

YOUR
FAMILY
HISTORIAN

Getting Started With Your Family History Research



A Guide



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INTRODUCTION



Andy Robson, *Genealogist*

Genealogy, or the study of Family Trees, is one of the most popular hobbies in the UK and it's not hard to see why. After all, at one time or another most of us have wondered 'where did I come from'? and genealogy, even if it's only for a few generations, provides an answer.

But more than this, it allows us to see where our families fitted into the bigger picture of history. The books may be full of Lords and Ladies, Generals and Politicians, but for most of us this has little direct relevance. What we want to know is how our own forebears survived, thrived, struggled, as the great wheel of history turned.

It all sounds good, but, like everything else in life, if no-one's shown you how to go about it, how do you start? In this guide I will give you practical tips for getting started on your own Family History journey.



Step 1: Talking To Relatives

Before you do anything else, talk to ANYONE you can think of who might know something about the family. You can spend hours trying to find out where your Great Grandparents were married, for example, when Auntie Doris could have told you in a couple of minutes.

It's important to have these conversations before it's too late. Information like dates can often be retrieved from official records but actual memories are irreplaceable.



Where they lived /their Homelife

Their education /qualifications

Religion/spiritual beliefs

Occupations, apprenticeships

Key achievements (work/sports)

Family stories/anecdotes

Family heirlooms /traditions

Military service

Famous/infamous ancestors

Hobbies/pastimes

Key world events they recall

Before speaking to older relatives, it may be worthwhile drawing up a list of questions/topics to keep you focused. As well as gathering information about names and key dates (birthdays, marriages, death) for their parents and grandparents, siblings and other relatives, other areas to explore are listed opposite .

Write EVERYTHING down, or, with their permission, consider recording the conversation. Starting out you don't know what's going to be useful and what's not.



Step 2: Get Hold of Family Records

Try to get hold of any family records that may exist and make copies/take photographs of them to help you in your research.

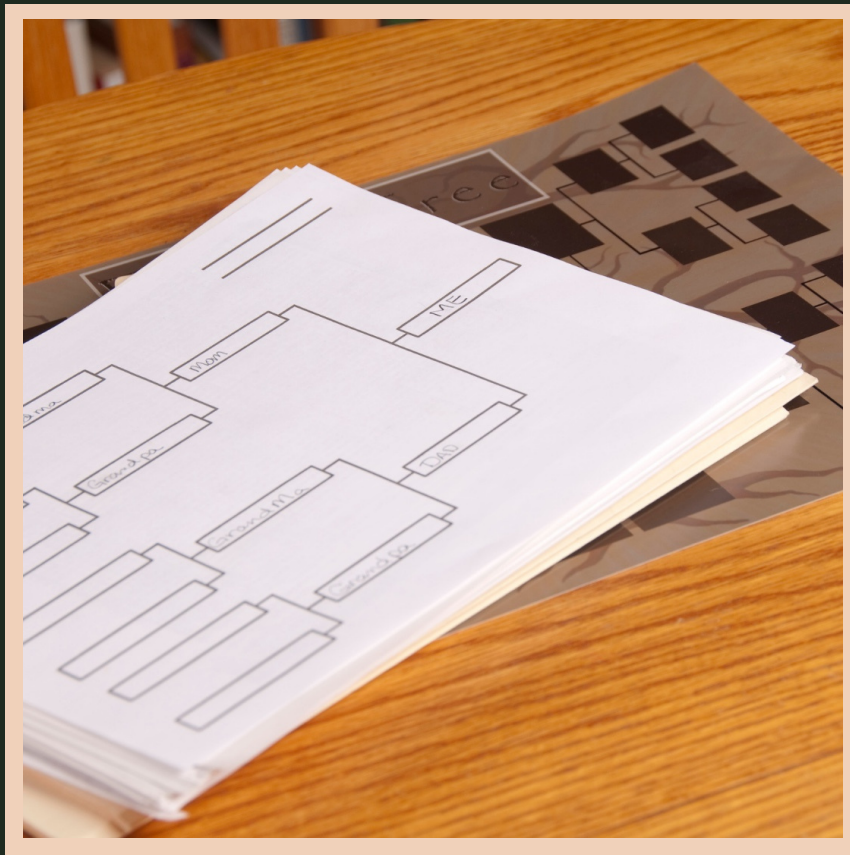
These might be written documents such as certificates (baptism, confirmation, academic, marriage, burial), or items such as family bibles, diaries, postcards, newspaper cuttings, scrapbooks, photographs or family heirlooms like medals.

Used in conjunction with 'official' records these can be the backbone of family history research and give a unique insight that will not be found in the official records.





Step 3: Build Up a Provisional Family Tree



Build up a provisional family tree - you at the bottom, then working your way up - and create a file of any additional information you might get; great uncle so-and-so was a miner and lived in the Hight Street' etc.

Try to be systematic and ordered in the way you note things - separate files for each family, separate page for each individual, etc. - or you'll never be able to find that bit of information you really need later on.



Step 4: Decide What Part of the Family You Want to Trace

Obviously, the more lines you follow, the more work is involved - you have 2 parents, 4 Grandparents, 8 Great-Grandparents, 16 Great-Great-Grandparents, 32 Great-Great-Great-Grandparents etc. Each of us has 4,094 ancestors over the past 400 years!

2 parents
4 Grandparents
8 Great Grandparents
16 Great-Great Grandparents
32 Great-Great-Great Grandparents
64 Great-Great-Great Great Grandparents
128 Great-Great-Great-Great -Great Grandparents
256 Great-Great-Great-Great-Great -Great Grandparents
512 Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great -Great Grandparents
1024 Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great- Great- Great Grandparents
2048 Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great-Great- Great Grandparents

If you decide to follow one line, still get ALL the information you can beforehand about ALL branches of the family. You'll probably become interested in these later and the information might not be there then.



Step 5: Decide Which Family History Site to Join

There are many good Family History sites at the moment, the most popular and comprehensive of which in the UK are: Ancestry.co.uk, FindMyPast, MyHeritage and TheGenealogist. I have used all of them and can give you the benefit of my experience in the hope that it will help you with your choice.



In my opinion, for ease of use, number of records and number of members, Ancestry wins hands down. It's not the cheapest, and has a few features I'd like to see improved, but overall, I think it's the best.

It is often possible to subscribe free of charge for a trial period before committing to an annual subscription. Alternatively, libraries and local archives often subscribe to Ancestry and FindMyPast and can be used on site free of charge.

An important point to remember, however, is that building your Family Tree with a particular site is not an all or nothing decision. Great strides have been made in standardising the way records are stored on these. So you can download your Tree and its associated records as a GEDCOM file, for example, and then upload it to any of the other sites. There are still some limitations with this - photographs etc. uploaded by individual members will not be incorporated into the GEDCOM file as they are simply too big - but these are relatively minor.

The same goes for DNA results. You might get your DNA sequenced by a particular site, but you can download the results at any time and upload them onto another site.



Step 6: To DNA or Not to DNA?

DNA (Deoxyribonucleic Acid) is, and will, revolutionise Family History. This is on two general fronts.

Firstly, Just because the records tell you that 'Jo Bloggs' was your Great-Great Grandfather, how do you know that actually was the case? No matter how distasteful the subject may be, we know that infidelity, informal adoption and illegitimacy happen and all threaten to create breaks in a family line.

Now from what I can gather, such occurrences were actually relatively rare. I was privileged a few years ago to take part in a DNA study into the origins of my own family, the Robsons. This found that there were actually 2 distinct branches of the family, of which my own branch went back to a common ancestor who lived around 2,000 years ago. Of the 100 people who gave DNA samples, only 4 did not descend from one of these 2 branches. 4 breaks in 2,000 years. Nevertheless, such breaks are possible, and finding a genetic link to a common ancestor provides definite, no-argument confirmation that the genetic line is true.



Secondly, a DNA link can you give a way forward that would otherwise be unobtainable. Suppose that you are looking for a John Smith born in 1790. There are 3 Smith families - A, B, and C - living in the broad area that you are interested in. But none have a son called John. You do a DNA test and find that you are related to 2 people descended from Family C. The very strong inference is then that 'your' John belonged to Family C but for some reason his birth had gone unrecorded.

Now all this is a bit questionable - the DNA link to these 2 people might actually be through a completely different branch of your family. I find it amusing when people say, 'oh yeah, my name is O'Reilly so my family are Irish'. No. your patrilinear (father-son) ancestry is Irish, but you have very, very many other branches to your family whose origins might be completely different.

However, as more and more people take DNA tests, and as more and more Family Trees are linked in on-line databases, it will be possible to establish a link with absolute certainty.

Most commercial Family History sites test Autosomal DNA (atDNA) which maps our 22 Autosomal Pairs which contain the DNA of all our recent ancestors. The thing to remember about atDNA, however, is that our DNA can only carry a set amount of information, so with each generation, statistically the contribution from each of our ancestors is halved. So atDNA is only considered good for detecting relationships back 5-7 generations.



The Autosomal Pairs are something of a melting pot, where the various elements of our parents' DNA are mixed to create us. This is not done in an ordered fashion, however, so some strands are passed intact to us while others are diminished or even eliminated. This is worth bearing in mind when someone is boasting of being descended from Lord Such-and-Such in the 1200s. They might very well be so, but it could also be the case that this ancestor's contribution to their DNA has been so diminished over the years that it has disappeared altogether.

So, should you do a DNA test? In my opinion the benefits outweigh the pit-falls. I think on-line Family History companies have recognised people's concerns and are going to some length to show that your results will be protected and not made available to third party businesses. On the pro side, it's great to find all these new people that you're related to, no matter how distantly. Certainly in my own case I've made contact with people through shared DNA and been given access to family memories, photographs, etc that I would otherwise have never known about.

One of my Grandparents was illegitimate and the only clue to her father's identity that we had was that she had the middle name 'Hall'; not a family name. An analysis of my DNA results led me to my Great Grandfather's family though, as yet, not to him specifically. Although I suspect my Grandmother knew his identity, my Mother and her siblings had no idea. In time, someone genetically closer to my Great Grandfather will take a DNA test and I'll be able to pin down the exact individual. In the meantime, discovering my Great Great Grandparent's identity has opened up a whole new avenue of research for me.



Step 7: Make Meticulous Notes

When doing your research (and it can be a really long and tedious process) make a note of everything that seems of any interest. For example, if you're researching the name 'Smith', make a note of ALL Smiths you find, as well as references to any married names of brothers and sisters. Researching the family of a sibling can often give you a lead to your own direct ancestor.

You DON'T want to have to search the same register twice (though you undoubtedly will) so try and be as thorough as possible first time around.

Unusual first names, recurring middle names, family names used as first names, all these can be gold for establishing a link.





Step 8: Don't Rush - Accuracy is Essential



The classic mistake is to simply take the first entry which fits the facts as the one you are looking for. Just because you have found a John Smith born in the correct year in the right place, doesn't mean he is your John Smith. It's tedious, but it's necessary to look into every possibility before making up your mind.

Family History is a bit like being a detective - you have to sift through the available information and make your conclusions accordingly. If the facts aren't there, don't force them just to get on to the next generation.

If you can get back a few generations from information you get from relatives, try and find the individuals mentioned in the records. This will give you a good feel for the basics (where the records are, how to use readers etc.) while allowing you to check any findings you make.

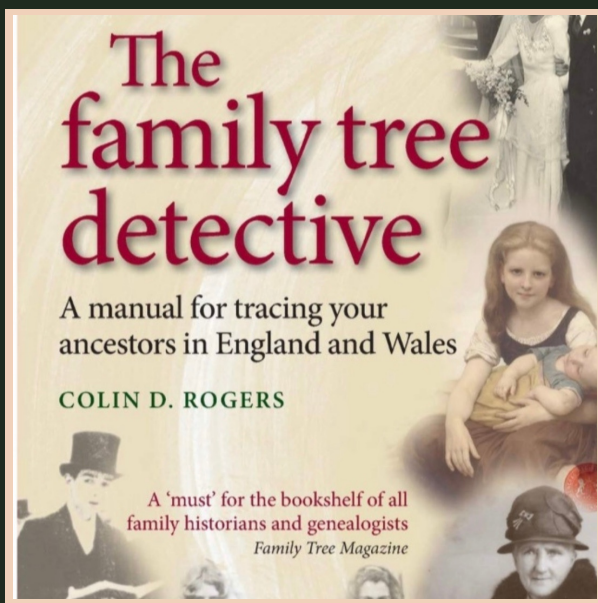


Step 9: Read About Family History

BOOKS

I find that the best ones are the 'how I traced my family tree' type, which give practical examples rather than dry facts and figures.

The book that got me hooked was: 'Discovering Your Family History' by Don Steel. This traces the patrilineal (father-son) ancestry of the News Reader Gordon Honeycombe. Simple, clear and interesting. Unfortunately, I think this is now long out of print, but it was made into a TV series which can still be accessed on YouTube.



For a complete coverage of what records exist and how they can be used, I don't think you can do better than: 'The Family Tree Detective' by Colin D Rogers.

But this is quite a personal thing. You may well not like these books and find others more relevant. Try a few and see what you think.

MAGAZINES

There are two main Family History magazines to buy/subscribe to in the UK: 'Who Do You Think You Are?' and 'Family Tree'. Both also offer free newsletters via e-mail.

www.whodoyouthinkyouaremagazine.com/newsletter

www.familytree.co.uk

PODCASTS

There are many podcasts available. BBC have a series with Sally Magnusson and Nick Barret and Family Tree also have a free podcast. The Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives (AGRA) have a monthly 'Ask AGRA' Family History podcast series.

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006zbxm/episodes/downloads

www.family-tree.co.uk/how-to-guides/family-tree-podcast

www.agra.org.uk/podcast



Step 10: Consider Joining a Family History Group or Society

Online Groups

There are many online groups available on social media where people interested in genealogy can share ideas, information and tips. If you search for 'genealogy groups' or 'family tree groups' in Facebook there are many to choose from. I of course, recommend the 'Your Family Historian Group'.

[Click here to Join](#)

Local Family History Groups

Most counties have their own local Family History Societies, groups started by amateur Genealogists to promote the hobby.

These societies have regular group meetings, organise tasks to help others involved in genealogy (such as indexing records) and produce a regular Journal with news, hints, etc. The Northumberland and Durham Family History Society (N&DFHS) is one of the biggest and best in the country (I'm a member) but how directly useful it is, of course, depends on how much use you make of it.

The Family History Federation has a list of local groups at:

www.familyhistoryfederation.com/societies-az



A Final Word

These are just some points to think about before embarking on your Family History research. As with most things, preparation, preparation, PREPARATION is the key to success. Get the basics right and the rest should follow.

I hope you have found this guide useful and it has encouraged you to embark on the great journey of Family History Research.

If you would like support we offer workshops and 1-2-1 tuition and are happy to provide a fresh pair of eyes if you get stuck or want to talk through a problem you've encountered. We are happy to arrange a free consultation.

Details of our services can be viewed by clicking the button below

[Services](#)

Good Hunting!



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