SUSSEX FAMILY HISTORY GROUP

FIRST STEPS IN FAMILY HISTORY

Where do I start?
Start with yourself and your immediate family and work back from there. Draw a basic family tree on paper. Question your relatives: older relatives can provide a great deal of helpful information; do not neglect younger relative who may remember things they have been told. Nobody remembers everything accurately, so it is important to try to locate family documents and pictures and either scan or photograph them. In the case of pictures, always name your image of them in a way that makes it clear who is included and, where possible, when it was taken. With prints use soft pencil on the back.

I have recorded everything I can. Where do I go next?
If you are fairly sure where the people you are looking for lived at some stage in the period 1841 to 1911 (for instance, a village, a small town or a particular part of London), you could go straight to census records. However, you do need to track down their Birth, Marriage, Death certificates. Please see separate handout: Birth, Marriage, Death (BMD) Certificates.

But this information only applies to England and Wales. My ancestry is Scottish and Irish. What do I do?
Civil Registration began in Scotland in 1855 and in Ireland in 1864. Certificates can be obtained from New Register House, Princes Street, Edinburgh EHI 3YT (for Scotland) and from the General Register Office, Government Offices, Convent Road, Roscommon, for Ireland. Registrations for Northern Ireland Northern Ireland from 1922 are at Oxford House, 49-55 Chichester Street, Belfast BT1 4HL. Before commencing this part of your research, however, you are strongly advised to read the relevant chapter in one of the many books available. See separate handout for Scottish Research.

I think my relative was born overseas. What do I do?
The General Register Office (GRO) also holds overseas records containing details of births, marriages and deaths of British Citizens that have taken place abroad since the late eighteenth century. It is not compulsory to register every birth, marriage and death that occurs overseas and the GRO is not notified of every event that has taken place. For non British Citizens www.familysearch.org has details of many vital record collections available to view free of charge and www.cyndislist.com may provide details of records available for your country of interest.

Census
A census is taken every 10 years and records become available for the public when they are over 100 years old; that is those of 1911 and earlier. Please see separate handout: Census.

How do I get further back from the mid-19th century?
Now, you will be largely dependent on the church (or parish) registers which were introduced in 1538 and contain baptisms and burials (as distinct from births and deaths) and, of course, marriages. Although many early registers have been lost over the years, a surprising number still exist.

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Where do I find parish registers?
England and Wales 1537 onwards but there are gaps and missing registers. They record Baptisms, Marriages and Burials not Births and Deaths.
Ask at the relevant county record office or local studies library, or your nearest Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) Family History Centre for details of the records available.
Many of the registers have been surname indexed by voluntary or commercial organisations.
Visit the online catalogue at www.genfair.co.uk and www.parishchest.com
www.freereg.org.uk has indexes. Select a single county to see the places covered. If you do not find a Place and Church on these pages, it has not yet been transcribed.

In addition to the registers, from 1598 parish priests had to send to their bishop an 'annual return', a copy of the register, known as a Bishops' Transcript. Those, which still exist, can be very useful in supplying entries omitted from the register or replacing a missing register.
1753 Hardwicke's Marriage Act to prevent clandestine marriages.
1907 Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Act and 1921 Deceased Brother's Widows Marriage Act changed the consanguinity rules for widows and widowers.
1929 Age at Marriage Act increased age of girls & boys to 16 (previously girls 12 and boys 14).
1931 Marriage (Prohibited Degrees) Relationship Act permitted marriages to nieces and nephews.

I've heard that wills can be useful - how do I go about using them?
The Probate Service has recently closed the London office where one could find and order wills from 1858 onwards. You now have to search online at www.gov.uk/search-will-probate.
Some are available from commercial organisations.
During the Commonwealth period in the 17th century most wills were proved in London and are now held at The National Archives (TNA). Wills proved at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury are also there and both are available to download for a fee. Please see separate handout on Wills and Probate.
For other wills try the local County Record Offices.
Transcriptions of Sussex wills may be available from willstore@sfhg.org.uk

What else can I expect to find out about my family?
There are many other sources which you can search, far too many to list here. There are numerous books and specialist magazines that may help, so ask at your local library or search the Internet. Family history societies have a wealth of information to help you with your research and the location of source material, visit their websites. A comprehensive range is available from GENfair: the 'One-stop shop' for family and local historians. View the online catalogue on the www.genfair.co.uk.

How do I find out about family history classes?
Try your nearest family history society or Workers' Educational Association and your Local Education Authority, both of which may offer adult classes. County Record Offices and Libraries often advertise as well as run classes. There are also courses available online.

Where can I find information on any family history societies that I might want to join?
Most societies have websites with contact details. Those that are members of the Federation are listed on their website, or details can be requested from The Administrator, Federation of Family History Societies, PO BOX 8857, Lutterworth, LE17 9BJ.

Supposing there is someone already researching the same family as me, how do I find them?
Many family history societies publish Members' Interests. The Guild of One Name Studies is the world's leading organisation for one-name studies. A listing of registered surnames is available on their website at www.one-name.org There are also commercial organisations which provide a means of building your family tree and the possibility of connecting with wider family members.