

Researching family history: Step by step guide

Introduction

In recent years family history has become an extremely popular hobby for many people, particularly as a result of the huge number of helpful websites that have been made available on the Internet. This means that record offices and libraries are usually no longer the first point of contact for budding family historians. However, the more dedicated researcher will also need to know exactly what sources exist other than those available online, and where one must go in order to locate them.

In fact there are numerous sources available to help with both basic family history and with 'putting flesh on the bones'. Different sources of information will help to answer different questions.

Basic advice to beginners in family history

Begin by assembling information which exists within the family e.g. birth, marriage and death certificates. Talk to elderly relatives before it is too late to do so. They often have a wealth of information and knowledge.

Always work backwards and logically and do not take leaps back into the middle of the 18th or 19th centuries.

Be aware that not everything is available online. There are some extremely useful family history sites containing a wealth of information, but enquirers will generally have to visit record offices or libraries at some point in their research.

Tracing your family history can take a long time and can be frustrating at times. People must be prepared to carry out research for themselves when visiting the Archive Service or their library.

It is important to record information accurately and make a note of the reference to the source in which it was found. It may be necessary to re-visit the source later. Records earlier than the 19th century may be difficult to read because of earlier styles of handwriting. Latin occurs regularly in 16th and 17th century parish registers. Latinised Christian names are also common e.g. Johannus for John, Maria for Mary.

Be prepared for variant spellings of the same surname at different times. The spelling of surnames can also be phonetic in earlier records. Diminutives are also common for Christian names.

Remember that records were kept for very specific purposes, not to help later generations to research their family history, and therefore may not always record the information which people might expect.

Do not make assumptions about ancestors, about their religious faith or about their capacity to move around. Economic necessity often determined people's movements in the past. Staunch Anglicanism in the present generation does not mean the same necessarily applied to former generations.

Always check unproven family traditions however romantic or attractive, e.g. "We are related to the Duke of Bloggs".

People will get more out of their family history if they try to put a little flesh on the bones and read about the place where their family came or about the social history of the time.

The Archive Service does have a research service for people who cannot visit the Service in person. Details are available via www.staffordshire.gov.uk/leisure/archives/

Before visiting any of the Archive Service offices enquirers should telephone to make an appointment. Seats or microform readers cannot be guaranteed without prior booking.

Research sources

The following are the standard sources for family history. In general terms there is a much wider range of sources available for family history research for the 19th and 20th centuries.

1. Civil Registration Records

The system of registering births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales was introduced in 1837. Indexes are available to these records, meaning that searches are possible. These indexes are now most easily accessible online on websites such as www.ancestry.co.uk (a subscription site, but available to use free of charge at your local Staffordshire library), and www.freebmd.org.uk (transcribed by volunteers, with coverage at present better for the earlier years of civil registration). Some record offices and larger libraries also have the indexes available on microfiche.

2. Census Returns

The census returns are amongst the most useful sources of historical information about families and individuals. The first national census was taken in 1801. Since then it has been repeated every ten years, except in wartime. As the returns are closed for a period of 100 years, those currently available for consultation by the public cover the census years between 1841-1901.

1801 – 1831: The census returns are purely numerical in content and contain no personal information.

1841 census: The first detailed national census was taken on Sunday 6th June, 1841. It lists the name, age, sex and occupation (sometimes fairly generalised) of each person in each household. It also indicates whether a person was born in Staffordshire or not by the use of a "Y" or "N", but it does not record the parish of origin. It was usual to apply the "rounding-down" principle with ages for anyone over the age of 15. The age was rounded down to the nearest five years.

1851 – 1901: The 1851 census records full names, exact ages, sex, occupation, trade or profession, family relationships and parish and county of birth. Addresses, such as they were, are given, although it should be remembered that there was little street-numbering, particularly in rural areas.

The subsequent census returns gradually record more information. By 1891, more detail is recorded concerning employment status and the size of individual dwelling

houses and in 1901 whether a house is in occupation or is being built. It is also worth remembering that as the population increased and urban areas developed during the later 19th century, the census returns become comparatively bigger and take longer to work through.

Within Staffordshire Libraries you can access all the census returns that are currently publicly available for free via www.ancestry.co.uk. Various other websites offer access to census returns, but most are chargeable. However, the 1881 census for this country is available to search for free at www.familysearch.org. All major libraries within Staffordshire hold census returns for their local area on microfiche. The Archive Service also provides access to the census returns for the county.

3. Trade Directories

Trade directories provide lists of principal inhabitants and trades people in particular places. They were published every few years, although not on a consistent basis, and they can be useful supplementary sources to the census returns, since they can help to locate people in the years between each census. They also pre-date the earliest census returns, the two major directories for Staffordshire prior to this date being those published in 1818 and 1834.

All major trade directories for Staffordshire (and some adjoining counties) can be accessed via the Archive Service and at all major libraries in Staffordshire. You can view a selection of old trade directories at www.historicaldirectories.org.

4. Electoral Registers

These list persons eligible to vote according to the franchise in force at the time. This means that, although they can be very useful, the earlier registers are only dealing with a relatively minor percentage of the population. The Archive Service holds electoral registers for most parts of the county from 1832-1908, 1918-1939 and 1945-1974. Main libraries hold some past copies of electoral registers for the local area. The arrangement of electoral registers varies at different times.

5. Parish Registers and Bishops Transcripts

Before civil registration was introduced, family historians are largely dependent on parish registers of births, marriages and burials. Parish churches were obliged to keep such registers from the mid-16th century onwards. The amount of information recorded in them will vary depending on the date, and earlier registers contain less useful information than later ones.

The Archive Service holds original registers for the majority of parish churches in the county. These are available on microfiche. Most larger libraries have copies of parish registers for their local area.

Bishops' transcripts are the diocesan copies of parish registers which were produced from c 1660 onwards. They can be useful where gaps occur in the series of original registers. They are held at Lichfield Record Office and the holdings cover Derbyshire, north Shropshire and north-east Warwickshire as well as Staffordshire. The International Genealogical Index (IGI) is an index to baptisms and marriages, transcribed from original entries. It is extremely useful to anyone undertaking family history research, although it must be remembered that most entries come from years prior to the end of the 19th century. Most record offices and larger libraries will have copies of the IGI for their local area on microfiche.

www.familysearch.org is an excellent website which includes free access to the

IGI.

6. Nonconformist Registers

Registers survive from the late 18th century for a variety of nonconformist denominations and a number of original registers are deposited with the Archive Service. They are available for consultation on microform at all of the Archive Service points. Full details of holdings can be found in 'Nonconformist Records', a handlist produced by the Archive Service.

7. Roman Catholic Registers

Roman Catholic registers of baptism, marriage and burial survive mainly from the period after 1778, although there are a few earlier registers. The Archive Service holds microfilm copies of some Catholic registers but the originals are deposited with the Archdiocese of Birmingham Archives.

8. Wills and inventories

These can be particularly helpful for establishing family relationships as well as the social and economic status of individuals. Original wills for the diocese of Lichfield wills are held at Lichfield Record Office from the 16th century until 1858. Copy wills are held from 1858-1928.

9. Other sources

There are a number of other, less well-used sources, which can expand on aspects of family history. These include records of the poor, education and crime and punishment as well as pedigrees and coats of arms. Local newspapers can also be valuable to family historians as these often include announcements of births, marriages and deaths. Some newspapers may have been indexed.

Further Information

Staffordshire Library and Arts Service

www.staffordshire.gov.uk/leisure/librariesnew

Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Archive Service

www.staffordshire.gov.uk/leisure/archives

Staffordshire Record Office, Eastgate Street, Stafford, ST16 2LZ.

Tel: 01785 278380 Email: staffordshire.record.office@staffordshire.gov.uk

Stoke on Trent City Archives, Hanley Library, Bethesda Street, Hanley, ST1 3RS.

Tel. 01782 238420 Email: stoke.archives@stoke.gov.uk

William Salt Library, Eastgate Street, Stafford ST16 2LZ

Tel: 01785 278372 Email: william.salt.library@staffordshire.gov.uk



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