

Starting Your Family History

1. Define your aims and objectives before you begin

- Are you interested only in your own direct line of ancestors, i.e. parents, grandparents, great grandparents? You may decide to follow just one or two lines initially.
- Do you want to widen your research to include all the siblings in each generation? Siblings become the aunts/uncles/cousins, etc., of your direct ancestors.
- Do you want to put the information you find on a family tree chart, with names, and the dates and places of vital events only? Or are you also interested in writing up a story (narrative), which includes more details of the lives of your ancestors.
- Set realistic targets – even going back to the beginning of the 20th century represents well over 100 years of your family history. Going back to the first census in 1841 represents over 170 years and covers possibly five or six generations.
- As you research, sketch out your ancestral tree on a large piece of paper, which you can keep adding to. This will give structure to your research and will help you to make sense of all you find out.

2. Gathering the evidence from the family

Talk to relatives to get your basic family tree information. You need their names, including maiden names for married women, dates and places of birth, marriage and death and occupations. Then ask about the names of the siblings and children of each generation.

Ask about any documentation that family members might hold. This will help you fill in more details about your extended family. Record photos and documents with a digital camera to avoid the need to make photocopies.

- Family photographs – pop the photos into transparent envelopes and attach self-adhesive labels to the envelopes with names, relationships of those photographed, dates and places shown.
- Certificates of births marriages and deaths.
- Funeral reports, etc., cut out of newspapers.
- Family Bibles – these often contain the records of children born to parents, with their dates of birth/christening, etc. Check for this information at the beginning and end of the Bible as well as between the Old and New Testaments.
- Old diaries, letters and postcards.
- Other documents such as military ephemera, medals, etc.
- Inscriptions on family graves.

Listen to and record the stories of your family, their memories of their childhood etc. Use a digital recorder or cassette recorder to preserve these memories. Offer the interviewee a copy of the recording on CD.

3. Organising the evidence

Right from the start, get into the habit of recording the *sources* of each item of information you obtain. Organise the information in a systematic way, e.g. in folders or in a computer program, and produce genealogical charts

4. Filling in the gaps – Civil Registration (with reference to Breconshire)

Information found in official documents can lead you to other documents.

- Civil Registration began in July 1837 – from this time onwards, births, marriages and deaths had to be recorded by the District Registrar.
- Registration Districts do not necessarily follow county boundaries. The Powys Registrar for Births Marriages and Deaths (at Llandrindod Wells) now holds the registrations for all the Civil Parishes within Breconshire.
- Remember that a birth or death should be registered in the district where it took place. This is particularly so if the event occurred in hospital, e.g. Hereford, Abergavenny, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath, Llandovery.

- The GRO (General Register Office) index, available on-line, will give you the event, the name, the year, the quarter (3-month period ending Mar, Jun, Sep or Dec), the Registration District, and the Index Book volume and page number. Armed with this information you can order the certificate copy from the GRO (www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/default.asp) or from the Local Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths (e.g. Powys). Note that BMD certificates are **not** free. The Powys Registry is at www.powys.gov.uk/index.php?id=1&L=0
- Birth Certificates can give you the individual's full name, names of mother and usually father, place of birth (possibly the hospital address) and occupation of at least the father.
- Marriage Certificates can give the full names of the spouses, their occupations, addresses at time of marriage (not necessarily their usual address), both fathers' names and occupations (sometimes the word *deceased* is inserted to signify that the father is dead), and names of witnesses (may be relatives).
- Death Certificates will give you the person's name, date of death, stated age at death (might be inaccurate, depending on the informant's knowledge), name of informant (relative, hospital staff, coroner), cause of death. You will **not** get information about the place of burial from this document.

5. Filling in the gaps – other Records

- Church Records: Parish Records & Bishops transcripts take your ancestral lines back before Civil Registration, with possible Baptism, Marriage and Burial records. Nonconformist records are not as comprehensive, but are also useful.
- Censuses, taken every ten years since 1841 and up to 1911 at present (100 year closure rule). Remember that each census is a picture only of who was in a house on census night.
- 1939 Register: a pre-WW2 register of all households in England and Wales – almost as good as a census. Available online via the Find My Past website: www.findmypast.co.uk
- Wills and Probate – the National Probate Calendar (an index of Wills and Administration) from 1858 to 1966 is available online at www.Ancestry.co.uk.
- Pre 1858 Welsh wills are indexed on the National Library of Wales (NLW) website at www.llgc.org.uk/discover/nlw-resources/wills/ and can be ordered for a small fee.
- Electoral Registers (Voters Lists) – Women did not gain full voting rights in the UK until 1928.
- Trade Directories – from libraries or www.historicaldirectories.org/hd/ [19th and 20th centuries]
- Local newspapers – available on microfilm at the NLW, Powys Archives and Brecon Library
- Phone books – e.g. 1880-1984 on Ancestry: <http://search.ancestry.co.uk>
- Gravestone inscriptions, Many Breconshire MIs are available for searching by BLFHS.
- Military Records – Commonwealth War Graves Commission www.cwgc.org/ and Ancestry www.ancestry.co.uk for searchable Military records, especially the World Wars:1914-18 and 1939-45
- School and Hospital Records – Powys Archives www.powys.gov.uk/index.php?id=647&L=0

6. Publish your results

- As a chart
- In a booklet – self publish e.g. through Lulu.com at <https://www.lulu.com/>
- On the World Wide Web (internet website)

7. Useful Books for Welsh Family History Research (available at or through Brecon Library)

- John & Sheila Rowlands *Welsh Family History: A Guide to Research*.
- John & Sheila Rowlands *Second Stages in Researching Welsh Ancestry*.
- *National Index of Parish Registers*, vol. 13 *Cofrestrï Plwyf Cymru / Parish Registers of Wales*. 2nd edn. Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 2000.

See the BLFHS website for a more comprehensive reading list: <http://www.blfhs.co.uk>

And a plug for John Ball's own personal website, which includes his *Welsh Family History Archive*, and *Welsh Churches and Chapels Collection*: <http://www.jlb2011.co.uk>