

Hints and Tips: Family History



Introduction

Family History is becoming more and more popular, as a greater number of people want to connect with their personal heritage. Realistically, though, with so many sources out there both in print and online, where do you actually start? Look no further than our Hints and Tips to help you get the best from your Family History research.

Where to begin?

Start with what you know

Before reaching for the internet, it is worth starting your research a little closer to home. Due to Data Protection legislation in the United Kingdom, most archive records which were created less than 100 years ago are closed to the public, if they contain personal information (e.g. names and addresses). Data Protection no longer applies once the person concerned has died, but this can still make the most recent

100 years of your family tree the most difficult hurdle to overcome. As a result, it can unfortunately put some people off before they really get going.

With that in mind, it is better to start with what you already know (or can find out). What photographs or family possessions do you have which may shed light on the lives or careers of some of your ancestors? Talk to older relatives and other family members to see what they can remember of their parents or grandparents, including key dates or events. If they can identify people in photographs for you, even better.

It is worth noting that if you have ancestors who were born, married or died outside the United Kingdom, including in countries which were formerly part of the British Empire, their records are most likely going to be held in the country concerned. There are, though, some exceptions, as in theory copies of registers relating to British nationals were sent back to the [General Register Office](#) in London. The National Archives at Kew also holds some records. More information on those records can be found [here](#).

Have a clear end goal

It is very easy to become overwhelmed by the amount of information on offer, particularly online. Identify a clear goal in terms of what you want to achieve (even if those goals need to be revisited over time). It is sometimes better to just start with your direct line of ancestors (including only basic details of their siblings) and conducting more in-depth research into them, before expanding outwards in your family tree. Having a clear goal from the start will help you to keep focussed on your research, and *should* stop you getting side-tracked as often!

Things to remember

Work backwards

It is much easier to work backwards in time systematically. Starting with your own date of birth, look at the date of the marriage of your parents or for their birth certificates. Usually marriage certificates include information on how old both parties in the marriage were, which would give you a rough indication of when they were born, and birth certificates usually give the date of marriage of the child's parents. From this, you should be able to locate their birth certificates, and so on.

Certificates less than 100 years old can be ordered from the [General Register Office](#) for a fee. Many earlier records over 100 years can be found online, including on [Ancestry](#) and [Find My Past](#).

Keep good notes

This is arguably one of the most important tips, as without keeping good records of what you have seen, and where you obtained it from, you may be left going round in circles! Save any images you download from internet sites with the name of the person, where you downloaded it from and the type of record it is in the title, and arrange files on your computer in a way that makes sense to you (by person or by time period are common ways to split the information up). For written notes, keep them in a secure folder with dividers. You can also purchase specialist family tree software if you prefer.

If you are consulting sources in an archives service, always make sure that your notes include the name of the service (particularly if you end up visiting more than one) and the full reference name and title of every source you looked at. This is invaluable if you decide you want to revisit sources in the future.

Not everything is online

It is very easy to assume that with millions of records now available on genealogy sites such as [Ancestry](#) and [Find My Past](#), everything you need is online. Whilst it may look that way, it is worth remembering that only a very small fraction of the sources available in the United Kingdom have actually been digitised. This number is constantly growing, but if you want to conduct more in-depth research about a particular person beyond their significant dates and what you can find in the census returns, you will most likely need to speak to your local archives service (or the archives service covering the area your family came from).

More details about local archives services in the UK can be found in the [National Archives' Find an Archive portal](#).

Speak to your local library or archives service

If you get stuck, or would like more information or advice, consult your nearest Local Studies Library or archives service, and they will be able to point you in the right direction. In York, our Archives and Local History Service at York Explore Library is the place to contact. At York Explore we have a dedicated Family History Room with hundreds of reference books on all aspects of family history. We also have:

- a free Family History Buddy service for if you get stuck (by appointment)
- free sessions to get you started with Ancestry and Find My Past

- more in-depth sessions on getting the best out of Ancestry and Find My Past (for a charge)
- hands-on 'Moving on with Family History' workshops (for a charge). Please contact us for further information as to when the next workshop will run.

We also provide free access to Ancestry Library Edition, Find My Past and the British Newspaper Archive in all our libraries, both on the Public Network PCs and on your own laptop or tablet over our Wi-Fi network.

We are always happy to answer any questions you have about your family history. Just contact us on 01904 552800, or email archives@exploreYork.org.uk.

Further resources:

The [UK National Archives](#) has a huge number of online guides available on its website, covering all areas of family history. These guides cover records held at the National Archives in Kew, as well as tips for online searching and where to consult local record offices.

The [Society of Genealogists](#) has a very detailed website with more information and support for researching your family tree.