

## *Viewpoint*

# **Genealogy and the Use of Online Resources**

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Over the last twenty years, the rapid development of the Internet has led to a massive shift in the abilities of ordinary folk to delve into their ancestral history, helping to democratise the story of the nation in a way that has never before been so possible or popular. The changes within the field of family history have also had a major knock-on effect on the archive world, with many repositories increasingly finding themselves trying to satisfy a never-ending hunger for further resources to be made available online, both in terms of digitised records and via catalogues. Digitisation within archives has also been employed for conservation purposes, a consequence of which has been the way in which family historians are able to access certain materials, with many original records no longer available for consultation once the scanner has been put to work.

As a working genealogist, I have been asked to produce a short article looking at the advantages of using digitised resources and how they may have changed my approach to historical research. Although only too happy to oblige, I do so with one healthy caveat – it being my belief that there can be as many disadvantages to the presentation of historical resources online as there are advantages. At times, for example, the convenience of material found online can lead to many false conclusions. A raft of online data, often presented with little context as to what is not included, as much as to what is, can cause all sorts of problems for those chasing ancestral stories. Poorly indexed resources, or poorly transcribed records, can equally cause issues, whilst inadequate cataloguing can also mislead researchers as to the very existence of relevant material in the first place.

Commercial companies offer data online with the purpose of making money, and as such, quality control in terms of both digitisation and indexing can sometimes be quite poor, creating problems for even the most diligent of researchers. Worse still, collections presented online can often only be queried with a handful of search terms and frequently cannot be browsed, thereby limiting the potential of such offerings. For example, I might be able to search for a bride and groom in a vital record, but not for the names of any witnesses, officiating ministers, informants, parents or place names. Many data-hosting sites have also grown so large that they can have an apparent authority ascribed

to them by users which is not always justified, being sometimes quite shoddy and rushed; quantity of offerings, rather than quality, is often the name of the game in the desire to be a market leader. As such platforms have grown, and researchers have become increasingly reliant on them, pressures have also grown on the continued survival of many specialist family and local history societies, previously the means by which researchers would often locate finding aids, transcribed data and expertise.

Despite having written about the use of online-based material, I have always adopted the attitude that a useful source is a useful source, whether it be found online or offline, and I am most certainly not a proponent of one means of access as having a more superior advantage over another. It cannot be denied, however, that the availability of online resources has dramatically changed how family historians carry out research, perhaps most immediately in the form of convenience. Key resources, such as vital records and censuses, can be found easily online through web platforms such as ScotlandsPeople ([www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk)), saving the necessity of a trip to the repositories which hold the original versions of the records. When I first started researching my own family history in 1999, I was working at the BBC as a television documentary maker, and was thus unable to visit the General Register Office for Scotland (GROS) or the National Archives of Scotland (NAS) without taking time off work. Both institutions were only open from Mondays to Fridays – the days which also formed my working week in Glasgow – and so the ability to access such records online at home when the host archives were closed was crucial. It remains the case today that whilst some archives, for example The National Archives (TNA) at Kew, have adopted a more twenty-first-century approach to opening hours, Scotland still largely remains driven by a twentieth-century approach in this regard. Those who complain about people trying to do research from home as opposed to within an archive should perhaps step back and wonder why that might be – an archive's opening hours may well be part of the problem.

For many people the opening hours are not the issue at all, but simply the geographic distance from the relevant repository. A midweek trip from Glasgow to Edinburgh may be an inconvenience for some, but it is a virtual impossibility for those based somewhere like Stornoway, Toronto or Sydney, for whom the benefits of online access may well be considerably greater. Online access can also prove to be financially advantageous in some instances. Digitised military records from TNA at Kew, for example, which have been made available both on its website and by other sites under license, are offered at a much cheaper cost than a trip to London would involve. A digitised civil registration record on ScotlandsPeople, at just under £1.40 per record, is a bargain compared to the cost of an official certified extract at £12, when both offer exactly the same genealogical information.

The digitisation of the key vital records held at Edinburgh has also allowed for another major development in recent times, and that is the provision of access to nationally held collections at other archival repositories across the

country. Although records can be individually purchased on the ScotlandsPeople website, this can still turn out to be quite expensive if a great deal of research has to be carried out. An alternative means of viewing the same records has, for many years been the provision of unlimited access at GROS, now part of the National Records of Scotland (NRS), for a daily fee currently charged at £15 (via the NRS-hosted ScotlandsPeople Centre). This has always been handy for someone living close to Edinburgh, but horrendously difficult for others. If I again look to my own situation, as someone who lives in North Ayrshire, a visit to the ScotlandsPeople Centre has in the past involved travelling by train from Largs to Glasgow, and thereafter to Edinburgh, at two-and-a-half hours duration in each direction. The recent enlightened decisions to provide access to certain national database resources at local archive facilities has transformed my working practice. Today, I am more likely to travel to the Burns Monument Centre in Kilmarnock, just half an hour away down the road, or the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, no more than an hour away. Similarly, the NRS provides free access to digitised materials such as kirk session registers through its Virtual Volumes system, and yet I can now also obtain access to many of these same records in local archives, via the Scottish Documents portal. Quite apart from the added convenience and travelling time saved, it also means less travel expenses that I have to pass onto my clients. This makes me more competitive as a researcher not resident in Edinburgh, as it undoubtedly does for many other researchers across the country.

There are several other deep-rooted benefits to the digitisation of records and the availability of online resources, in terms of my approach to historical research. As with any commission I will start with a brief from the client and, in working out how to pursue that, will usually adopt several strategies. The first is to examine the brief to identify likely research areas and topics on which to target the research. If there is a military element, for example, I will often turn to various online military help resources, such as those on TNA's website, as well as from any relevant books within my own library. I will also run keywords through several search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Mocavo to help focus background knowledge on the subject. If enough detail can be established I may then start to commence some online research in terms of digital records resources. I will also run structured queries through online archive catalogues, such as TNA's Discovery system or the catalogue of the NRS, to identify other potential resources. In addition, I will also try to find some background contextual information for the geographical area of my research, perhaps utilising online resources such as the first two Statistical Accounts of Scotland, or online maps from the National Library of Scotland (NLS).

All of this is usually carried out in quite a disciplined way. At the same time, however, I also have no problems whatsoever throwing in a few 'lucky dip' queries to particular web resources. By this I mean perhaps a visit to a digitised newspaper site such as the British Newspaper Archive (<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>), where I might do a speculative search on a name or an address to see what might arise. Similarly, in almost every case

when researching within Scotland, I will always run names as a matter of course through online resources such as the Edinburgh and London Gazettes, and the NRS and Scottish Archive Network (SCAN) catalogues. A few years ago, I was approached by a client from New Zealand who had traced her family back to an Aberdeenshire parish, and had hit a 'brick wall' in the early 1800s. The work had been carried out by another professional genealogist, and was very competent for what had been achieved, but it had been restricted to certain usual suspects in terms of sources consulted – ScotlandsPeople and monumental inscriptions mainly – which could take the research only so far. In this instance, the very first thing I did was to look up her ancestor's surname and the farm name on the NRS catalogue, and immediately discovered that her brother had written a diary. A visit to Edinburgh the next day allowed me to consult the work. Within a couple of hours I not only had uncovered the client's family tree back a further four generations, but had also considerably fleshed out the family story; the diary being a veritable font of knowledge from that period.

For professional genealogists the most important resources online are not necessarily the digital platforms such as ScotlandsPeople or Ancestry.co.uk, but the websites of the archives and libraries that hold the original resources. These can offer a range of useful tools and information, though some are better constructed and maintained than others. The most important aspects of such sites for me are the provision of contact information, current news, catalogues and help resources. The need for contact information is fairly obvious. Not only do I need to know where an institution is if I wish to visit, but also how to speak to someone if I have a query I wish to make in advance. An artist may be only as good as his tools, but a genealogist is certainly only as good as the experience and advice he or she can draw upon from those who actually hold the records. News updates can be equally useful, not just in flagging up new acquisitions, but also in more day-to-day reportage such as information about closures, strikes, bank holidays and changes in opening hours. In more recent times I have been gaining a lot of information about archive developments from posts on Twitter and blogs, which I collect in daily feeds – considerably more convenient than having to access individual website addresses for each archive of interest.

Of paramount importance, however, are online catalogues and help resources, both of which are crucial in planning a research strategy for any client work. Cataloguing is considerably more important than digitisation, for if I do not know about the existence of a collection or a record I simply cannot consult it. What I am certainly not advocating, however, is item-level cataloguing. To know that an archive has in its possession papers from a particular estate in Scotland in a period of interest, which includes rentals, accounts and letters, is about as much detail as I need to justify my visit to that archive to consult them. But I certainly need to access a degree of detail online to allow me to make the decision to visit in the first place. Equally crucial are an archive's online help resources – not just those listing what a collection contains, and how to use it, but those that tell me what information is not contained, and where else I

might need to look. In this regard, the guides offered by the NRS and TNA in England are good examples.

At the beginning of this article I mentioned some of the disadvantages of various online data sites, particularly from commercial companies, but there are of course just as many benefits. Some genealogists do still adopt a Luddite approach to the use of online resources, but it is impossible to be able to carry out research today without them. So rapid is the rate at which material is being placed online, and so important is it to know what has been uploaded, that in 2007 I started to keep a daily news blog (now located at <http://britishgenes.blogspot.co.uk>) announcing the latest developments from various archives and vendors. The primary reason for doing so was to force me to keep up to date with developments in the online world, in what is essentially a form of self-inflicted CPD. As with many working within the family history world, social networking via platforms such as Blogger, LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter has become a major part of my professional practice, crucial for communicating with other genealogists and archivists, gathering news developments of potential use to my business, and advertising; it forms a regular part of my daily genealogy-related business activities.

I have previously mentioned the advantages of consulting digital surrogates of nationally held resources from national Edinburgh-based institutions at local archives, but it is also useful to consult online resources from other archives, libraries and commercial vendors whilst at any repository. For example, a marriage record at the ScotlandsPeople Centre may tell me that the groom was a soldier, at which point a quick consultation on Ancestry.co.uk may reveal a service record from TNA which tells me that he was then killed in action, potentially saving me a lot of time trying to locate a death certificate for him in later life. Whilst my visits to archives will always be planned in advance to a certain extent, with a list of resources lined up to consider, I never know what I will encounter when the documents are actually examined. Consequently, I quite often need to access online resources to help me understand certain discoveries that have been made. I may read a document and find a legal term that I need to understand in order to get the sense of a particular sentence – in which case instant access to the various nineteenth-century Scots legal dictionaries hosted on Google Books can be invaluable, or the web-based Dictionary of the Scots Language at <http://www.dsl.ac.uk>. When they do not work, I might throw a query out on Twitter – ‘does anyone know what such and such means?’ – and through my social networks I might get a helpful response back within minutes.

The physical ability to interact with other online resources can, however, be extremely problematic at many archives. As I write this, I note ironically that ScotRail has just announced that twenty-five railway stations in Scotland are to be fitted out with free WiFi, along with many trains across the country. The public will soon be able to access the Internet easily whilst travelling to and from an archive – but in many cases, still not whilst actually at an archive. A few repositories may offer access via a terminal or two, particularly if there

is a library present in the same building, but not necessarily in the same room; some may offer a terminal with a pre-approved restricted list of sites that can be consulted. Increasingly many researchers have their own laptop computers or tablet devices of some sort with them, and it is much preferable to be able to access what you need to find there and then without having to go to the hassle of relocating to another part of the room or elsewhere in the building (assuming there is indeed any form of Internet access available at all). It recently became such an issue for me to be able to use online resources whilst at a repository that I bought a tablet offering 3G access, in order to help me to carry out research more successfully.

Interesting developments within the online world offer great potential for the future including web projects which are more ambitious than simply uploading indexed digitised resources. A useful example is a project called Addressing History (<http://addressinghistory.edina.ac.uk>) which the University of Edinburgh has produced in partnership with the NLS. The premise was simple, to digitise certain Post Office directories, and to plot the data found within them onto geo-referenced contemporary maps of the areas to which they related. A search of a term such as ‘tailor’ can now instantly reveal where all of the tailors in a town worked in a particular year, or a search of a rare Irish surname can show how chain migration may have led to the growth of an immigrant family’s presence within a particular area. Such combinations of resources can create new research methodologies not easily achievable before such online tools were available, and there are many equally useful projects appearing all the time.

If there is one overall lesson I have learned from the growth of online tools, it is perhaps bizarrely the following: the more the Internet grows, the more material that is placed on websites, and the more I need to use it in my daily life for genealogical research, the more I have learned to question absolutely everything that is now laid before me on a computer screen. When I first started to carry out my ancestral research many years ago, I sourced data primarily from online resources because I had few other options that would suit my particular lifestyle at that time. Being trained to use such resources taught me a great deal of useful skills – and an equal number of bad practices. I have spent as much time in the last few years learning how to ‘unlearn’ such genealogical evil as I have in developing a better understanding of the merits of both offline and online resources. I now have both a healthy respect and disrespect for the offerings in the online world in equal measure, as much as I have for any source or resource I might encounter within the offline world.

The Internet is simply a tool, and online offerings should rightly be criticised at times as much as they should be praised. Can I see myself being able to do my job today without them? Most definitely not, as much as I cannot envisage carrying out research without a network of archives and libraries across the country. The Internet is here, the genie cannot be put back into a bottle – but as with any offline repository, it can be engaged with, challenged, befriended, understood, improved, criticised and praised in equal measure.