



Making Everything Easier!™

2nd Edition

Researching Your Family History Online

FOR
DUMMIES®

Learn to:

- Get the most out of genealogy websites and resources
- Store and organise information on your computer
- Create your family tree and host it online

Consultant Editor:

Dr Nick Barratt

Genealogist on the BBC series Who Do You Think You Are?

Sarah-Jane Newbery

Jenny Thomas

Matthew L. Helm

April Leigh Helm

Genealogy experts





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Researching Your Family History Online For Dummies[®], 2nd Edition

Visit www.dummies.com/how-to/content/researching-your-family-history-online-for-dummies.html to view this book's cheat sheet.

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Researching Your Family History Online For Dummies[®], 2nd Edition

**by Dr Nick Barratt, Sarah-Jane
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Matthew L. Helm and April
Leigh Helm**



**Researching Your Family History Online For Dummies[®], 2nd
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Sarah-Jane Newbery has worked for Sticks Research Agency for three years, overseeing historical and genealogical research for a variety of television and radio projects as well as coordinating research for private clients. Prior to joining SRA, Sarah worked as a reader advisor at the National Archives, and has since contributed to many genealogical articles for magazines, websites and production companies. Sarah has a degree in Early Modern History from St Mary's College (University of Surrey).

Jenny Thomas was the co-author of the first UK edition of this book. In 2002, she graduated from Oxford in Ancient and Modern History. Jenny has worked on seven series of the BBC

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Together, the Helms have co-authored *Family Tree Maker For Dummies*, *Your Official America Online Guide to Genealogy Online* and *Get Your Degree Online*.

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We're proud of this book; please send us your comments through our Dummies online registration form located at www.dummies.com/register/.

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Introduction

Genealogy, as you've probably noticed, is all the rage. Everyone's talking about it. People of all ages are catching the genealogy bug: teenagers are researching alongside their grandparents, and children are researching with their parents. Fathers, sons, mothers, daughters, uncles, aunts, grandparents, great-grandparents – and even the in-laws – are beginning to take a curious interest in earlier generations of your family.

Perhaps members of your own family are chiding you for how little you know about your immediate ancestors. Perhaps you feel out of things at family reunions, where you don't like to ask 'So who *is* Great-great-uncle Bernard, anyway?' You may even feel embarrassed and nervous because you aren't sure how to begin your own research.

Beneath the embarrassment at how little you know, you may have discovered a more profound and deeply rooted desire to research your family tree. Perhaps you want to find out about the part your ancestors played in history. No doubt you remember the occasional humorous family story, and wish you had asked more at the time. Or perhaps you have an increasing desire to find out about the stock from which you're built. Maybe you have distinctive looks, talents or characteristics and want to discover where they came from. Perhaps you've visited castles, museums, country houses, old tin mines or cotton mills and wondered how any of them relate to you. You may feel there's more to genealogy than having fun, solving interesting puzzles and compiling data, photos and memories to display at your family reunion. Perhaps as you begin your research you discover that genealogy's your route both into the past and into yourself.

You may think this is all rather dramatic – and perhaps you're right. But genealogy can be as much or as little as you want it to be. Genealogy can be an enjoyable hobby to wile away rainy afternoons or keep your brain ticking over. It can be a way of meeting interesting people and learning new things. It provides an excuse for a good day out to visit places significant to your ancestors. It brings families closer together as they become aware of their shared heritage. And it may spark your imagination as you start to understand how your great-great-grandma lived as a little girl. And it can become a healthy obsession!

Twenty years ago, genealogical research was very different. As a genealogist, you had to carry notebooks to archives all over the county, trawl through microfilmed copies of censuses and spend long and often unrewarding hours ploughing through records for which no indexes had been compiled. Each clue in those days was a hard-won achievement. And so only a few hard-core genealogists had the time, energy and money to do any serious research.

With the advent of the computer and the constant expansion of genealogical resources on the Internet, the genealogy landscape has changed beyond recognition. You can now lay a solid foundation and pursue a good deal of your research without leaving the comfort of your home. Genealogy online is both the present and the future.

Indeed, things have changed even since we published the first edition of this book! Since then, various organisations have made more and more records available online, the most significant of which are the 1911 census returns. Also, more genealogy websites than ever are now out there, many of which enable you to load your family tree directly to their site. The best news of all is that more help than ever before is now

available, both from organisations and from other genealogists, and all at the touch of a button!

But before you get started, we should give you a couple of warnings. First, genealogy is very addictive. You may find yourself staying up into the wee hours on the trail of an elusive ancestor. So don't blame us if your boss complains about you falling asleep at work because you've been up all night with Great-great-uncle Stanley. Second, and more seriously, bear in mind that online research is one of many tools for finding info about your ancestors. If you want to research your genealogy thoroughly, you'll have to use a whole range of these tools – many of which we discuss in this book.

Now the health warnings are out of the way, we can turn our minds to the task in hand. So put the kids to bed, let the cat out and shut yourself away with your computer. Your ancestors are calling you and waiting to be found!

About This Book

Researching your family history online can be like digging up a chest of buried treasure. So many amazing things catch your eye that you may not know what to look at first. You quickly learn that all that glistens isn't necessarily gold. Before long you may need a little guidance – and that's where this book comes in. We help you become a discriminating treasure-hunter by showing you the location of useful genealogy websites and how to use them to their full potential to meet your research goals.

Having said that, you're probably asking how this book differs from the other genealogy books you see in the bookshops. We believe this book has three crucial differences. First, many genealogy books are out-of-date: They discuss only the

traditional methods of genealogical research and get you travelling hundreds of miles to visit archives, graveyards and ancestral homes and then using a good old typewriter to summarise your results. These books neglect the growing wealth of online resources that save you a great deal of time, money and trouble, whereas this book brings you bang up to date. Second, other books that *do* cover online genealogy tend to group resources by how genealogists access them – for example, listing all websites, chat rooms and so on together. This approach is fine, but it doesn't show you how to integrate the many Internet resources to achieve your genealogical goals and to build up a rounded picture of the identities, lives and times of your ancestors. As genealogists, we understand that researchers don't operate by searching all of one type of resource, then all of another and so on. When we seek a certain piece of information, we use many resources at once – websites, email, newsgroups or whatever's available. This book helps you to take this more open approach. Third, few genealogy books tell you how to actually use the resources on the Internet. Often they list resources and where to find them, but rarely do they guide you through. We do the opposite: we don't go into detail about every resource that we mention, but we discuss the major tools in great, but simple, detail, so you can use them properly and to your best advantage.

We've tried to avoid the mistakes that we think appear in some online genealogy books. We've taken care not to become bogged down in computer-heavy detail at the expense of the broader picture. Our focus is on genealogy rather than computer technology or the obsessive ins and outs of the Internet and its resources – although we do assume a familiarity with basic computer technology. Neither do we pretend that everything you need during the course of your research is available online. We've tried to achieve a balance, and we hope this book helps you make the most of what's available without

leading you down false avenues or creating false expectations. We tell it as it is.

Finally, we'd like to induct you into the world of genealogy. Hold your head up high and say in a loud clear voice, 'I declare myself to be an official genealogist!' And there you have it. You can even call in witnesses if it helps you to play your part. Whatever you choose, we emphasise that you don't need any formal qualifications to call yourself a genealogist: you don't need a degree or a diploma. You don't have to know all the kings of England or name the Scottish Clans. And you don't have to memorise the contents of this book to prove yourself to your genealogically minded friends. You simply need an interest in your ancestry and a willingness to devote lots of spare time to gathering information to illustrate it.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing and updating this book, we made a few assumptions. If you fit one or more of the following assumptions, this book's for you:

- ✓ You've done at least a little genealogy groundwork, and now you're ready to use the Internet to pursue and prepare yourself for your genealogy research both online and offline.
- ✓ You may have carried out research years ago without using the Internet and the online census indexes now available. Using the information in this book you hope to find the ancestor that eluded you all those years ago and take your research further than you previously thought possible.

- ✓ You have at least a little computer experience, are now interested in pursuing your family tree, and want to know where and how to start.
- ✓ You have a little experience in genealogy and some experience with computers, but you want to learn how to put them together.

Of course, you can have a lot of computer experience and be a novice to genealogy or online genealogy and still benefit from this book. In this case, you may still find it useful to read some of the basic sections on computers and the Internet in case you find an alternative to use.

How to Use This Book

We don't expect you to read this book from cover to cover. Nor do you need to approach the chapters in numerical order. You can read the book in this way if you wish, and you won't regret your investment. But you won't miss out on vital info if you skip through the sections looking only for the stuff that you're interested in at any particular moment. We want this book to be useful and a little entertaining – but how you use it is up to you. In fact, when writing this book we've tried to accommodate your every need. The sections within each chapter stand as separate entities, so you can turn directly to a section that deals with what you want to find out. If something in one section's relevant to something somewhere else, we cross-refer you to the relevant bits of the book – but we've tried hard to do this referencing in a manner that isn't distracting if you're reading the book from cover to cover.

We use a couple of conventions in the book to make it easier for you to follow a set of specific instructions. Commands for

computer menus appear with arrows between each selection. For example, the command File⇒Print tells you to choose the Print command from the File menu. And if we want you to type something, we use **bold type** to indicate what you need to type.

How This Book Is Organised

To give you a better picture of what this book offers, we tell you a little about how we organised it and what you can expect to find in each part.

Part I: Starting at the Roots

You need to establish a good foundation before you begin your online genealogical research. That way you have something solid to build on. Part I explores the fundamental family information that you need to collect, how to form an online research plan and how to organise your research and place it in a genealogical database.

Part II: Focusing on Your Ancestors

Searching online for information about your ancestors can be a little daunting. Part II examines the resources you can use to locate your ancestors by name and offers advice about placing your ancestors geographically on your ancestral map.

Part III: Rooting Around in the Past

Here we come to the fundamental section of the book. In this part, we guide you through the key online genealogical resources, from civil registration to the census, from parish records to wills. We describe a host of online resources and databases to speed you on your way. We also discuss offline resources and how to find them when you've reached the limits of the online collections.

Part IV: Share and Share Alike

One of the most important and rewarding aspects of genealogical research is joining other researchers to achieve your mutual goals. This part introduces you to the online resources that you need to make the most of sharing. We show you how to cooperate with other genealogists, coordinate with groups and societies and share the fruits of your research with the genealogical community online.

Part V: The Part of Tens

The infamous Part of Tens: Every book in the *For Dummies* series has one. Each section in this part bristles with profound advice and lists of things to do. Here you find a series of quick-reference chapters that give you useful genealogical hints and reminders. We include a list of online databases that you should be aware of, some tips for creating a genealogical web page, hints on keeping your online research sailing smoothly and a list of sites offering help to genealogists. The appendix defines many of the terms you're likely to encounter during the course of your genealogical research.

The Researching Your Family History Online For Dummies Internet Directory

The Internet directory in the middle of this book lists a number of Internet sites of use and interest to genealogists. You find sites dedicated to a whole range of topics, from surnames to comprehensive genealogical indexes, from big search engines to commercial endeavours (sites selling their services or software). For each site that we identify, we give the name, web address and a brief overview of what the site offers.

We want you to be able to see immediately whether a site in the directory has a particular type of information or a service that interests you. For this reason, we've created some mini-icons – or, if you prefer, *micons*. See *The Researching Your Family History Online For Dummies Internet Directory* for details.

Icons Used in This Book

To help you get the most out of this book, we've created some helpful icons that indicate at a glance whether a section or paragraph contains important information of a particular kind.



Here we refer you to other books or materials that you can look at to get additional information.



Here we describe concepts or terms unique to genealogy.



This icon marks important genealogical info.



When you see this icon, you know we're offering advice or shortcuts to make your research easier.



Here we walk you step by step through an example of something.



Look out! This is something to be aware of and you need to be on your guard.

Where to Go from Here

What next depends on where you are at the moment. If you're browsing in a bookshop, you need to remember to pay for the book before rushing home to your computer. If you're at home, simply turn the page and start reading, following the steps for the online activities in the book as they come along. You're ready to give your research a go. Good luck!