

IN SEARCH OF SINGERS

A GUIDE TO GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH

By Elizabeth Draper

In September of 2024, singer and author Nick Dow sent out a request for help 'looking up a few folk singers from the south west of England', from whom the Hammond Brothers – specifically Henry – collected songs in the early 1900's.

As Dorset is my home, my interests span over forty years of folk customs, singing, and genealogy, I offered to help, receiving a folder containing nearly two hundred names of singers from Hampshire, Somerset, and Dorset to look for. Nick has already fleshed out some of the singers in his book 'Southern Harvest' but many more have been nothing but a

name and location on the corner of a page; doomed, seemingly, to anonymity.

The field of genealogy – the study of family trees, family history and ancestral lines - has progressed rather rapidly in the last 4 decades. The popularity of several television programmes, and worldwide access to the Internet has provided the impetus for millions to search out illustrious relatives – something that our Victorian ancestors were also fond of; there are many fabricated genealogies from that period, which have erroneously attributed noble ancestry to the socially ambitious. However, the majority of us are just the latest product of good, peasant stock

who worked the fields or factories, were born, lived, and for the vast majority, died un-noted and un-noteworthy. There were however, a few whose actions have touched and shaped our lives a century and more since they lived, by what they left behind with the collectors of folk traditions such as Cecil Sharp and the Hammond Brothers.

To create a family tree, all one needs is a pencil and notepad or a computer; and access to either the Internet, a Family History Centre/County Records office, or the National Archive. Also useful are a scanner, a reasonably good camera, and copious free time!

3 Note your sources. Until the Registration Act enabled on 1 Jul 1837 recorded all births, marriages and deaths, the only official records were the Established Church parish registers, so it is these records that genealogists depend upon for the basic details. Non Conformists have their own records for births and burials but all marriages had to be undertaken in the Established Church (Anglican) Registers until 1837, when civil marriages were introduced. The National Census, begun in 1841 and taken every decade, is a crucial deposit of information for the last 180 years. It is made public 100 years after creation, so the latest available is the one taken in 1921. We also have what is known as the 1939 Register – the survey of Britain taken as a preparation for the wartime identity papers and used later during the formation of the NHS. All of these can be found at the National Archives which can be perused at local Family History Centres. Churchyards and cemeteries can also prove informative. Wherever you find your information, make a note of when and where you found it.

4 Transcribers (including AI) make mistakes. The genealogists' "curse of cursive writing" can so often lead a transcriber to confuse cursive lowercase letters, but knowing that the uppercase J was frequently used for I and often mistaken for uppercase T or F can make interpretation easier. Checking the rest of the document will often give better examples of the name or word, or a feel for the author's handwriting. Tracing or copying the letters may help in determining how the letters were formed, and of course online documents can be easily enlarged. Transcribers are also prone to leaving out things they do not deem 'necessary' that can actually be an important clue for the genealogist. This all leads to less than accurate or incomplete transcriptions becoming 'gospel' online, making Rules 1 and 2 vital.

5 Spelling changes with literacy. Spelling was not really standardised until the late 1800's, as literacy became more widespread, so the earlier the document, the more likely the spelling could be deemed "creative". Be wary of the effect that a regional dialect or accent may have on those who recorded details in the parish registers and family Bibles, and family divisions over differently spelled surnames.

6 Try to be objective, pragmatic and not judge. Whilst the lot of unmarried mothers, their children, and females in general has improved greatly over the last few decades, there was a lot of prejudice against them in the past. Women were often lambasted from the pulpit – or at least in the parish registers – for having children out of wedlock; and children as young as six or seven could be taken before the magistrate for what we might consider petty crimes, up to assault and murder. Whilst some are proud of their rebellious ancestors, many descendants may not know or be willing to talk about their parents or grandparents' "accidents" or criminal exploits, or accept that their lovely uncle Ernest may have been a bit of a wicked uncle Ernie in his youth. Tact and diplomacy are required when contacting descendants for more information about common ancestors. ▶

Whether you are searching online, in the National Archives, or at a local Family History Centre, there are a few ground rules for genealogical research to remember:

1 Always check the original document (or a scanned image of it) where you can. Those left by song collector Henry Edward Denison Hammond available on the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library website are by turns a feast of information and a dearth of details. The majority of his contributors are given a surname, but often nothing more than an initial, a somewhat vague description of age and/or location with little consistency. Women in historical records fare badly, for they are often referred to as 'Mrs Joseph Bloggs' or worse 'The Relict of Jsph. Bloggs' - at least Hammond gave most of his female contributors the dignity of their own first name or initial.

2 Always check the whole document where feasible. This is invaluable for finding family members and other clues to the full name or location of the subject at that particular moment in their history. The temptation is to stop when the research subject has been found, but further reading may reveal so much more information. A couples' first child may have been baptised in the mother's home village which can provide confirmation of a maiden name and suggest a marriage entry or if they were known by a nickname. It also may explain allocating a different birthplace to other siblings on a census return, or a change in birth date where a new baby was named for a sibling who had died young. Many of the documents available online have been transcribed several times, by different methods including AI, and these different transcriptions can be contradictory.



Less vital, but still important is a consistent approach to researching, with a few more strong suggestions, which may improve your genealogical journey.

Talk to and record older relatives and their family stories. The memories of older relatives are a useful source of information – not always the most accurate, but they can contain little nuggets of description and anecdotes which make the research subject into a 3D person, rather than just a name and a date on a page. Go through their old photograph albums and note down names and stories they may remember.

Be consistent in your research. When you find a way of noting dates and events you like, stick to it. When you search a document, make a note of its name, catalogue number, web page, and contents, so you don't find yourself looking at it unnecessarily further down the line, and you know where to verify research.

Be prepared to read further. Knowing a little more about the social history of the time and location gives a better appreciation of the lives our ancestors lived. Be prepared to learn the difference between a cobbler and a cordwainer, and that 'agricultural labourer' covers a multitude of skills and activities.

Make back-ups often. Always make a back-up of any digital documents and images, on a separate hard drive. Transcribe handwritten research onto the computer and back-up that document with a clear title – a family name and dates, military records, event (births, marriages, deaths, etc) and the parish that recorded them, and censuses by year. Do not shred or destroy any written notes until you are sure they are duplicated legibly!

Be prepared to never finish a tree. You can stop or start a family tree wherever you feel. The traditional starting point is yourself, followed by your parents, grandparents, great grandparents, and so on, to an arbitrarily picked number of generations, or more usually, back to the most interesting or famous person. Many people want all the siblings and their offspring; others prefer just the direct line. One thing that is certain though, is that you will never completely finish a tree, because new records are being released, discovered and added to databases every week. This means that there will always be more information to be found, corrections to make, more records to add - so in truth, a family tree is never finished.

Most people start with online family tree makers, or with their local Family History Centre, and use themselves as the home character, being the person they know most about. There are two ways to go about writing a tree – noting down only the direct ancestors, which I like to refer to as the Jeffrey Pine, straight and narrow; or adding in every sibling and their families, which I call the Espalier, with widely spread branches full of siblings, nibblings and cousins.

To find a singer, I begin with the name, and the date and place given by Hammond. Remembering Rule 1, check the original document where

Hammond noted the home of Mrs J Bishop, transcribed as 'Harden Newton' and 'Marden Newton', Dorset. Using a search engine such as Google Maps, we find no place called Harden, but a partial match to Marden Newton, and personal local knowledge, the village was identified as Maiden Newton. This was then verified by checking the 1901 census return for that village, where Mrs J Bishop was found to be the widowed Jane Bishop, with children born in the village. Going back through those Census records shows us that Jane Bishop was married to James Bishop, labourer, giving us Hammond's 'Mrs J Bishop.'

Further search into Jane Bishop's census entries show us her children were all born in or near Maiden Newton, her age suggests a birth date around 1833, and her birthplace is given as Watercombe, a village fourteen miles south-east. A check with the Online Parish Clerk for Dorset (opcdorset.org) shows us that Watercombe people are included in the parish records of two villages so both these and those of Maiden Newton must be checked for Jane Bishop's marriage Banns, usually some 3-18 months before the first child was baptised. The marriage record was found in Maiden Newton's records – showing her maiden

name as Lovell, for which we can now look for her baptism contained in the Warmell or Poxwell parish records. Her birth in 1833 came four years too early to be entered in the Civil Registers, so church records are the major source of information. Thus we find her parents Robert Lovell and Charlotte Ferry, and her siblings, most of whom had been baptised in Maiden Newton, which is where they were living

when Jane and James married in October 1857. Their first child Emily was born on 19 Dec that year. Six more children followed, although at least one died in infancy. James died in 1884, when their youngest child was just ten. The Census Returns of 1861 to 1901 show us that the children grew up, attended school, and moved away for work or marriage, or stayed at home to look after their mother. The 1921 Census shows us she was living near the station, with her eldest daughter Emily who took care of the house. A search in the Civil Register of Deaths shows us she died in 1925.

We now have a picture of Mrs Jane Bishop from her birth, through to marriage, parenthood and to her death in 1925: Born in a time when the average pay for an agricultural labouring man was nine shillings, much less for women; the aftermath of the Swing Riots was still being felt, and six men from the neighbouring Piddle valley were being tried and transported for forming a Friendly Society, which stirred up the labouring masses to protest. She grew up to a life of

work, taught by her mother to cook, clean, spin and sew, launder and mend, care for children, and no doubt to sing to make the drudgery less taxing. She would also have learned to keep a vegetable garden, look after poultry, to milk a cow and churn butter, help with the harvesting, winnowing and gleaning; tasks a woman in rural Victorian England accepted as their lot. Her husband was one of the labourers whose

wage by 1870 had not increased by more than a few shillings, and their life would be one of privation, rather than outright poverty. Another surge in public feeling for the plight of the labouring man rose in 1870, Jane would have had to deal with a husband whose wage was once again reduced, and their children were not quite old enough to contribute. By the time of James' death, three of the children are able to work and bring in enough for the family to live. The children continue to support Jane and in 1901 she is shown with two daughters, all 'living on own means'. By 1911 a daughter has been replaced by boarder who no doubt brought in a few more shillings and Jane is now an 'old age pensioner' – the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908 ensuring she had 5 shillings a week. In 1921 it is just Jane and daughter Emily at home, in a 'house by the station', which is where she presumably died in 1925. If Henry E D Hammond had not noted down a song from her, she might have remained just one of the millions of ancestors who are but a name on a page.

I hope I do the ancestors proud, by fleshing their bones, giving them faces and family, sharing their unadventurous, near anonymous lives, and learning their songs, without which we would have a sadly smaller heritage ■

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With thanks to PM Draper and
Nick Dow*

*Previous page: antique books
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Useful Sites:

Ancestry:

ancestry.co.uk

Find My Past:

findmypast.co.uk

Online Parish Clerk:

various local, search for your area

The British

Newspaper Archive:

britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

The National Archives:

nationalarchives.gov.uk

National Records of Scotland:

nrscotland.gov.uk

Old Ordnance Survey maps,

National Library of Scotland:

maps.nls.uk/os