

Genealogy or Family History



Do you know the names of your great-grandparents, or the kind of lives they had? It is surprising how little we know of our family history and how little has been passed down the generations. It is uncommon for us to have known our own great-grandparents these days or to hear about their lives from our families, and often nothing at all is known about the generations beyond that.

To delve into our own family's past is a fascinating hobby and sometimes an emotional journey, as you may have seen on the BBC programme 'Who Do You Think You Are?' Those of you who enjoy detective stories or puzzles can get great pleasure and a sense of achievement from piecing together the snippets of information, like Hercule Poirot, into a verifiable family history. Many riddles can be solved and family stories proved or disproved. One such story in my own family prevailed for many years and was vehemently upheld as true by my maternal grandfather. The story goes like this.....

My grandfather's parents had both died by the time he was 10 years old and the money from their estate put into a trust fund which was held by a firm of solicitors. Money was released on request by his guardian to buy shoes, clothes etc. He has always maintained that the solicitors 'ran off with the money'.

I have been able to show by careful research that his mother re-married aged 39 yrs to a young soldier aged 22 yrs (this skeleton was well hidden in the cupboard) and within 6 months had died. So.....maybe the solicitors were innocent and the young soldier inherited it, who knows? It is a great pity that I did not start my research earlier when my grandfather was alive, we may have got to the bottom of the mystery. I am sure that many other families have similar apocryphal stories of the 'missing fortune'.

If you think you would like to trace your own family history, begin your research by gathering together family documents, photographs and stories. Talk to relatives to find out what they know of family relationships, locations, occupations and those all-important dates of births, marriages and deaths. The family bible is a very useful source of information if you have one. It was common practice for the head of the family to record significant events such as these in the family bible. All the information gathered can be recorded on family pedigree sheets, or more commonly these days, on computer. All the information will need to be verified by documentary evidence. The importance of this cannot be over emphasised, many budding genealogist have found themselves 'barking up the wrong family tree' because of an assumed connection. I have learned the hard way that everything must be verified in as many ways as possible in order to avoid this. Copies of many documents can be obtained from various places. For example birth, marriage and death certificate copies can be ordered from The General Register Office, Southport (www.gro.gov.uk/gro) at a cost of £12.00.

There are many sources of information on the internet now, some of which are free and some you pay for. A good starting point is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as the Mormon Church) which has been engaged in large-scale microfilming of genealogical records, not just those of its members. Their International Genealogical Index (IGI) contains millions of records of

individuals who lived between 1500 and 1900 primarily in the United States, Canada and Europe. This information is available free on their website (www.familysearch.org) which also includes several other large databases of information. So if you can get information on your own family going back beyond 1900 this is a good place to try to get even further back.

I should, at this point, give thanks and pay tribute to all those people who make this information available to all. These people, often unpaid volunteers, spend many tedious hours transcribing and collating documents into an accessible form. I have also been involved in doing some of this by transcribing hand written parish registers into computer files, some of them written in beautiful copper plate handwriting but many of which are as cryptic as my doctor's prescriptions! I have necessarily become quite good at deciphering these (with the aid of a magnifying glass).

Of course researching the documents can be interesting enough, but one of the greatest pleasures is to visit some of the places where your family have lived and get a real sense of the lives they had. In this way I have visited many interesting places I would not otherwise have visited, many of them little changed since the times my ancestors lived there. If you are lucky you can find out much more about your relatives on these visits by looking at gravestones, war memorials and the like, even the local pubs frequently have old photographs and documents on the walls. On one occasion we were visiting a small village where a relative had lived, and popped into the local pub for lunch. When we got talking to the landlord about our visit he brought out a copy of a newspaper cutting from 1895 about an inquest into the death of this particular relative who it turns out had committed suicide by hanging himself and also revealed more new detail. Apparently it was common practice in those days to hold inquests at the local pub and this landlord had kept the cutting as part of his research into the history of his pub.

I have found the process of exploring my family history, although time consuming, to be fascinating and rewarding, why not have a go? The family tree of Confucius has been maintained for over 2,500 years and is listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the largest existing family tree, so there's your target!

Get in touch with me if you like; I will always help if I can.