

Top 10 Tips

Genealogy - finding people

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1. Decide what you want to achieve.

Do you want to find every ancestor in all lines? Concentrate on one line only? Research one surname? Explore a family story or legend? Start with that, and stick to it without diversions until you decide to pursue something else.

2. Start with someone who was alive around 1911 or 1901.

Birth, marriage, death, census, wills & testaments, valuation rolls and more information is readily available back from that date, and it's close enough to be able to check details within living memory.

3. Start from a census.

This is a snapshot of a family at one place and time. Work from that back to marriages, births and other details.

4. Work backwards.

It's a lot easier to track a line of ancestors than starting in the past and working all the lines forward. Someone born in 1700 will have perhaps 4,000 descendants – which lines will you chase?

5. Talk to your oldest living relatives...

...but don't necessarily believe everything they tell you! Over the years, stories get spun, expanded, changed and in many cases suppressed. But it's a starting point, from which you can seek out actual evidence.

6. Never guess and trust nothing!

The ONLY worthwhile evidence is documentary evidence. Do not trust second-hand stories, published genealogies, websites or hearsay. Many family trees on the internet (Ancestry, Geni, MyHeritage etc.) are usually copies of each other – mistakes, inventions and all. Look for actual documents.

7. Names are not fixed.

Surname spellings can change from one generation to the next, and were not fixed until fairly recently. Don't fret over variants – a McKay is a MacKay is a M'Kay is a McCay is a Mackey is a Makee is a Makey, and all are derived from MacHugh (Gaelic, MacAoidh). Forget everything you have heard or read about "Mc is Scottish and Mac is Irish" – it's nonsense, and often both will be recorded as M'. There is no point researching McLaren and not MacLaren or M'Laren. Remember too that someone may be known by a second or third forename, or by a diminutive – so "Sandy Brown" may have been christened "John Harold Alexander Brown".

8. Think laterally.

There is birth information in marriage and death records, and don't forget wills and testaments, land transfers, court records and so on.

9. Never despair!

You are at the bottom of a very tall mountain, and sometimes it's hard going. If you hit a log-jam, shelve it and work on another aspect, such as cousins. You'll be amazed how often that one piece of vital information comes from an unexpected direction.

10. Join a local Family History Society and a Surname/Family Society.

Even if it isn't local to you, or even if you're overseas, having experts in a particular locality with access to resources at the end of the phone or email can help break down brick walls. They will also have details of resources you can take to get you started.

Places to start.

Online and free

FREEBMD – <https://www.freebmd.org.uk/> – Civil Registration index of births, marriages and deaths for England and Wales from 1837

FREEREG – <https://www.freereg.org.uk/> – free Internet searches of baptism, marriage, and burial records, which have been extracted from parish registers pre-1837

FREECEN – <https://www.freecen.org.uk/> – U.K. Census data being from 1841 to 1891. There are other places to get 1901 and 1911 census data

Locally

Join...

Your local Family History Society – check out the Federation of Family History Societies for lists at <http://www.ffhs.org.uk/>

Visit or Contact...

Cumbria Archives – <http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/archives/> – there are Archive Centres in Barrow, Carlisle, Kendal and Whitehaven

Take a course

There will be local courses all over the country. Ask your local Family History Society or at your local Library.

Commercial Family History sites

Ancestry.co.uk/Ancestry.com – collates both official records and other reference information, but not much on Scotland. Do NOT trust uploaded Family Trees. SUBSCRIPTION www.ancestry.co.uk

[Family Search \(IGI\)](http://FamilySearch.org) – the largest genealogy organization in the world, and free to use, but of variable accuracy, especially in Member uploads. FREE www.familysearch.org/

[Find My Past](http://FindMyPast.com) – like the others, not many of the important Scottish records SUBSCRIPTION www.findmypast.com/

[Deceased Online](http://DeceasedOnline.com) – access to official records for UK burials and cremations. FREE TO SEARCH, THEN PAID-FOR www.deceasedonline.com/

[The National Archives](http://TheNationalArchives.gov.uk) – TNA, Kew, London, holds many records relating to Scottish family history, especially military records. MUCH FREE, SOME PAID-FOR

[PublicProfiler](http://PublicProfiler.org) – <http://gbnames.publicprofiler.org/> – Where your surname was clustered in 1881 and 1998. FREE

[GENUKI](http://GENUKI.org) – <http://www.genuki.org.uk/> – a non-commercial virtual reference library of genealogical information for the UK and Ireland.

Not every record is available online, and not all are held centrally. There are many excellent archives, museums, local history and family history centres and other resources all over the country – just waiting for you to visit.

Visiting or researching remotely?

There is no question that the way to get the most out of a visit is to have done a great deal of research first – then you'll know where to go, what to look for and whether you have to combine a trip to an archive with a journey to your ancestral homeland. And once your appetite is whetted, there's no question you'll want to visit!

Please bear in mind that...

1. Transcriptions and indexes are not always accurate – use wildcards, Soundex etc.
2. Surnames can change in spelling.
3. Consider a DNA test – FamilyTreeDNA is the best: www.ftdna.com