



Newsletter - March 21, 2009

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CERTIFICATES LOST IN BUSHFIRES TO BE REPLACED FREE

Australians who lost their possessions in the recent bushfires have been offered free replacement birth and marriage certificates by the Australian state registrars and also by the New Zealand authorities (see this [article](#) on the Victoria state website). Unfortunately it seems they are only offering to replace certificates for living people - genealogists and others who lost historic certificates may have to pay for replacements.

ONLINE OR OFFLINE - WHICH IS BEST?

I was recently reading a discussion about whether it is best to research your family tree online or go the traditional route - but why does it have to be one or the other? Both can be hard work, both can be rewarding, and both offer opportunities for serendipitous discoveries. One of my own finds was a group of letters written by John Calver, a younger brother of my great-great-great-great grandfather William Calver, in the 1820s and which are preserved in the [Suffolk Records Office](#). I'd love to be able to show you an example of the original documents, but there are copyright issues - so here instead is an extract from my own transcription of one of his letters (I've retained the original layout and spelling):

Henny August 25th 1827

*Sir I Receved your Latter and I hope you
Will B able to Reede my Riten you must
Excues it I neaver had no Larning only By my
own Practs sinces my farther + Mother have
Bin Dead + Sir I have to in form you
that the Boy have Bin with me he Came
to me in a vary Bad State his Feete next*

*to the grownd + all Rags in Deede Sir I
wors vary much hurt to see him I have
Bin in quiren to get him a Marster But Can
not Succeed I Ment to uf Rote to you if I
Cold But of Succeeded Sir if you or Eany of my
friens at Fornham Cold get him a Marster
I shall B vary glad poor Boy it is
A Pitte that he should B Lost for the
Wont of a frend*

As you can tell, my great-great-great-great-great uncle John was not an educated man, though the fact that he could read and write at all set him apart from many of his generation (my 4G grandfather couldn't even sign his own name when he married in 1788). For this correspondence from a semi-literate man, who wasn't rich or famous but simply a good man helping his orphaned nephew get an apprenticeship, to have survived almost two centuries is testament to the excellent work of the local archives around Britain, and just one example of the discoveries I've made through visiting some of the local archives that are relevant to my family tree. Of course, I've also made some wonderful discoveries online - but nothing beats seeing the actual documents (that said, full marks to findmypast.com for putting beautiful full colour copies of the 1911 Census schedules online).

Sadly, with over 70,000 LostCousins members to look after, I don't have as much time to visit records offices as I once did. Are you spending too much time online, and not enough visiting archives - or do you feel that you've got the balance right?

WW2 HEROINE DIES AT 90

Audrey Coningham, later Roche, who is believed to be the only woman decorated for bravery at sea during World War 2, died in January at the age of 90. There were obituaries in both the [Times](#) and [Telegraph](#) - click either link to find out more about this brave lady. Also in the news recently was Harry Patch, at 110 the second-oldest man in the UK and - according to Wikipedia - one of the 90 oldest men ever. Harry is the last survivor of the Great War trenches, and on March 9 he added to his many decorations when he was appointed an Officer of the Legion d'honneur by the French ambassador (who travelled to his nursing home in Somerset).

CHELSEA PENSIONERS WELCOME WOMEN SOLDIERS

I've just been watching a documentary on BBC4 about the arrival of the first lady pensioners ever to be admitted to the Royal Hospital at Chelsea - I'm sure they'll be the first of many (see this [Daily Mail article](#) for background information). These days, when we talk about a Chelsea pensioner we mean someone who actually lives at the hospital - but it wasn't always so. When you see someone on a 19th century census described as a Chelsea pensioner it usually just means that they received an army pension (the equivalent for naval personnel was to be a Greenwich pensioner). The [National Archives](#) holds records from 1760-1913 under reference WO97, and according to the TNA site they are in the process of being digitised by findmypast.com, so I hope we'll see them online soon.

LOST WAR RECORDS FOUND BY BRITISH HISTORIAN

A recent [story](#) on the BBC news site caught the eye of LostCousins member Fiona, and she kindly passed the link to me. British historian Peter Barton discovered an enormous archive dating from the Great War at the headquarters of the International Red Cross in Geneva, part of which relates to British and Commonwealth servicemen. According to the BBC article there are plans to digitise the records over the next 5 years and make them available online - which is great news for genealogists.

1911 CENSUS LATEST - ENGLAND NOW NEARLY COMPLETE

Durham and Yorkshire are now complete, so the only English counties still to go online are Cumberland, Westmorland, and Northumberland. Remember that credits bought at findmypast.com can also be used at the 1911 site.

LONDON METROPOLITAN ARCHIVES - ONLINE AT LAST?

Since many of my ancestors were in the London area at some point during the 19th century I was very interested in the announcement last year that Ancestry were planning to digitise the parish registers and other records held at the London Metropolitan Archives, which holds most of the surviving records for the Greater London area. Although no announcement has yet been made, I've just noticed that the back cover of at least one of next month's family history magazines has an advert devoted entirely to these records - so the first instalment must be close. If you're not an Ancestry subscriber this may be a good time to take advantage of their 14-day free trial (but beware, you WILL need to provide your credit card details, and they WILL charge you if you don't cancel prior to the end of the trial).

THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE

The Man Who Wasn't There is the title of a 2001 Coen Brothers movie - it sprang to mind when I was reading the home page of Frank Ahearn, who not only advises people how to vanish, but also traces people who don't want to be found. "They don't want to be found" is something I often hear from members who are struggling to track down an elusive ancestor. Now I can't tell you how Frank Ahearn would address the problem, but I can tell you what I would do.....

First and foremost, I'd try to lay my hands on every piece of information about that person, even if it doesn't seem to be relevant. So if I'm struggling to find someone on the census I usually go off and look for him in the birth indexes instead. Why? Because if his name changed he won't be recorded there under the name he used in later life.

A typical 'brick wall' is an ancestor who doesn't exist before his (and it usually is a man) marriage. Faced with a situation like that, my reasoning goes something like this: "Is it really likely this person is not only missing from all the censuses prior to his marriage, and also that his birth wasn't registered?". Of course, the answer is NO. Only about 2-3% of the population is typically missing from a census, so for somebody to be accidentally omitted from two consecutive censuses is very unlikely (in fact you've got more chance of persuading Sir Fred Goodwin to hand back his pension - apologies to overseas members who haven't been following the scandal of the ex-boss of the Royal Bank of Scotland, and his enormous pay-off).

And for that same person to also be omitted from the birth indexes - well, it's almost inconceivable. Far more likely is that the information you already have is WRONG. Perhaps he lied about his age, perhaps he didn't know where he was born, and perhaps when his birth was registered it was under a different name?

Of course, when we have so little information about one of our ancestors, the last thing we want to be told is that the little information we have may be wrong - but by the same token, it's often our unswerving belief in that information that's preventing us from finding out more. When you're up against a 'brick wall', make sure that it isn't one of your own making!

PETER'S TIPS

Last weekend my wife and I were down at Homebase - little did we know that this weekend we'd be able to buy everything for 15% less if we bought it online! Click here to go to the website, and be sure to enter DISC15 at the checkout (by the way, this offer even includes products which are already reduced). The offer ends on Sunday March 22, so you'll need to be quick.

For 20 years I've been a member of the Airmiles scheme which offers free British Airways flights, but it's been some years since I added to my tally. However, I have enough miles in my account for a couple of flights to somewhere warm, so imagine my horror when I read in the latest edition of Which? that my miles

will be lost if I don't spend them or add to them before July! I've never received any notification about this change in rules, so I suspect there are also some LostCousins members who are also 'in the dark'. A black mark to Airmiles for keeping this quiet, but full marks to Which? for altering their members to the problem.

Tom in Canada wrote to let me know about a scheme there which allows homeowners to claim a tax credit for renovation work that they carry out between February 2009 and January 2010 (it seems like a better way to boost the economy than handing out big bonuses to fat cat bankers). I'm not going to go into details of the scheme here, but if you think it may apply to you - or to a relative in Canada - see this [page](#).

Christine sent me an email with a link to a British website called [FixMyStreet](#) which simplifies the process of getting your local council to sort out problems such as faulty street lighting, broken paving slabs, graffiti, or fly tipping. I haven't tried it out yet, but I certainly will in the future. Talking of streets, have you tried the new Google Maps feature which provides 3D views of streets in 25 British cities (including London), and many other cities around the world? What a shame we don't have the equivalent for 1911 - wouldn't it be fascinating? By the way, I've had a lot of positive feedback after mentioning the facsimile edition of the [1938 A-Z of London](#) since mentioning it in the last newsletter - I just wish I still had the copy of Kelly's directory of Ilford from the same era which was on my parents' bookshelves when I was a child in the 1950s.

Only 2 more weeks before Royal Mail puts up the postage rates, so it's your last chance to buy the stamps you'll need for this year's Christmas cards - just make sure you get the ones marked 1st or 2nd class, not the ones with a value in pence printed on them! (If you buy them in the supermarket you can pay by credit card, which is handy.)

STOP PRESS

This is where corrections and updates will appear.

That's all for now - I hope you've found some of it relevant to you and your family tree. Please do keep sending in your comments and suggestions for future issues.

Peter Calver
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