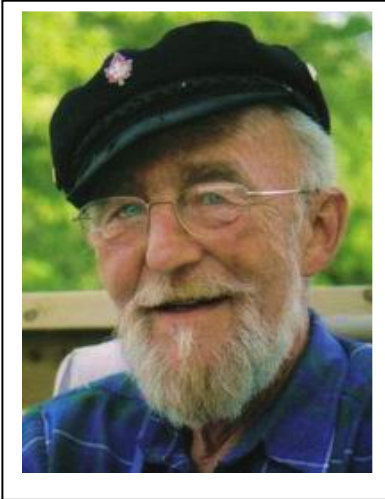


The Family Historian

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British Documents Online



The UK National Archives has updated and redesigned the former PRO-Online site and they have done a very good job of it. It really is quite user friendly and recognizes that most of the searchers will be Family Historians.

From the Home Page, you may browse the various categories of documents or conduct a search. It isn't a bad idea to browse a little at first, just to see how the listings are presented. The document categories are grouped as 'Family History' and 'Other Records'. There are two search options in the menu on the left side of the page, 'Quick Search' and 'Advanced Search'.

To conduct a 'Quick Search', you enter the name and a date range for your subject and select a category to search. There are four categories of documents: WW I Campaign Medals, WW II Merchant Seaman's Medals (some with place and date of birth), over one million wills (1384-1858), and Victorian Prisoners Photograph Albums.

I checked out the Prisoners Albums because this was a new category for me and found a 13-year old girl sentenced to 21 days hard labour for stealing a chemise!

With the 'Advanced Search', you can use more keywords and search multiple categories, or all of them, at the same time.

There is also lots of esoteric material to titillate the searcher, such as the Magna Carta, Napoleon Bonaparte's will, etc.

Searching the site is free but to download a digitized image of a document costs £3.50. The documents are downloaded as Portable Document Files (PDF's) and some of them are hardly legible.

You will find the site at: www.documentsonline.nationalarchives.gov.uk.

Beyond the Internet

The ever increasing amount of resources available on the internet for Family History research is seducing some researchers into thinking that research is strictly a surfing activity and that everything you want must be there somewhere.

Some readers have contacted me and voiced frustration that they can't find what they are looking for on the internet. Sometimes that is because it isn't there. With the exception of actual digitized record collections, it is better to think of the internet as a tool to help us find the records that may contain the information we are looking for.

It is the records themselves that we need and they (or microfilms of them) are housed in archives, libraries and other repositories across the land. Those record collections that are available online are a real bonus but we must be very careful in assessing their validity and reliability before evaluating the significance of their contents.

Working backwards from what we already know, each record will give us more information that will suggest where to look for the next record. Our parents' marriage record will usually have the names of their parents and that can help us to find our parents' birth records and grandparents' marriage records and so on.

It is these church and civil registration records that are the backbone of our research. Censuses, municipal records, newspaper notices, and others can help locate our ancestors in time and place, making it easier to locate their vital records. Other public and private records can help to flesh out the story of their life.

The internet can sometimes make our research a little easier and a lot faster but it won't do the whole job for us.