2. Family history: Getting started

1. Talk to the living!

The only on-line sources likely to be of use to you in finding anything about relatives back to your great grandparents are the main GRO Indexes. This is because only these details are available for living individuals or those born back to before World War I.

Similarly, you are unlikely to make contact with any relatives beyond your first or second cousins until you have taken your tree back at least to your great grandparents since you have common great great grandparents ('2 times great grandparents') with third cousins. [If this cousins business, or any other relationships term causes consternation, try the Genealogy Relationship Chart at <genealogy.about.com/library/nrelationshipchart.htm> or Genealogy.com's article 'What is a First Cousin, Twice Removed?' at <www.genealogy.com/genealogy/16_cousn.html>]

The reason you are unlikely to make contact (say, through Genes Reunited) with any relatives is that most people already know their cousins and are at least aware of second cousins, so anyone more remotely related is likely to be at best a third cousin. Without a family tree back to your great grandparents, you are unlikely to have anything to enable a contact.

All of which means that you should be making the most of living family contacts to ensure that you have as much sound, or at least strongly anecdotal, evidence upon which to build you embryonic family tree. Remember, however, **always check original sources** – memory can become doubtful over long periods, and sometimes there are reasons for selective editing of memories!

Which leads us to the topics of …

2. Good Practice, Privacy, Etiquette and Copyright.

Genealogical research is an academic pursuit; there are standards of 'proof' that must be applied to data and procedures for acknowledging and citing sources of evidence. We will not explore these here since they form a significant part of more advanced courses. However, it is vital to note that nothing should be incorporated into our own family trees until we have verified its accuracy against, hopefully, primary sources – or sources we feel are reliable extracts from those sources. It is unfortunately true that many published family trees are based on fiction. The author recently came across a possibly distant relative who had constructed a tree stretching back some 17 generations. Unfortunately only some 4 generations back from the present an error was discovered which seemed to have been picked up in the early 1980s when that individual imported an earlier tree that had been published as an 'Ancestral File' (via www.familysearch.org - see later).
It has been said many times, but another time won't hurt, that genealogy is the pursuit of evidence upon which to establish relationships – there is no place for seeking out famous (or infamous) forebears or claiming ancestry back 'to the Conqueror' (the latter is virtually impossible unless you are royalty, if for no other reason than the break in many records during Commonwealth or the chaos of the Black Death).

When dealing with the living, privacy and etiquette are important. Most (all?) family have secrets, no-go areas or 'black sheep. To delve into sensitive matters requires tact and sensitivity, particularly when relating the information uncovered to others. Personal privacy is also an important issue, particularly in the current climate of 'personality theft' and related matters. For this reason it is generally agreed that information about living relatives should not be included in on-line family trees.

Copyright exists on most published materials; the law treats both websites and e-mails as publications, so you should not 'disseminate' material obtained from these sources as well as that obtained from more traditional 'published' sources such as books, magazines or CD-ROMs.

3. Really getting started!

The following is a summary of the first steps that you should take in mapping out your family tree:

a) Interview all of your elderly relatives, collecting as much first or second-hand information as you can. Record it at the time. Revisit this process as later stages as the process reveals new information and throws up new questions.

b) Get marriage and birth certificates for most recently deceased ancestors.

c) Use these to work back to the marriages and births of the parents of those ancestors.

d) Keep repeating the process until you get back to the start of General Registration (mid-1837 for England & Wales, later for Scotland and Ireland).

e) Once you have names and either place or actual addresses for a date in the 19th or early 20th century, refer to the censuses to see (i) whole family groups, (ii) birth places, (iii) ages, from which you can calculate approximate birth years.

f) Once you have found a census entry for an adult ancestor who was born before General Registration, use the birth place and age information in the census to locate a baptism in parish registers.

g) From this, work back to the marriages, and then baptisms, of the parents of that ancestor in the parish registers.

h) Repeat for each line in your ancestry until you hit a brick wall. At this point you will need to consider other approaches and sources.