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Starting your research

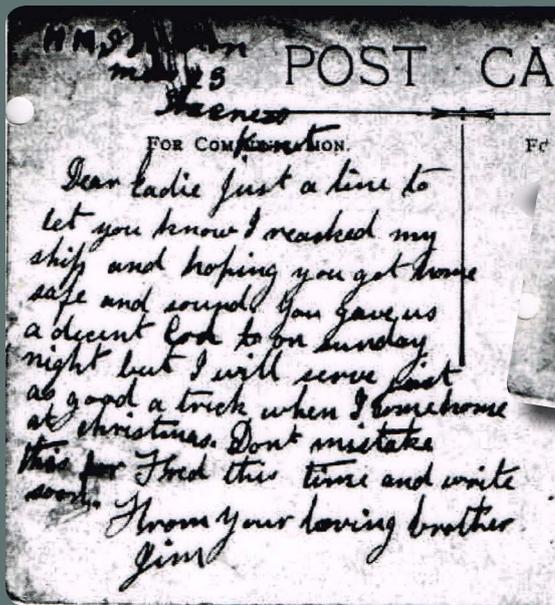
A fascinating and amusing insight into family tree research. Ann Macey...

“don't get me started!”

You want to 'do' your family history? There are a couple of questions to ask yourself before you do anything else.

“How would you feel if there was unequivocal proof that your granny had premarital sex with your grandad?”...





If you don't like it and wouldn't want to know, then close the notebook and find something else to do because you will find illegitimacy, bigamy, embezzlement, murder and a whole host of other things lurking in your ancestry, you just don't know it yet.

If the idea of a black sheep in the family fills you with glee then here's how to get started - what? The bit about granny? Oh yes, that's true I have the postcard to prove it. She was sixteen and "in service so she wasn't allowed to receive letters from men, from anyone outside the family. She told me that when grandpop wrote to her he pretended to be her "loving brother, Jim." When a cousin sent me images of the postcard I knew it was real because that's how it was signed. Grandpop was a sailor and men and women haven't changed that much in a hundred years.

Start with living relatives. I began researching because I had just had major surgery and needed something to keep my brain active while my body recovered. My dad was doing his tree so my husband said "Do mine, I haven't got many relatives".

He lied

I followed the advice from a magazine (This was in the 'olden days' as my granddaughter calls the time before mobile phones and t'internet) and rang his Aunt Lilian. You need to picture me in bed, propped up with pillows, a notebook and pencil (no ink on the sheets please!) and the phone wedged between the pillow and my ear so I had both hands free to hold said notebook while I scribbled down all the information she was about to give me.

"I'm doing the family tree," I said, "Oh don't ask me I don't know anything" (you'll hear that a lot). "Your brothers," I continued, "What were their names," "you know them!" she said, as though I was completely stupid (you'll get that a lot too). "No, I only know what they are called in the family. What names were they given when they were born - and when were they born?"

There was a slight pause and then she rattled off the given names of her brothers and their birthdays. I then asked for her father's name and her mother and then came the question that set this whole thing in motion.

"Did your dad have any brothers or sisters?" I said as I flicked to a clean page in the notebook



“Oh yes,” she said in that matter-of-fact voice all knowers-of-great-things have, and proceeded to list the eleven siblings, their birthdays, their wives and husbands, their children AND the fact that two of them were still alive (Not many relatives? Ha!).

I joined the local Family History Society. This was invaluable. They have regular meetings where you can meet and chat with other researchers. Most UK societies are affiliated to the Federation of Family history societies and this gives you access to people who are very knowledgeable about their area. This is great if you live, like I do in Wales and all your research is in places like Bristol, London, Ayrshire and Ireland. Over the years I also joined the society’s local to my research and then I could ask questions in their quarterly journals. It is worth thinking about if only because they usually have someone prepared to go to local archives and search for you – always handy.

That was how it began and here I am 25 years later, still searching out information about dead people, still organising family reunions because, suddenly my cousins and I have become the “older generation”. Still doing the Happy-Dance down the hall whenever I find a new branch of one of

the trees and still learning something new about our ancestors nearly every day.

Today it is easier because so much is online but the buzz you get when you track down a birth before registration began or you ask a question on www.british-genealogy.com and someone comes back with so much information your head reels cannot be bettered. It’s not a cheap hobby but you don’t need special clothes or boots and you don’t need a lifejacket or a wetsuit. A notebook and pencil for the record offices – and you will still need to go to some archives to see some original documents. Access to a computer and the internet and membership of a local family history society and a good, helpful forum where you can ask the daftest questions and no one will laugh.

Oh, a word of warning here. Be very careful about family trees you find scattered across this here ‘intarwebby’ thing. Treat them with suspicion. Do not assume that because it is on the biggest family history site that it must be correct. There are people out there that see a name that is the same as one of their ancestor’s so they put it on their tree. They don’t check, sometimes they don’t even look at what they have added to



their list of names they just harvest from other people's work and claim kinship. There have been cases where trees have couples marrying even though the female is actually the grandmother of the male and died three years before the boy was born.

Never put anything about living people onto an internet tree, it is just not done and people will shriek and shout "*data protection*" and the fallout from that makes you feel so silly. When in doubt ask on the forum. The moderators are pretty darned good at getting back to you and finding links to answers and if they can't help there are a lot of members of the forum just waiting for the chance to get their teeth into a bit of research, not because they are showing off their knowledge but because they are stuck on their own names or they have seen something previously that will help you. I found that I was given loads of information about a great grandmother simply because a member of the forum was doing a tree about the man great granny called husband (not the only bigamist in my family). Family historians are the most generous of hobbyists and will give you their most precious gift, their time, just to ensure that you take another step forward.

To sum up your first steps you should

1. Decide whether you want to discover blush-making information about your ancestors
2. Talk to living relatives. Don't wait because it will be too late.
3. Join www.British-Genealogy.com It's free and always open and the members are just great
4. Join the local family history society and talk to other sufferers
5. Write everything down straight away. Make sure that you note the source of every fact
6. Enjoy the chase

So that's how to get started in this (addiction) hobby. I hope you have as much fun as I am having, (that's me on the left). I look forward to seeing you in the forum.

