

First Steps Guide to Family History

Presentation notes and handout for Harborough Welland U3A Family History Group Meeting April 2022

Welcome to the world of Family History. If you are just starting the good news is that as well as the people in our group, there is a whole industry out there ready to assist you and new records and information are going on line every day. There are Family History groups in every county and most large towns in the UK and throughout most of the world, and there are endless self-help videos, podcasts and user groups to assist you in your journey to discover and learn about your ancestors. By learning about them, I do not just mean a series of names, births and deaths, but also details of their lives in the context of their times. If you are hooked on the BBC TV series "Who do you think you are? ", you are not alone. If you have been researching your family tree for many years you will know it is good TV but the reality of searching is a bit different, and in my opinion much more fun.

With so much information available it is great hobby, but starting can be daunting!

The object of this guide is to give members of this group a common way of starting which is less daunting when you start and, if you follow the guidance, will make it easier for more experienced people to assist.

I am assuming everyone will want to develop their own trees on line, if not, I am sure there will be people here, myself included, who will be happy to help, or do it for you or with you. Whatever what follows still applies.

Agenda

- 1) Preparing to build a Family Tree
- 2) Starting an on-line tree
- 3) Avoiding pitfalls
- 4) Building the tree and beyond

Preparing to build a Family Tree

The first thing most tutorials state when starting research is to ask parents and older living relatives..... Few of us are now able to do this!! We probably ARE the older, living relatives.

The principle behind this advice still holds, if we look there is a huge amount of information we already have or know, or think we know, so the best thing is to ensure we secure it.

Before purchasing software or subscriptions or pay per view records it is best to write out what we already know on paper, starting with ourselves or our children and working back to parents and grandparents and back as far as you can. This can be from your memory, birth or marriage or death certificates, birthday books, etc.

The way to start is by filling in a Pedigree Chart, there is proforma attached to these notes.

The original and a bigger version can be found on the Lost Cousins website which I would recommend you look at, at some stage after you have done enough research to find several of your ancestors on the 1881 Census.

Here is the Lost Cousins Home Page

<https://www.lostcousins.com/pages/members/home.mhtml>

Here is a link to the Pedigree Chart

https://www.lostcousins.com/pages/info/lostcousins_chart.pdf

You start with yourself (or possibly one of your children) and work back to your parents and then grandparents. Note the full names, dates and places of birth, marriage and death. I also like to add occupations or employers. If you don't know, leave it blank to be completed later. Note the convention is to put the father above the mother for each generation and use women's maiden names even if they marry. Nicknames are worth noting and can be recorded as "also known as"

For each couple take a separate sheet and note the parents and list all their children including dates and places of birth, marriages and deaths etc. Having this will make it much easier to complete it in any computer programme, or to allow anyone else to help do that. This is called a Family Chart.

When you get beyond the information you have in your head and start to use documents or the memories of others make sure you make a note of the source of each piece of information. I.e "Birth Cert on file" or "from discussion with Uncle Fred in Jan 2022" or "my mother's address book, on file".

At the same time as this, look out any address books, old photograph albums, any other information which may give clues, and ensure they are not disposed of. You may think they do not have useful information but let me give you some examples where these may be useful.

There are experts and groups who can date pictures based on the clothing people are wearing, identify military service units and other professions based on uniforms. There are ways of identifying places and often dates based on landscapes, buildings, vehicles etc.

Think of siblings or cousins who may have information you can get later, consult them before it is too late.

Starting an on-line tree

Before computers and the popularity of family history you had to work out how to document and file and display information, but now there are several on line solutions, which follow internally recognised guidelines and ensure compatibility. In the past you had to visit churchyards and spend considerable time in various record offices looking at microfilms or great ledgers, scanning for your relatives. Now most records are on line, digitised and searchable. Later we can look at some of the internet sites where further records can be found but first let us look at putting your “tree” on line.

All the major on-line trees automatically hide information about living people and usually anything under 100 years old. You need not worry that you are putting in your mother’s maiden name and other information the banks usually ask as security questions. I cannot say it is entirely safe but it is probably much safer than say Facebook or Twitter if you are a relative novice.

There are two basic types of on-line family trees. The first a bit like Wikipedia, in that there is one tree and anyone can contribute. Examples are Family Search (run by the Church of the Latter Day Saints) and Geni (associated with MyHeritage) We will ignore these for now. Partly because they are not so easy to navigate but mainly because it is better to have your own tree which no one else can meddle with and you do not risk putting something incorrect on a tree shared by everyone. I would note that in the longer term, FamilySearch almost certainly has more useful information than any other source. It is worth looking at just to read what it contains, but do not be discouraged if you find it difficult to navigate. It takes time and effort to get the best out of it.

Here is a link to the FamilySearch site:

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/>

The second type is where the company provides a platform for everyone to build their own tree. Examples are Ancestry, Find My Past and My Heritage. At our first meeting we will ask who in the group uses what software.

(Post meeting note: by far the most popular site used by those at the April 2022 meeting was Ancestry, a few also used Find My Past.)

There are pros and cons for each but the way they work is very similar, you fill in the information for your tree. You can look at this information in different ways, and add in source information, pictures, notes, research comments or other documents. These sites will then use your information to search their own databases and come up with hints as to possible documents or other people’s trees which may be relevant to your relatives. The information is held in their cloud but you can access it from your computer or tablet or even phone and in many cases share access with other people. The downside is it is not held on your own computer, so you need to keep copies of the information in case the company goes out of business. There is a standard format for transferring Family Tree info called a Gedcom file. It is beyond the scope of this talk but before you get too much info on line it should be done.

The more information you fill in on your on-line tree the more and better hints you will see. If you want to see the details of these hints you usually have to pay. You can take out monthly or annual subscriptions at various levels, depending on what sort of records you want to access. You can usually get free access in the local library, but you are then confined to library opening times to do your research.

Ancestry and FindMyPast have the biggest databases, FindMyPast possibly has more English records and newspapers that Ancestry lacks, but Ancestry had significantly more records from outside the UK. It is free on either site to build your tree and as it grows you will begin to see where your ancestors lived and so work out which you need to subscribe to get the best records. Most people end up subscribing to both at some stage.

Here is a link to Ancestry. (ensure you use the .co.uk site rather than the .com one)

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/>

Here is a link to FindMyPast

<https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>

If your ancestors are mainly Scottish or Irish there are few original records on either Ancestry or Findmypast, but you still get the facilities to build a tree and have it backed up on line.

It does not really matter which you use to start with, my preference is Ancestry, and it has the added advantage of having the biggest DNA database, so if you have also done a DNA test you have the possibility of an additional check on the accuracy of the tree. (or possibly something darker in your ancestors past)

It is beyond the scope of this presentation to go into details about entering information into your tree but it is fairly self-explanatory, and all sites have online guides. Or there will be someone in the group who can help.

If you want to go a step further, you can purchase specialist software which gives the options of presenting and printing the information in different ways and I would argue makes it easier to enter and check information. Most will also synchronise with one or more sites. I use Family Tree Maker, but others are Roots Magic, Legacy, Family Tree Builder. We will find out at the meeting which are commonly used in the group.

(Post meeting note: several people used Family Tree Maker. No one suggested using any other ones at the meeting)

Here is a link to the site where you can find out about and purchase Family Tree Maker

<https://www.mackiev.com/ftm/>

Avoiding Pitfalls

No one wants to put incorrect information on their tree, and if you get a wrong spouse then every person who you put as an ancestor of that spouse will also be wrong. Any errors can be corrected but it is time consuming.

Make sure you keep a note of the source of every piece of information you use. If from a birth record you will have a person's date and place of birth, also the father's name and the mother's Christian name and possibly her maiden name. These sources (ie the Birth Record) can be added to your tree as you enter the information or at a later date.

Most apps allow you to merge a single document from their hints or database into your tree. This will then add that document to the sources for the relevant facts. This is a brilliant time saving feature but you still need to check for errors. Generally, you will have to add sources manually for documents found on other sites or your own papers.

Be aware that it is estimated that few trees on Ancestry or FindMyPast are without errors, and some are almost pure fiction.

Never just merge information from another person's tree, without exhaustive checks. If you are happy, merge a "document", but never merge a "person" It is made too easy to do in Ancestry. You would be amazed, if you look at some of the on-line trees, at how many women had children before the age of 12 or over 50, or siblings born within 9 months of each other, or successive children of agricultural labourers being born in areas miles apart or even different continents. Some may be correct but they certainly need checking!!

4) Building the tree and beyond

Once you have entered all the information you have collected about your family you will start to get hints on potentially useful documents. Work from what you know and go back in time, looking at the actual images and checking they are right before merging the relevant documents and keeping notes or making changes as necessary. Note there will usually be more information on the image than the transcription. Records will have been transcribed from the handwriting in the image and although most are correct some of the handwriting is not good and mistakes occur. But if it were all perfect our hobby would be greatly diminished!!

(Post meeting note: It was pointed out at the meeting that there are many Family History groups who are currently or have already transcribed local parish records, so if an image is poor or difficult to read you may be able to get a better transcription, the example given was Staffordshire)

Some of the most useful documents are the UK Census's. Here you get information on everyone in a household with their ages, occupations, and places of birth, plus some other information depending on the year. Most importantly it notes the relationship of each person to the head of the household. If you are really lucky you may find the mother or mother in law or a sibling living with the family.

(Post Meeting Note: It was noted that if you know the date of the night of the census you can get a more accurate birth year. The dates of the census nights can be found on Google, but beware, although for children this is a good indicator, in these times accuracy in age was not that important, and in many cases, either people did not get it right or were economical with the truth. Often for an obvious reason. Infant mortality was high and childrens' names were often re used. Ie if Jane died in infancy and the next child was a girl she may well have been called Jane. In the 1841 Census adult ages are only accurate to the nearest 5 years. In addition to this be aware that before the 1911 census these forms were filled out by enumerators, and given possible strong local accents and a lack of consistency on spelling, you may find differences in ages, spelling or even just mistakes by the enumerator. All adds to the fun!!))

These UK Census returns are on line for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871,1881,1891,1901 and 1911. For Scotland you will need to go to the ScotlandsPeople website and pay per document viewed. The costs to view England and Wales Census returns are covered by the monthly or annual fees for Ancestry or FindMyPast. A version of the 1881 Census transcription is free on most sites.

Ireland is different as many Census records were destroyed but there are other ways of getting to the information.

The USA, Canada and other countries also held censuses, they were on different dates and have different information, details are beyond the scope of this talk)

The 1921 Census has just been released for England and Wales on FindMyPast but it costs an additional fee for each record viewed. Records for Scotland are due to be released next year on ScotlandsPeople.

Hints can include images of actual records such as Birth, Baptism, Marriage, Death, Burial, Probate, ships passengers, passport applications, Military service and medals, the list is almost endless and expanding all the time. Often if the image is not available there will be an index with basic information and the actual image may be accessible on another site.

Years ago when there were few records on line and you had to visit record offices or use websites sites like GRO, FreeReg, Free Cert etc. you needed to know the difference between statutory records and parish records and the dates that legislation changed, for both state and church. If you did not you could spend hours searching for something which did not exist. I would argue that now that is less important. Just get all you can from the hints, you may not need to get more sophisticated to get what you need for a particular individual or family. When or if you get stuck then that sort of information will help.

When you have exhausted the hints and tried different spellings and changing search parameters, in the site you are in, it is time to explore other sources and the more complex searches in your subscription service. That is again beyond the scope of this talk. By this time also you may have some lines back to the early 1800's and

others you may be stuck at grandparents. This is normal, and the places you are stuck at are referred to as “Brick Walls” because you can’t see past them! Gather as much information as you can about these people their children, occupations and the places they lived in or attended church in. Armed with that information it is time to consult others or the many books on breaking down brick walls. That again is beyond the scope of this document.

Everyone’s tree will be different and you will find yourself researching in different directions, finding out about places and topics you might never have in your wildest dreams have thought would interest you. Which is one of the reasons it is such an interesting hobby. Remember there will always be more to find and there will also be someone who can help you

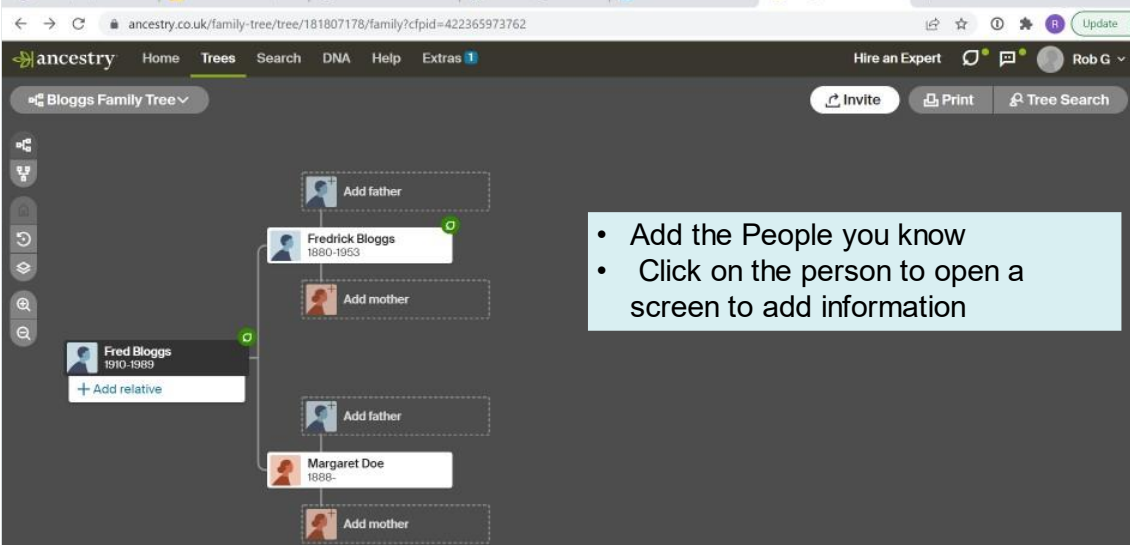
Rob Green

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Ancestor Chart
(Numbers shown are ancestor/Ahnentafel numbers)
Provided free by www.lostcousins.com

Starting an On-line Tree



The screenshot shows the Ancestry website interface for a family tree. The tree structure is as follows:

- Top level: Fredrick Bloggs (1880-1953) with a green leaf symbol and an "Add father" button above him.
- Second level: Fredrick Bloggs (1880-1953) and Margaret Doe (1888-) are connected by a vertical line. Margaret Doe has an "Add mother" button below her.
- Third level: Fred Bloggs (1910-1989) is connected to Fredrick Bloggs (1880-1953) by a vertical line. Fred Bloggs has an "Add relative" button below him.

On the right side of the screenshot, there is a light blue text box with the following instructions:

- Add the People you know
- Click on the person to open a screen to add information

All the online trees I have seen have tabs and buttons all over the screen, and as the sites make “improvements” they change.

It just takes a bit of time to get used to them.

I won't spend much time on these but I started a tree for my fictitious friend Fred Bloggs,

I had only entered his parents when Ancestry found a “hint” the green leaf symbols. The more info you put in the better the hints are likely to be. At first most will be obviously wrong, they will improve.

Fredrick Bloggs
 BIRTH 1880 • Market Harborough, Leicestershire, England
 DEATH 1953 • Market Harborough

View in tree | View notes | View comments | Merge with duplicate | Save to tree | Print | Member connect

LifeStory | **Facts** | Gallery | Hints 1

Facts Filter Add

- 1880 (AGE) Birth 1880 • Market Harborough, Leicestershire, England
- Possible marriage records Search
- 1910 30 Birth of son Fred Bloggs (1910-1989) 10/10/1910 • Market Harborough, Leicestershire, England
- 1953 73 Death 1953 • Market Harborough

Sources Add

- Search on Ancestry
- Add source
- Add web link

Family Add

Parents

- Add father
- Add mother

Spouse and children

- Margaret Doe 1888-
- Fred Bloggs 1910-1989

So far this is all FREE!

From here you can enter everything you know about that person. As you do so in the background the sites web crawlers are looking to find information which may be useful to you. Look at the Hints to find this information.

That could be census records, statutory of parish Birth Marriage burial wills probate voters lists photos, military records the lost is almost endless and growing.

Your job is to be a detective and work out which are relevant.