Tracing your Family Tree
A Beginner’s Guide

FIND OUT IF YOU HAVE A FAMOUS FAMILY
sthelens.gov.uk/history

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Introduction

St.Helens Local History and Archives Library (LHA) holds thousands of historical records, which can aid your family history research. This guide will introduce you to some of the most popular and useful resources, as well as providing helpful tips about how to get the most from your research.

Stage One: Initial Research

From your own resources, find out as much information as possible about your ancestors.

**Check:** Any old correspondence, birth, marriage or death certificates, old family Bibles, deeds, photographs, wills or any family heirlooms.

**Talk to:** Any relative, especially elderly ones, or even friends of the family. Do not dismiss all the family 'legends', but make a note of them as they may contain some elements of truth, even though some aspects may have been embellished over the years.

**Try to:** Ascertain some or all of the following facts about as many ancestors as possible - but do not despair if this is not feasible.

- Dates of birth, marriage or death
- Names of immediate close family, especially surnames on the female side
- Specific names and addresses of everyone
- Jobs, trades or professions of family members
- Religion and place of worship
- Significant life events, e.g. awards, divorce, emigration, epidemics, prison, war.

Stage Two: Check Existing Research

There is always the possibility that your family tree has already been researched and perhaps published. Although this seldom happens, it may be worthwhile checking some of the following books:

- **Bridger, C** An index to printed pedigrees. 1867.
- **Burke’s Landed Gentry** Hard copy from 1836 and current version online.
- **Burke’s Peerage** In hard copy from 1826 and current version online.
- **Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)** Although there are older hard copies in existence, the current edition is online.
- **Marshall, G. W** The genealogist’s guide to printed pedigrees. 1879.
- **Thompson, T. R** A catalogue of British family histories. 1980.

Much unpublished information is also available in:

- **Johnson K. A. & Sainty, M. R** Genealogical research directory, national and international. Published annually in hard copy format until 2007.

All the above books are available to consult within the Search Room of St.Helens Local History and Archives Library. Local Family History Societies may also have lists of members’ interests and many archive repositories and local history libraries hold unpublished local pedigrees.

Do not forget to check the ever-changing family history websites, but always remember that there can be many inaccuracies out there, so always check the source data.
Stage Three: The Archives

When you have accumulated as much information as possible, the Local History and Archives Library can assist your research by providing access to the following records. At this stage it might also be useful to join a family history society or adult education class, as both these organisations can provide useful guidance to the maze of sources available and to help to solve any potential problems that you may encounter.

1. Census returns, St.Helens 1841-1901 (35mm Microfilm)
   The library holds the detailed returns for the whole of the modern Borough of St.Helens from 1841 to 1901. These describe each family unit, making it possible to discover names, addresses, occupations, age or birthplace.

2. Census returns, UK (Microfiche, CD and Internet)
   - The 1881 census index on microfiche is available for England, Wales, the Channel Islands and Isle of Man, while the CD version of the same data also covers Scotland.
   - The 1891 census index for Scotland is also on microfiche.
   - Much of the census information for England and Wales is also available on the Internet and covers the period 1841-1911.

3. Civil Registration Indices (16mm Microfilm, Microfiche and Internet)
   - England and Wales
     - Births 1837-1990
     - Marriages 1837-1990
     - Deaths 1837-1990
     - This source is variously referred to as St.Catherine’s House Index, the General Register Office Index or just the GRO. It provides an index of all births, marriages and deaths registered in England and Wales and should ideally provide enough information to acquire a copy of a full certificate, which can be obtained from a local register office or purchased by post, telephone or Internet by sending the appropriate fee to:
       General Register Office
       PO Box 2, Southport PR8 2JD.
       Telephone: 0845 6037788
       Website www.gro.gov.uk

   - Overseas (Microfiche)
     - These records provide an index of births, marriages and deaths of British nationals overseas. Unlike the ordinary English and Welsh mainland Civil Registration, they list British nationals from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales who have registered one of these events abroad. They include entries for the Forces, Consular Offices, High Commissions and deaths from the Boer War, the First and Second World Wars and also Ionian Islands’ registrations.
     - They should be consulted carefully as the terms of reference can be slightly different from mainland Civil Registration. For instance, the regimental records commence in 1761 and may include some non-British nationals if they were serving with the British Army, Navy or, at a later date, Airforce.
     - A detailed list of these records is available in the Search Room, along with further research suggestions.

4. Directories
   - St.Helens directories start in 1819 and continue at irregular intervals to the 1960s. They can provide names and addresses, but the earlier volumes exclude the vast majority of ordinary people.

5. International Genealogical Index (IGI) or Family Search (CD-Rom and Internet)
   - The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints provides access to millions of birth and marriage records, especially in the UK. Here the emphasis is on Anglican records, particularly before the end of the nineteenth century.
   - It also includes data from other countries, although not every country, county or church has been covered.
   - As it brings together so many church records, it can be useful for tracing elusive ancestors and variant surname spellings.

6. Local newspapers (35mm Microfilm)
   - Most of the St.Helens newspapers are held from 1855 to the present date. They can supply information on births, marriages and deaths and major local incidents, but the older newspapers may be of lesser use as there used to be greater emphasis on national news, as opposed to local events.
6. **Ordnance Survey and Tithe Maps**

Ordnance Survey maps are available for the whole Borough from the 1840s onwards. Copies of the nineteenth century Tithe maps (maps defining ownership) and apportionments are also held for the Borough and may assist in pinpointing landowners and occupiers, houses, land-use and field names.

7. **Parish Registers**

Within the archives, there is a good collection of local registers, most of which are in microform or transcript format. A complete set of the Lancashire Parish Register Society volumes is also held, along with the useful guides of the National Index of Parish Registers.

8. **Photographs**

Various collections of images are available which can help to embellish a family tree, but always consider the copyright implications before using.

9. **Registers of Electors**

Municipal Registers are held for the old Borough of St.Helens from 1870 to the present date. The urban districts that form the current St.Helens are only covered from 1974, although some Parliamentary lists are available on microfilm from 1885 to 1915.

10. **Wills and inventories**

Some copies of local wills and inventories are stocked, but the Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire’s volumes are available to locate wills, from 1457 to 1858, in either the Cheshire Record Office or the Lancashire Record Office.

11. **General background material**

The LHA library also has a good range of genealogical periodicals and books as well as complete sets of the volumes of the:

- Chetham Society
- Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire
- Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire

Some of the records included in this list are available in several different formats, e.g. microform, transcript, CD, Internet, etc. This can be confusing, as each format tends to be better for a certain type of enquiry. If you are having difficulties, please consult a member of staff.

12. **Electronic records**

a. **www.ancestry.com**

Free access is provided to this extensive and ever-expanding site. Sources include:
- Australian electoral rolls (Various cities)
- British Army World War 1 Medal rolls index
- Canadian passenger lists from 1865 onwards
- England and Wales Census returns 1841-1901
- England and Wales Civil registration indices of births, marriages and deaths 1837 onwards
- Scotland Census returns
- United States Birth, marriage and death indices (Selected states and years)
- United States Census returns
- And much more.

b. **www.familysearch.org**

As an official site of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, its international genealogical data places great emphasis on church records, although it is increasingly covering census and other information. The pedigree charts, library catalogue and digitised book programme (mainly American) are part of this continually expanding site.

c. **www.genuki.org.uk**

This site provides a "virtual reference library" of genealogical information for the UK and Ireland, and also contains many useful links.

d. **www.ffhs.org.uk**

The Federation of Family History Societies site, lists most of the Family History Societies in the UK, as well as news, events and their Ezine (electronic newsletter).

e. **www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon**

This provides the main contact details for all the archive repositories in the UK and also some overseas institutions.
f. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a

Under the umbrella of The National Archives, the Access to Archives site allows searching of some of the catalogues of around 400 archive repositories in England and Wales. This includes lists of documents from the eighth century to the present day and is an excellent signpost to a vast amount of information not necessarily available in electronic format.

These are just a few examples of the many websites available for those interested in family history. However, even though these sites provide access to millions of names, it is always worth remembering that the data being accessed is only as good as the data acquired by the site owners. Most categories of record are seldom completely without error. This applies to both private and official records like the census or civil registration, both in the UK and abroad. If an error occurs at the transcription stage or incorrect information is provided at the point where the record was created, then this can present the family historian with problems. If this occurs, it is advisable to seek assistance from a member of staff, who may be able to suggest possible solutions.

Stage Four: Wider Research

Once the basic framework of the research has been completed and the family tree populated with as many generations as possible, it may be time to explore other aspects of the lives of your ancestors. Try to consider how life was experienced in previous centuries. Imagine a time without the Welfare State or Old Age Pensions. Visualise the hardships of war or having to pay for the services of a doctor if the children were seriously ill. Ask what life would have been like if you only owned the clothes you were wearing or you could not read or write. Alternatively, think of an era when open fields could be seen from the centre of a town, where coal mines were still abundant or the only form of transport was a tram, a horse and cart or just your own two feet. An understanding of the hardships and high points of life might even help solve the inevitable problem of the occasional elusive ancestor. Read a good social history of the period in question, as this can sometimes provide new avenues of approach to research.

Also consider exploring other types of record, which will embellish your existing research. Examine the lifestyles of your ancestors. Ask lots of questions.

- Did they go to school? Could the archives of that school have survived?
- Where did they live? Are there building plans available?
- Were they active members of a church society or Sunday school? Lists of members and the events they attended may have been retained.
- Were they involved in a local business? Even if the business archives have not survived, then interesting advertisements, letterheads or newspaper articles may be available.

The St.Helens Local History and Archives Library also has a wide range of material relating to the social and cultural history of St.Helens. Our archive catalogue amounts to about 2,000,000 items and can be used to trace the changes in industry, business, architecture, education, housing and health that have occurred in St.Helens over the past few centuries. Please view our catalogue online at www.sthelens.gov.uk/history or visit the Search Room to consult our printed catalogue and our diverse collection of local history books.
Opening Times and Accessibility

St.Helens Local History and Archives Library,
First Floor, St.Helens Central Library,
Gamble Building,
Victoria Square
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Fax: 01744 20836
E-Mail: lha@sthelens.gov.uk

Monday: 10.00am - 7.00pm
Tuesday: Closed
Wednesday: 10.00am - 7.00pm
Thursday: Closed
Friday: Closed
Saturday: 10.00am - 4.00pm
Sunday: Closed

There is access for disabled people via a lift from street level.
The nearest car park is on Birchley Street at the side of St.Helens Town Hall.

Please note that it is advisable to book a microfilm reader or computer before visiting the library. It is also advisable to bring a pencil to take notes, as ink pens can damage original documents and books.