



9-1-2006

## Ancestry Tracing and the Internet

Cecil R. Humphery-Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byufamilyhistorian>

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Humphery-Smith, Cecil R. (2006) "Ancestry Tracing and the Internet," *BYU Family Historian*: Vol. 5 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byufamilyhistorian/vol5/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Family Historian* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

---

---

# ANCESTRY TRACING AND THE INTERNET

---

---

CECIL R. HUMPHERY-SMITH

There is a belief that seems to be increasing amongst those interested in tracing their ancestries that everything can be found on the Internet. In fact, this not only is erroneous, but leads to particular hazards in research. Some readers may know me as the one who began family history as a concept of genealogy, attempting to get genealogists to come to know their ancestors in the context of their historical, environmental, occupational, and social circumstances throughout their individual lives, instead of being vague records of “hatch,” “match,” and “dispatch” of names on a family tree. In introducing family history as an academic discipline sixty years ago, I used those somewhat disparaging descriptions of birth, marriage, and death deliberately to compel audiences to be aware that their ancestors were more than entities. We need to get to know them, respect them, and honor them, whatever their economic circumstances may have been. An eighteenth-century English author once wrote that there was not a mayor in the New World that was not branded on the hand. Such a remark (*Family History*, No. 28/29) may have reflected the truth that they had been transported for crimes of petty larceny and other minor offences largely due to the injustices and poverty of the times in England. Few of these people would have known their family origins.

Often we have come across pedigrees made up from the sources found on the Internet. The late W.H. Whitmore admonished genealogists nearly a century and a half ago **not** to insult true progenitors with false claims to others. Links to others who are entirely unrelated are readily established by using the Internet indiscriminately. There are those who resent any professional genealogists questioning the erroneous conclusions or trying to correct what has clearly gone wrong. But what is the point of producing a family tree that links you with somebody to whom you are simply not related? Or, why put effort into family history that may be the story of someone else’s ancestor?

A scientific approach to genealogy depends upon investigation of proof and demonstration of knowledge. Proof is dependent upon finding sufficient evidence or establishing a fact or producing a belief in a certainty based upon determinable judgment of nonconflicting facts and evidence with the calculated dismissal of what is submitted that is conflicting. Proof arises from the condition of having successfully withstood a test, recognized without anxiety. Truth must not be imitation; it must not be discountable; it must not be unbelievable. So what of the evidence of material culled from the Internet for genealogical research?

Genealogy, which is the scientific process of relating an individual to the generations before him and those that follow, is worthless if it is not conducted according to the strictest rules of evidence. Any entry put into the family tree must have co-ordinates of evidence that prove beyond every reasonable doubt that the right individual is properly identified in the context of ascent and descent in the family tree. Similarly, the historical accounts that are built around that individual in the family history must be evidenced by documentation, preferably original. If evidence is secondary, it should, wherever possible, be checked against the original (where that has survived). What is on the Internet has been culled from a large selection of copy material that has been made over the years, in the distant past, and more recently, by antiquaries and family historians anxious to preserve records. The ability of those who have produced these listings or prepared indexes of them, has depended upon individual skills in reading old handwriting and accurately copying. How easy it is to turn over two pages at a time or to skip a paragraph or entry when the same name appears, one under another.

An entry on the Internet may suggest that a whole parish register has been transcribed. In fact, that register may have many gaps in it, information lost or destroyed over the centuries. The original transcriber may have been interested only in certain names and in transcribing the register, taking out only those few names for a limited period and neglecting all the other names in the register. This is by no means uncommon. The original searching and transcription carried out by a professional record searcher in the locality may have made a transcript. After it was submitted to some society, a copy may have been made subsequently. The copier may have had no knowledge of local orthography or names. The result is, not infrequently, many errors and omissions and misinterpretation of initial letters and even of dates and places.

The very idea that the Internet provides a panacea for family historians and that everything you need is on it insults the intelligence of the amateur and ultimately causes the professional a great deal of time-consuming work and frustration unraveling entirely bogus family trees. Even the most experienced professional knows the errors that can so easily be made by misreading copies or using anything but primary sources without discrimination and proper judgment. Indeed, for these very reasons, the leading professional organizations insist that researchers be properly trained, best by following a full-time four-year post-graduate course of study with The Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies, or an equivalent program in the United States.

As stated above, every fact needs to be confirmed by additional documentary evidence in support of each statement. So far as English research is concerned, such evidence might be in the form of wills, probate inventories, land tenure documents, proceedings in the courts of Chancery, Exchequer and Requests, records of manorial copyhold tenure, rentals and the records of the Ecclesiastical Courts, visitations, subsidiary censuses and the collections of the Heralds in their Visitations and researched and registered pedigrees. Most frequently, amateurs do not have access to these or do not know how to gain access to them. Even when they can see them, they will find difficulties in reading and interpreting them. Sadly, teaching skills in paleography and in reading Latin texts is neglected in most courses, as is the knowledge of basic history and the origins and etymology of names.

“I have spent days and searched everywhere for the birth of Jim Hanes,” a lady e-mailed me. “I hope you tried James; but have you looked for Hain(e)s, Haynes, Aynes and such like variants, even without the “s,” as well as all the sources up to when James would have been in his middle twenties, especially if the individual’s family were Baptists.”

I never had any thanks until years later, when the lady attended a class and explained how easy it was once she had thought of variants. But ISCUA that turns out to be BEALE or FLELLO that was KELLS are challenges for experts, not easily found on the Internet.

Individuals engage professional researchers for several reasons. First, they do not have the time, knowledge, or the opportunity to carry out family history work on their own. Secondly, because they have a particular purpose in wishing to acquire proven facts about their ancestries; or, thirdly, because the professional, if properly qualified, has had the training and experience to provide solutions to problems that might not otherwise be solved. The professional will generally devote time and expertise, together with corresponding costs, to research conducted on a scientific basis, step by step. It does not necessarily mean that it will produce immediate results to satisfy curiosity. It will, however, be thorough and accountable, discovering the best means to reaching the ultimate conclusion. A stint of research may be spread over a number of weeks, months, or even years in pursuit of an answer. The professional researcher would keep the client fully informed as to progress.

Teams of professionals have a number of particular advantages. Experience and resources are shared. There is some pride in achievement of results. The research team supporting The Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies has the enormous advantage of the library and resources of a charitable educational trust into which it deposits any surpluses that it may make towards the maintenance of the building where they work alongside the academic staff. Achievements Ltd was founded as a not-for-profit company. There are no directors or shareholders taking profits. Not only a vast collection of books and papers, original manuscripts and indexes, but a most comprehensive collection of microfiches, microfilm, and CD-ROM resources saves researchers an enormous amount of time, effort, and cost in not having to travel to London or other centers for much of the information they need. In addition, the Institute holds some special indexes and collections to which the research team of Achievements has access. Achievements' team forms the longest-running research service anywhere and has the greater advantage of a collection of tens of thousands of research cases already investigated. This is a resource of experience where clues are often found within old files that help with current work. There is still the matter of time, however, and the best professionals deserve proper remuneration.

Apart, of course, from copies of the records of General Registration and censuses for the whole kingdom, and the International Genealogical Index that grew out of the Institute's idea of

the British Vital Record Index, later developments and indexes are available. I was responsible for purchasing the Pallot Index, 1780–1837, Andrews and Gretna Green collections, and marriage and baptism indexes. More and more of these resources are being made available on the Internet, but every copying is the source of more errors. Much work has also been done in collecting monumental inscriptions before churches have become redundant.

London marriage licenses (often with copies of the original marriage licenses), Catholic marriages for the period 1837–1870, Sussex baptisms and marriages, Nonconformist registers and transcripts of Wills and other papers and Settlements, Soldiers who died in the Great War of 1914–18, collections of notices from newspapers, the *London Gazette* and many foreign sources of people dying abroad between the 1890s and the 1970s, next-of-kin lists, periodical sources, Freemasons' Indexes, Australian Civil Registration from 1856, New South Wales convicts, Apprenticeship Indentures, and indexes to Wills and Administrations for most counties. These and many other sources are held in the Institute's library. There is also a special collection for Sussex, Hampshire and Kent, Ireland and Personal Names, Coats of Arms and *original and unique* documents, proven pedigrees, charters, and deeds.

Very little of this material is yet available on the Internet directly, but the collections at the Institute, along with others in libraries and public and private archives in England, Scotland, and Wales, represent only a fraction of the many thousands of other record sources and indexes that, similarly, are not available to the public surfing the Web. It is therefore dangerous to believe that everything has been done in genealogical research once it has been extracted from the Internet. Nothing could be further from the truth, which is another good reason for needing professional assistance. Count your own time, costs and frustration, and you will find that it is often the cheapest and most effective way forward. If you are interested in researching for yourself, the professional may well be able to provide material for the missing link that you have sought, to enable you to continue once more on your own.

I have been personally involved in family history for more than seventy years. I have been researching and teaching for several universities since the 1940s. I continue to learn, but, thanks to a computer buff and a knowledgeable grandson, a website has been erected on which I

put essays and lectures intended to assist amateurs and professionals alike, free of charge. After all this time, I continue to learn. Good professionals never cease learning to improve their ability to assist their clients, and are unlikely to be able to without learning from their peers and sound instruction as well as from the surprises on the Internet.

If you seriously need an ancestor because you cannot find yours on the Internet, do let me give you the opportunity from an entry in a parish register from Suffolk; “Last week, or it may have been the week before, I baptized a child whose name I have forgotten.” Do read my article on “Evidence” to be found on [www.britishancestry.org](http://www.britishancestry.org).