

London Borough of Lewisham Local History and Archives Centre

Information Sheet No. 13

Tracing Your Family Tree

1. How to Start

Begin by finding out as much as you can from family papers (e.g. birth and marriage certificates, letters and family bibles) and from older relatives. It is also helpful to read a book on the subject. Many other books are available at bookshops and in your library. The National Archives, the Family Records Centre (FRC) and GENUKI [www.genuki.org.uk] have useful tips on getting started. Once you have gathered all the information you can, you will be able to decide where to start your search. Most people begin with a set of known facts from which they work backwards into the past using marriage and birth or baptism records. For example, you may know the date and place of birth of your grandmother. Her baptism or birth certificate will tell you the names of her parents, so that searches can be made for their marriage and births or baptisms. Birth or baptism certificates will give you the names of *their* parents, and you can continue tracing back.

2. Parish Registers

Some of the registers record Church of England baptisms, marriages and burials date back to 1538 and they do not usually record dates of births and deaths. Most Lewisham Borough parishes have deposited their registers with the Local History and Archives Centre. Some registers are still held by the churches themselves. Contact the Local History and Archives Centre to see if they hold the registers you wish to see. There is no name index covering all the registers. If you are stuck, try:

- **The International Genealogy Index (I.G.I).** This lists baptism and marriage entries for the whole country [coverage is patchy]. It is arranged alphabetically by surname within each county. It is available on microfiche for the whole of England or online at Family Search [www.familysearch.org].

3. Civil Registration Records

Civil registration of births, marriages and deaths began in July 1837. The General Register Office (GRO), based at the FRC, holds records for England and Wales. You can obtain certificates if you can give the name, date and place of birth, marriage or death from the Local Superintendent Registrars or the FRC. If you are unsure of precise details, try checking the GRO indexes to births, marriages and deaths. They are arranged alphabetically by surname within the quarter of the year in which the event was **registered**. The details are limited (name, quarter of the year when the event was **registered**, and the registration district, **not** parish). You can request a full certificate (quoting the information from the indexes) by visiting the FRC, by writing to the GRO, or online at <http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates>. You can see the indexes to births, marriages and deaths at Bromley Local Studies and Archives [1837 – 1997 microfiche] or online at Ancestry [free at any Lewisham Library]. You can also search indexes online at FreeBMD [www.freebmd.org.uk]. Coverage is not complete but it is worth checking.

4. Census Records

Census records are available for 1841 – 1901, although censuses were compiled, 1801-1831, they are mainly statistical and few survive. The census is arranged by street within each Enumerator district, with occupants of each house listed. In 1841, the name, age and occupation are given and ages of adults rounded down. From 1851 onwards, they include name, relationship to the head of the household, marital status, age, occupation and place of birth. The census only lists the people staying at the house on census night. Census records for England and Wales are held at the FRC. You can see copies for the Lewisham area at the Local History and Archives Centre Indexes available for 1851 [printed] and 1881 [microfiche] or online at Ancestry [free at any Lewisham Library], fee only to print images.

5. Wills and Other Probate Records

Wills can supply valuable information about the person who made the will and their links with family and friends. An administration may have been granted if the deceased did not leave a valid will. Although less informative than wills, administrations name the person appointed to administer the estate (often the next-of-kin), whilst the date of the document indicates an approximate date of death. Before 1858, wills were proved (made legally valid) by church courts, the Lewisham area is covered by Prerogative Court of Canterbury [PCC]. The wills are held by The National Archives and can be seen on microfilm at the FRC or online at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline]. The index is free, but is a fee for the digital images. From 1858 civil courts proved wills and the original wills and administrations for England and Wales are at the Principal Probate Registry or the index is available on microfiche at the FRC [1858 – 1946].

6. Visiting the Lewisham Local History and Archives Centre

We hold many other sources of interest to family historians. These include:

- Some nonconformist church records
- Directories
- Local Histories
- Electoral Registers

You can consult documents free of charge, but it is recommended that you check with the Local History and Archives Centre, that the records you want are available, whether they are in microform and book a machine.

7. Useful Addresses

Local History and Archives Centre

Lewisham Library,
199 – 201 High Street, London, SE13 6RG
Tel: 020 8297 0682
Website: www.lewisham.gov.uk

Bromley Local Studies and Archives

Central Library, High Street, Bromley, BR1 1EX
Tel: 020 8461 7170
Website: www.bromley.gov.uk

Family Records Centre

Myddelton Street, London EC1R 1UW
Tel: census & general enquiries 020 8392 5300
Tel: certificates 0845 603 7788
Website: www.familyrecords.gov.uk/

General Register Office

P O Box 2
Southport, Merseyside PR8 2JD
Tele: 0845 603 7788
Website: www.gro.gov.uk/

Principal Probate Registry

Family Division, First Avenue House
42-49 High Holborn, London WC1V 6NP
Tel: 020 7947 6939
Website: www.hmcourts-service.gov.uk/