



Notes for Americans on tracing their British Ancestry

A successful search for British ancestry depends almost entirely on prior knowledge from American records or family tradition of the exact parish from which the immigrant family came. If the migrant came alone, without wife or children, he may be almost impossible to trace unless his place of birth is known, particularly if he migrated before 1837. The few surviving passenger lists do not normally provide this information though they may show the family group which emigrated.

You are not ready to commence research in England until you have traced back in America to the first immigrant. Matters to be considered then are the immigrant's approximate birth-date, his religion, occupation and marriage, and the dates of birth of any children born in Britain before migration.

Centralised indexes since 1837

The registration of births, marriages and deaths commenced on 1 July 1837 and provides a centralised index covering all such events in England and Wales. The quarterly indexes may be searched without charge at the Family Records Centre, 1 Myddelton Street, London, EC1R 1UW, England (Phone: (020 7392 5300 to check opening times) and copies on microfiche are available in various libraries including that of the Society of Genealogists (up to 1920 only). The full information about any event is only available in the form of a certificate costing £6. If the full index reference is known postal application can be made to General Register Office, Smedley Hydro, Southport, Merseyside, PR8 2HH, England at a cost of £13.

There are similar indexes for Scotland from 1 January 1855, at General Register Office (Scotland), New Register House, Princes Street, Edinburgh, EH1 3YT, Scotland, and for Ireland from 1 January 1864, at the General Register Office, 8-11 Lombard Street East, Dublin 2, Eire.

Parish registers before 1837

Before 1837 in England and Wales, 1855 in Scotland and 1864 in Ireland the main records are those of baptism, marriage and burial in the individual registers of the parish churches or nonconformist (i.e. non-Church of England) chapels. There were about 12,000 parish churches in England and Wales. Most of the English registers are no longer in the churches but have been deposited in county record offices. For the whereabouts of Welsh parish registers see *Parish registers of Wales* by C J Williams & J Watts-Williams (London, 1986) and for the whereabouts of Irish registers see *Guide to Irish parish registers* by Brian Mitchell (Baltimore, 1989). Most Scottish registers before 1855 are at General Register Office (Scotland), New Register House, Princes Street, Edinburgh, EH1 3YT, Scotland.

Many of these registers have been individually copied and indexed and many more have been microfilmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah. From these copies three major centralised indexes have been compiled which may locate the migrant and his family in the British Isles:

- *International Genealogical Index*, contains about eighty million entries of baptism and marriage, arranged in alphabetical order of surname and forename in county sections. Several editions of this index have been distributed by the Genealogical Society of Utah on microfiche and it may be seen in all the local Family History Centres (see below) and in the libraries of many State historical and genealogical societies in America. If the migrant was baptised or married anywhere in the British Isles between 1538 and 1875 he may be found in this Index. Whilst a search through all the sections may be accomplished in two or three hours, it is easier and quicker to use the version now available on CD-ROM. Computers providing access to this version are available at Family History Centres and many other sites including the Society of Genealogists.
- *Boyd's Marriage Index*, contains about seven million marriages in England between 1538 and 1837, arranged in alphabetical order of surname and forename in 25-year sections divided by county. There are typescript copies of the index at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City and at the Society of Genealogists in London. Microfilm copies are available in the United States through the Family History Centres (see below) and a microfiche copy is held by the National Genealogical Society at 4527 Seventeenth Street North, Arlington, VA 22207-2399, USA.
- *Pallot's Marriage Index*, covers most marriages in the London area 1780-1837. It is arranged in alphabetical order in one sequence, but no copies are available and postal searches only are possible. Apply to Achievements Ltd., 79-82 Northgate, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 1BA, England. Fees are payable. This index is important as about 10 per cent of all the population of England has always lived in London.

The last two indexes will only be of assistance if the migrant married in England before migrating. Other county marriage indexes are being compiled by local family history societies and individuals. They can only be used if the likely county of origin is known, but are listed in J Gibson and E Hampson, *Marriage, census and other indexes for family historians* (Birmingham, 1994).

Useful summary lists of English and Welsh parishes, showing the whereabouts of their parish registers, the availability of copies, and the extent to which they are covered by the above indexes, are published in *The Phillimore atlas and index of parish registers* by C R Humphery-Smith (Chichester, 1995).

Nonconformists

If the family did not attend the Church of England its baptisms may be found in the registers of a nonconformist chapel. Most English and Welsh nonconformist registers kept before 1837 are now at the Family Records Centre, 1 Myddelton Street, London, EC1R 1UW, England. Most have been indexed in the International Genealogical Index (see above). This Index does not include Quakers. Few nonconformist marriages, other than of Quakers and Jews, took place in England and Wales before 1837, and the marriages of Baptists, Catholics, Congregationalists and Methodists are usually found in Church of England registers. Those with Huguenot ancestry may wish to consult The

Huguenot Society at The Huguenot Library, University College, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT, England, and those with Quaker ancestry may consult Friends House Library, Friends House, Euston Road, London, NW1 2BJ, England.

Research in America

If you have not traced back to your immigrant ancestor or do not have the basic details about the immigrating family you may wish to consult an expert in America. The Board for the Certification of Genealogists, PO Box 14291, Washington, DC 20044, USA, can put you in touch with a reputable genealogist in the appropriate area or you may obtain their *Certification Roster 1997-8* (88pp. \$12)

If competent research in American sources cannot trace the emigrant's place of origin, certain research procedures are possible in British records but they may be long and consequently expensive. They are outlined in L D Szucs and S H Luebking, *The source: a guidebook of American genealogy* (2nd edn. Ancestry, Salt Lake City, 1996). Success depends mainly on the relative frequency of the surname (see below).

Much of the initial work in British records may undoubtedly be done more conveniently and economically through microfilms of the records available in the Family History Library in Salt Lake City and through its branch family history centres in America. A description of the resources available on loan through these centres is to be found in *The library: a guide to the LDS Family History Library* by J Cerny and W Elliott (Salt Lake City, 1988); this is also available on CD-ROM at the centres. For a list of family history centres in your geographic area write to the Family History Library, 35 North West Temple, Salt Lake City, UT 84150.

Passenger lists

No regular series of passenger lists of ships leaving England for any period before the early 19th century exists. Stray lists for a few ships and lists of persons going abroad for a particular reason (as apprentices, ministers, convicts, etc.) are, however, extant in various places. Most have been printed and the books in which they appear are listed in P W Filby, *Passenger and immigration lists bibliography* (2nd ed. Detroit, 1988). All the names in these lists are given in P W Filby and N K Meyer, *Passenger and immigration lists index* (3 vols. Detroit, 1981) and its annual *Supplements*, which together list over three million immigrants.

The earliest regular series of passenger lists of aliens to North America starts in 1820 and this, with a few lists of aliens from 1798, is in the National Archives at Washington. It is arranged by port of entry. These records, however, do not generally show the emigrant's place of origin. Full details of passenger arrival lists and naturalization records in the United States will be found in *Guide to genealogical research in the National Archives* (Washington, 1982, pages 39-69). Duplicate passenger lists deposited at English ports of departure before 1890 have been destroyed.

Surnames

It is not wise to generalise about the origin of your surname even when it has been traced to its earliest form. You may, however, wish to consult *A dictionary of English surnames* by P H Reaney (London & New York, 1991) *The surnames of Scotland* by G F Black (New York, 1963), or *Welsh surnames* by T J & P Morgan (Cardiff, 1985), or *A guide to Irish surnames* by E McLysaght (Dublin, 1964). Earlier works in this field have little value. It is rarely possible to say anything about the more remote history of a family (e.g. that it was of Norman or Saxon origin) from the surname alone. However, some indication of the distribution of a surname in the British Isles may be gained from *Homes of family names in Great Britain* by H B Guppy (Baltimore, 1968).

Coats of arms

No-one can comment on the possibility that your family had a right to a coat of arms unless the exact place of origin of your first immigrant ancestor is known with certainty. Arms were granted only to individuals and to their descendants in the male line. They were not granted to all the families of a particular surname. Arms should not be assumed unless a descent in the male line from the person to whom they were first granted has been established and registered.

All enquiries about armorial bearings should be addressed to the appropriate official bodies; no other organisations can provide authoritative answers. For England, Wales and Northern Ireland consult the College of Arms, Queen Victoria Street, London, EC4V 4BT, England. For Scotland consult the Lyon Office, New Register House, Edinburgh, EH1 3YT, Scotland. For the Republic of Eire consult the Genealogical Office, 2 Kildare Street, Dublin 2, Eire. Fees will be payable.

Genealogical societies in the British Isles & Worldwide

There are family history societies in every county in England and Wales and many elsewhere in the British Isles. These societies do not undertake genealogical research but they may publish your research queries in their journals if you become a member. Full details of these societies, and of others worldwide, their addresses and subscription rates, will be found in the annual publication *Genealogical research directory* by K A Johnson & M R Sainty. This Directory should be found in the library of any large genealogical society.

Research queries

Those wishing to publicise their interest in their ancestral lines in the British Isles or to find others working on the same families may do so through the annual *Genealogical research directory* mentioned above. The Directory's agent in America is Mrs. J. Jennings, 3324 Crail Way, Glendale, CA 91206, USA and she will provide details of the costs involved. These Directories each contain over a hundred thousand surnames and have a wide circulation in the British Isles and elsewhere. You may also publicise your interests through the microfiche, *BIG-R*, regularly produced by the Federation of Family History Societies. The Society of Genealogists will publish longer research queries from non-members on a wordage basis in the *Genealogists' magazine* (rates from 14 Charterhouse Buildings, Goswell Road, London, EC1M 7BA, England).

Professional assistance in the British Isles

Those wishing to employ a searcher are best advised to use only members of the Association of Genealogists and Record Agents (29 Badgers Close, Horsham, West Sussex, RH12 5RU, England), the Association of Scottish Genealogists and Record Agents (PO Box 174, Edinburgh, EH3 5QZ, Scotland), and the Association of Irish Genealogists and Record Agents (2 Kildare Street, Dublin 2, Eire). These organisations publish regular lists of their members which should be available in the libraries of the larger genealogical societies in America. These bodies will not make individual recommendations.

Society of Genealogists

For those able to visit England, the Society of Genealogists has an unrivalled collection of family history material, copies of parish registers, indexes, etc. Full details are available on this Web Site.

Stamped self-addressed envelopes or international reply coupons (available from post offices) should be sent when writing to any of the above organisations