

FEATURE ARTICLES



Tracing Your English Ancestry Online, Part 1 of 3

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Throughout the 20th century, migrants from the British Isles flocked to Canada. Over two million British immigrants entered the country between 1901 and 1921, so it comes as no surprise to learn that almost half modern Canadians claim some British ancestry. For people tracing their family history, the Atlantic ocean can seem like a huge obstacle to progressing research, but many people fail to realise how much information is available on the Internet at a modest cost, or even for free.

Numerous organisations in the UK work tirelessly to make a range of information available on the Internet. From census records to indexes of the Register of

Births, Marriages and Deaths, several sites can help you track down your ancestors. All you need is knowledge of a few things, like where they were born. There are many websites that provide useful details once you've identified your ancestors. These include wills, trade directories, and even military service records. If you're looking for information on your family history involving English or Welsh ancestors then an initial search on the Internet is a cost effective starting point. There are also numerous records available for Scotland and Northern Ireland, but in this article I have concentrated on English and Welsh data.

Getting Started

Before you fire up your PC and begin surfing the Web, there are a few things to bear in mind; thorough preparation will save you time and frustration later on.

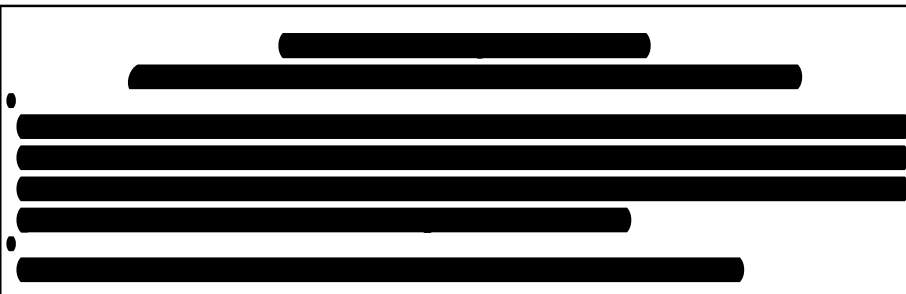
First, review what you already know about your ancestors and how reliable that information is. Genealogists will tell you that any family anecdotes should be backed up by documentary evidence. Some of this you will find as you search, but if the only source for a name you have is your Great Aunt Agatha—who dimly remembers that “second cousin Jimmy came from the south east of England”—then you might not get very far with your research.

Before beginning, gather all your existing information together and choose your starting point. For example, if your parents arrived as a young married couple during the Suez Crisis of 1956 then you are not going to find much information on them. The most recent British census information available to view is from 1901, so you can only find people born before March 1901 (such as grandparents and great grandparents).

Once you have identified your starting point, be methodical and work backwards in time. It can be extremely tempting to follow up a new lead as soon as you find it, but try to contain yourself. It may be that the information you have uncovered relates to someone other than your ancestor, particularly if you have a common surname such as Smith. As little as one hundred years ago, it was still common for surnames to have geographic distributions around particular villages in the UK; often, several unrelated individuals with the same or similar names were born within a couple years of each other.

For each individual you want to trace, you should have a name—remember that there may be variations in spelling—or people may have been known by a nickname) and an approximate year of birth. To avoid being overloaded with data, you should also know a little about where the person was born or lived. At a minimum, you should know the county in question, but having the actual place of birth helps to narrow your search. Be aware that English censuses rely heavily on Civil and religious parishes. Various guides to old parishes are available, and an Internet search should help

(Continued on page 3)



you find what you are looking for. Knowing that your grandfather was born in Manchester in 1904 suggests that his parents might have lived there at the time of the 1901 Census, but this is not necessarily the case. By all means check the records, but be prepared for failure and, even if you find a likely match, be prepared to check the new information extra rigorously.

NEXT MONTH: Census Records

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Richard Crowhurst is a freelance writer from Lincolnshire in England. He writes about many things, but specialises in British history and heritage subjects. He is a keen amateur genealogist and (with help) has researched his own family history back to the early 1600s.

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