

TRACING YOUR BRITISH ANCESTORS

Note: if you are experienced in researching your family history, but are researching British relatives for the first time, you can skip the first section and go straight to the [Censuses](#) section.

FAMILY HISTORY FOR BEGINNERS

The three main sources of information when you start tracing your ancestors are:

- your family
- censuses
- birth, marriage, and death certificates

Let's start by looking at each of these in turn.

WHAT YOUR FAMILY ALREADY KNOW!

It's easy to under-estimate how much useful information is already held within the family. For a start, it's quite likely that one of your relatives began to compile a family tree a long time ago - and then gave up, because in the days before the Internet, researching family history was a long hard slog. An older version of the family tree could well incorporate information from relatives who are no longer alive (and which you might find very difficult to reconstruct on your own).

But even if you're the first, you should still be able to collect a lot of information by asking your relatives the right questions - just don't expect them to have perfect memories, though, or to remember everything on the spur of the moment! In fact, you'll often find that if you go back to someone with bits of information you've gleaned from other relatives, or perhaps an old wedding photo you've found, it helps to unlock other memories. It's amazing how little things can bring it all back!

When you talk to your relatives begin with simple questions, such as 'How many brothers and sisters did your father/mother have?', then follow up if necessary with 'Who was the oldest/youngest' and so on. Don't expect people to remember exact dates of birth (though they sometimes will), but a birthday or an approximate age will be a great help in your later researches.

At this stage it's also useful to gather information about where your ancestors originated from. There was a lot of migration during the 19th century, prompted by the mechanisation of agriculture, and aided by the introduction of the railways - and as a result many of us live in

towns which barely existed 150 years ago. However, don't rely too much on the information you're given - it's amazing how quickly families can forget their origins.

People are often known by nicknames, so try to find out - for example - whether Aunt Lily was really Lilian, or Auntie Nell was in fact christened Ellen. Ask who got married, and to whom, remembering to note the maiden names of your female ancestors. And whilst divorce has only recently become common, many people remarried following bereavement, often when they were still young enough to have a second family.

Information that's written down is a bonus, whether it's a marriage certificate or a family tree written inside the family bible. The most unlikely objects can provide a useful lead, from an inscribed clock or watch given as a retirement present, to a book with a dated and signed dedication. 'To Florrie, on your 21st birthday, from Uncle Fred and Aunt Maud, 19 September 1938' tells you not only Florrie's birth date, but also that she had an Uncle Fred who was married to Aunt Maud - and that they were all still alive in 1938.

Relatives are a great source of information - but as we hinted above, memories are fallible. Always keep an open mind, and double-check the information you've been given whenever you get the opportunity.

A final thought - why not record your conversations with your relatives, using a camcorder if possible. This will free you from the need to take notes while you're talking to your relative, and will also provide a record for future generations. If you are unable to record the conversation, make sure you have plenty of paper to make notes (and print out a copy of the blank [Ancestor Chart](#) that's available at the LostCousins site).

The remainder of this guide focuses on the primary sources of family history information.

Note: scattered through this document are links to websites which appear in blue. Whilst priority is given to free sites, there is some information that just isn't available online unless you buy credits, or pay a subscription.

CENSUSES

The first British censuses were taken in 1801, and they have been taken every 10 years since (except for 1941). The earliest census returns to be generally preserved are those for 1841, and these are also the first to show the names of individuals. The 1911 England & Wales census is the most recent to be published, and the 1911 census for Scotland should be available online during 2012.

Subsequent censuses are usually not released until they are over 100 years old, so the 1921 censuses will not be released until 2022.

Note: the 1931 Census was destroyed by enemy action during World War 2, and no census was taken in 1941 because of the war; the next census to be released after 1921 will be the 1951 Census, which is not due until 2052!

For censuses up to 1901 the documents that have survived are the Enumerators' Books. The pages in these books were completed by the enumerator, who copied the information from the Householder Schedules. In many cases the Householder Schedule was also completed by the enumerator, sometimes because the head of the household was illiterate.

For the 1911 England & Wales census the Householder Schedules that have survived, and in most cases these are in the handwriting of the head of household, which makes them more interesting to family historians.

In general each census provides slightly more detail than one before, but there were also some major changes: in particular the 1841 census is far less informative than later censuses - ages of adults are shown to the nearest five years below, marital status is not indicated, relationships between members of a household are not identified, and so far as birthplace is concerned, the returns merely indicate whether someone was born in the county or not, and whether born in 'Scotland, Ireland, or foreign parts'.

Nevertheless, as you work backwards identifying your ancestors, there will be times when even the limited information of the 1841 census proves invaluable, particularly because it is the earliest census in existence.

From 1851 onwards there were only minor changes; the next major change was in 1911, when married women were asked to say how long they had been married, and give the number of children born, dividing them between those still living and those who had died.

Transcripts and images of the handwritten Enumerators' Books for all British censuses from 1841-1901 are available online; for the 1911 census for England & Wales there are a range of documents available online, including the Household Schedules.

Although information from most censuses can only be viewed at subscription sites, there is a complete transcript of the 1881 Census of England & Wales that can be accessed free of charge. (It's for this reason that 1881 Census was the primary source chosen by [LostCousins](#).)

Where to find England & Wales censuses online

Introduction

When you search a census online your chances of success are determined partly by the accuracy of the transcription, partly by the range of search options at the site you're using, and partly by your ingenuity!

About half of all census records are wrong in some respect, and it won't necessarily be the transcription that's wrong - the enumerator may have misread the householder's writing, or misunderstood the householder's dialect. Quite often the householder themselves made a mistake - for example, a surprisingly large number of people didn't know where they were born, and some couldn't remember how old they were.

In these circumstances being able to search by name *or* address is very useful - but only [findmypast](#) offers this feature for all of the England & Wales censuses.

Unless otherwise stated, all of the sites mentioned below, other than free sites, offer both indexed transcriptions *and* images of the handwritten census schedules. Free sites can only offer transcriptions (or partial transcriptions) because the images are Crown Copyright, and must be paid for.

1841 Census

The best transcription of this census can be found at [findmypast](#), a site which offers both pay-per-view and subscription options; [Origins](#) has a similar transcription, but has less sophisticated search capabilities.

At Ancestry.co.uk the transcription is not as reliable, which makes finding your relatives more difficult - but on the other hand some of the handwritten census schedules which are particularly difficult to read have been re-photographed.

Note: other advantages of searching at findmypast are that you can search for any two people in the same household - which is particularly useful in 1841 because of the limited data shown about individuals - and you can also search by address.

Free alternatives: at FreeCEN you can search an indexed transcription for the whole of Cornwall and partial indexes for a handful of other English counties; however searching can be very slow as this volunteer project has limited resources.

1851 Census

The best and most recent transcription of this census can be found at findmypast, a site which offers both pay-per-view and subscription options. This census is also online at Ancestry.co.uk, where it can again be accessed on a pay-per-view or subscription basis; however only findmypast allows you to search by address or by occupation.

Free alternatives: FreeCEN has an indexed transcription for the whole of Cornwall; however searching can be very slow as this volunteer project has limited resources.

1861 Census

This census can be found at findmypast and Ancestry.co.uk, both of which offer pay-per-view and subscription options, however only findmypast allows you to search by address or by occupation. Origins has a similar transcription to findmypast, but has less sophisticated search capabilities.

Free alternatives: FreeCEN has an indexed transcription for the whole of Cornwall, and partial indexes for several English and Welsh counties.

1871 Census

This census can be found at findmypast and Ancestry.co.uk, both of which offer pay-per-view and subscription options, however only findmypast allows you to search by address or by occupation. Origins has a similar transcription to findmypast, but has less sophisticated search capabilities.

Free alternatives: FreeCEN has a partial indexes for a few English and Welsh counties.

1881 Census

Complete transcriptions can be searched free at three sites: FamilySearch, Ancestry.co.uk, and findmypast. The latter two sites also have images of the Enumerators' Schedules, though they can only be viewed by subscribers.

The original transcription was carried out by FamilySearch and the transcriptions at the other sites are derived from this.

The 1881 census transcription is also available on CD ROM at a very low cost (check the FamilySearch site for details), and it is important to note that the CD ROM version includes Scotland, which is not available at the FamilySearch website.

Free alternatives: see above; also FreeCEN has a partial index for Cornwall.

1891 Census

This census can be found at [findmypast](#) and [Ancestry.co.uk](#), both of which offer pay-per-view and subscription options, however only findmypast allows you to search by address or by occupation.

Free alternatives: at FreeCEN you can search indexed transcriptions for the whole of Bedfordshire, Cornwall, Devon and Warwickshire - and partial transcriptions of many other English and Welsh counties.

1901 Census

This census can be found at [findmypast](#) and [Ancestry.co.uk](#), both of which offer pay-per-view and subscription options, however only findmypast allows you to search by address or by occupation.

Free alternatives: no free online data.

1911 Census

The 1911 Census of England & Wales is available at [findmypast](#) and at the dedicated 1911 site run by the same company. Until November 2009 it was only accessible on a pay-per-view basis, but it is now possible to buy a subscription. A 1911 Census subscription can be purchased separately from the main [findmypast](#) subscription if you already have a subscription for another site.

Free alternatives: no free online data.

Where to find Scotland censuses online

There are fewer options - both the official Scotlandspeople site and Ancestry.co.uk have indexed transcriptions of all 7 censuses from 1841-1901, but only Scotlandspeople has images of the handwritten pages.

Free alternatives: FreeCEN has partial indexes for 1841, 1851, 1861, and 1871. 1841 is the most complete, with 100% coverage of many Scottish counties.

Which census should you use?

As the 1881 census for England & Wales is free it is a good place to start - provided you have some information about your ancestors who were alive in 1881. It will also enable you to enter relatives at the [LostCousins](#) site.

But ultimately you're likely to have to pay to get the information you need, and if you're serious about wanting to research your ancestors you should seriously consider taking out a subscription that gives you unlimited searches at [findmypast](#) or [Ancestry](#). Pay-per-view (buying credits) may seem like a cheaper option, but it will cost much more in the end, and knowing that any mistake you make will be expensive is likely to make you less adventurous - and less successful - in your searching.

How to get the most out of the censuses

If you're initially unsuccessful in finding your relatives try using alternatives search options. For example, try searching by first name and birthplace or occupation - or else using the address search at [findmypast](#).

Remember that different census sites offer different options - just because you can't find the person you're looking for at one site doesn't mean you won't find them at another. For a long list of tips see the article "[Key Tips for Census Success](#)" on the [Help & Advice](#) page at the [LostCousins](#) site.

BIRTH, MARRIAGE & DEATH CERTIFICATES

Civil registration began on 1st July 1837 in England & Wales, and on 1st January 1855 in Scotland. In theory all births, marriages, and deaths after that date should be recorded in the General Register Office indexes, although in the early years a small percentage of births were not registered.

If you're lucky, you may find that some of the certificates for your ancestors have survived, and are still held within the family. However copy certificates can be obtained, and for England & Wales they will currently cost you 7 pounds each.

For an introductory guide to Birth, Marriage, and Death certificates visit the Directgov which not only tells you how to obtain certificates, but also details the information you can expect to find. Marriage certificates in particular can be a goldmine of information, providing not just the bride's maiden name, but also the names and professions of both fathers. Even the names of the witnesses can provide valuable leads.

Although it is usual to obtain certificates from the General Register Office (GRO), if you know the registration district in which the event occurred you can visit the local Register Office. They may be able to provide you with a certificate which incorporates a facsimile of the original register entry, which in the case of a marriage will provide copies of the 'actual' signatures of your ancestors. Certificates ordered from the GRO are based on hand-copied records, so do not show actual signatures (though they will indicate whether a person signed, or made their mark).

To order England & Wales certificates from the GRO you ideally need to provide the full reference, which means finding your ancestor in the indexes of Births, Marriage and Deaths. Even if you don't go ahead and order a particular certificate, just finding the event in the indexes may provide you with useful information. For example, from 1912 onwards the marriage entries show the surname of the spouse - which might be the missing piece of the jigsaw.

Birth, Marriage, and Death Indexes online

Numerous sites have indexes of births, marriages, and deaths for England & Wales, but the key sites are [findmypast](#) (which has the most complete set of indexes, with records up to 2006), [FreeBMD](#) (which has only partial indexes, but is free to search), and [Ancestry](#) (which has transcribed the indexes from 1916-1983, although there are many errors and omissions).

[Scotlandspeople](#) has indexes of births, marriages, and deaths for Scotland from 1855, as well as parish records prior to that date.

FAMILY TREE SOFTWARE

There are many family tree programs, some of which are available free, such as *Personal Ancestral File* which can be downloaded from the FamilySearch site.

Family Historian is not free, but has received excellent reviews - it is also a British program written with local requirements in mind. It has an active user support forum to which the program's author frequently contributes.

However, the one I use most is [Genopro](#), because it gives me all the control I need over the layout of my family tree, whether I'm printing it out or looking at it on-screen. You can get a 14-day free trial AND a 10% discount when you click [here](#). There are extra discounts for multiple purchases - if you club together with friends to buy 2 or more copies you'll save a minimum of 25%!

All of these programs, even the free ones, will allow you to create family trees on screen, and print them out. Most, including all of the programs listed, support GEDCOM files (GEDCOM is the standard format for the interchange of genealogical data)..

THE NEXT STAGE

Perhaps the best guide for researchers who want to go further is *Ancestral Trails*, a book by Mark D Herber that is published by Sutton Publishing in association with the Society of Genealogists.

The Genealogist's Internet by Peter Christian is another valuable book which offers a superb guide to the ever-expanding resources online. It is regularly updated, and the most recent edition features LostCousins.

As you work back church registers become an ever more valuable source of information, especially before the introduction of civil registration (of births, marriage, and deaths). Most parish registers are held in county Records Offices or Archives, and can usually be searched - typically on microfilm or microfiche - free of charge.

Other sources of information include wills, directories, and churchyard inscriptions. Visit the [GENUKI](#) site to find the addresses of Records Offices and Archives in each county.

The [FamilySearch](#) not only provides online access to the 1881 census but also to other resources which have been compiled by researchers, including the International Genealogical Index (IGI). The information submitted by individual researchers varies in quality, and you should therefore always check it before using it as the basis for further research of your own, but it can provide you with leads that you would otherwise never pick up from any other source.

When using FamilySearch be sure to search each resource separately - this will produce far better results than a global search.

There are family history societies throughout the UK: the [Federation of Family History Societies](#) has links to the sites of member societies in England, Wales & Ireland whilst the [Scottish Association of Family History Societies](#) provides links to those in Scotland. Most societies keep lists of members interests, and some allow non-members to both search the lists and contact members who are researching the same families (there's invariably going to be someone researching the same family - it's just a question of finding them!).

[GENUKI](#) is a virtual reference library of genealogical information with links to other websites that cover every part of the British Isles. It also has an informative section called 'Getting started in genealogy' which offers excellent advice and information for the beginner.

TRACE YOUR 'LOST COUSINS'

In almost every branch of every family there's someone researching family history. Each will have a different starting point, and a different perspective, each will make different discoveries. Just imagine if all the people researching the same ancestors could pool their knowledge!

The [LostCousins](#) website is the answer - it uses census data to link together distant cousins who are researching the same ancestors. Unlike other websites that offer a superficially similar service, it virtually guarantees that the people you're matched with really are related, whilst keeping your information confidential (information entered at LostCousins can't be viewed by anyone else).

USEFUL WEBSITES

LostCousins.com	Find distant relatives and share your research with them
Findmypast	Complete indexes of England & Wales births, marriages & deaths 1837-2006 England & Wales censuses from 1841-1911 Ships' passenger lists 1890-1960
General Register Office	Order England & Wales BMD certificates online
FreeBMD	Partial index to England & Wales births, marriages & deaths from 1837-c1930
Scotlandspeople	Scotland censuses 1841-1901
FFHS	The Federation of Family History Societies
FamilySearch	1881 England & Wales census & International Genealogical Index (IGI)
Ancestry	Complete England & Wales censuses, indexes to Scotland censuses
GENUKI	Virtual reference library of genealogical information
PharosTutors	Online genealogy courses