Your Family Tree Series: 1

How to Trace Your Family Tree

Family history, or genealogy, can be a fascinating hobby but it can prove very frustrating if you don't know where to start. The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) holds many archives that will be of help to you but, before beginning your search at PRONI, you should try to discover as much as possible about your family history from other sources.

Starting out

Start by ***asking family*** and friends what they can remember. Check family ***gravestone inscriptions*** for names and vital dates. See if you can find any old ***photographs*** – these are often annotated with the names of those in the image as well as the place and the date the photograph was taken. Family ***Bibles*** are also a useful source as they may sometimes contain details of births, deaths and marriages in the family. Incidentally, birth, death and marriage certificates can be obtained from the ***General Register Office*** (see separate Information Leaflet). This sort of information will help to flesh out the picture before you begin your research.

What you will uncover here at PRONI will depend on the quality of the documents that have survived for the area. In order to use the archives to their best advantage, you need three pieces of information: ***names, dates*** and ***places***. ***Names*** often recur in the family: check the names of grandparents, uncles, etc., to see if there is a common family name. Remember, too, that spelling was not standardised until relatively recently and variations in the spelling of surnames is common. Vital ***dates*** are: date of marriage, birth, and death. Date of emigration, if applicable, is also helpful. The ***area*** whence your ancestors originated is very important: see if you can discover references to townland names, villages, towns, parishes and counties.

At PRONI

If you have little or no information on your family, the easiest way to begin a genealogical search is to use the **Electronic Catalogue** in the Public Search Room. This is searchable by keyword, phrase or reference

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number. The information returned usually gives names, dates, locations and some information on the actual document, giving you enough information to decide whether to order it out from the storage area. You can order directly from this catalogue.

The **Personal Names Card Index,** arranged alphabetically by surname, is also available in the Search Room. It will give you some details about the document in which the name appears, and a PRONI reference number. Always check the reference number against the catalogues located in the Search Room as, to order the document, you will need a more precise reference number than the one that is on the card. The catalogues also give a better description of the document, allowing you to decide whether it is relevant to your research and worth ordering from the storage area.

If you have no idea where your ancestors came from in Northern Ireland, you can discover the distribution of any surname by looking in the **Householders' Index** (available on the Public Search Room shelves). This is a guide to the names listed in the **Tithe Applotment** books, c.1830, and in the **Griffith's Valuation**, c.1860. From this index you can discover the localities where the name was most common between 1830 and 1860. Where the letter '**G'** appears in the index beside a particular name, it means that the name appears in the Griffith's Valuation books (the printed version is available on the Public Search Room shelves). The number following (e.g., '**G2**') refers to the number of times that the surname is recorded in that particular barony or parish. The letter '**T**' in the same index means that the surname appears in the Tithe Applotment books (PRONI reference number **FIN/5A**).

If you know the area whence your ancestor came, you can search records relating to that particular district. Ireland and its counties are sub-divided in a unique way: ***counties*** into ***baronies***, baronies into ***parishes***, and parishes into ***townlands***. Other divisions you need to be aware of are Poor Law Unions (***PLU***) and District Electoral Divisions (***DED***). The **townland** is a unique feature of the Irish landscape and is one of the most ancient divisions in the country. Records are generally organised by townland but within larger divisions. For example, Griffith's Valuation is arranged by County and PLU, and within that by barony, parish, and then by townland. For church records, you only need to know the parish in which the townland is situated but if you are using the 1901 census you will need to know which District Electoral Division the townland is in. To discover which parish, barony, PLU and DED any townland is in, consult the **Alphabetical Index to the Townlands and Towns, Parishes and Baronies of Ireland**, available on the Public Search Room shelves. These indexes were compiled during the 19th and early 20th centuries after each census.

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Once you know the correct geographical location, a good way to begin your research is by consulting the **Geographical Index**, available in the Public Search Room. It will give the PRONI reference numbers for many official and private records relating to many townlands in Northern Ireland including the valuation books in **VAL/1B**, **VAL/2B** and **VAL/12B** (see separate Information Leaflet) and the 6″ Ordnance Survey maps **OS/6** (see separate Information Leaflet).

If You Cannot Come to PRONI

If you are unable to visit in person, you can still search our Electronic Catalogue on-line. It is located on the home page of our website. We can also undertake specific searches for a fee. You must put your request for a copy or a search in writing (e-mail is fine). We cannot provide a comprehensive research service but a list of commercial researchers operating in Northern Ireland who undertake this work can be obtained from PRONI and is available on our website. **Please note**: the commercial researchers listed do not work for PRONI, we cannot recommend any particular person or organisation, nor can we be held responsible for the standard of their work, or for any qualification or title they may claim to hold. Further information on search options, together with details of the copying service, can be found on the PRONI website: www.proni.gov.uk

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