



BREAKING DOWN “BRICK WALLS”

A “Brick Wall” occurs when you come to a dead end in your research. You are looking for a crucial piece of information and without it you cannot make any further progress. This is a common occurrence and the longer you research your family, the more Brick Walls you will encounter. However, there are some potential solutions that you might like to explore.

Have you really exhausted all possibilities?

For example, have you searched all the available online resources and used every possible variant spelling of the name(s)? Have you searched for a One-Name Study of a particular surname? If you don't have an online subscription to a particular site, or sites, perhaps your local library or archive office may have one that you can use free of charge?

Not all records will be available online. Have you visited the relevant archives offices that hold the documents that you need to consult? Do you belong to a family or local history society where members assist one another in solving research problems? You could also consider employing a professional researcher; or perhaps you have a friend or distant cousin that can help you.

Parish Registers, Bishops' Transcripts & Other Parish Records

After contacting your family to glean all the information that they may have, you will have drawn up the first, very rough, draft of your family tree. The next step for most researchers is to examine the relevant parish registers. A very common Brick Wall occurs when the registers have not been deposited. They may be still in the hands of the incumbent, or perhaps they have been destroyed by mould, water or mice. The alternative is to check the Bishops' Transcripts (BT's). These were copies of the parish register entries made in a particular year that were sent to the Bishop of the Diocese and they are catalogued as Diocesan records. For the geographic County of Sussex, all BT's are held in the West Sussex Record Office.

Also, parish boundaries have changed over time, have you checked all possibilities? In the 19th and early 20th Centuries, there was a huge population movement from the countryside into the towns where the ancient parishes couldn't cope with the influx. Many new parishes were created, e.g. Brighton originally had one parish, St. Nicholas and during this period 24 new parishes were created. Of course, by the latter part of the 20th Century, many of those modern parishes were made redundant, due to falling congregations.

Other parish records include vestry minutes, tithe awards, parish accounts, and parish charities.

The records of Non-Conformist and other denominations

Parish Registers and BT's all belong to the Church of England. Might your family have worshipped in a Roman Catholic church? Or perhaps, even for a short time, they were Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists, Salvationists, Quakers, Presbyterians, or belonged to the Connexion? All these denominations of the Christian faith have their own records and many have not survived the passage of time. For Sussex Non-Conformist records, there is a published index of the surviving records and that can be purchased from SFHG, or consulted at our two record offices.

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Created September 2021

Probate Records

These can be an excellent source of genealogical information and it is often worthwhile to check if any Wills have survived for members of the extended family. This is especially true for the Wills of maternal grandparents as they sometimes leave small bequests to named grandchildren. SFHG has a separate Research Guide on Probate Records.

Newspapers

Many local and national newspapers are now available online via the subscription sites, especially Findmypast & The British Newspaper Archive. They contain details of court cases, local disputes and much more besides. There is an SFHG Research Guide on this subject.

Manorial Records

Were your family manorial tenants? If your family lived in a rural parish, it would be worth checking the Manorial Documents Register on the web site of The National Archives to see what Manors held land there and what has survived. A check of the Court Baron minutes for the required period might record the conveyance of property upon the death of the tenant, sometimes naming a widow or heir and even quoting large passages from the Will of the deceased. SFHG has a separate Research Guide on Manorial Records.

Illegitimacy and Adoption

It is sometimes impossible to follow the male ancestral line, due to illegitimacy. For various reasons, the mother may have been reluctant to reveal the name of the child's father and therefore there would be a blank space on the birth certificate; or the words, bastard, base born or Illegitimate will be found in the parish registers. There may have been a dispute over the maintenance of the child and the Poor Law authorities may have obtained a Bastardy Order, Maintenance Order or similar from the courts to defray their expenses. SFHG has a separate Research Guide on this subject too.

There was no formal process of adoption until 1927. However, prior to this date, there was guardianship and fostering, sometimes arranged privately and sometimes arranged by charities, such as Dr. Barnardo's and The Thomas Coram Foundation, amongst many others. Some of those early charity records have survived and searches can be requested if a fee is paid and a strong relationship to the adopted child can be demonstrated. In addition, there were several schemes where children were sent to other countries in the hope of a better life overseas, especially to Canada and Australia. Unfortunately, some of those children had very unhappy experiences and there has been much recent publicity about the abuse that they suffered. There are specialist web sites that contain further details.

Emigration

If people completely disappear, it might be worthwhile to see if they emigrated. They may have been transported to the USA, West Indies, Australia & New Zealand in the 18th & 19th Centuries, following a criminal conviction. They may have joined The Petworth Scheme of assisted Emigration to Upper Canada in the 19th Century: or, more recently, perhaps they became £10 "poms" on a voyage to a new life in Australia.

Military records

Boys and men may have enlisted or been "pressed" into service in the Army or Navy. Many military service records are now available via the subscription sites and The National Archives.

DNA

This can be an important new tool for the family historian to use. The use of DNA in popular television programmes in recent years has heightened the awareness and usefulness to researchers. There is also prominent advertising of the products in the media and competitive pricing too, especially around the key dates of Christmas, Mothering Sunday, Father's Day and Thanksgiving. However, you will still need a paper trail from more traditional research methods.