

Beyond All Reasonable Doubt

The Golden Rules for Accurate Genealogical Research

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Incorrect pedigrees are nothing new but these days there are more opportunities for inaccuracies to be promoted as 'known facts' due to the copying of incorrect data via online family trees. Therefore it is even more important to have a sound research technique. A good research technique will also help flesh out the lives of your ancestors with the information you find – because you will potentially find so much more. The Genealogy Proof Standard (GPS) drawn up by the USA Board for Certification of Genealogists makes a good basis for sound research:

- Reasonably exhaustive research conducted
- Each fact has a complete & accurate source citation
- Evidence is reliable and skilfully correlated & interpreted
- Any contradictory evidence has been resolved
- The conclusion is soundly reasoned & coherently written

Celia's Golden Rules For Accurate Research

1. Prove to 'Verified Pedigree Level' (VPL)

Verified Pedigree Level does all of the above and provides at least 2 forms of independent documentary evidence to confirm each individual's parentage. We should be striving to prove our trees to Verified Pedigree Level where possible. The remaining Golden Rules should help us achieve both GPS and VPL

2. Work Methodically

- Work from known fact - not something that might be right
- Cross reference with other sources where possible. Do the facts match?
- Write a dated summary & action plan after each round of research

3. Search thoroughly and extensively

- Don't stop at the first likely entry e.g. baptism – there may be more than one
- Use as many sources as possible. Know what these are and use online catalogues to see which records survive
- Don't forget records that are in the UK but not online. Plan a trip/Join the relevant local history society/Use a UK researcher

4. Assess your source

- How likely is it to be correct?
- All sources are open to human error at any stage
- Errors & omissions: Coverage? Lost/damaged records/Online databases – incomplete – inaccurate/inadequate source data?

5. Have an Informed Mind

- Read read read! To assess your source - requires good genealogical knowledge. See reading list below.
- How & by whom was the information in the source collected?
- Be aware of **all** the sources you can use & use online record office catalogues e.g. Discovery - covers material at the UK National Archives & 2500 other archives and educational institutions around the UK. Check the coverage of record offices from the Discovery home page. Use search engines to track down private websites detailing private research e.g. One Place Studies
- Which records exist for which place?
- Knowledge of locality e.g. administrative units
- Improve knowledge of the locality through reading.
- Improve overall geography of England & Wales. Where are places in relation to each other? It's important to include local history as you build up your knowledge database. Many studies which come under the umbrella of archaeology will also provide useful background information
- Improve your geography – of England/Wales. FamilySearch Wiki is useful tool especially for coverage of sources as is Genuki (see below).

6. Never Make Assumptions

We all make assumptions – it is part of human nature. These may cause us to rule out certain entries in records when we should not do so

- Don't presume your ancestors were rich/poor unless you know for sure!
- Interpretation and terminology in records – e.g. use of term labourer. Is our modern day perception putting an incorrect light on the information?
- Don't presume that what you read must be right – or wrong!
- Credibility: Relating to information in sources – is it believable or not – e.g. labourer to farmer in 20 years? Internal Migration within the UK. Could you ancestor be the same man who turns up 200 odd miles away from where he married before the railway age? If he was poor did he really walk that far? He may have done! But you need to question it.
- There are exceptions to every rule and sometimes the unlikely is true – but you need proof!

7. Cite Your Sources

We should use good source citation in our research to remind ourselves and show others where each piece of information came from. To quote The (UK) National Archives, good source citations and notes should include the following:

- Name of the repository where the original record is held
- Full reference number of the source as found in the catalogue of the relevant record office or, if the source is from a private collection, then details of who put the collection together, when and for what purpose, as well as which original sources were used. Also a note where the database is a transcription.
- Where information comes from a website then include the date the website was accessed, as the site may evolve e.g. The National Archives, Kew, England
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/citing-documents-national-archives/> Accessed 15 November 2015

8. Know Your Websites and How to use Them

- Be aware of the contents of websites & completeness of databases
- You may have to read the small print and use other sources such as parish maps to check whether all parishes are uploaded.
- Keep up to date - sign up for newsletters including my own at www.chfh.co.uk

9. There's an Exception to Every Rule

This sounds like we are breaking part of Rule 2: work from known fact to known fact. However, you may be able to work back from something that you are not sure is right to see if your research throws up any further clues e.g. naming patterns/shared occupations. Look at wills for a family you suspect are related to see if they mention any of your family. Make sure to check wills for maternal ancestors' lines, not just same surname lines.

Do not add unverified facts to your tree; you can join doubtful generations with a dotted line to show it is unverified. Working forward from a line might help rule out a potential baptism. You may prove that a particular baptism relating to your ancestor's namesake cannot be your ancestor since there is evidence linking him to a different marriage.

10. Use Family Profiling

Use extended family profiling when there is no birth or baptism or other record for your ancestor to prove or disprove his or her parental line. Consider DNA testing to help untangle family branches. An introduction to DNA is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9RyoEVDG7o>

Further Reading & Websites

Mark Herber *Ancestral Trails* (2005). Gives a pretty comprehensive background to English and Welsh records. Highly recommended

Mike Whitfield Foster *A Comedy of Errors, or The Marriage Records of England & Wales, 1837-1899* (pub 1998). Read about the extent of errors in the General Register Office Index.

Pick up a copy second hand. Mike died recently & it is unclear whether you can still purchase copies from his website at <http://homepages.paradise.net.nz/mikefost/>

Harleian Society Publications (include Herald's Visitations) <http://www.heraldry-online.org.uk/HarleianPublications2.htm>

Genealogical Proof Standard: <http://www.bgc certification.org/resources/standard.html>

Locate a UK Researcher: <http://www.agra.org.uk/>

The National Archives Discovery Catalogue:
<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Family Search Wiki https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page

GENUKI Virtual reference library of genealogical information for the UK
<http://www.genuki.org.uk/>

Family Tree Magazine (UK) – blogs & articles <http://www.familytreemagazine.com>

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Celia's Downloadable Talk

Wills Not Just a Source for Your Better-off Ancestors

£9.99 <http://www.chfh.co.uk/tutorial>

Celia's You Tube Channel: *Heritage on Heritage*

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkNMqDxE5PZ5lgO-MojqQQw>

Celia's Blog: <http://www.chfh.co.uk/blog/>

Twitter: @CeliaHeritage