

# FIRST STEPS

in family history:



## Where do I start?

- **Start** with yourself and your immediate family and work back from there.
- **Draw** a basic family tree on paper.
- **Question** your relatives: older relatives can provide a great deal of helpful information, do not neglect younger relatives who may remember things they have been told.
- **Locate** family documents and pictures. Important as nobody remembers everything accurately, so either scan or photograph them and always name your image with who is included and, if possible, when it was taken. For prints, use a soft pencil on the back.

## Where do I go next?

### I have recorded everything I can.

If you are sure where the people you are looking for lived at some stage, in the period **1841 to 1921** (e.g. a village, a small town or a particular part of London), you could go straight to census records. However, you do need to track down their Birth, Marriage, Death certificates.

- **Census:** taken every 10 years and records become available for the public when they are over 100 years old; from **1921** and earlier. *Please see handout: [Census](#).*
- **BMD:** In England & Wales, Births, Marriages and Deaths have been registered since **1<sup>st</sup> July 1837**. *Please see handout: [Birth, Marriage, Death \(BMD\) Certificates](#).*

### But my ancestry is Scottish and Irish.

Civil Registration began in Scotland in **1855** and in Ireland in **1864**. Certificates can be obtained from New Register House, Princes Street, Edinburgh EH1 3YT (for Scotland) and from the General Register Office, Government Offices, Convent Road, Roscommon, for Ireland. Registrations for Northern Ireland from 1922 are at Oxford House, 49-55 Chichester Street, Belfast BT1 4HL. Before commencing this part of your research, however, you are strongly advised to read the relevant chapter in one of the many books available. *Please see handouts for [Scottish Research](#) and [Irish Family History](#)*

### I think my relative was born overseas.

- **British Citizens:** [www.gov.uk/research-family-history](http://www.gov.uk/research-family-history) The General Register Office (GRO) also holds overseas records containing details of births, marriages and deaths of British Citizens that have taken place abroad since the late eighteenth century. It is not compulsory to register every birth, marriage and death that occurs overseas and the GRO is not notified of every event that has taken place.
- **Non British Citizens:** [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) has details of many vital record collections available to view free of charge, though you will have to register, and [www.cyndislist.com](http://www.cyndislist.com) may provide details of records available for your country of interest.

## How do I get further back from the mid-19th century?

Now, you will be largely dependent on the church (or parish) registers, which were introduced in **1538** and contain baptisms and burials (as distinct from births and deaths) and marriages. Although many early registers have been lost over the years, a surprising number still exist.

### Where do I find parish registers?

Ask at the relevant county record office or local studies library, or your nearest Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) Family History Centre for details of the records available.

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- **Registers:** Many have been surname indexed by voluntary or commercial organisations and are online to search for a fee/subscription. However, [www.freereg.org.uk](http://www.freereg.org.uk) has indexes. Select a single county to see the places covered. If you do not find a Place and Church on these pages, it has not yet been transcribed.  
[www.genfair.co.uk](http://www.genfair.co.uk) has an online catalogue of transcriptions.
- **Transcripts:** In addition to the registers, from **1598** parish priests had to send to their bishop an 'annual return', a copy of the register, known as a Bishops' Transcript. Those which still exist can be very useful in supplying entries omitted from the register or replacing a missing register.
- **Acts of Government:** Provide an understanding into relationship legality.
  - **1753** Hardwicke's Marriage Act to prevent clandestine marriages.
  - **1907** Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act and 1921 Deceased Brother's Widows Marriage Act changed the consanguinity rules for widows and widowers.
  - **1929** Age at Marriage Act increased the age of girls & boys to 16 (previously girls 12 and boys 14).
  - **1931** Marriage (Prohibited Degrees) Relationship Act permitted marriages to nieces and nephews.

## How do I go about using Wills?

### I've heard they can be useful.

- For England & Wales you can find a probate record, also known as a 'grant of representation', for someone who died after 1857 online at [www.gov.uk/search-will-probate](http://www.gov.uk/search-will-probate). There is a different process in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Not all probate records contain a Will.
- During the Commonwealth period in the 17<sup>th</sup> century most wills were proved in London and are now held at The National Archives (TNA). Wills proved at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury are also there and both are available to download for a fee.

For other Wills try the local County Record Offices.

Transcriptions of Sussex Wills may be available from [willstore@sfhg.org.uk](mailto:willstore@sfhg.org.uk)

*Please see handout for [Wills and Probate](#).*

## Moving Forward

### What other help is there?

There are many other sources which you can search, far too many to list here.

- **Books and specialist magazines:** Ask at your local library or search the Internet.
- **GENfair:** the 'One-stop shop' for family and local historians. View the online catalogue at [www.genfair.co.uk](http://www.genfair.co.uk)
- **Family history societies:** They have a wealth of information to help you with your research and the location of source material, visit their websites. Those that are members of the Federation are listed on their website, [www.familyhistoryfederation.com/societies-az](http://www.familyhistoryfederation.com/societies-az) or details can be requested from The Administrator, Federation of Family History Societies, PO BOX 62, Sheringham NR26 9AR.
- **Family history classes:** Try your nearest family history society or Workers' Educational Association and your Local Education Authority, both of which may offer adult classes. County Record Offices and Libraries often advertise as well as run classes. There are also courses available online.
- **Other Researchers:** Someone may already be researching the same family or surname as you. Many family history societies publish Members' Interests. The Guild of One Name Studies is the world's leading organisation for one-name studies. A listing of registered surnames is available on their website at [one-name.org](http://one-name.org). There are also commercial organisations which provide a means of building your family tree and the possibility of connecting with wider family members.