

# GETTING STARTED IN FAMILY HISTORY

## 1. Start in the present

Start in the present and work from what you know – the full names and dates of birth of your immediate family.

You might have copies of birth, marriage or death certificates, which will help you to trace your family tree back further. If, for example, you have the birth certificate of one of your parents, it will give you the maiden name of his or her mother too.

Don't worry if you don't have copies of these documents – you can order them – you can find out how in Section 5.



## 2. Talk to your family

Talk to your family. Perhaps one of your ancestors or a relative has done some genealogical research before - this could save you a lot of time, especially if they have already obtained official certificates etc. Ask elderly relatives about their memories - you will find out all sorts of useful information this way. You might find it useful to compile a list of questions before you start to help you focus on what you are trying to find out.

Remember to take notes during your talk and share new information you discover with your relatives - this might spark off more memories. You might also find old family photographs, letters, diaries or a family bible which can also give you clues to the past. It is worth asking your relatives if you can poke around in the attic.

## 3. Keeping your own records

You will want to start formally recording the information you have unearthed. You will need files to store your certificates, photocopies and letters. You will probably want to start charting a family tree and using a computer to help you. See the section on Genealogy software at the end of this leaflet.



#### 4. Looking at official records

Don't be daunted by the number of records available or worry about visiting a record office. Some records are available on the web but in the end you will need to visit a record office, library or family history centre where you can view copies of the records on microfilm or fiche. Carefully plan your visit to the archive, library or museum you are interested in, so that you get the most information possible.

#### 5. Life events

*Births, marriages and deaths* only started being recorded by the government in 1837 – this is known as civil registration.

When you start your family history research it is crucial that you obtain primary source material. This will allow you to verify and document your family tree. Certificates of birth, marriage and death contain useful information that will allow you to trace back your line.

First you need to discover where your ancestor was born, married and died. This local website ([www.staffordshirebmd.org.uk](http://www.staffordshirebmd.org.uk)) will help you if your family is from Staffordshire, but you will need to use the GRO (General Register Office) indexes for other parts of the country.

Certificates are obtained in a number of ways. If your family is from the Burton/East Staffordshire area you can order your certificates from the Burton Register Office in High Street. You can also visit, phone or write to any other Register Office in the country, depending on where your ancestors lived. You can also order them on line from the GRO at [www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/](http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/)

To trace your family back into previous centuries you will need to look at *Parish records*. Parish registers and records from other faiths are the key source for records of “life events” such as baptisms, marriages and burials before the advent of civil registration in the 19th century.

The Anglican Church began keeping records of baptisms, marriages and burials in 1538 in England and Wales, and in 1634 in Ireland, and the earliest surviving registers begin then. However, the earliest surviving registers date from around 1611 for England, 1541 for Wales and from the late 18th century for Ireland. Unfortunately, very few survive for Ireland. In Scotland there are baptism and marriage registers from 1553 and registers of burials after 1560.

Local Parish records and Census returns can be viewed on microfiche

or microfilm at the Local Studies Centre in Burton Library off High St. The **Census** is a survey taken by the government every 10 years to collect information on the population of the United Kingdom.

From 1801 to 1831 the censuses were simply head counts with no personal information on individuals recorded (except in exceptional cases).

From 1841 personal information on individuals was recorded.

[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) has a facility for searching the 1881 census.



No.	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation
1	John Smith	45	M	Farmer
2	Mary Smith	42	F	Wife
3	Robert Smith	15	M	Son
4	Elizabeth Smith	12	F	Daughter
5	Thomas Smith	10	M	Son
6	Ann Smith	8	F	Daughter
7	James Smith	6	M	Son
8	Elizabeth Smith	4	F	Daughter

## 6. Using the Internet

The internet is a major source of information for family historians.

Many genealogists use the net to share their research results.

Everyone has their reasons for using online genealogy websites. Some want concrete data, others to see who is researching a particular family name, while others want information about an ancestor's occupation.

Whatever your reasons, you should always ask yourself how reliable the site is, before using the data it contains. Always check whether a source is given - such as an archive of origin or, better still, an archival reference - for any information provided. This will allow you to check the validity of the data.

Many archives are placing their catalogues online and giving researchers the opportunity to search for information by typing in a keyword.

Therefore you can, in theory, type in a relative's name and see if there are any documents relating to them, but unless your relative's name appears in the title of the document, it will not usually be found.

There is a beginner's guide to get started with your family history at [www.genuki.org.uk/gs](http://www.genuki.org.uk/gs)

## 7. Family history societies

Remember, you are not alone. You can join a local family history society and sign-up to email mailing lists on the family history topics that interest you. Usually, you can join a society or list in the area where you live and/or the area where your research interests are (even if you live 100s of miles away).

For a list of Family History Societies go to the Federation of Family History Societies at [www.ffhs.org.uk](http://www.ffhs.org.uk).

## Resources

With so much available on the world wide web it can be hard knowing where to start but it is best to use reputable sites that have built up a good reputation in the genealogical community.

[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) is a large collection of free family history, family tree and genealogy records. Family Search is the website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church has gathered a lot of genealogical records on microfiche and microfilm which can be accessed in their family history centres worldwide. The nearest one is in Purcell Avenue in Lichfield. Tel: 01543 414843 for an appointment. Subscribe to a mailing list – these will allow you to find genealogical information from all over the world and correspond with researchers anywhere. For example look at [www.rootsweb.com](http://www.rootsweb.com).

You may also find search engines useful for finding family history information that may not be found on a genealogical website. Examples are:- google, yahoo, lycos, altavista, ask, etc.

The information in this leaflet has been adapted from the informative site [www.familyrecords.gov.uk](http://www.familyrecords.gov.uk) which will give you lots more details about each topic.

The BBC also has a useful beginner's guide at [www.bbc.co.uk/history/familyhistory](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/familyhistory)

There are several sites which require a subscription to obtain family history data, such as the GRO birth, marriage and death indexes and two examples are [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com)

and [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk). Also the official government website at [www.nationalarchives.co.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.co.uk) has a vast collection of useful records.



## Genealogy software

As you find out more about your family history - you will find yourself gathering more and more pieces of information. It will help immensely if you organise this information systematically from an early point in your research. Although this can be done manually using notebooks, files and card indexes, computers can really help you not only to store information but also to view and print out that information in many different ways without retyping it. Ten software reviews are at <http://genealogy-software-review.toptenreviews.com/>