Tracing Your Irish Family History
ireland and its people have always been proud of their heritage and culture. It is this pride that drives millions of people around the world to trace their Irish family history. Since the 1600s Irish roots were spread far and wide around the globe and today researchers from both Ireland and abroad are fascinated to find out all they can about their ancestors from the Emerald Isle.

Millions of Irish family history records are now available online making Irish family history research simpler, more affordable and more accessible than ever before. There has never been a better time to start building your Irish family tree!

This guide is an essential tool for tracing your Irish genealogy. From where to start, to expert hints and tips, you will find all you need to know about Irish family history in one concise booklet.

GETTING STARTED

Irish family history begins at home. Your starting point for tracing your Irish roots is to talk to your family, in particular the older members. No research can replace hearing first-hand accounts from the people whose shared history you are trying to trace. There’s a good chance that they will know the names of relatives whom it would otherwise take months to find by searching alone, as well as stories and family legends that you won’t find in any record. Discovering whether such tales are accurate is one of the joys of building your family tree. Be sure to take notes. Not only does this remind you of your source once your family tree begins to grow, but it is also a document of your personal history for future generations.

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK FAMILY MEMBERS ABOUT YOUR ANCESTORS

- Where and when were they born?
- When did they die? Where were they buried?
- Were they married? If so, what was their spouse’s name?
- When did they marry? Where did the marriage occur? Was this the only marriage for both parties?
- Where did they live?
- What stories can you tell me about their life?
- Did they have children? If so, what were their children’s names?
- What did they work at?
- Did they serve in the military?
- Did they ever leave Ireland and travel or move abroad?
- Which religious denomination were they?
- Do you have original written records, including post-cards, letters, property deeds or a will?
- Do you have any photographs or newspaper clippings of them?
Once you've found out all you can about your ancestors from family members, the next step is to try and locate them in the 1901 and 1911 Census using the information you have. The census records are held by the National Archives of Ireland and are available online. You can search by year, surname, forename, county, townland/street, age and sex. You can find out plenty of interesting facts about your ancestors from the census including where they lived, their occupation, their level of education and where they were born.

CENSUS, LAND & SUBSTITUTES

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GRiffith’s Valuation

Griffith’s Valuation is perhaps the most important Irish land record available for the 19th century. It coincides with the start of mass emigration in the 19th century, and is a key source to trace Famine emigrants. A government land valuation project led by Richard Griffith, it listed approximately 80% of householders in Ireland 1847-1864 and included the names of over 1.4 million individuals. Information found on Griffith’s Valuation includes location, occupier’s name, landlord’s name and property description, including size and value. The most complete version of Griffith’s Valuation is found on findmypast.

DID YOU KNOW?

There was no 1921 Irish census due to the War of Independence. The next was in 1926. A ‘100 year rule’ prevents public access to the 1926 census until a century has passed.
WHERE ELSE TO LOOK?

As well as Griffith’s Valuation, there are other key land and substitute sources available to trace your Irish ancestors.

Findmypast provides exclusive online access to the Landed Estate Court Rentals 1850-1855. This source comprises the records of all the large estates bankrupted in the Great Famine and for the next generation (1849-82). There are over 8,000 estates, with more than 500,000 tenant holdings in this record set.

Electoral registers are also an important source of information for Irish family history research. The Reports from Committees, Fictitious Votes (Ireland), Select Committee on Fictitious Votes 1837-1838 contains 52,600 named individuals, their occupations and addresses, across Ireland’s cities, towns and countryside.

Local records should also be considered. Often, local districts conducted their own censuses and some still survive like the 1749 Census of Elphin available on findmypast.

National, regional and local directories are also a great census substitute when tracing your Irish ancestors. Findmypast has the largest online collection of historical Irish directories.

SEARCHING IRISH RECORDS ON FINDMYPAST

STEP 1
To search Irish records on findmypast go to the homepage and enter the name and any details you know of the ancestor you are researching. Select Ireland as your location.

STEP 2
The results for your search criteria will be displayed on a new page. You can narrow your search by selecting the record category, collection and set you are looking for.

STEP 3
Once your search has been narrowed, click the transcript or image icons to view the records. You can clear or save your search at the top of the page.
BIRTHS, MARRIAGES AND DEATHS (BMDs)

Vital records are another essential starting point for tracing your Irish family history. Civil registration began in Ireland in 1864 (1845 for non-Catholic marriages). To find a relevant record, and make the best use of your time, search the index to births, marriages and deaths online at findmypast. The indexed transcripts contain the person’s name, the year/quarter the event happened, the civil registration district it was registered in and the volume and page numbers it was registered under. Research copies of civil birth, marriage and death records can be obtained from Ireland’s General Register Office for a fee.

PARISH RECORDS

Local parish records are useful when tracing your Irish ancestors before 1864. This means knowing the parish your family came from is important for your research. As the parish name is often listed on land records, cross-referencing records can help pinpoint location. It’s common to have different denominational churches in the same parish in Ireland so knowing which religion your ancestors were will help you to narrow down which church records to search. Roman Catholic, Episcopalian & Methodist, and Presbyterian are the most common denominations. Church records commonly consist of baptism, marriage and burial records and much of the same information that is found in civil records can be found in them like addresses and parents’ names. It is at the discretion of each individual parish whether or not to make their records available online or accessible to the public.

GRAVEYARDS

Irish graveyard headstones and memorials are very useful for gathering information on your ancestor’s life and death. As well as the name of the deceased, additional family names and exact relationships are often included on headstones. Many details from gravestone transcriptions have now been indexed, digitised and made available online like the Ireland Memorial and Burial Register, 1618-2005 on findmypast.

WILLS & PROBATE

The vast majority of Ireland’s testamentary records (wills, administrations, probates, etc.) were destroyed in the explosion at the Public Record Office in 1922, but all was not lost. The Index of Irish Wills 1484-1858 is available on findmypast. This is the only complete list of surviving wills and other testamentary records at the National Archives of Ireland and contains information relating to every part of Ireland. Will records usually contain the person’s name, address and often their occupation.
The Irish Prison Registers 1790-1924 on findmypast are a treasure trove of information for family history research. There are over 3.5 million names in the prison registers, as people were imprisoned for very minor crimes. They include records for all prisons in the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland.

The wonderful thing about prison records is the depth of information provided in them. Everything from next of kin information to physical descriptions, including scars and tattoos are often included.

Irish court records are just as enthralling. At findmypast there are over 20 million court records from 1828 to 1913. The Petty Sessions records are one of the great untapped resources for Irish family history. They are a window on the past, and provide detailed identifying information (names, occupations, addresses) about people in their own communities.

LEGAL AND CRIMINAL RECORDS

Before the invention of TV, radio and internet, newspapers were the only mass media available. They are a rich source for family historians because of their detail and colour. In the 19th century, personal details such as names and addresses, that would be omitted today to protect identities, were often published. National newspapers also got much of their content from their local and regional counterparts. The kind of information you can expect to find in historical Irish newspapers includes:

- News reports, including details of crimes and misdemeanours
- Family notices such as births, marriages, deaths and elopements
- Letters to the Editor
- Obituaries that may include unique information
- Advertisements of a family business
- Photographs and illustrations

NEWSPAPERS

WATCH OUT!

Prison and court records for Northern Ireland are held separately from those for the Republic of Ireland, either in the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland or in individual court houses and prisons.
MILITARY RECORDS

The Irish people have always had the reputation as the ‘fighting Irish’. After 1760, millions of young Irish men enlisted in the British armed services, including the Merchant Navy. Findmypast has digitised millions of service records to provide an invaluable source for tracing Irish family history. The detail available in military records can be fantastic. Names, ages, addresses, next of kin and even physical descriptions are usually listed. Using service records, you can also find out where your ancestor served, for how long and whether they received any medals or decorations. Many British military units were named after Ireland or Irish placenames like the Royal Dublin Fusiliers or the Royal Irish Artillery. Look out for records from regiments with Irish titles because these units are likely to have included Irish soldiers. Remember, it’s not just British records that can be useful when tracing your Irish military ancestors. Ireland’s tumultuous history of rebellions and unrest has left behind some interesting records like the 1798 Claimants and Surrenders and the Sinn Fein 1916 Rebellion Handbook, both available to search on findmypast.

EMIGRATION RECORDS

The Great Famine (1845-51) reduced the Irish population by a quarter, and was the start of mass emigration. With movement on such a scale, passenger lists and travel records are very important resources for Irish family history. From these records you can find out where your ancestors went, the ship they travelled on and who they travelled with. Irish emigrants continued to pass through Irish and British ports well into the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Passenger Lists on findmypast cover departures to long-distance destinations, including the passenger lists for the HMS Titanic and the thousands of US immigrants who disembarked at Ellis Island after 1892.
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