

# Newsletter



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## Editorial

I have been chasing my Welsh ancestors recently and its opened a whole new way of family history research. Have you ever thought how many William Jones have married a Phoebe (?) in Wales?

Looking backwards as you should I recorded as much information as I could from census's and death certificates but the number is still high. I reduced the odds by only looking at one year in one county and still found over twenty. Next I looked in one District finding the numbers cut to twelve. Family stories (always unreliable) gave me the name of two villages so this is where I looked next and found that one village had three marriages and the other had four. I spoke to a very helpful lady who works at the GRO Southport but at first she couldn't help as her only suggestion was to buy all seven marriage certificates as they only do a limited search. Thinking 'out of the box' I mentioned to her that my ancestor was a Master Cordwainer (shoemaker) and would this help. She said it would and agreed to look at all seven marriages to see if one William Jones was a Cordwainer. Result. I am now the proud owner of a copy marriage for William Jones and Phoebe Parry. With this I can now research further back though I'm really stuck on the Flintshire marriage of Thomas Roberts and Annie Jones, there are hundreds,

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## Commander Edward John Smith, RD, RNR,

Edward John Smith was born in Hanley to Edward Smith, a potter, and Catherine Hancock, *née* Marsh, who married on 2 August 1841 in Shelton, Staffordshire. His parents later owned a shop. Smith attended the Etruria British School until the age of 13 when he went to Liverpool to begin his seafaring career. He began his apprenticeship on *Senator Weber* owned by A Gibson & Co., Liverpool. On Tuesday 12th July 1887 Smith married Sarah Eleanor Pennington. Their daughter, Helen Melville Smith, was born in Waterloo, Liverpool, England, on Saturday 2 April 1898. The family lived in an imposing red brick, twin-gabled house, named "Woodhead", on Winn Road, Southampton. He joined the White Star Line in March 1880 as the Fourth Officer of SS Celtic. Smith earned his Extra Master's Certificate and joined the Royal Naval Reserve (thus entitling him to append his name with "RNR"), qualifying as a full Lieutenant. As he rose in seniority, he gained a reputation amongst passengers and crew for quiet flamboyance. Some passengers would sail the Atlantic only in a ship he captained. From 1904 on, Smith commanded the White Star Line's newest ships on their maiden voyages. Smith received the Royal Naval Reserve's long service decoration, along with a promotion to Commander. By virtue of his receiving the long service decoration, he would now be referred to as "Captain Edward John Smith, RD, RNR", with RD standing for "Reserve Decoration" Smith had built a reputation as one of the world's most experienced sea captains, and so was called upon to take first command of the lead ship in a New Class of ocean liners, the Olympic— again, the largest vessel in the world at that time. The maiden voyage from Liverpool to New York was successfully concluded on 21 June 1911. On 10 April 1912, Smith, wearing a bowler hat and a long overcoat, took a taxi from his home to Southampton docks. He came aboard *Titanic* at 7AM to prepare for the Board of Trade muster at 8:00AM. He immediately went to his cabin to get the sailing report from Chief Officer Henry Wilde. After departure at 12:00PM, the huge amount of water displaced by *Titanic* as she passed caused the laid-up *New York* to break from her moorings and swing towards *Titanic*. Quick action from Smith helped to avert a premature end to the maiden voyage. At 11:40PM on 14 April, *Titanic* struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic. The ship sank two hours and forty minutes later, killing an estimated 1,500 people. Smith was one of those who died. His body was never recovered.

### The plaque below his memorial statue in Lichfield states:

*"Commander Edward John Smith, RD, RNR. Born January 27 1850, Died April 15 1912, Bequeathing to his countrymen the memory and example of a great heart, a brave life and a heroic death. "Be British."*

## **News from Derby Records Office.**

Derbyshire Record Office is beginning an exciting project to expand storage and public spaces. This project is due for completion by Spring 2013, when a new combined archives and local studies service will reopen at the current record office building in New Street, Matlock. Whilst building work takes place, Derbyshire Record Office will operate a temporary service from the Crèche Building, in the lower car park of County Hall, Matlock.

### **Temporary closure**

Derbyshire Record Office will be closed for three weeks between 12 and 30 September 2011 to allow us to move to the temporary premises, re-opening at the Crèche Building on Monday 3 October 2011. Whilst we are closed we regret that we will be unable to provide any access to records, or to deal with enquiries.

### **Restricted service during building works**

From 3 October there will be a small public search room at the Creche Building for access to original documents. All documents held on microfilm, DVD and CD, including most of the parish registers, will be available at Derbyshire Local Studies Library on Bank Road, Matlock.

Please note that:

Our opening hours will remain unchanged.

Original documents must be ordered in advance, with five working days' notice. If you know the document reference numbers, you can order by telephone (01629 538347) or email [record.office@derbyshire.gov.uk](mailto:record.office@derbyshire.gov.uk).

If you do not know the document reference numbers, you can either check the finding aids in the temporary search room and fill in request slips in advance of your visit; or you can contact us to discuss what you would like to see, and we will order on your behalf.

You can check the online parish register guide to see if the register you need is on microfilm or DVD at [www.derbyshire.gov.uk/leisure/record\\_office/records](http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/leisure/record_office/records)

To access wills and letters of administration, please also check the online guide, which tells you what can be seen on microfilm and what is available on DVD at [www.derbyshire.gov.uk/leisure/record\\_office/records/wills](http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/leisure/record_office/records/wills)

Microfilms, DVDs and CDs can be accessed at Derbyshire Local Studies Library, and will not need to be ordered in advance. As demand may be high, we recommend that you book microfilms readers, and /or PCs to access the DVDs and CDs by telephoning 01629 536579, or by emailing [localstudies@derbyshire.gov.uk](mailto:localstudies@derbyshire.gov.uk)

Two disabled car parking spaces will be available at the Crèche Building, and one space at Local Studies. If you are not a 'blue badge' holder, alternative parking is available elsewhere in Matlock.

### **Search Service**

Whilst building works are going on, we may have difficulty in accessing some documents, so responses to search requests may take a little longer than people have been used to.

Sarah Chubb  
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## Interviewing older relatives - useful guidelines

In family history, the oldest relatives we have are a treasure chest of gold and jewels, but just like Long John Silver, you can lose it all if you fail to follow the treasure map properly. Fortunately, accessing the treasure trove of elderly relatives' family history knowledge is actually quite easy, as long as you follow five basic principles: Patience is *the* Virtue; 'what' you ask is *never* as important as 'how' you ask; *your* silence is golden, *sincerity* and *sensitivity* are your watchwords, and plan it as a *marathon*, not a sprint!

When seeking the help of elderly relatives, you can eliminate most issues by *thinking ahead*. Think about your relative – are they active or infirm? Make an appointment (no matter how silly this seems) at least a fortnight in advance and be clear about why you are calling and then ALWAYS follow this up with a letter (no text or email).

The letter should clearly state day, date, time and venue; it should reiterate exactly why you are visiting. Specifically ask him or her to 'write down any *stories* (not 'anecdotes') you remember being told when you were young' and then, as a bullet-point list, (not paragraph), ask your relative to 'look out' any photographs, birth, marriage, or death certificates, baptism certificates, obituaries, postcards, letters, medals, ration books, schoolbooks, report cards, wills, deeds, knick-knacks, keepsakes, locketts, cufflinks, rings, etc. Do NOT use terms that - whilst familiar to seasoned researchers - might not be intelligible to others, for example 'genealogy', 'educational', 'BMD', 'ephemera', and 'memorabilia'. Be specific not vague: after all, your relative may have 70, 80 or even 90 years of memories to sift through!

Make contact a couple of times beforehand and, if you have to postpone the appointment, make a definite rearrangement of date and time. If you think your relative will need a bit of support, you might take someone with you - ideally someone in their age bracket and if possible their sibling or relative. But remember, you have to note down the information they are giving you, so having more than two people talking away is going to be difficult to follow.

Do your pre-preparation. A4 pad and pen is ideal. A laptop can intimidate and distract your relative; however, a camera phone can be a handy aid. You could also take a Dictaphone, but you should explain to your relative what you are doing then put it out of sight, so it doesn't put them off.

Family history isn't just about the sort of things that can be found in official records. To really understand someone's life it's helpful to know about their hobbies, favourite foods (and dislikes or allergies), health and physical characteristics, skills and ineptitudes. I find that Rudyard Kipling's '6 honest serving men' – who, what, where, when, why and how - cannot be beaten for covering all the bases.

When you arrive, you must be organised but also relaxed - remember you are there to *interview* not to *interrogate*. Once you've got your 'starting cuppa', ask them to show you anything they've been able to find out and jotted down. These will focus your relative's mind.

How you ask your questions is crucial in two ways. First, wording: 'Birthdate', 'siblings', 'occupation', 'denomination' will cause your relative's brain to concentrate on the construction of the question instead of what you want, the content. E.g., 'Have you any siblings? What is your birth date/occupation?' versus 'Have you got any brothers and sisters? When's your birthday? What was your job?'

Second: context. We're all egocentric; We try to remember events in the context of how they impacted on 'me', rather than other people, so you get the 97 year old who can clearly remember stubbing his big toe at six, but isn't sure when his brother had his arm amputated in a farm machinery accident. As far as possible relate all of your questions to your relative: How old were *you*... Where were *you*... What did *you* do... Did *you* use Brylcreem, Did *you* like liquorice?

## Interviewing older relatives - useful guidelines (continued)

If you've done your preparation correctly, you will have memorised or have to hand a timeline of key dates which you can use to help you fix your relative's memories 'in time'. So, for example, 'you were six in 1926 when the General Strike was on, do you remember it?' 'Oh yes, no rubbish was collected, everything stopped'. Had your older sister Bette got married by then or did it stop her wedding?'

The strongest memory triggers are not sight and hearing but smell and taste - if you can take with you a bag of 'proper' old fashioned mint humbugs or carry a hankie with Olbas oil because your great-granddad always smelled of it your relative's memories will receive powerful stimuli. Getting your relative to reminisce about Charles Boyer or Joyce Grenfell may unlock relevant personal memories. The conversation may meander and double back sometimes but you can always bring it back on course.

Having asked a question, LISTEN! Silence doesn't mean that your relative didn't understand the question - it usually means they are accessing their memory banks. Do not interrupt as this will break their concentration - when they have finished you can go back over it. For example, if you ask "Did you have any your brothers and sisters?" and the response begins "There's our Jack, Bert, Betty..." wait until your relative has finished speaking before trying to clarify with questions like "Was he Jack or John".

Ask related supplementary questions. For example, "Did he have a middle name?" might lead to the discovery that Bert was really George Bertram. A great question is: "Were you/your brother/sister named after anybody?", or, "Why did your mum and dad name you.....?". If you're lucky you'll find yourself being told information and stories about ancestors several generations before your relative's. My grandmother's name came from Megan Lloyd George, highlighting her father's politics.

Tie in the memorabilia they have and use it with your non-standard' questions: if you get responses like "our Alice could sing like an angel but, by heck, she'd got three left feet" then you are doing your interview properly. It should be a voyage of discovery.

Lastly, stay but don't over-stay. Ideally arrive shortly after lunch, and stay till tea-time/early evening, but no longer. You want an enjoyable afternoon of reminiscing not 'mental exhaustion'. Emphasise the long-term nature of your project and offer to pop back now and then and keep them up to date. This opens the door for more visits to clarify and find new information - it is unlikely they will remember everything at the first attempt, no matter how alert and sharp they are.

That's it, except for one caveat which I think is important enough to emphasise: sensitivity, not just by you, but shown towards you.

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### What the postman saw.

Written on the back of this local postcard: -

*Tom, come home quick. I think Dad's dying. Do you like this postcard of our house. Love Mother*