

TRACING THOSE ELUSIVE ANCESTORS

Genealogy carries a health warning! – it's addictive and can cause temporary insomnia. It can be frustrating, as you search for those elusive ancestors who seem to have disappeared off the face of the earth. But it can be very rewarding, as you piece together the bits of the jigsaw to produce the complete picture. But it does take a long time.

I have been researching my own family history for more than 15 years and helping others in their searches too. Over the years you develop skills and techniques, but there is always an element of following your 'gut feeling' about something which helps too. You are a detective, making sense of the various clues and following many lines of enquiry, which will often end up as dead ends. But you persevere, as you need to tie all the threads together and bring the mystery to a satisfactory conclusion.

But it is an ongoing task, which will take you many many years and you will never ever get the full picture. You will come upon snippets of information which will surprise you, may shock you, and may even upset you, but such is life!

You have to admire the many millions of Scots who have emigrated to all parts of the world, very often in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in adverse travelling conditions. Within my own research, I seem to have a number of eldest sons who emigrated to find a better life for themselves and their families "down under" or "across the Pond".

In one case, the young mother must have been heavily pregnant, as she gave birth on the high seas, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. This son was given the middle name of "Cartsburn" – the name of the ship on which they were sailing. Another couple was travelling with their 3 young children when the youngest – an 11 month old boy – died en route and, according to a family story, was buried at sea. However I have found his grave in Massachusetts where they landed.

About 80% of my family research is based in the rural agricultural area of Banffshire. Quite a considerable number of brothers and their cousins seem to have emigrated to the same area of Boise in Idaho in the USA. And now that I have visited the area where some of them farmed, I am puzzled as to why they left the luscious green land of Scotland for the dry desert

area of Mayfield in Boise. Or, in another case, the prairie lands of Saskatchewan in Canada. There is no doubt that they were successful in what they did, but it must have been a hard life. I was taken on a tour of the area by two of the daughters of one of those early settlers, an area now completely abandoned, except for a few ruined buildings, but these elderly ladies had such happy memories of their upbringing there.

Did these early emigrants ever return home? In my case many of them did, but only to attend family events, such as weddings and mainly the funerals of their parents or siblings. I am not aware of any who came home for good. But the interest among their descendants in seeking their Scottish roots is very strong, and it is these people who are returning home to search for the stories of their ancestors.

I have made contact with many 2nd and 3rd cousins, some who have stayed with me and others whom I have visited, and we have had many happy and exciting times meeting other members of the family, exchanging stories and building up our family trees. It's great to have the official data about ancestors – the dates of their births, marriages and deaths, and names of their offspring - but it is far more satisfactory to add the flesh to these bare bones. All these stories from their children and grandchildren add so much more to a family tree.

Being involved with helping other people to trace their ancestors can also be very rewarding. Over the years I have dealt with several enquiries which have come to the church. The latest one has been Walter Scott who left Polmont in the 1830s yet requested that he be buried back 'home' in Polmont churchyard, despite the fact that he spent the larger part of his life in Glendronach in Aberdeenshire.

Although we didn't know too much about his life after he left Polmont, it is thanks to research which Keith Salvesen started for the souvenir leaflet for the re-dedication of the stained glass windows service, that I have now discovered the Scott family grave in the churchyard. This led me to his death certificate and his 44 page will, which I was able to download from a special genealogical website. I now have the names of a number of nephews and grandnephews, which I will now need to follow through to the present day to try and discover any 'living' relatives.

Yes, a very rewarding hobby, but at times very frustrating!!!
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