

Researching family history in Hampshire



Chris Pavey, HGS Research Centre manager



Hampshire Genealogical Society volunteers at the research desk at HRO

Family history has never been so easy

A walk-in enquiry and support service in Winchester and other important new developments offer family historians a first-class service, writes Barry Shurlock

AN agreement between the Hampshire Genealogical Society and the Hampshire County Council Office is creating a novel one-stop hub for anyone exploring the history of their family and related enquiries at the Hampshire Record Office, Winchester.

For the past few months HGS volunteers have been manning a Research Desk at the entrance to the HRO search room where anyone exploring any aspect of family history can seek advice free of charge. This includes specific enquiries or general guidance on tackling particular problems.

It is yet another benefit offered by an all-Hampshire society that for many years has provided unequalled facilities for 'discovering who you are'. With a membership of 1,900 – and slowly rising – HGS is by far the largest group in the county devoted to uncovering the past.

Its president is the celebrated historian, broadcaster and genealogist Dr Nick Barratt, who was the consultant and lead researcher for the first four series of *Who Do You Think You Are* and is currently working on various projects associated with history and heritage. He is a Fellow of the Royal

Historical Society, runs Sticks Research Agency and is director of Learner and Discovery Services at the Open University.

Until last August the HGS Research Centre was based in Cosham, where a dedicated band of volunteers have worked over the years collecting data on a wide front – not only births, marriages and deaths, but also monumental inscriptions and village histories.

Over the years an archive of information on specific families and other topics has been assembled. Ongoing projects include the transcription of thousands of records on Britons from the county who died overseas. Also in hand for use by members is a huge collection of 'unwanted' BMD certificates for Hampshire that members have bought, only to find they are not relevant to their particular interests.

Commenting on the new arrangement at the HRO, HGS chairman Paul Pinhorne said: "The move to Winchester was undertaken after careful consideration. The Cosham volunteers have done a great job and we are very grateful to them. But since coming to the Record Office our footfall has increased.

"Although we have unfortunately lost some volunteers, we have had been delighted to find that there are many new ones that have come in from all about – not only Winchester but Andover, Fair Oak, Romsey and Fareham.

"Our Research Desk is now in the HRO between 10am and 4pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays and we hope to extend it to other days when we have the volunteers."

HGS also has its own office in the building, as well as space for archives and the large collection of books brought from Cosham.

The benefits of membership of HGS, which costs £15 a year, are enormous. They include a quarterly magazine, a members'

handbook and access to indexes at Winchester on baptism, marriage, burial, census, monumental inscriptions and other items. A huge amount of BMD data on all the parishes in Hampshire – some dating from 1537 – transcribed by volunteers and currently on CD-ROMS will be available on another storage medium in the near future.

HGS sells the Eve McLaughlin genealogy guides and antique OS maps published by Alan Godfrey for many parts of the county, with the added benefit of directory entries from the period on the back. Also available are HGS booklets on more than 100 Hampshire villages written by Roy Montgomery, which provide useful information for researchers not familiar with a particular location.

HGS keeps a database of 'surnames of interest' for members, who can also join one of many local groups, or participate in national and even international discussions.

Paul explained: "One great asset of HGS membership is sharing information with others in one of the 13 area groups spread throughout the county. Also, we hold separately National and International Zoom sessions every two months. There are speakers on topics of interest and plenty of opportunities to chat with other members and make new links."

Other benefits of membership include access to news and presentations made exclusively to HGS. Recently, for example, experts from the online genealogy site Find My Past gave members – including some from California, British Columbia and Australia – a master lesson on the 1921 census which has just been released. A video of the session has been posted on the members-only area of the HGS website.

The 1921 census will enable many family historians to extend their



Hampshire Genealogical Society chairman Paul Pinhorne

studies to the period after the First World War. It is available on Find My Past behind a paywall (£3.50 per page, transcriptions £2.50, with small reductions for subscribers).

For those prepared to travel, however, access is free of charge at three regional hubs. The most convenient for Hampshire is the National Archives, Kew, where records can be downloaded on personal devices, including smartphones. One researcher is already rejoicing at saving £700!

Many features are similar to earlier censuses, but there are also significant additions. For the first time the 1921 census gives the names of employers and their addresses. This has already enabled Paul to discover the name and address of the restaurant in London where one of his great-grandfathers was working in 1921.

It shows that he was born in the small Italian village of Cadenabbia on the west shore of Lake Como. Interestingly, in the 19th century this was a popular health resort with English travellers. In 1891 one of the first Anglican churches in the country was built there and Mary Shelley, wife of the poet, wrote about the place after a visit in 1840.

Not everyone will find such exotic family links, but there is much in the 1921 census that will add to researchers' family trees. The next opportunity to get a glimpse of ancestors will not be until 2051 –

when only those now relatively young will be able to benefit! – because the 1931 census was destroyed by fire and a census was not held during the Second World War.

Limited information from the start of the war can be found on the 1939 Register, compiled to issue ID cards and available on the commercial sites Ancestry and Find My Past. These sites, together with the British Newspaper Archive, can be searched in public libraries in the county without charge – with the exception of the 1921 Census – on Go Online public access computers, but not on personal devices.

Downloading in libraries is free but there are charges for printing. Ancestry was made available in libraries in January, but it is not expected at the HRO until the end of March, according to an HCC spokesperson.

There are many other sites online for family historians, some free of charge, like FreeBMD, FreeCEN, FamilySearch and Irish Genealogy, whilst even those with a paywall can often be accessed with special offers or free trials. Scottish records can be searched without charge and documents downloaded for a fee (www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk).

For more on Hampshire, visit: www.hampshirearchivestrust.co.uk, and www.hantsfieldclub.org.uk.

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HGS president, Dr Nick Barratt.
Photo: Alex Rumford