



*"Genealogy Fast Track Secrets"*

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Family History Researcher Academy

# **Genealogy Fast Track Secrets: English/Welsh Family History**

By

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*A note on spelling. I shall be using British spelling of words but for those of you accustomed to American English I shall put some words in brackets. For example: In Britain a marriage licence (U.S. - license) is a document that we may wish to search for evidence of.*

## **Genealogy Fast Track Secrets**

Have you searched for hours on end trying to find an elusive ancestor, with no luck? Like many of us, who have been in that very same situation, did you begin to wonder how the professional historians often make a breakthrough where the hobby researchers draw a blank?

Well the fact is that not every brick wall can be breached; but in spite of that truth, many of our family history problems can be got around. The trick is to make sure that you use as broad a set of record collections as you can and employ the techniques that the professionals use when they are doing research. In this report I am going to show you just some of the ways you too may find the ancestor that you are looking for and unblock some of the logjams that you may be experiencing.

### **1. Where are your ancestors? - Incorrect Area.**

Firstly, are you looking in the wrong area? We may think that we know that our ancestor lived in a certain town or area and so we get frustrated when they don't appear where we believe they should be. Perhaps it is a town or district that you have assumed your ancestor should have been registered in? You may have reason to think that because that was where other records show them to have lived at one time. But people move around, even in the olden days.

Sometimes it may well be worth taking a look in the surrounding area and the neighbouring (US: neighboring )districts and towns as the family may have moved to get employment, or to be near other family who have themselves moved.

In 1837 the government introduced civil registration of Births, Marriages & Deaths (BMDs) in England & Wales. If you can't find your ancestor in the indexes for the town that you expected to find them then check the surrounding areas as well, especially in the first few years after 1837.

There is a very good reason for this. You see early local Registrars were paid by results and they were made responsible for gathering the information from people.

A financial incentive could lead to them gathering as many registrations to their area rather than to the one where you would naturally you had expected to find your ancestor.

Later on the responsibility for registering vital events was transferred on to the public and so they would much more likely go to the registrar for their correct place of abode.

So when you can't find an ancestor where you had expected them to be then take a look at the records in the surrounding areas. There is a handy bit of free software called the *Parish Locator Program* that you can download to your computer. It is a mapping tool that you can use to find contiguous parishes. I reveal more about useful maps that you can use inside the Maps & Charts module in the Family History Researcher Academy course at [FamilyHistoryResearcher.com](http://FamilyHistoryResearcher.com)

## **2. Dates and some incorrect "received wisdom".**

Looking in the wrong year is a quite common mistake to make and can really throw you off the track. Perhaps you are acting on some family tale, or a written note that is the 'received wisdom' in the family? Sometimes people seem so sure about a date in their past that they can be really adamant about it. Always treat a date as a clue to something until you have found the primary source that backs it up.

I saw a date, written down by a close relative of mine, that said that my great-great grandfather was born in a particular year. Another time I was told about a memory of a war time experience that happened on the storytellers 17<sup>th</sup> birthday when their ship was in port in America. A check for the date of my 2x great-grandfather's birth required me to do a search for five years either side until I eventually found his correct date in the indexes.

As for the elderly merchant seaman's recollections, *The Merchant shipping movement cards 1939-1945* at The National Archives proved that his ship was elsewhere on his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday - though it most certainly did land at that port at various other times in the war including around his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday!

The storytellers had simply got their memories mixed up, so always try to back up dates given to you by checking the primary sources where you can and start with five years either side and then increase your date range if need be.

Don't assume that our ancestors all died young. While some only had short lives, others did live into a ripe old age. Professional probate researchers, those people whose work takes them to court to give evidence, will often look for a person right up to 100 years of age when they are searching for a death.

They will, as a matter of course, look for a woman's marriage up to the age of 100 and search up to 25 years after marriage for the birth of a child. We need to keep in mind that some people may marry several years after a child was born, as well. Be aware that not everyone conforms to the expected.

### **3. So are you really sure about that name?**

We can sometimes be a bit obstinate about what we know. We have a name for an ancestor and that is what we go and look for. We may think about the regular short form for a name such as Tom for Thomas or Eliza for Elizabeth but there are other ways that our ancestors like to be known by and sometimes they change what it is along the way!

Could it be that you are looking for an ancestor who had been known by their middle name instead of their first? Quite a few people are known, in life, by a second name rather than their first. So a man baptised (US: baptized) by his parents as John Alan Smith may have preferred to have been called Alan Smith all his life.

Consider this also: his name may have been spelt (US: spelled) Allan, or Alun so do try to watch out for spelling variations. You need to be aware that people may be mis-indexed, as well, or just spelt differently than you expect. I spent ages over a great aunt Winnie who was christened Eveline Winifred and so appeared in many records as Eveline.

Another thing that can catch out the unwary is that an ancestor may have chosen to revert to a previous name after the collapse of a marriage so think of looking for maiden names long after they got married.

By opening your mind to ancestor's using names, other than those that you thought they would, can very often help you tease them out of the records and put you back on the road to discovering more about them.

### **4. Family stories**

Family stories can be excellent starting points as they give you information that you can further research. But there is the downside that sometimes they can send you off on a wild goose chase.

In my family there is a story that there was a handsome Irishman not far back in one branch of our family tree. It was given credence because all my cousins had heard the story as well. The problem was that when I started researching back up the direct lines of this branch, all our ancestors in the actual records were from Devon, with the exception of a small bit of Cornish that had married into one generation! So the elusive handsome Irishman may have been in a collateral branch and will take some finding, or he was a family friend that was given the honorary title of an uncle some generations back and so hatched the story that got passed down to my generation.

People can also make up stories to cover embarrassing relatives or situations. I once came across a story of a man whose family had been told had died young as a result of a fall from his horse. In reality, finding him in the death indexes and purchasing the copy of the death certificate revealed that the man had died in a mental asylum from insanity brought on by venereal disease.

By treating your family stories as a clue as to where to begin looking and not as a fact, then with some research you may find your ancestor in documents that are primary sources and carry more weight.

### **5. Inconsistent searching**

Scatter gun searching can be wasteful of our time and may lead us to become discouraged about ever finding our ancestors as we fail to make the progress that we all seek.

If you don't record what and where you have searched for an ancestor then this can lead to forgetting whether you have done it or not. You may end up doing a search in the birth records for exactly the same period that you have already looked at in an earlier session. This can waste your time and possibly money if you are using credits on pay-as-you-go site. I know that many of us can hold our hands up to doing this!

Keep a log of where you have looked for that elusive ancestor and then you won't waste time going over the same ground. This is not to say that checking back every so often to see if a site has updated and added new records to a collection is

not a bad thing. But to keep starting at the same point, because you have forgotten whether you checked for your ancestor between a certain set of dates in a record collection, is not good practice.

Search for an ancestor within a record set by selecting +/- 5 years and the name variations and note down what you have looked for. Then when you go back and chose +/- 10 years or a different name variation your research log will show you what you have discounted and then the next time you can start with a different set of parameters.

### **6. Not registered**

In some cases the reason that you can not find an ancestor in the vital records is that, simply your ancestor was never registered for one reason or another. This may occur, especially in the early years after the introduction of civil registration in 1837, when it was not compulsory.

The Births and Deaths Registration Act 1874 made registration compulsory, imposing fines for late registration. The onus for registration of a birth was now passed to the parents of the child, or the occupier of the house where a birth took place.

Once it was a requirement to register people missing from birth registers should be a more rare occurrence, though it is not absolutely impossible for someone to slip through the net. In between 1837 and 1875 some districts were certainly under registered.

If this is the case then think about what other records you could use to find out about your forebear. Many amateur family historians will have read that the government took over the civil registration of births marriages and deaths, from the church, in 1837 in England and Wales. While this is so, the churches still went on recording baptisms, marriages and burials and recording these in their registers. Many parish registers and nonconformist records are online to search, but others may be available in microfiche copies at County Record Offices or heritage centres (US: centers). Some county records have entered into partnerships with online commercial data websites to make their records available to subscribers; but beware that they don't always digitize the complete set! I have heard this being bemoaned in more than a couple of record offices by the staff of counties that are supposedly online on a big commercial genealogy site.

Try asking the local family history society if one or other of their projects to index people in some of the smaller collections may help you find an ancestor. They may offer to do a look up for you at a reasonable rate. I discovered someone in the Vaccination records for the town in Devon that this person lived by using this route. The Vaccination records are data that their members have extracted from the record of smallpox vaccinations under the 1898 Vaccination Act and usefully provided the child's name, sex, date and place of birth, parent's name and occupation, date vaccinated or death date if the child died in infancy.

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### **Advanced Beginner**

I hope that these tips have been of some use to you in your own family history research and that in days, weeks and months to come you find that you are able to break down what ever brick walls may appear in your way.

All I can advise is that you learn as much as you can about English and Welsh family history research by reading around the subject to acquire the essential tools needed.

I think it was an article by Else Churchill, the Genealogist at the Society of Genealogists, that first introduced me to the concept of being an *advanced beginner*, never accepting that we know all there is to know.

This idea revolves around the thought that the best family historian is one who thinks of themselves as being an *advanced beginner*. That is, they are constantly wide open to learning more skills. And the more proficient you become, the better you'll be able to uncover those elusive ancestors!

I have put together this membership website that weekly publishes a new tutorial that takes the beginner through to an intermediate stage in English Family History

If you signed up to add it to your purchase of **Tips & Techniques to find English Ancestors** then you already have a month's trial access.

Each week, for one year, I release a module into the private area of the website in which I go in-depth into a topic of English/Welsh family history and reveal techniques that you can use to break down your own brick walls.

I have planned the lessons carefully using my own experience in tracing my diverse English ancestors and I am confident that you will find it both interesting as well as of practical use.

For as long as you remain a member I will send you the lessons, of which I have 52 updates planned. You can, however, cancel your membership with just one click at any time without any hard feelings on my part.

If you didn't opt to add this to your purchase then the good news is that you have a second chance! Join me now in this journey at this link:  
<http://www.FamilyHistoryResearcher.com/course>

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