



Ask the Family!

Family Sources and Oral History

It is easy to get stuck into online research and to lose sight of one of the best free sources of information – other family members. While the oldest family members may spring to mind first, don't overlook the possibility that some of the younger ones may remember different things – or may remember the same things differently.

Take notes! You may think you can remember a conversation, but it is easy to confuse details. Ideally, record discussions, but make sure the other person is happy with this first.

Be tactful! Bear in mind that elderly people may have a very different attitude to such issues as illegitimacy and divorce to that generally prevailing today. Tread carefully if these issues come up. You may find an otherwise invaluable source of information 'clams up' if they feel that you are just looking for scandal.

Share your findings! If you give your interviewees feedback, not only will they trust you more, but your discoveries may trigger more memories.

Don't believe all you are told! Most families have at least one story of a famous connection, lost fortune or about the origins and escapades of previous generations. Some will be true, some may contain a grain of truth and some will be pure fantasy. Listen to everything, but wherever possible try to verify what you are told.

Ask about documents! Your interviewee may assume that you have all the documents you need or not recognise the importance of documents they have. One of the most important things they may have is photographs. Not only may they show people you previously knew only by name, or not at all, but the interviewee will probably be able to put names to most of the subjects. Just looking at old photos may trigger more memories.

There is a considerable variety of material which might be considered within this heading. Family documents can either provide the framework for a pedigree, provide personal information to expand the family story or possibly contribute to both. The value of family documents is not always immediately apparent. These notes provide some indication of the possibilities and problems which they present.

While the above provides an outline of family sources, the possibilities are very wide. The notes below explain the system in more detail and discuss some of the problems which you may encounter.

Looking More Closely at Family Sources

Family Bible

Possibly the greatest treasure in any family is the family bible. This may date from the early 19th century or even earlier and will usually contain "genealogical" pages for the family to record births, marriages and deaths. Caution is, however, needed and the following points must be watched. Firstly, it was common to enter earlier family details immediately the bible had been purchased. These might be copied from another earlier bible or from memory. There is possibility of error in either case. Note the publication date of the bible and the dates of the entries. If the entries pre-date the publication date by a lengthy period, treat them with particular caution. Also, watch out for a "run" of entries in the same ink, pen and handwriting. This may be a sign of entries transcribed from elsewhere at a single sitting. Be aware also that the birthdates of illegitimate children or children born within the first few months of a marriage may have been adjusted to "legitimise" them. Obtain certificates to confirm details in all cases.

Birth, Marriage & Death Certificates

You may be fortunate to find original certificates or later copies. This will save the need to purchase copy certificates and may speed up your early research. Original certificates are particularly valuable since it is not unknown for certificates to be lost or incorrectly indexed within the registration system. It is also possible on a modern copy, if it has to be transcribed from a poor quality microfilm, that an error may be made. For example a birth certificate which names the mother as Mary Ann HARMROYD was transcribed as Mary Ann ARINROYD.

Diaries, Birthday, Address and Autograph Books

These will frequently contain names and various details of friends and family members. It may be difficult to work out which is which. Birthdates will often be noted but frequently the year will not be recorded. This can still be useful when faced with two possible birth index entries. Marriage and death dates may also be found in such books. Ages at death may also be noted. Addresses may be particularly useful when searching census records or electoral registers for the family.

Records of Military Service

These might include discharge papers, pay books, medals, citations, items of uniform (badges etc.) or other items. They will each provide some useful data but the key piece of information you will be looking for is the name of the regiment or vessel in which the ancestor served and possibly their service number. These are essential details to access the wealth of material which can be found in military archives. Medals can usually be identified by reference to specialist textbooks or web sites and their identity may suggest further lines of investigation.

Cemetery and Undertakers' Receipts

While it can sometimes be moderately difficult to find a death certificate, it is often a much greater problem to locate where the person was buried. Cemeteries usually issue receipts for payments for burials and these will usually include the grave plot number. Even if an undertaker's receipt does not name the cemetery, it will probably give the date of burial or will have been produced shortly after

the burial which makes it much easier if one has to ask the cemetery staff to search their registers which are often not indexed. A receipt for a headstone may also help but note that this may not have been erected until some months or even years after the burial.

Identity Cards

Systems of registration were imposed during both world wars. The cards do not contain much information but can still be of help. Firstly, they required the new address to be entered on the card when the person moved so providing a record of movement throughout the war years and some years after. Secondly during WW2, cards for children aged 16 or under noted the fact and named the parent. Date of birth is not recorded.

Photographs

While they will not often provide much help with relationships, family photographs add a considerable amount to our understanding of the family. They can show the clothes our ancestors wore, their hairstyles, where they lived, worked and holidayed and many other aspects of their lives. The principal problem is that seldom are the subjects clearly identified, if they are identified at all. It is therefore important to use the knowledge of other family members to the full. Even if names are not provided, it may be possible to identify individuals with some certainty from their presence in group photographs (particularly weddings) or their association with a known house or business premises. Some clues may be obtained if the photo can be dated and there are several books which assist with this using clothing, hairstyles, poses and photographic processes as clues.

Education and Work Records

Family records may include such items as school reports, university publications and documents relating to employment. In addition to such information as is contained in the documents themselves, they may point you to other sources, school records in local record offices, university alumni books or business records deposited at record offices or still held by the businesses concerned. For professions such as medicine and the law, there are professional registers and other sources available.

Clubs, Societies and Other Organisations - Membership Cards & Publications

These will at the very least provide some indication of the person's interests and pastimes. If the organisations are still in existence, they may still hold records, if defunct, records may have been deposited at local record offices (for example friendly societies, trades unions, charitable organisations etc.). Newsletters and other publications by the organisation may also contain information if the person was an active member. They may even contain an obituary of your ancestor. An indication that the person was a member of an organisation may be found in non-documentary form such as a badge or official regalia.

Postcards and Letters

These may contain valuable personal information which might not be found elsewhere but even the most trivial holiday postcard will link a name and address at a particular date (postmark if legible). With postcards, it is often difficult to identify the sender since they are usually signed with forename only and rarely carry the sender's home address.

The Preservation of Family Sources

If the history of your family is important to you, so must be the preservation of family documents and artefacts. Take copies whenever possible in case they are lost at a later date. Make sure the possessor is aware of your interest; they may hand them over into your care or make others aware of their value to you. If possible, encourage them to specify arrangements for their preservation in their will or by enclosing a note with the items.

John Marsden 15 June 2020