

A look at family history

by Graham Gower

Are you a Taylor, Baker or Butcher, or are you Short, Strong or Light? Possibly not, but maybe you are a Chester or Darby. You could even be a King, Prince, Abbott or Priest. But whatever surname you have, English or otherwise, you can be sure of one thing, it will probably have a meaning obvious to you or not. To many their surnames are self explanatory and immediately recognised as deriving from an occupational name, a nickname or a place-name. However, there are those surnames which are not so easily explained, their origins and meanings being somewhat obscure or uncertain.

Nevertheless, the desire to find the origins of a family name is an activity that grips many people and is part of the overall excitement enjoyed by those who are looking for their 'roots'. This satisfying pursuit of tracing ones family origins has developed into a popular pastime, engaging thousands of people across the world, especially in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. Out of this interest has developed a host of national and international family history societies and organisations, plus numerous books, journals and magazines, a number of popular web sites and a range of computer software. In addition there are regular family history fairs and events which are held across the country. Furthermore the various county and local record offices have responded accordingly by producing user friendly guides and lists to their extensive genealogical sources and services to the public.



So, if you are curious, where do you start? First of all it is worth knowing that many people have traced their ancestry back to the sixteenth century and beyond into the Middle Ages. However going back this far does require a modicum of good fortune plus a degree of dedication and study. Yet this should not deter the enthusiasm of a potential family historian. Many people have successfully traced their family back over the generations with little difficulty and with great satisfaction.

Basically success will depend on a number of factors, such as the records available for study and the approach taken by the individual researcher, which will vary from person to person. Another consideration is the time available for study and for likely travel to the various record offices and archives departments. As mentioned the approach will vary

and may see some individuals tracing only the paternal or maternal lines of their family, while others will seek out all the branches, aiming to create an extended family tree. Some may simply prefer to undertake a 'surname' study. But once the approach has been decided, it is well worth becoming familiar with the methodology and techniques employed in family history studies. This can be gleaned from the numerous books and guides available to the family historian which are readily found in bookshops, libraries and record offices.



Although the documentary sources available to the family historian are extensive and go way back into history, there are a number of basic ones which are common to all genealogical studies. These are civil registration certificates namely birth, marriage and death certificates; census returns from 1841 to 1891; settlement papers; parish birth, marriage and death registers; non-conformists records; poor law records which relate to the workhouse system; apprenticeship records; cemetery registers; rate books; electoral registers and town and county street and trade directories. Moreover there are manorial rolls; subsidy rolls; protestation returns; monumental inscriptions; land tax records; tithe redemption records; school records and those that cover the armed forces and clergy; all utilised in one way or another by the family historian in their endeavour to find their roots.

As the reader will appreciate the sources are encompassing and wide ranging, offering the researcher scope and choice in selecting their manner of approach. Initially this will include obtaining birth, marriage and death certificates to establish names, ages, occupations and addresses of past family members. These certificates will take you back to 1837 when civil registration first came into being. Before this date the next sources to turn to are parish registers. These were introduced in 1538 and record baptisms, marriages and burials and by the nineteenth century included addresses and occupations. If you happen to know where your ancestors came from there is a fair chance of finding them in these registers. When looking at such sources one must bear in mind that surname spelling and handwriting styles do change over the generations.

Variations in surname spelling are often seen in the census returns. These began in 1801 when the first decennial census of the population of England and Wales took place. These were statistical until the 1841 census

when information about people was collected and included. From these returns can be extracted ages, birthplaces, occupations and family structures and are also considered an important sources for social and local history studies. The last census available to the public is for 1891, and as a 100 years has to pass before the next census is released, the 1901 census will be available for public use from January 2002.

With information taken from the above sources an outline 'family tree' can soon be established, albeit probably with some gaps. This tree may take you back many generations and will introduce you to new family surnames and possibly to an ancestral village or town. But quite often other sources are needed and called upon when a certain individual or family cannot be located, having disappeared from the registers or not found in the census or other obvious sources - a problem which can beset the family historian. This occurrence is often a reflection of the mobility that our ancestors enjoyed, moving from one parish or town to another, usually in the pursuit of gainful employment. Such movements of people can often be traced using settlement certificates but checking this source may not always produce the expected results.

However, all is not lost and most researchers will turn to the numerous parish or county surname lists that are available in record offices. These have been compiled from many of the sources previously mentioned. Such lists are usually found as transcripts, indexes or as published volumes, as for example with marriage licences and wills. These lists can often help narrowing down the field of research and ease the occasional moments of frustration when an eagerly sought after ancestor becomes elusive or difficult to find. To aid the researcher many surname lists have been copied onto microfilm or microfiche. These can be consulted in local record offices where viewing machines and printout facilities are readily available. Likewise, the researcher will find parish registers, rate books, census returns and many other prime sources also available in this manner.



Furthermore, a visit to a record office or to a local library will familiarise the researcher with the numerous societies and organisations established to aid and encourage family history studies. Most of these groups can be visited on the internet along with a number of popular family history web sites. These offer information and links to other researchers based in this country or abroad. So, if you are curious about your ancestry, why not have a go. But firstly, take a closer look at your surname - it may hold a clue.