

BRANSCOMBE PROJECT – September 2021

History Snips 15

Sue Dymond: writing your family history

Maybe during Lockdown you felt the urge to gather together your family history ... and maybe it turned out to be harder than you expected. Here are some suggestions from Sue ...

If I was asked to give one piece of advice on starting researching your family history it would be to talk to your relatives. Record what they say, and then it'll always be there for you to refer back to. If someone feels awkward about being recorded then just talk to them and either write down what they say there and then, or as soon as possible afterwards. There's nothing worse than wishing in later years you'd asked your parents or grandparents things that would have helped piece your story together.

Then you need to review what they've told you. You'll probably have to ask further questions to clarify certain statements. Be aware that people tend to edit their past, leaving out awkward events that they feel reflect badly on themselves or others. You'll need tact and diplomacy to avoid causing upset and a drying up of information.

Another resource is family photos. Sadly many have no writing on the back, but photos can be used as a discussion point with your parents or grandparents, or other relatives. Remember to label your old photos!

Findings from online research can inform the questions you ask. There are free websites, but I subscribe to *Ancestry* and *Find My Past*. They hold a lot of records in common, but I particularly value the family trees on *Ancestry* and the online newspapers on *Find My Past*.

Building a family tree is fun using online census records. Births, marriages and deaths can be verified by online records, but remember that sometimes the name a relative goes by is not their actual recorded name. Start with the ones you think you know and then go backwards and link in more distant relatives. Sometimes ancestors appear in newspaper accounts and this dates an event quite solidly. I found a great uncle who drowned himself by jumping in a river with heavy chains attached, and a great grandfather who died by setting himself on fire. Neither event was passed down in oral history – they were probably felt to be too shameful. People who migrated show up on ship

manifests and once settled in another country they start to appear on census records and electoral rolls.

Connecting with others through *Ancestry* family trees may allow you to swap stories, photos and even get help identifying people in your own photos.

Neither I nor my father knew that my paternal grandmother was one of ten children, but now I've seen photos and heard of the lives of quite a few of them through *Ancestry* connections.

DNA testing has been a game changer in family research. I have taken a DNA test and connected with relatives with interesting stories to tell. A lack of DNA match helped me correct an error in my tree.

In 1911/12 my grandfather Harold, his eldest brother Tom and their brother-in-law Robert all migrated to Australia. From my research I thought that Tom was the last to go out, that he'd gone out with a family of young children, settled on the east coast of Australia and had a few more children. It seemed that my grandfather and his brother-in-law had gone out earlier and settled on the west coast. I did think it odd that that they chose to live so far apart. DNA matches proved I'd got the story wrong - I was not related to the Tom that I'd put in my family tree! The Tom I'd chosen had the same town of origin as the 'real' Tom, almost a match date of birth and migrated at the same time. My mother had always maintained that the eldest brother, Tom, went first and the other two followed on – she proved to be correct!

So what was the 'real' Tom's story? Truth can be stranger than fiction. Tom left the mill towns of the north and turned up in Dorset as a Church Army Evangelist! He was boarding with a family. The 1911 census shows him still a boarder but in another part of Dorset, in the household of a widow and her four more or less grown-up children. He is now a farm worker. Within months of the census he had married the widow and the whole household was Australia bound and settled on the west coast. The twist in the tale is that the 'widow's' husband was actually still alive, so a case of bigamy. None of this story filtered down through the family.