

## **TRACING YOUR BRITISH ANCESTORS - A BEGINNERS'S GUIDE**

The three main sources of information when you start tracing your ancestors are:

- your family
- censuses
- birth, marriage, and death certificates

Let's start by looking at each of these in turn.

### **WHAT YOUR FAMILY ALREADY KNOW!**

It's easy to under-estimate how much useful information is already held within the family. For a start, it's quite likely that one of your relatives began to compile a family tree a long time ago - and then gave up, because in the days before the Internet, researching family history was a long hard slog. An older version of the family tree could well incorporate information from relatives who are no longer alive (and which you might find very difficult to reconstruct on your own).

But even if you're the first, you should still be able to collect a lot of information by asking your relatives the right questions - just don't expect them to have perfect memories, though, or to remember everything on the spur of the moment! In fact, you'll often find that if you go back to someone with bits of information you've gleaned from other relatives, or perhaps an old wedding photo you've found, it helps to unlock other memories. It's amazing how little things can bring it all back!

When you talk to your relatives begin with simple questions, such as 'How many brothers and sisters did your father/mother have?', then follow up if necessary with 'Who was the oldest/youngest' and so on. Don't expect people to remember exact dates of birth (though they sometimes will), but a birthday or an approximate age will be a great help in your later researches. At this stage it's also useful to gather information about where ancestors came from - there was a lot of migration during the 19th century, aided by the introduction of the railways, and many of us live in towns which barely existed 150 years ago.

People are often known by nicknames, so try to find out - for example - whether Aunt Lily was really Lilian, or Auntie Nell was in fact christened Ellen. Ask who got married, and to whom, remembering to note the maiden names of your female ancestors. And whilst divorce has only recently become common, many people remarried following bereavement, often when they were still young enough to have a second family.

Information that's written down is a bonus, whether it's a marriage certificate or a family tree written inside the family bible. The most unlikely objects can provide a useful lead, from an inscribed clock or watch given as a retirement present, to a book with a dated and signed dedication. 'To Florrie, on your 21st birthday, from Uncle Fred and Aunt Maud, 19 September 1938' tells you not only Florrie's birth date, but also that she had an Uncle Fred who was married to Aunt Maud - and that they were all still alive in 1938.

Relatives are a great source of information - but memories are fallible. Always keep an open mind, and double-check the information you've been given whenever you get the opportunity.

The remainder of this guide focuses on online sources of family history information. Note, however, that most local records offices hold copies of censuses for their local area, and some also have microfiche copies of the indexes of Births, Marriages & Deaths. These indexes can also be inspected free of charge at the Family Records Centre in Islington, London. The Family Records Centre also holds complete copies on microfilm or microfiche of the censuses from 1841 to 1901.

## **CENSUSES**

The first British censuses were taken in 1801, and they have been taken every 10 years since (except for 1941). The earliest census returns to be generally preserved are those for 1841, and these are also the first to show the names of occupants. The 1901 census is the most recent to be published, but the 1911 census for England & Wales should be available online during 2009.

For censuses up to 1901 the documents that have survived are the Enumerators' Books. The pages in these books were completed by the enumerator, who copied the information from the Householder Schedules. In many cases the Householder Schedule was also completed by the enumerator, sometimes because the head of the household was illiterate.

For the 1911 England & Wales census it is the Householder Schedules that have survived, which means that they are in many cases in the handwriting of the head of household, which makes them more interesting to family historians.

The 1841 census is less informative than later censuses - ages of adults are shown to the nearest five years below, marital status is not indicated, relationships between members of a household are not identified, and so far as birthplace is concerned, the returns merely indicate whether someone was born in the county or not, and whether born in 'Scotland, Ireland, or foreign parts'. Nevertheless, as you work backwards identifying your ancestors, there will be times when even the limited information of the 1841 census proves invaluable.

From 1851 onwards the information shown is broadly standardised, though there were minor changes that are largely obvious from the census returns themselves.

Transcripts and images of the handwritten Enumerators' Books for all British censuses from 1841-1901 are all now available online. However, the only complete census transcript that is available free of charge is the 1881 Census of England & Wales.

### **Where to find England & Wales censuses online**

#### **Introduction**

When you search a census online your chances of success are determined partly by the accuracy of the transcription, partly by the range of search options at the site you're using, and partly by your ingenuity!

About half of all census records are wrong in some respect, and it won't necessarily be the transcription that's wrong - the enumerator may have misread the householder's writing, or misunderstood the householder's dialect. Quite often the householder themselves made a mistake.

In these circumstances being able to search by name *or* address is very useful - but only findmypast.com offers this feature for all of the censuses that the site supports.

Unless otherwise stated, all of the sites mentioned below, other than free sites, offer both indexed transcriptions *and* images of the handwritten census schedules.

### **1841 Census**

The best transcription can be found at findmypast.com, a site which offers both pay-per-view and subscription options; Origins has a similar transcription.

At Ancestry.co.uk the transcription is not as reliable, which makes finding your relatives more difficult - but on the other hand some of the handwritten census schedules which are particularly difficult to read have been re-photographed.

Note: other advantages of searching at findmypast.com are that you can search for any two people in the same household - which is particularly useful in 1841 because of the limited data shown about individuals - and you can also search by address.

Free alternatives: at FreeCEN you can search an indexed transcription for the whole of Cornwall and partial indexes for a handful of other English counties.

### **1851 Census**

The complete census is online at Ancestry.co.uk, and can be accessed on a pay-per-view or subscription basis.

Free alternatives: FreeCEN has an indexed transcription for the whole of Cornwall.

### **1861 Census**

The complete 1861 Census of England & Wales is online at findmypast.com and you can search not only for individuals, but also for two people living in the same household. You can even search by address. There are two levels of image quality, the higher quality being far superior to other sites.

This census is also available at Ancestry.co.uk, but you cannot search by occupation or address.

Free alternatives: FreeCEN has an indexed transcription for the whole of Cornwall, and partial indexes for several English and Welsh counties.

### **1871 Census**

The complete census is online at Ancestry.co.uk, and can be accessed on a pay-per-view or subscription basis.

Many English counties (including both London and Middlesex) can also be searched at both findmypast.com and Origins.

Free alternatives: FreeCEN has a partial indexes for a few English and Welsh counties.

### **1881 Census**

Complete transcriptions can be searched free at three sites: FamilySearch, Ancestry.co.uk (which also has images, though they can only be viewed by subscribers), and findmypast.com.

The original transcription was carried out by FamilySearch and the transcriptions at the other sites are derived from this (findmypast.com claims to have the most accurate transcription).

The 1881 census is also available on CD ROM (check the FamilySearch site for details), and it is important to note that the CD ROM version includes Scotland.

Free alternatives: see above; also FreeCEN has a partial index for Cornwall.

### **1891 Census**

The complete 1861 Census of England & Wales is online at findmypast.com and you can search not only for individuals, but also for two people living in the same household. You can even search by address. There are two levels of image quality, the higher quality being far superior to other sites.

This census is also available at Ancestry.co.uk, but you cannot search by occupation or address.

Free alternatives: at FreeCEN you can search indexed transcriptions for the whole of Bedfordshire, Cornwall, Devon and Warwickshire - and partial transcriptions of many other English and Welsh counties.

### **1901 Census**

The complete census is online at Ancestry.co.uk, and can be accessed on a pay-per-view or subscription basis.

### **1911 Census**

The 1911 Census of England & Wales will be released in 2009, but it is possible to obtain copies of individual pages from the National Archives at a cost of 45 pounds per address.

Free alternatives: 1911census.info has transcriptions for a small number of households.

### **Where to find Scotland censuses online**

There are fewer options - both the official Scotlandspeople site and Ancestry.co.uk have indexed transcriptions of all 7 censuses from 1841-1901, but only Scotlandspeople has images of the handwritten pages.

Free alternatives: FreeCEN has partial indexes for 1841, 1851, 1861, and 1871. 1841 is the most complete, with 100% coverage of 15 Scottish counties.

### **Which census should you use?**

As the 1881 census for England & Wales is free it is a good place to start - provided you have some information about your ancestors who were alive in 1881. It will also enable you to enter relatives at the LostCousins site.

But ultimately you're likely to have to pay to get the information you need, and in this case you should consider taking out a subscription that gives you unlimited searches at

findmypast.com or Ancestry. Pay-per-view may seem like a cheaper option, but it will cost much more in the end.

### **How to get the most out of the censuses**

If you're initially unsuccessful in finding your relatives try using alternatives search options. For example, try searching by first name and birthplace or occupation - or else using the address search at findmypast.com

Remember that different census sites offer different options - just because you can't find the person you're looking for at one site doesn't mean you won't find them at another.

## **BIRTH, MARRIAGE & DEATH CERTIFICATES**

Civil registration began on 1st July 1837 in England & Wales, and on 1st January 1855 in Scotland. In theory all births, marriages, and deaths after that date should be recorded in the General Register Office indexes, although in the early years a small percentage of births were not registered.

If you're lucky, you may find that some of the certificates for your ancestors have survived, and are still held within the family. However copy certificates can be obtained, and for England & Wales they will currently cost you 7 pounds each.

For an introductory guide to Birth, Marriage, and Death certificates visit the official site [www.familyrecords.gov.uk/topics/bmd.htm](http://www.familyrecords.gov.uk/topics/bmd.htm) which not only tells you how to obtain certificates, but also details the information you can expect to find. Marriage certificates in particular can be a goldmine of information, providing not just the bride's maiden name, but also the names and professions of both fathers. Even the names of the witnesses can provide valuable leads.

Although it is usual to obtain certificates from the General Register Office (GRO), if you know the registration district in which the event occurred you can visit the local Register Office. They may be able to provide you with a certificate which incorporates a facsimile of the original register entry, which in the case of a marriage will provide copies of the 'actual' signatures of your ancestors. Certificates ordered from the GRO are based on hand-copied records, so do not show actual signatures (though they will indicate whether a person signed, or made their mark).

To order England & Wales certificates from the GRO you ideally need to provide the full reference, which means finding your ancestor in the indexes of Births, Marriage and Deaths. Even if you don't go ahead and order a particular certificate, just finding the event in the indexes may provide you with useful information. For example, from 1912 onwards the marriage entries show the surname of the spouse - which might be the missing piece of the jigsaw.

### **Birth, Marriage, and Death Indexes online**

Numerous sites have indexes of births, marriages, and deaths for England & Wales, but the two key sites are findmypast.com - which has the most complete set of indexes - and FreeBMD which has only partial indexes, but is free to search.

## FAMILY TREE SOFTWARE

There are many family tree programs, some of which are available free, such as *Personal Ancestral File* which can be downloaded from the FamilySearch site.

*Family Historian* ([www.family-historian.co.uk](http://www.family-historian.co.uk)) is not free, but has received excellent reviews - it is also a British program written with local requirements in mind. It has an active user support forum to which the program's author frequently contributes.

All of these programs, even the free ones, will allow you to create family trees on screen, and print them out. Almost all support GEDCOM files (GEDCOM is the standard format for the interchange of genealogical data), and it is worth noting that *Family Historian* uses the GEDCOM file format itself, so no file conversion is necessary.

## THE NEXT STAGE

Perhaps the best guide for researchers who want to go further is *Ancestral Trails*, a book by Mark D Herber that is published by Sutton Publishing in association with the Society of Genealogists.

*The Genealogist's Internet* by Peter Christian is another valuable book which offers a superb guide to the ever-expanding resources online. It is regularly updated, and the most recent edition features LostCousins.

As you work backwards from 1881 parish registers become an invaluable source of information, especially before 1837 when civil registration of births, marriage, and deaths was introduced. Most parish registers are held in county Records Offices or Archives, and can usually be searched - typically on microfilm or microfiche - free of charge. Other sources of information include wills, directories, and churchyard inscriptions. Visit the GENUKI site ([www.genuki.org.uk](http://www.genuki.org.uk)) to find the addresses of Records Offices and Archives in each county.

The FamilySearch site ([www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)) not only provides online access to the 1881 census but also to other resources which have been compiled by researchers, including the International Genealogical Index (IGI). The information varies in quality, and you should therefore always check it before using it as the basis for further research of your own, but it can provide you with leads that you would otherwise never pick up from any other source.

When using the FamilySearch site be sure to search each resource separately - this will produce far better results.

There are family history societies throughout the UK, and the Federation of Family History Societies has links to the sites of member societies in England, Wales & Ireland ([www.ffhs.org.uk](http://www.ffhs.org.uk)) whilst the Scottish Association of Family History Societies provides links to those in Scotland. Most societies keep lists of members interests, and some allow non-members to both search the lists and contact members who are researching the same families (there's invariably going to be someone researching the same family - it's just a question of finding them!).

GENUKI ([www.genuki.org.uk](http://www.genuki.org.uk)) is a virtual reference library of genealogical information with links to other websites that cover every part of the British Isles. It also has an informative

section called 'Getting started in genealogy' which offers excellent advice and information for the beginner.

## TRACE YOUR 'LOST COUSINS'

In almost every branch of every family there's someone researching family history. Each will have a different starting point, and a different perspective, each will make different discoveries. Just imagine if all the people researching the same ancestors could pool their knowledge!

The LostCousins web-site is the answer - using a proprietary method it links together distant cousins who are researching the same ancestors. Unlike other websites that offer a superficially similar service, it virtually guarantees that the people who meet up really are related, whilst keeping their information confidential (information entered at LostCousins can't be viewed by anyone else).

## USEFUL WEBSITES

<a href="http://www.LostCousins.com">www.LostCousins.com</a>	Find distant relatives and share your research with them
<a href="http://www.findmypast.com">www.findmypast.com</a>	Complete indexes of England & Wales births, marriages & deaths 1837-2005 England & Wales censuses for 1841, 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891 Ships' passenger lists 1890-1929 (will extend to 1960)
<a href="http://www.gro.gov.uk">www.gro.gov.uk</a>	Order England & Wales BMD certificates online
<a href="http://www.freebmd.rootsweb.org.uk">www.freebmd.rootsweb.org.uk</a>	Partial index to England & Wales births, marriages & deaths from 1837-c1912
<a href="http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk">www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk</a>	Scotland censuses 1841-1901
<a href="http://www.ffhs.org.uk">www.ffhs.org.uk</a>	The Federation of Family History Societies
<a href="http://www.familysearch.org">www.familysearch.org</a>	1881 England & Wales census & International Genealogical Index (IGI)
<a href="http://www.ancestry.co.uk">www.ancestry.co.uk</a>	Complete England & Wales censuses, indexes to Scotland censuses
<a href="http://www.genuki.org.uk">www.genuki.org.uk</a>	Virtual reference library of genealogical information
<a href="http://www.PharosTutors.com">www.PharosTutors.com</a>	Online genealogy courses