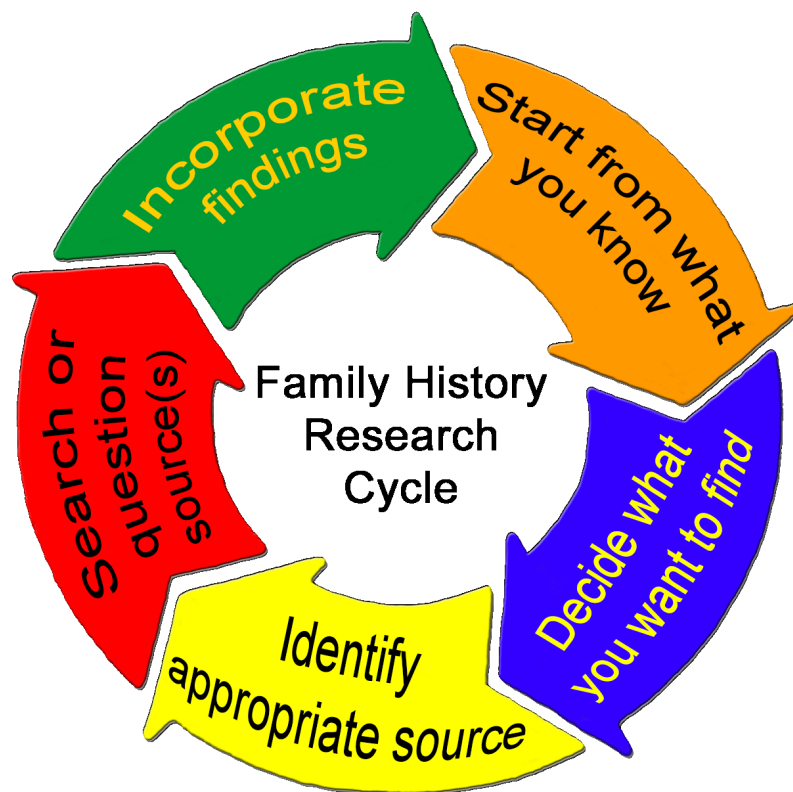


A Warm Welcome

Beginning your family history

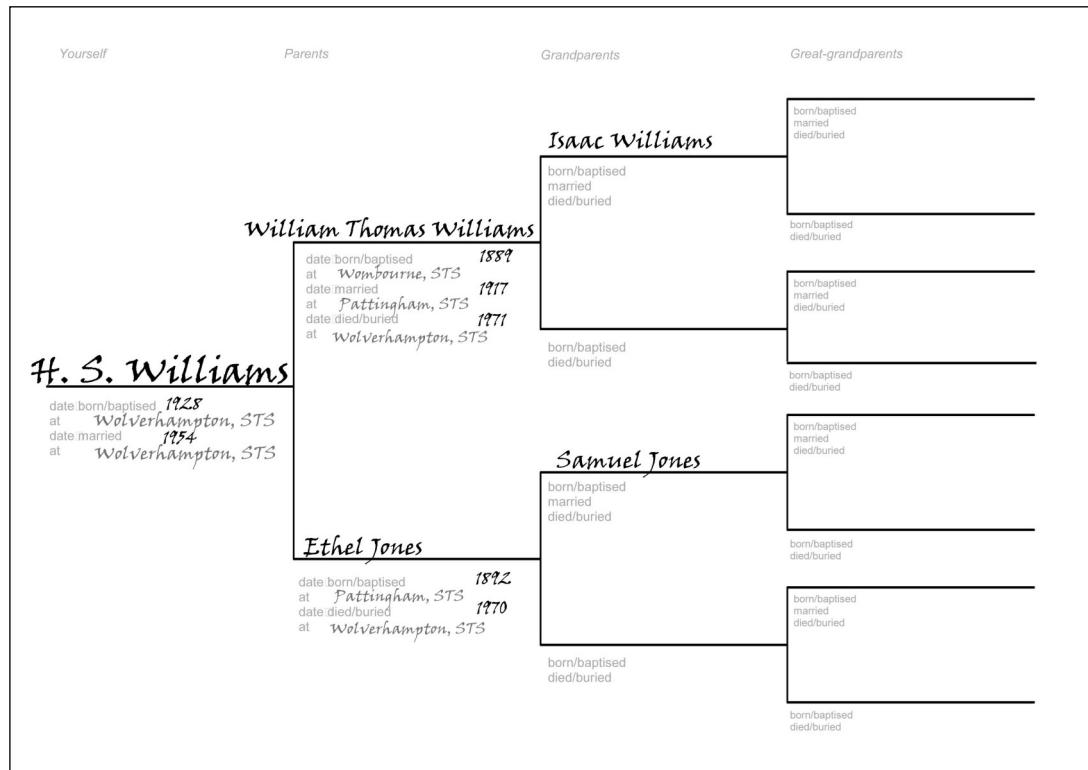
The process of family history is the same wherever your ancestors are from:

1. **Start with yourself** and write down your ancestors' names, birth and death dates, and locations, if known. This may be in the form of a pedigree chart on paper, online or using family tree software.
2. **Ask any relatives** for information in case they have certificates or know details that you don't.
3. **Decide** what information you want to find out — this needs to be as specific as possible, e.g. where was my grandfather, John Smith, born in 1920?
4. **Identify** what sources may have the information you are looking for — this may be a person, or may be records online or archives held in a record office.
5. **Check** the sources and incorporate your findings into your family tree. It's a good idea to keep a note of unsuccessful searches, as you may waste time doing them again later.
6. **Repeat** steps 3-5 until you complete your research or hit a brick wall.



Start off by writing down what you know

Our Solihull Life blog contains some useful family history articles, including how to start off. If you visit <https://solihulllife.org/> and click on the **Research Guides** menu you should see an article on **Starting your family tree — the first steps**. This includes an editable pedigree chart that you can start completing with details of your direct ancestors.



Focus on the records rather than the websites

To search most efficiently, it's important to focus on the records rather than picking a website and searching for hours at a time in the hope of finding what you want.

It can be tricky to know what records you need, and where they might be, but library staff can advise if you can explain what you want to find out.

You are welcome to email heritage@solihull.gov.uk if you get stuck and don't know what to do next. It doesn't matter where your ancestors are from — they don't have to be from Solihull — we'll do our best to help.

Some libraries have family history groups that meet regularly — keep an eye on your local library's Facebook page for further details, or sign up for Stay Connected emails by visiting www.solihull.gov.uk and scrolling down to the Stay Connected link.



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Key records for beginners

Birth, marriage and death certificates 1837 onwards

Civil registration of births, marriages and deaths began in England & Wales on 1st July 1837 (later in Scotland & Ireland). It is still possible to purchase copies of certificates for events registered since this date.

Birth and death certificates are not available to view online—copies must be ordered via the General Register Office (GRO) for England & Wales. Details of how to order are at: www.gov.uk/general-register-office

If a marriage took place in a church, the information recorded in the church's marriage register from 1837 is the same as on a marriage certificate. Some church registers are online with Ancestry or Find My Past, so it may be possible to view a copy of the entry without having to purchase a copy of the certificate. Marriage registers for weddings that took place at a register office are not available to view online, so copies would need to be ordered from the GRO or from the local register office.

Birth, marriage and death indexes 1837 onwards

Indexes to births, marriages and deaths from 1837 up to c.2006 are available on Ancestry, Find My Past and Family Search. Indexes 1837-c.1990 are also freely available on the FreeBMD website www.freebmd.org.uk

The GRO website www.gov.uk/general-register-office currently has birth indexes 1837-1934 and 1984-2023, and death indexes 1837-1957 and 1984-2023.

The indexes available via the GRO contain more information than those on Ancestry, Find My Past, and FreeBMD — e.g. middle names rather than just initials, maiden name of mother pre-1911 — but the search functionality is rather cumbersome so it is sometimes helpful to search some or all of the other sites first.

Censuses 1841-1921

A population census has been taken in England & Wales every 10 years since 1801, although people's names weren't routinely taken until 1841, which is the first census of use to family historians. Personal information is confidential for 100 years, so the last census available to us is 1921. The 1931 census was destroyed by fire. No census was taken in 1941.

Census returns 1841-1921 are available on Ancestry and Find My Past. These sites are freely accessible at Solihull Libraries. Census returns usually give a person's name, age, occupation and place of birth, so can be a key resource. Ideally, try to track a person on each census during their lifetime to compare the information given and view other family members.



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How to search effectively

It's never been easier to start your family history research, but it's never been easier to go wrong! By being focused about what you want to find out, and being careful how and what you search, you will make the most efficient use of your time, and have less risk of being overwhelmed by information.

Our top tips are:

- **Search the specific records rather than searching from the site's home page**
Having decided what records you want to search, find the specific search page for those records as you will then have search options relating to the records, rather than just general options. On Ancestry find the "Card Catalog" list and search for the record set you want. On Find My Past look for the "All record sets" list and then choose the appropriate collection from the list.
- **Make sure you can explain any inconsistencies**
If any of the information is inconsistent — e.g. ages, places of birth — you should try to explain it. You need to be as sure as possible that you have the correct person. This is especially important if you are researching a common name.
- **Consider alternative spellings**
Spelling didn't settle down until the early 20th century, so don't automatically rule out variant spellings as not being the correct person/family. Historians have examined marriage registers and, based on the numbers able to sign their own name rather than signing with a cross, have concluded that in 1840, around 33% of men and 50 % of women were illiterate. By 1900, only about 3% of the population was illiterate.
- **Try different sources/websites**
Although websites may have the same records, they may have created their own indexes and the search options may vary between sites. This means that, if you can't find an entry using one site, it is worth trying other sites that have the same records. Be aware that Ancestry uses the FreeBMD indexes for birth, marriage and death indexes 1837-1915.
- **Double-check other people's research**
Don't assume that other people's research is correct! There are many absolute horrors on publicly available trees (e.g. people living for 200 years and marrying/having children when they were too young/too old for this to be feasible). Double-check everything you find and make sure it is the correct person/family.
- **Try to understand the records**
Family history is basically following a paper trail of records so understanding the records is key to searching them effectively. Read up on why the records were created, what information was collected, whether any records have been lost or damaged. This may help you to understand why your ancestors' details are missing, incomplete or incorrect.



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