

## Researching family history helps you to appreciate the sacrifices that people have made

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Traditionally, skeletons were firmly locked away in closets, but recently we have become obsessed with seeking out forebears.

Unearthing our past has become a national hobby.

Ancestry. co. uk was prepared for huge interest when it launched the 1841 Census on its website this month. From royalty to paupers, it lists 16million people - even tiny newborns and lovers in residence.

More than five million amateur family historians already regularly log on to trace their roots through the census records and this latest tool is the earliest available, providing more than just a simple list of names and places.

In the UK we're not only fascinated by our own family trees: The BBC series Who Do You Think You Are? followed celebrities including Jeremy Paxman, Stephen Fry and Jane Horrocks as they traced their humble - or not so humble - beginnings, and the facts were more gripping than fiction.

When it came to choosing a household name to become the "face" of Ancestry. co. uk, the family Records Office picked the right man in Tony Robinson.

The Time Team presenter's career has neatly segued from playing Baldrick in historical comedy Blackadder, to fronting archeological digs - and even gamely re-enacting the Worst Jobs In History on Channel 4.

Recently, TV historian Nick Barratt helped him dig out his own family history from the National Archives in Kew.

"If you can track down your family history with a fairly common name like Robinson, then anyone can do it, " says Nick.

"Through the census, once you've found one branch of the family, you can also discover other surnames and create a family map."

Tony, whose ancestors came from east London, discovered a connection to a family of picklemakers called Parrott, who sold their wares door-to-door from great big tubs at the turn of the last century. "People would come out with their own containers to buy a penny's worth, " he said.

He has made no secret about his enthusiasm for family history, saying: "History, as I was taught it, was always the story of those who had enough money to learn to write, or pay someone else to do it.

Through the censuses, just like archaeology, you have the history of ordinary people, which is not recorded anywhere else."

Nick Barratt agrees: "Family history matters greatly, we almost have a moral duty to appreciate the sacrifices people have made along the way. History can be perceived as dull, but it's vibrant.

"If you discover, for instance, that you had an ancestor who was alive during the First World War, then having a blood tie to a Tommy in the trenches makes that period much more relevant."

Tony Robinson adds: "Who'd have thought archives could be sexy?"

The census records from the National Archives also provide an opportunity to snoop upon the rich and famous of the day.

Charles "Chas" Dickens, of Devonshire Terrace, Marylebone, lived with his wife Catherine, four of the nine surviving children they would have, and four servants.

"Dickens listed his occupation as 'Gent', " says Josh. "It seems he thought it would look better to appear a gentleman of independent means, than declare that he earned his living writing."

Anine-year-old Charles Dodgson - author Lewis Carroll - is listed in the 1841 census as living at 12 Newcastle Street, with his clergyman father, mother, four sisters, two brothers, one "gent", three private pupils and four servants.

Rich or poor, the head of each household had to return the 1841 census form detailing the full address and the names,

age, gender and profession of every person who had slept under that roof on the night of June 6.

They were also required to state whether they were born in the same county, or "Scotland, Ireland or Foreign Parts".

EVEN Queen Victoria is registered as dwelling at Buckingham Palace with a husband the same age, 20, a six-month-old daughter and 47 servants. When the census was recorded in June that year, she was already pregnant with her second child, Edward VII, but it would not be until 1851 that he appeared on the national census.

Discovering who once lived in your own house or up your street is becoming increasingly popular, now that indexed records can be checked in a matter of seconds.

"Home history is now all the rage, " says Josh Hanna of Ancestry. co. uk. "One of the first things I did when I moved to the UK from America was to look at the 1891 and 1871 census to find out the history of my flat."

The first English census was launched in 1801 and it has been collated every 10 years since.

"Censuses date back to ancient China and Egypt, but it wasn't until 1841, around the time that Scotland and Ireland also started, that the English Census started recording interesting snapshots of what life was like, " says Josh.

"The 1841 census coincides with the building of the railways. Prior to that, most people were born, married and died in the same town or village and the census was little more than a headcount.

"Once you know how to look, there's a story in each piece of paper that was returned. Part of the fun of researching family history is piecing stories together from the information now available at the touch of a button."

Nick Barratt agrees that 1841 was a key moment. "It was the pivotal gateway between medieval times and the modern age. People were still living the last vestiges of a rural lifestyle and the new urban factory-based society hadn't quite begun. It's a real glimpse into the way our ancestors lived their lives for centuries.

"The completion of the national census online is a real milestone for people interested in family history. Now, for us, the real fun begins, as we are starting to put newspapers, military records and passenger lists online, " says Josh.

"Previously, the names listed may not have meant anything to anyone, without family records to cross-reference. Eventually, we'll be able to read local newspaper stories of murders, thefts, weddings, and announcements, which really put the spice into family history."

Win your family tree IS THERE a fascinating piece of folklore in your family that you are longing to learn the truth about? Are you descended from royalty or from a Victorian who made the news?

We want to hear your family legends and your weird or wonderful stories in a competition that will lead to one reader digging deeper into the past with the help of an Ancestry. co. uk expert.

The family history that makes us most curious to discover the facts, will win a consultation to trace their ancestry back to the 1841 census and the full story will be followed up in a future edition of the Sunday Express.

The winning entrant and one runner up will also receive a year's World Deluxe subscription to Ancestry. co. uk worth GBP200.

To enter, write the details of your family story, detailing as far as you have already got with the family tree (names and places of birth where possible, please) and how an expert hand might help you in your quest. Please keep your entry to one side of A4 paper and include your own name, address and a daytime telephone number. Send your entries to:

Sunday Express Ancestry Competition, Northern & Shell Building, 10 Lower Thames Street, London EC3R 6EN.

All entries to arrive by Friday May 12. Usual Express rules apply and the Editor's decision is final.

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