

A Beginner's Guide to Family History

Introduction

Family history research is an ever-growing hobby, becoming increasingly popular through various television programmes that make the process seem easy and straightforward. But how do you organise the confusing mix of names into a logical, illustrative and accurate family tree?

Where do I begin?

The main thing to remember when constructing your family tree is to start with the present and make logical progressions backwards, from generation to generation. Firstly try to map out what you already know, beginning with yourself. Start by constructing a pedigree with the names of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, including any dates of birth, marriage or death, which you already know.

The next step is to talk to knowledgeable older relatives who may remember additional details and stories. At this stage it may be best to just listen and take notes, as their train of thought can often stray from the point. Details can always be clarified at a later date. When talking to older relatives it is also wise to ask after family papers, photographs and Bibles. Birth, marriage and death certificates may be lingering in a shoebox somewhere and a family Bible may record the dates of baptisms, marriages and burials. It is also useful to try and find out where in Somerset your family lived. Somerset contains 567 ancient parishes and it could be a long search if you only know a vague locality. A final reminder is not to assume all persons in a parish with the same surname are part of the same family: prove they are yours before claiming them!

The Sources

Records of Civil Registration are normally the starting-point for family history. The registration of births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales began in 1837, and although not compulsory until 1875, should list all the events registered since. It is quicker to order a certificate if you know the volume and folio number of the entry, which can be found in the indexes. There are separate national indexes for each event, and each year is divided into quarters (March, June, September and December quarters), with the event being recorded in the quarter during which it occurred, thus a birth in January would be recorded in the March quarter. Once an entry has been found in the index, an application can be made to the General Register Office or the local registrar to purchase a copy of the certificate. See the separate Civil Registration leaflet for more details.

Parish Registers were ordered to be kept from 1538, although most for Somerset survive from the 17th century. Registers record baptisms, marriages and burials for the Church of England. Registers for the Diocese of Bath and Wells are held at the Somerset Record Office, and most are available on microfiche. To use this source you need to know which parish to search, and an approximate date, as the majority of parish registers remain un-indexed. A related source are the **Bishops' Transcripts**, the annual returns from the parish to the bishop recording baptisms, marriages and burials performed in a parish. Bishops' Transcripts can fill in missing gaps in parish registers and a catalogue of the transcripts is available in the Research Room.

Catholics and non-conformist religions also kept registers, and the leaflet about non-conformist records provides more details.

Census returns were first collected in 1801, but names were not recorded until 1841. From then the census has been taken every ten years (apart from 1941). The Somerset Heritage Centre holds microform copies of the returns for Somerset for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901 (but not the 1911 census). The census provides details of individuals, including their address, position in the family, age, sex, profession and place of birth. Surname indexes are available for the 1851 and 1891 Somerset census and a national index for 1881. For more details, see the separate Census leaflet.

The International Genealogical Index (IGI) has been compiled by the Church of the Later Day Saints from parish registers and other sources. It lists many baptism and marriage entries for the whole country. The index is arranged alphabetically by surname within each county. However, the IGI coverage for Somerset is poor with only 3% of entries for the years 1754-1812 covered. Any entries found on the IGI need to be double-checked with original parish register entries to ensure accuracy. The index for Somerset is available on microfiche, and is also available online at www.familysearch.org.

Wills can be a very valuable source providing details about the person making the will and their families. Legacies are often bequeathed to wives, husbands, children or siblings. Letters of Administration were granted where a will was not written, and although less informative they often give the next of kin as the person appointed to administer the estate. Before 1858 wills were administered in church courts and after 1858 in civil courts and the Principal Probate Registry. Unfortunately, most of Somerset's wills were destroyed by bombing during World War II. Various indexes have been compiled to the wills still in existence as well as those that were destroyed. Please see the separate leaflet about wills for more details and ask staff for assistance with discovering whether a will still exists.

Other family history sources are also available, such as:

- Marriage licences, which often provide slightly more information than the parish marriage entries
- Settlement certificates and removal orders, which provide a rich source of information about the poor of a parish
- Quarter Sessions records, which deal with the criminal elements of society, along with bastardy, apprenticeship and licensing records
- Education records, which include the admission registers and log books for many schools in Somerset

More specific sources are also available if you know, for example, your ancestor worked on a large estate or had a profession. Please ask staff for assistance – we are always happy to help.

How to record your findings

It is very important to keep a record of every source that you search, so that you do not go over the same material twice. The best way to do this is to write down the type of record, dates and reference number. Even if your search has been unsuccessful, it is useful to know that it produced no results.

Next find a cataloguing system that works for you. Possible techniques are a biographical sheet per person, recording important dates at the top of the page, names of spouse, parents, siblings and children, with space at the bottom for other interesting facts, or a system based on

organising by family groups. There are also numerous computer programmes that can help you to organise your research.

At an early stage it may be useful to compile a pedigree, so family links are clear and you have an easy reference point. Where possible it may be worth having copies of relevant documents; difficult words can be deciphered at a later date and the copies help to add flesh to your research.

And finally....

There is a wide range of published family history guides, and most bookshops and libraries should stock several. These provide in-depth overview of sources, where they are held, and what information you can gain from them. A selection of guides are available at the Somerset Heritage Centre, and you can also purchase our more detailed guide: *Your Somerset Family: A Guide to Tracing Your Family History in the Somerset Record Office*. The Internet is also a rich source of information for genealogy, providing general guidance, online searchable data, and a wide variety of discussion groups.

Our staff are always willing to help. They can point you in the direction of relevant information and may be able to help with a niggling question or lost ancestor. So if in doubt, please ask.

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