

Introduction

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Equipment needed: A computer, printer, Internet access; the earliest marriage certificate among your family papers.



Skills needed: Patience, persistence and a liking for detective stories.



I was recently at a one-day family history event in central London. It was not surprising that the queues for entry started forming half an hour before the doors opened, even for those who had pre-bought tickets. Inside the hall, individuals who had developed materials while undertaking their own research had set up stalls. There were some 30 regional or themed interest groups, most of which operate as membership societies with charitable status. Finally, there were the big commercial organisations, global in scope and often with project links to government agencies. Family history is clearly an activity that operates at a number of levels.

What was most striking, however, was the extent to which technology formed an expected and accepted part of what was on offer. Every stand had a computer, many linked to the Internet. While many books were for sale, they were complemented by hundreds of CDs, many of which were the result of cooperative indexing projects undertaken by members of various societies wishing to share their research with a much wider audience of both new and more experienced family historians.

It wasn't always like this. When I first started my family history research in 1994, computing was a minority interest in genealogical circles. Rather like digital

cameras among the photographic community, it was somehow seen as cheating. As in photography, attitudes have now changed and there is an appreciation of how technology can enhance the sharing of data, ideas and resources. While the individual still has to do groundwork in relation to his/her family tree, few researchers deny the benefits that technology has brought. It saves them time, effort and cost, and makes them feel part of a much broader activity.

When I run family history sessions, I often tell the participants that I am envious of the fact that they are at the beginning of their journey with all the excitement of discovery still to come. For many of my generation, this family history journey is also accompanied by an exploration of what we can accomplish using the new technology. The computer no longer has to be seen as a solution looking for a problem – family history research and the computer are ideal marriage partners.

Enjoy your journey!

How to use this book

This book aims to take you through the stages of researching and writing your family history using online sources. These sources are growing in number on a daily basis, so the emphasis is on the major sites where you can access information and records, and the techniques for deciding whether you have found family members. The primary focus is on resources in England and Wales, with sections on Scottish and Irish records where these have significant differences.

Some of you are already experienced computer users; other may have done some research into your family history. I have organised the material in a similar way to the courses I have run in the University of the Third Age (U3A) and with other local groups. This book can be used by individuals or as a course book for groups who want to support each other in the early stages of learning to research their families and who may not have an experienced family historian among their membership.

All researchers need some basic core knowledge to do research. As groups progress, interests diverge and become more specialised. You may develop an interest in a particular geographical location, need to research relatives who have moved to Australia or find Jewish family originating in Eastern Europe, military

ancestors or those in particular professions. Once you need to start researching in these directions, you will find an enormous amount of information on the Web: people with similar interests, websites and one-name studies all help you take your research to the next stage.

The rest of this introductory section looks at the benefits of using a computer for your research, and some of the associated costs. It also introduces the case study, which provides a means for all the members of a group to work together on the same material. At the end of each chapter, there are usually two research activities: one uses the case study family to test the methods and sources covered; the second asks you to apply these techniques to your own family research.

Part II looks at the basic genealogical building blocks: birth, marriage, death and census records. You look at how to start reviewing and evaluating the evidence you find in these sources.

Part III focuses on three of the major resources for online research: the Latter Day Saints' (LDS, also known as the Mormons) FamilySearch website; Ancestry, an ever-growing repository of databases and documents; and the National Archives. This is followed by an overview of a range of other resources available to you.

Part IV sets out how you can record your research using spreadsheets. Family history software will then allow you to produce reports in many different formats, all from the same data you have collected. You also look at using photographs to bring life and interest to the names and dates you are collecting.

Part V examines how research can be shared, whether with your family or with other researchers. This may be in the form of presentations, online information or printed material.

What, why and how much?

What is the difference between family history and genealogy? It is probably true to say that these terms are now used interchangeably by those undertaking their own research. Most of the societies exhibiting at the event I mentioned earlier called themselves 'family history societies'. There were some exceptions, such as

the Society of Genealogists. If a distinction were to be made, it would probably give genealogy a focus on the academic study of lineage and the creation of pedigrees with names, dates and sometimes places. Much of this work was initially undertaken for royal and noble families. Evidence from wills, marriage settlements and land registries is focused on those who had land and significant possessions to pass on to their heirs.

Family history, by contrast, supplements this work through a broader consideration of social, economic and political history. Examples of this would be the movement of people from the country to the land at the time of the Industrial Revolution, the impact of the development of the railways on the creation of the London suburbs and the migration of large numbers of Irish families to the United States following the potato famine of the mid-1800s. By its nature, this covers the lives of families from more modest backgrounds where there may be less documentary evidence available of the pure genealogical variety. The recent increase in the numbers of people researching has meant that these aspects overlap. Both terms are used in this book.

Why use a computer for family history?

People were collecting and recording information about their ancestors long before computers were invented. It is, of course, still possible to do this work in the traditional way, and much of the research involves looking at a variety of evidence and deciding whether you have found members of your family. This has to be based on your own knowledge and judgement.



Your work is similar to that of the detective. You need to look for clues, put forward your hypothesis, and find and weigh up the evidence.

Modern detectives are assisted in their work by databases of DNA, criminal records, fingerprints and car numbers. Such records no longer need to be searched manually, which speeds up the detection process. Databases can also highlight connections that might otherwise have been missed.

In the same way, the computer can act as a tool for speeding up your research and allowing you to record your findings in a variety of ways.

How much is it going to cost?

Most hobbies have some form of associated cost, and this may increase as you delve deeper into your family history. Costs could include:

- computer, printer and Internet access
- software for recording family history and for associated tasks such as editing photographs
- copies of birth, marriage and death certificates
- subscriptions to websites with genealogical databases such as census indexes
- subscriptions to family history societies
- books and magazines
- research trips to archives, libraries and locations where your family lived.

Not all of these are essential and there are a number of ways to keep down costs:

- Make use of computer and Internet access in your local library.
- Collect or copy documents and photos in your possession or held by other members of your family.
- Use free software on your computer for recording your family history and for other tasks. Some free software, such as spreadsheets and photo editing programs, helps you record your research.
- Don't buy a certificate unless you are reasonably certain that it relates to your family. As these cost several pounds each, it can be expensive if it turns out not to be your relative.
- Only buy certificates if they give you important information that is not available in any other way. Look for proxies. For example, an old passport gives you a date, place of birth and full name. The person had to submit a birth certificate to get the passport, so it's a good alternative to buying the certificate.
- Use any free databases that are available online. Even where you may need to pay for access to records, develop strategies to get the maximum information from any free index searches that you are allowed.
- Many libraries now have subscriptions to paid websites, which you can access for free using your library card.

- Visit the websites of family history societies to decide whether they are worth joining.
- Get involved with indexing projects. You will get an early sight of data not yet generally available and you may be given a copy of the data for your personal use once the project is completed.

Case study

Researching your family history is a very individual activity. There are common resources and techniques but the paths down which these will lead you diverge very rapidly. Much also depends on the amount of background knowledge that you have or can glean from your family and their documents before you actually start. Many are fortunate to begin with a wealth of information; others feel overwhelmed by the resources available and concerned that their own knowledge is so minimal.

I decided that I would run a U3A family history group based on a single 1890 marriage certificate (shown in Figure 1.1) that I had purchased at an antiques fair. The certificate has no connection with any of the families I am researching and my subsequent investigations have failed to find any links. This makes it a perfect case study for a family history group to adopt. You have no background knowledge of the family, no supporting documentation, no family myths to prove or disprove. But you can use the information on this certificate and available resources to try to build a history for the two families identified.

Each time I look at an available resource, I try it out first of all with this 'adopted' family and scrutinise the reliability of the information I find. I show you how to test assumptions about what you know and the accuracy of your results. This then allows you to undertake the same research tasks with your own families, using the skills and questioning techniques that you have learned.

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1840 Marriage solemnized at the Parish Church in the Parish of <u>Feering</u> in the County of <u>Essex</u>								
No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Surname.	Rank or Profession of Father.
244	October 18 th	Carl Robert Fischer Maria Smith	full age	Bachelor Spinster	House Decorator Servant	20 Harrington Street Feering	Frederick Fischer John Smith	House Decorator Labourer

Married in the Parish Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established Church

This Marriage was solemnized between us, by after Band By me, F. L. Moysey, Officiating Minister

In the presence of us, Arthur Slack, Horace L. Price
John W. Hunt, F. Fischer

I HEREBY CERTIFY the above to be a true copy of the Marriage Register of the Parish in the Year of our Lord One Thousand Eight Hundred and Eighty

Extracted this Nineteenth Day of October By me, Fred. Nuttall Moysey, Registrar

Figure 1.1



Research task: Fischer/Smith family

How much information can you get from the facts recorded on this certificate, and can you use them to make certain deductions that will then inform other research that you can undertake to build up a tree for this family?

- Carl Robert Fischer married Maria Smith on 18 October 1890 in Feering, Essex.
- Carl, a house decorator, was the son of Frederick Fischer, also a house decorator.
- Maria, a servant, was the daughter of John Smith, a labourer.
- Carl's address is given as 20 Harrington Street.
- Maria's address is just given as Feering.
- The bride and groom were both 'of full age', which means over 21. Neither had apparently been married before.

Before reading the next section, can you draw up a list of at least five questions and assumptions that arise from studying this certificate more closely?

My U3A family history group recorded the following observations. This is not necessarily the order in which you might undertake the research.

- If the couple is 'of full age,' this means that they were both born before 1869. Start here and work backwards if looking for their birth certificates.
- There is no indication that the fathers are deceased. (It usually says so if this is the case.)
- F. Fischer is shown as one of the witnesses. This might be Carl's father but could also be a brother named after their father.
- Is Harrington Street in Feering? Why does Carl have a street name and house number but Maria doesn't? Is Harrington Street in a larger town?
- How difficult will it be to research Maria's father, John Smith? (More than 21,000 people with this name are listed on the 1901 census for England and Wales.) It will help if you can show that he was born and lived in Feering, which seems to be a relatively small place.

continued

- The spelling of the Fischer surname, together with the forenames Carl and Frederick, might mean a German connection.
- Be prepared for Fischer to be written in the form of Fisher in some documents. Carl might also be in the form of Karl.



Research task: Your family

Using the investigation of the Fischer/Smith marriage as a template, find the earliest marriage certificate among your family papers and apply the same techniques.

Summary

- Family history and genealogy are used synonymously throughout this book.
- Technology can save you enormous amounts of time but you still need to evaluate carefully the data it gives you.
- Costs can mount up. Don't rush out and buy/subscribe to everything at once. Investigate free resources first.
- When you have a certificate, extract all the obvious information and then start speculating about things not recorded on the document.





Brain Training

There may be more than one correct answer to some of these questions.

- 1. Which of the following pieces of information would you expect to find on a full English marriage certificate?**
 - a) Groom's date of birth
 - b) Name of bride's father
 - c) Name of groom's mother
 - d) Occupation of groom
- 2. Which of the following is the best proxy (in genealogical terms) for a birth certificate?**
 - a) Credit card
 - b) Driving licence
 - c) Passport
 - d) School leaving certificate
- 3. What is the minimum number of witnesses required on a marriage certificate?**
- 4. A marriage witness can't be related to the bride or groom. True or false?**
- 5. By what initials is the Mormon Church also known?**

Answers

Q1 – b and d

Q2 – c

Q3 – Two

Q4 – False

Q5 – LDS