Genealogy as a career

The great growth in interest in genealogy and family history and the corresponding technological developments and online resources has seen a number of related career opportunities develop in the subject which scarcely existed twenty or even ten years ago. However there are still relatively few people making a full time living solely as genealogists tracing the family history of other people for a fee. Most people who call themselves genealogists often supplement any living they earn from research by writing, teaching or lecturing, looking for living people, transcribing and indexing records, maintaining databases, working in archives and libraries or practice their genealogy along with other jobs or sources of income or support. The skills of genealogists are varied and often transferable to other disciplines.

There are few full-time employees of genealogical companies in the country and vacancies arise only every few years. The competition is considerable.

Professional Bodies

The Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives (known as AGRA) was founded in 1968 to promote and maintain high standards of professional conduct and expertise within the sphere of genealogy, heraldry and record searching and to safeguard the interest of its members and clients. The members and affiliate members are subject to a Code of Practice with which they agree to comply when accepting membership. This is open to well-qualified professional researchers who have been engaged as genealogists or record agents for a number of years. There are presently over a hundred members throughout the British Isles. The AGRA website www.agra.org.uk enables the public to find researcher by name, by the area where they live and work or by specialisms such as intestacy or palaeography. Most are likely to be sole traders or in small partnerships and mostly self-employed. Applicants for AGRA membership will usually have had two years full-time or the equivalent part-time experience in paid research. Alternatively, they may hold a relevant qualification in a related discipline. Associate membership was introduced in 1992 to provide guidance and support for those not yet ready for full membership.

An elected Council meets around five times a year to ensure the smooth running of AGRA and a quarterly Newsletter is circulated. There is also an online forum for members to communicate and exchange ideas. AGRA organises professional development and other educational activities. The AGRA website gives guidance as to how members might join and the Code of Practice that binds them. The contact details of every member are given, along with email addresses and links to websites. The
advice pages, give further information about how researchers work and charge for their services and are well worth reading.

AGRA has a partnership with the Scottish Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives which has a website http://www.asgra.co.uk/. The Association of Professional Genealogists in Ireland can be found at http://www.apgi.ie/. Both operate in a similar way to AGRA. Other countries have similar ‘professional’ organisations that offer some security when engaging their members. These can often be found by making an internet search or by following links from CyndisList.com.

In general terms a Genealogist directs the research, whereas a Record Agent or Archive Researcher undertakes it. The Genealogist therefore acts as a consultant, settling the line of enquiry and initiating, supervising and participating in the work that it entails. He then reports to the client and suggests possible lines of further research as appropriate. The work of the Archive Researcher lies in searching specified records for particular information which may be required by a genealogist, historian or biographer. However, many professional genealogists act in both these capacities as the need arises.

The fees of professional genealogists vary to some extent but are likely to be based upon an hourly rate for the time spent (including the giving of advice), to which is added the cost of disbursements (certified copies, search fees paid, photocopies, etc.). Most researchers are prepared to give an estimate for searching within a limited number of specified records, but in more open-ended cases a limit, perhaps the equivalent of one or two days’ work is suggested. Because of the amount of unproductive correspondence attracted by advertising, and the time taken in reporting as against actual research, the financial rewards of genealogical research are never great.

**Genealogy education and qualifications**

There are no formal qualifications necessary to be a professional genealogist. It is not enough, however, to have researched only one’s own family. A wide experience of many sources and areas is necessary. This is often best gained by working with another genealogist as an apprentice, though such opportunities are rare. Genealogical work requires a good basic education as well as a sound knowledge of social and local history sources both in original and digital form. Many genealogists have a history degree or a library or archive qualification. Knowledge of paleography and some Latin is also essential. Clients, as with any other profession, will expect their reports to be well presented and familiarity with appropriate software packages used for storing genealogical information and presenting genealogical reports can be useful.

The Society of Genealogists runs courses, lectures and events for all levels of interest in the subject of genealogy. A copy of our current diary of events which lists all for the remainder of year is on the SoG website and bookings can be made online. A paper copy of the events diary can be posted to you on receipt of an SAE. Booking forms and further details are available on request from events@sog.org.uk (tel 020 7553 3290). The SoG events programme is generally published in October/November. It often has day courses and seminars as part of a Genealogy as a Career stream. The SoG runs regular Family History Skills evening classes in London for beginners, intermediate and advanced level students. For a distance learning programme please see below. The Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies, 79-82 Northgate, Canterbury, Kent CT1 1BA runs courses and a correspondence course intended to guide students towards various levels of assessment and examinations including a Record Agent Assessment.
These are outlined in the syllabus of study available from the Institute. The Society’s own extensive skills courses for beginners, intermediate and advanced students largely follow this syllabus over a period of some 30 weeks of study. The Society of Genealogists occasionally runs a workshop for those who are thinking of sitting the IHGS examinations.

Short courses in palaeography, local history and genealogy are organised by the Society of Genealogists, by many local family history societies (of which there is at least one in each county), by branches of the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and by University Extra-Mural Departments. The meetings of the Society of Genealogists and of the local members of the Federation of Family History Societies are instructive and provide opportunities to meet and discuss with other workers.

Other adult education centres run courses, some such as London University Birkbeck College leading to diplomas. The Open University Course DA301 Family and community History 19th and 20th Centuries endeavoured to place individual and localised family history in a wider social and historical perspective and makes extensive use of demographic and sociological methodology. (The set textbooks for this course are useful and are still available). This course ran only until February 2001 with no information if it is likely to run again. There is still a journal and newsletter for students who attended this course that may be of interest.

The Open University devised a short online course (A173) called Start Writing Family History which began in May 2003 which is largely an introductory course for beginners and concentrates on nineteenth and twentieth century sources.

Local Societies that are members of The Federation of Family History Societies often publish information about events, courses and qualifications from educational centres and family history tutors around the country. Details of your local family history society can be found via the Federation of Family History Societies website and local family history societies’ websites.

The University of Central Lancashire offers distant learning courses related postgraduate courses through its Institute of Local and Family History though this has a more social history focus rather than genealogical technique.

The University of Strathclyde runs a postgraduate diploma in genealogical studies http://www.cll.strath.ac.uk/cpd/genealogy/

Learn Direct also offers an online course called Relative Strangers designed to help people begin their family history. http://catalogue.learndirect.co.uk/courses/100559SM001/?view=Standard


Various universities and centres of adult education run family and community history courses which are more social history than genealogical courses.
Career Opportunities

If you are young, interested in genealogy and hoping to devote your life’s work to it, you will be best advised to seek qualifications and first employment in some related field, such as archive administration, historical research or possibly librarianship or teaching. These offer careers in their own right, with opportunities for genealogy as a hobby.

While thus obtaining relevant experience there may be the occasional opportunity to search records to a client’s instructions. In such ways you can acquire a suitable background from which to apply for the rare vacancies under an employer, or perhaps to start a small spare-time practice. In the latter case you will probably wish to specialise in a particular type of record, subject or area of the country. If you have compiled some specialised index relating in some way to persons in this group or area you will find it a useful tool which may later be exploited commercially for fees and, perhaps, used as a basis for articles and lectures as well as advertisements.

Advertisements by many professionals will be found in the Genealogists’ Magazine and its online professional directory (only those of Members of five years standing, or of Members who are also members of AGRA, are accepted) and in the popular genealogical press, online and published directories and forums. Here are several adhoc professional genealogy associations and groups making use of social networking through site like Linked In and and Twitter

It is an advantage to be able to drive a car to visit local repositories, though many genealogists specialise in relatively small geographical areas. A good memory, meticulous attention to detail, a tidy and logical mind and working habits are needed, plus a considerable scepticism in avoiding too easy and often fallacious solutions.

The development of online genealogical databases and websites expressly for genealogists and containing digitized genealogical resources has provided opportunities for some to combine web development and Information Technology skills with in-depth familiarity with genealogical sources. Some of the larger online genealogical websites do advertise job opportunities with their sites.

The popularity of family history related television shows have given some opportunities for genealogical researchers. Others with good detective skills have applied their genealogical knowledge and technique to the search for missing heirs and living people.

The website of the American Association of Professional Genealogists shows the variety of careers into which genealogists might diversify such as writing and editing books, producing columns and articles for magazines, creating house histories, teaching, running conferences, planning family reunions or forensic research. The increasing application of DNA studies to genealogical research may provide opportunities for the genealogist with a scientific interest.