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## Genealogy: How to Get Started on Your Family Tree

Hello and welcome to my guide to genealogy.

My name is Claire and I created this introductory guide in the hope that more people will follow suit and begin a journey into their past.

My reasons for exploring my family tree were very personal but I've found the whole experience to be very rewarding.

I found myself taking time out from holidays to visit local archives and registrars and even went on a genealogy road trip with my husband.

### Motivation

I was simply motivated by the desire to find some sort of ancestral identity, but I found so much more along the way.

I don't know your reasons for starting this journey, perhaps you have the hope of finding a secret inheritance lost in the murky depths of time or you want to verify an old tale you once heard.

Some people take up the task for purely sentimental reasons, or just because they find themselves in need of a new and interesting hobby.

The great thing about drawing up a family tree is that whatever you set out to uncover, whether you have a specific goal in mind or not, what you discover along the way will be deeply personal and always fascinating. After all, this is the story of the lives that made your life.

Genealogy (that's the study of ancestry) has become something of a phenomenon in the West in recent years. In the USA, Alex Haley's hugely popular novel Roots: The Saga of an American Family (1976), which recreated the story of Haley's own ancestry from the time of the slave trade through to the present day, led many to develop an interest in the lives and times of their ancestors.

More recently, in the UK and later the US, the hit TV series Who Do You Think You Are? sees celebrities team up with genealogical experts in a quest to learn more about their family histories – often with highly emotional consequences.

**So why now?** Where has this fascination come from?

Perhaps it's because the personal past is one of the few things that isn't 'just a Google away'. The internet is a brilliant tool for genealogical research, but it requires deep digging, and indeed a knowledge of where to dig. Our great-grandfathers didn't have Facebook accounts, after all; it's easier than ever to learn about the time in which they lived, but perhaps more difficult than ever to learn about *them*.

Following this thought, perhaps our burgeoning interest in our family history is driven by the increasing distance between members of the family unit today.

Gone are the days when everyone in the village could tell you what your father's grandmother did to upset Joe's great-uncle Walter. We meet a tremendous number of people in our lives from a staggering array of places. We're keen to experience as much of this huge world as we can. In such times it's easy to believe that there's barely time enough for our own experiences, let alone those of people who passed away a long time ago. Despite all this, we will always be curious about who we are, and perhaps it's this sense of having spread ourselves too thin across the world that draws us back into the past: it becomes a journey to find our depth.

## Where to Begin?

The first thing to do is to get organized. Write down what you already know, decide what exactly it is you're looking for, and focus on exactly that area.

Family history is such a vast topic that if you're looking for specific information, it's best to make sure that you're not going to get side-tracked.

Alternatively, if your interest is more general, try to prioritize according to which parts pique your interest the most and just follow your instincts. In any case, a basic map and a list of leads always make for a good start.

Sites such as [docssuite.org](http://docssuite.org) can furnish you with templates for family trees if you don't want to be constantly screwing up ever-more detailed maps written in ever-smaller text on a single side of A4.

As mentioned above, the internet is a fantastic research tool, and the good news that if Google can't help you get straight to the facts, it can at least offer you a long list of websites specializing in just that.

**Tip:**

*Start your search by speaking with relatives and use free services such as Google, local records, military records and the not-for-profit Familysearch.org.*

## Online Subscriptions and Services



I found Familysearch.org was a great place to start my search, you can create a free account and get access to tons of information.

If you're completely new to genealogy, I recommend Familysearch.org as a starting point.

Ancestry.com is the favored tool of rookie genealogists in the US, offering access to 'all US records on ancestry' for £99.00/\$99.00 for six months or £19.99/\$19.99 per month.

In the UK, Findmypast.co.uk is a great resource that's even more competitively priced at £16.00/\$9.95 per month. This service offers travel and military records as well as tons of other information to help you build your history.

Do bear in mind that building a family tree is probably going to take time, depending of course on the timescale you're interested in, and indeed what kind of information you're searching for.

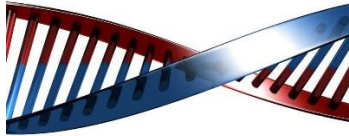
Myheritage.com, the second most popular genealogy site in the US, begins your search with a DNA test (this is also a service Ancestry offers at a price), and you build from there. If it's your genetic makeup that piques your interest – the often-surprising story of all the places in the world your family had to travel from in order to eventually produce you – then this might be a very worthwhile start.

Of course, if you should then find that a significant part of your heritage comes from a part of the world, you'd never associated with yourself, that might lead you to conduct further inquiries with a focus on a specific area. Myheritage.com offers a free 'basic' service, which allows you up to 250 spaces in your family tree (it sounds like a lot, but remember, you may not just doubling the number of ancestors every time you go up a step: they have other descendants, too). It also offers a premium service which allows you up to 2500 spaces in your family tree.

The reason I have suggested so many US-based sites is because genealogy is very popular there and as a country of immigrants, the online tools based there are a great way to trace a history back to Europe.

**Tip:**

*Findmypast.co.uk and Familysearch.org are the most popular UK services but don't be afraid to try sites based in the US such as Ancestry.com and Myheritage.com.*



## **DNA Testing**

DNA testing is an exciting way to discover what makes you the person you are today.

You can use the results to cross-reference and check you are on the right path with your traditional research.

The process is simple and costs around £70/\$99:

**Step 1 – Order your kit online from Ancestry.com or Myheritage.com.**

**Step 2 – Swipe saliva from your mouth onto the spatula and return the sample in the envelope provided.**

**Step 3 – Your sample will be analyzed in a state-of-the-art laboratory.**

**Step 4 – Your results will arrive in around 8 weeks' time and can be viewed online.**

Ancestry.com claims they can estimate your origins back to over 350 regions in the UK.

The DDC offers a similar product in the UK.

## **Libraries and Parish/Council Records**

As a rule of thumb; every piece of digital information found on an online service such as Findmypast and Ancestry.com will be based on an original paper copy that's still stored somewhere.

Many genealogists start by using an online service but then try to locate the original paperwork. While this can be a time-consuming process, it can be rewarding.

In the United States, libraries may be able to provide access to the US Census from over 72 years ago – more recent records are confidential, but chances are that you'll be able to get enough names and rough whereabouts from your immediate family to start your search before that period.

Libraries, whether in the UK or US, also often keep a catalogue of local newspapers, so if you know that your family has been based in the area for a long time, depending on the size of the collection these may offer some background of your ancestors' lives, as well as records of specific incidents. Parish records can also provide details of marriages, baptisms and burials, and these often go back further (and maybe more accurate in some cases) than the census.

Once you've learned what you can from your family, you'll hopefully be armed with a better idea of what it is you want to discover and will be in a good position to choose the best tools to uncover what you're after. Don't be surprised if you find, after your initial research, that you're not the only family member for whom the project has value: it's likely that taking an interest in your parents' and grandparents' lives and histories will mean a lot to them, and they may well be keen to know what you uncover. It makes sense, after all, that a journey into a shared past is all the richer as a shared experience. It's worth embracing this. If a major purpose of mapping out a family tree is to find a stronger sense of self and identity, then forging stronger bonds with the still-living members of that family tree is its own reward.

In the early stages of research, it's probable that you'll find out about some second and third cousins who you've never met, except perhaps briefly at a wedding or the like. Whilst it's always (hopefully) interesting to meet new people anyway, especially those related to you, the older generations of these family branches may also have interesting information for your project.

Distinct parts of the family attach particular importance to different events; for example, the descendants of a great-grandfather who served in World War I may predominantly associate his family with the military, where the descendants of his younger sister who campaigned for universal suffrage might have quite different associations and points of pride and interest.

On the note of distant relatives: depending on your budget and your areas of interest, genealogy can be a great excuse to travel.

Whether it's for purely informational purposes – for example, to check a record of a marriage – or to reconnect with the wider family, or just to see a place that your forebears used to call home, studying your lineage can offer opportunities to visit places that you'd never have heard of otherwise, let alone step foot in.

## London Resources

If you live near to or are visiting London, do explore these great resources:

The [London Metropolitan Archive](#) is a great place to start as you'll find parish records, tax and education records as well as poorhouse records.

The [National Archive](#) is absolutely huge and is the best place for military records, wills, tax records, immigration documents and general government records.

You should [visit the Westminster Archive](#) if you want to find electoral registers, plans, maps, business history and public census returns as they have a wealth of documents going back years.

## Paris and Germany

The [Paris Archives](#) contain census records going back nearly 100 years and military records dating back to the revolution.

Outside of the Paris, you'll find registrars in all the towns just like you would in the UK.

The [German Federal Archive](#) is the largest archives in the country and is a great place to start your research.

Here you'll find court documents, wills, military records and official government records going back hundreds of years.

### **Tip:**

*Large libraries are a great place to find official records.*

*This [British Library guide](#) is a good place to start if you're in the UK.*

*Don't forget that some countries had very different borders in the past, so you may to look at neighboring countries too.*



## Books

If you prefer a good book to a website, there are numerous books on the market that will help you get started on your family tree as well as teaching you research techniques. The Complete Idiot's Guide to Genealogy by Christine Rose and Kay Germaine Ingalls is a solid start, with Advanced Genealogical Research Techniques by George G. Morgan and Drew Smith provides a more comprehensive approach to amassing and analyzing evidence. Both come at the recommendation of genealogical and historical writer Elizabeth Shown Mills.

Before you whip your credit card out, though, there are less costly and arguably more interesting ways of beginning to trace the road back. Grandparents, and indeed their siblings, are almost certainly the best place to start. Bring a pad of paper and a pen and just ask them to talk about their own parents and grandparents, and you'll find yourself with a wealth of information which might include migration and military history as well as things that you might never find in official records. Family secrets can mean that the most diligent trawl through the archives is upended by a questionable paternity that is only remembered by word of mouth, for instance. If it sounds trivial, remember that it's this kind of detail that once held the key to royal successions and vast fortunes (and occasionally still does! Although don't get your hopes up).

***Tip:***

*Books can help you streamline your efforts by using tried and trusted methods. See how professionals build family trees and use their techniques to your advantage.*

## **The Best Time to Start is Now**

For many people, building their family tree and history is something that will take years and years.

There's no need to rush the process, the past isn't going anywhere but the sooner you start the sooner you'll get the satisfaction of finding out about your ancestors.

So, what are you waiting for? First things first, it's time to visit the folks and alarm them by asking them more questions than they ask you. Building a family tree is a long-haul effort and it really is a lot of effort, with dead ends and questionable reports around every corner.

Finally, though, the experience is rewarding and what you learn will stay with you forever, and not only you, but it'll be readily available for your children and their children after them. It doesn't matter what your reasons are or what your story is when you set off: *this* is your story and discovering it will be one of the most rewarding experiences of a lifetime.