



FAMILY HISTORY Federation

Supporting Family Historians since 1974

REALLY USEFUL Bulletin

No 39

November 2023

Welcome to the latest edition of the *Really Useful Bulletin*

inside find...

Lead article this month is Nick Barratt's *Through the Mists of Time* plus items from local FHS, DNA Notes and news from the Federation

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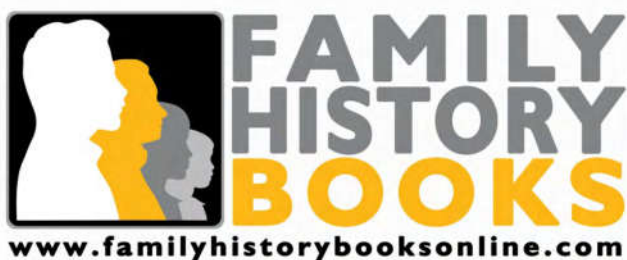
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Really Useful Bulletin

Through the Mists of Time—Searching for English Ancestors

By Nick Barratt

Hopefully you're familiar with the main ways of tracing your English ancestors back into the nineteenth century, given the existence of civil registration and census records that appear on most online genealogical platforms. Researching any further back in time can become quite tricky and seem somewhat daunting as it's a different world in every sense once one leaves behind the familiar national datasets based on Victorian bureaucracy.

However, you can achieve some spectacular results if you take a different approach and immerse yourself in the way our more distant ancestors lived their lives – in short, become more of a local historian and focus on place as much as people. Here are some top tips and key sources to help you penetrate the mists of time, and locate information about your ancestors prior to the eighteenth century.

Where were your ancestors?

The English economy was overwhelmingly rural right up to, and for many decades after, the industrialisation of towns and cities in the later eighteenth century. Most people were tied to the land where they lived in ways most of us can't understand today. It was quite rare to travel far beyond their village or community, except to take goods to the nearest market town, given the absence of an affordable public transport network. With the exception of London, cities were very small, often no more than 14,000 people. This means you can use place data from sources such as census returns and parish registers to identify where your family were from, and then focus on the history of the area. There are various publications such as the *Victoria County History* or other material held in the local history section of your nearest main library, though you can find quite a lot online at [British History Online | The core printed primary and secondary sources for the medieval and modern history of the British Isles](#). The key thing to look out for is information about the local manor or estate – for reasons that will become clear later.

What are the pitfalls?

However, before we look at the key records, there are a few things to bear in mind before you start. First, most material before 1732 will be written in Latin, the official language of government, Church and the courts. To make matters more

complicated still, the medieval clerks used a system of abbreviations to save time and space (which we call palaeography), whilst styles of handwriting changed over the centuries. Documents might have been written in French (the language of the royal court), Latin (for official business) or vernacular English. Equally, there was no consistency when it came to naming individuals or places. Surnames only became fixed or standardised from the late fourteenth century, with people variously described by where they came from, what they did for a living, their father's name, or some physical or personal characteristic. Therefore you're never too sure if Guillaume of Nottingham is the same

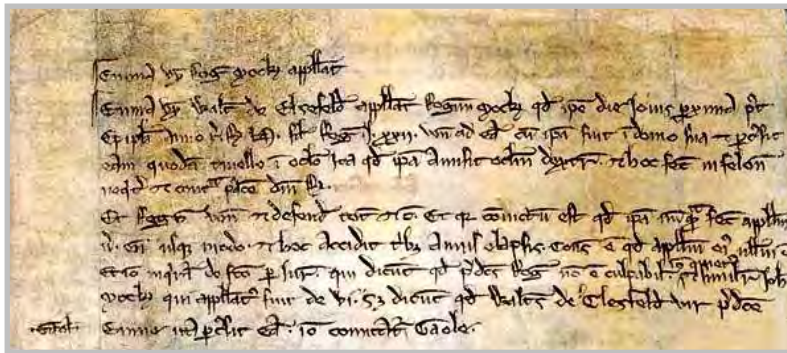
person as William the Mercer, Willelmus fitz Robert or Will le Gros – or indeed if Nottingham is the same as Notengeham, Snottengham or the abbreviated Snott.

To add to the complexity, we have to grasp the way our medieval and early modern ancestors

determined their dates. Until 1752, when England adopted the Gregorian calendar, the start of the year was 25 March (Lady Day), so you may come across dates such as 14 February 1730/31. Further back, you may have even more work to do as years were numbered according to the regnal year of the monarch and used ecclesiastical feast days to describe a point in the year. For example, the phrase *in crostino die festi Sancti Michaelis anno regni Henricii tertii nono* translates as the day after the feast of St Michael in the ninth year of the reign of Henry III. The feast of St Michael falls on 29 September – Michaelmas – and Henry III ascended the throne on 28 October 1216.

Fortunately, we have a series of resources (either online, or in most county archives) to help you navigate all these pitfalls. Eileen Gooder's *Latin for Local Historians* helps you to interpret most of the main records, Charles Trice-Martin's *The Record Interpreter* will enable you to decipher the common abbreviations and C.R. Cheney's *Handbook of Dates* lists all the regnal years, saints' days and other useful information about dates. The National Archives has created a tutorial to help you with the palaeography, which also includes a link to a Latin tutorial as well.

The National Archives | [Palaeography tutorial](#) (how to read old handwriting).



Eyre Roll 1241



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Landholding and the manorial system

English society was highly structured and hierarchical with everyone holding land from someone above them all the way up to the King. This was known as a *feudal pyramid*, and tenants had to perform service to the person above them, depending on the number of *knights' fees* that were held – a knight's fee being the amount of land that generated sufficient revenue to support one knight in the king's service for forty days each year. This unit of land or estate was known as a manor.

Each manor was a scaled down version of the wider social hierarchy, with the lord of the manor at the top, a variety of tenants who held land from them in return for service – often a set number of days working on the lord's land, or sometimes regular payment of rent – underneath, and a range of people who either leased land or worked on the land for pay. Life in the manor was governed by local rules and regulations known as *customs*, which would vary from place to place. The lord of the manor's representative – the steward – would preside over regular manorial courts, which were held to punish wrongdoers as well as regulate how land was sold or inherited within the manor.

Some tenants held land *free* of the customs of the manor – freeholders – and could sell or inherit land without having to seek the lord's permission first. However, they were required to attend the manorial courts and act as jurors or pay a small fine called an *essoin* to avoid this duty, and their names were recorded in the court rolls. Alternatively, tenants who held land according to the customs of the manor – customary tenants or copyholders – were required to seek approval in a manorial court before being admitted onto the land. At the death of the previous tenant, the land would automatically revert back to the lord's possession and the new tenant would need to seek permission in court, providing evidence that they were the *heir at law* – usually the oldest male son of the deceased. A note was made in the formal record of the court, stating when the previous tenant had been admitted, when they had died, the name of the new tenant and whether they were of age, usually twenty-one years or more.

Court rolls also contain information about other residents in the manor, particularly if they fell foul of the rules and regulations and had to pay financial penalties. There are often index books listing the name of the customary tenants, which can be used to identify a particular entry, which in turn can be linked to manorial maps, rentals and surveys showing who held which pieces of land.

For example, the lord's steward was also required to spend money or collect rents, and their accounts can also reveal information about local tradespeople who supplied food and drink to the lord's manor house, or services such as repairing houses.

Manorial records are therefore a fantastic resource for genealogy, and can extend for many centuries from the introduction of the manorial system after 1066, to be still in force over large parts of the country into the nineteenth century. You can search a manorial documents register [Manorial Documents Register](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk) (nationalarchives.gov.uk) by the name of the parish or manor, though very few manorial records are available online.



Manorial survey map

The National Archives has provided some really useful research guides to help you navigate the key sources, such as [Manors and manorial records - The National Archives](#) which includes a list of books for further reading.

[See also [Family History Books Online](#)]

National and local government

For most people, rural life had a repetitive pattern determined by the different seasons, regulated by the laws of the manor and interspersed by the solemn ceremonies of the parish church. Meanwhile local, regional and national government, operated through a network of royal officials, ensured the crown's interests were maintained, and law and order were enforced.

Information from the royal administration to local communities was largely dominated by two institutions throughout the Middle Ages. The Chancery was responsible for issuing written instructions and information, whilst the Exchequer collected and audited royal revenue. Both created vast numbers of records which are full of the names of our ancestors.

Many of the printed chancery close and patent rolls can be found online via medieval source material on the internet: Chancery rolls (medievalgenealogy.org.uk). The records contain copies of instructions sent to sheriffs, bailiffs and other royal officials based in the shires as well as details of appointments to key positions, directions to hold enquiries into aspects of local life, and inquisitions into the death of principal royal tenants and their land. This last set of



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records, known as *inquisitions post mortem*, survive from the thirteenth century to the mid-seventeenth and identify the date of death of a landholder, the various lands they possessed, and the name and age of the next of kin.



A bundle of documents!

Local communities also petitioned central government seeking intervention or guidance in their affairs, often addressed to the monarch, their Council or Parliament. As society became more complex by the sixteenth century, a more professional bureaucracy was required to run the country. Secretaries of State created their own networks alongside the royal officials and from the reign of Henry VIII onwards, many of their letters, papers and correspondence survive in the State Papers series at The National Archives alongside earlier petitions and special collections which we can use to research the key factors that affected the lives of our ancestors; these papers also include the turmoil of the religious upheaval in the 1530s when monasteries were dissolved and land sold off in vast quantities to an emerging middle class, who were able to buy privilege and status for the first time.

We can also learn about the military conflicts that scarred families and communities during the civil war of the 1640s. Some of the most revealing documentation can be found in the Committees that were established under the Commonwealth during Oliver Cromwell's period as Lord Protector when defeated Royalists had their lands sequestered and either *compounded as delinquents* – paid to get them back – or had them sold to Parliamentarians. Many of our ancestors were named in these papers, so it's a great way to find out more about people you've found in parish registers or probate material.

You can find out about these records through some useful research guides produced by The National Archives listed here:

- ◆ [Dissolution of the monasteries 1536-1540](#)
- ◆ [State Papers Domestic 1547-1649: Tudor and Stuart government papers](#)
- ◆ [State Papers Domestic 1642-1660: Government papers from the Civil Wars and Interregnum](#)

Law and order

The regulation of law and order was a key area where people interacted with the state. The Crown expanded its role as the provider of justice from the twelfth century onwards when a *common law* was extended throughout the country, supported by itinerant justices who would hear cases locally as they travelled the country. These were formalised into fixed circuits from the sixteenth century where cases would be heard at least twice a year at the assizes from the sixteenth century until 1971. Many cases were reported in local and national newspapers or via pamphlets for particularly notorious cases, which is often the best way to find out if your ancestor was tried before an assize judge. A large amount of material relating to assize trials can be found at The National Archives, with Welsh material at the National Library of Wales. [Criminal court cases: assize courts 1559-1971 - The National Archives.](#)

Central law courts were established at Westminster, most notably the King's Bench and the Court of Common Pleas, where more serious criminal and civil cases would be heard as well as stricter punitive measures taken against those who rebelled against the Crown. You can find images of the relevant records on the Anglo-American Legal Tradition website [AALT Home Page](#). Another important court was the Old Bailey, the central criminal court for London and the Middlesex assizes which had a disproportionate significance given London's vast population. Transcripts and trial records for cases after 1674 can be found at Old Bailey Online - The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1674-1913 <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>

Quarter sessions were also held at a local level by Justices of the Peace, a forerunner of the magistrate courts we're familiar with today. Hearings were heard four times a year on average and covered a wide range of business including breach of the peace, offences against local byelaws, bonds and recognisances by publicans to prevent rowdy behaviour in alehouses, ensuring local merchants upheld statutes on weights and measures, as well as some criminal cases.

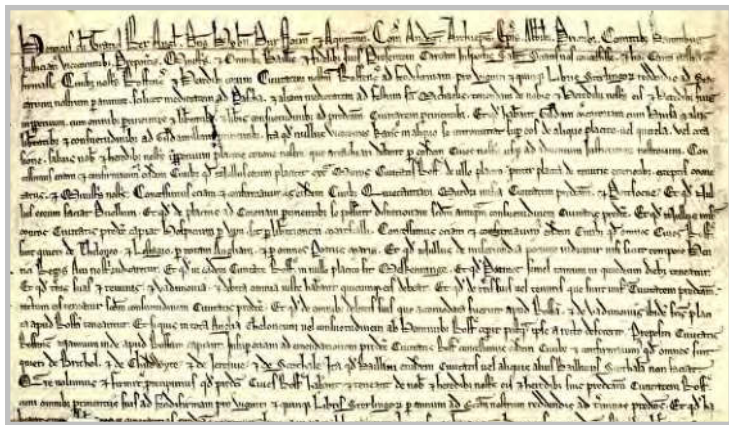
Most of the processes covered above related to punitive justice following *precedent* where the outcome of prior cases would determine the way other cases would be resolved. However, many people wanted redress or restitution – the overturning of the wrongdoing rather than punishment – especially when matters such as inheritance or property were concerned. As a result, a series of equity courts emerged using a process known as *bill pleading*, where the plaintiff submitted a bill of complaint setting out what they claimed had happened. The defendant was required to present their *answer*, explaining why the claims against them were wrong. Replications and rejoinders from both sides would follow until the clerks of court would issue decrees and orders to bring evidence into court. This would



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often take the shape of a set of questions – interrogatories – which required a written response, either in the form of depositions or affidavits from local people familiar with the case (often older members of the community, so a good source of information about parishioners). Finally, personal papers relating to the case, such as manorial court rolls, wills, family trees, marriage settlements and title deeds, would sometimes be brought along to strengthen the case.

The records of Chancery – the main equity court – are available at The National Archives, with the names of plaintiffs and defendants searchable via Discovery. Some useful guidance is provided via these guides Civil court cases: [Chancery equity suits before 1558 - The National Archives](#) and [Civil court cases: Chancery equity suits 1558-1875 - The National Archives](#) and, as with criminal cases, many equity cases were reported in local newspapers.



Extract from a Pipe Roll

And then there's all the rest...

This has been a whistle-stop tour of the most likely ways you will find your ancestors in surviving records prior to the eighteenth century, but there are many other places to look.



Collection of tally sticks

Many of the provincial cities supported a range of occupations and professions. In order to enter into these skilled trades, a worker would usually require an apprenticeship with a master, who themselves would often be a member of a trade guild. Some professions, such as lawyers, attorneys, barristers and clerics, were best served by specific university training. The only options were the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge; lists of former students and graduates – alumni – are largely available on [Ancestry](#).

Towns and cities also attracted large numbers of migrants, and you can use the England's Immigrants 1330 - 1550 ([englandsimmigrants.com](#)) project to search for many of them by name. Tax returns were used to create the database, and *lay subsidies* were often raised on moveable goods for the whole population giving us a sense of the relative wealth of families and communities associated with trade. [Taxation before 1689 - The National Archives](#) includes a link to a database which helps you locate taxes for particular towns and cities. Mercantile trade with the continent and, from the sixteenth century onwards, other parts of the world including the American colonies, was a source of wealth for many and reflected in the tax records. There are ways you can research these transactions in the medieval period via port books, as well as specific customs duties that were levied on goods that came through them [Medieval customs' accounts - The National Archives](#). Many men were involved in the various wars and military campaigns that typified the Middle Ages, especially once the requirement to serve in the army of one's lord was gradually replaced by other means of recruiting soldiers and sailors.

You can find more about these records, which were linked to royal expenditure, via [The National Archives Medieval maritime personnel and ships](#) and [Medieval and early modern soldiers - The National Archives](#)

There's a lot here, and there are no guarantees you'll find anything of note. However, if you investigate the local history of the area where your ancestors lived, you stand a far better chance – and, of course, you'll have some fantastic information about how they lived their lives.



About the Author: Dr Nick Barratt is an author, broadcaster and historian best known for his work on BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?*. He is an honorary associate professor of public history at the University of Nottingham, the Director of Senate House

Library (University of London), a teaching fellow at the University of Dundee and a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. His latest publication, *The Restless Kings*, explores the reigns of Henry II, Richard I and John.

We extend thanks to Ian Waller for supplying images from his personal collection to illustrate this article.



Family History Societies



East Surrey Family History Society

We will again be hosting our

Fabulous Virtual Family History Fair

Saturday 27th January 2024

10.00am – 12.00noon *and* 2.00pm – 4.00pm

Enjoy all the benefits of a family history show from your own armchair, **FREE** of charge, using Zoom

Go to our website to register for either or both sessions

Keep checking our website to see which societies are attending

Bring your specific questions to get the best from the event

And societies who would like to take part, do please get in touch!

<https://www.eastsurreyfhs.org.uk/>



St Andrew's, Gatton—one of the oldest parishes in Surrey

Photo from ESFHS website

Some UK organisations that are members of the Federation



Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives



British Association for Local History



Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies

Pharos Tutors



Register of Qualified Genealogists

Society of One-place Studies



Please support all members of the Federation

There are links to all members on

www.familyhistoryfederation.com/societies-az



FAMILY HISTORY Federation

Supporting Family Historians since 1974

The Really Useful Bulletin welcomes contributions from all Federation member organisations.

It is opportunity to promote *your* society to the extensive Bulletin readership.



Really Useful DNA Notes

SEGMENTS ARE PURE GOLD

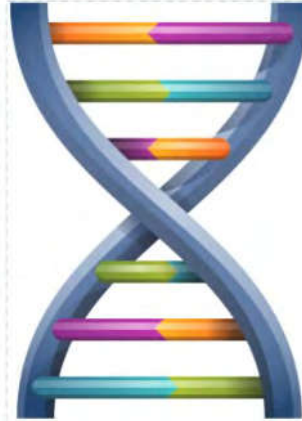
by Martin McDowell

DNA segments are genealogical gold. Each segment that is found in your DNA has travelled down to you through the generations from a specific ancestor. You will share this segment with others who are also descended from the same ancestor.

Using the segment information provided in your test results gives you the opportunity to find other relatives on specific family lines. These segments can be compared in what we call a chromosome browser and the object is to identify a group of people who share the same segment as this means they all share the same, common, ancestor.

This is the key to proving your family tree as your segments should help you to discover groups of matches that you can identify genealogically. In this way your DNA research should complement your genealogy – and vice versa.

As genealogists there is nothing more powerful than knowing that specific people relate to us through specific ancestral lines. This enables us to carry out focused research and make conclusions that we may not have been able to make otherwise. Interpreting your DNA correctly is essential and whilst there is a learning curve in doing this, the benefits are immense if we want to construct an extensive, robust, well researched family tree.



In a chromosome browser you can compare your DNA with that of others: each person's shared segments with you appear on a different line (and in a different colour). Segments of DNA need to overlap but, as you can see in the picture above, they do not need to be the same size or perfectly align. Each coloured block identifies an individual person who shares DNA with you. Simply put, if you already know how you relate to one of these matches, you can conclude that you are related to the others as well through the same ancestral line.

You can compare your DNA with that of others using a chromosome browser on Family Tree DNA, My Heritage or GEDmatch. Ancestry DNA don't provide this so if you have only tested with Ancestry then you need to download and add (upload) your DNA to one of these other DNA companies in order to see your DNA segments. It is well worth doing.

Luckily the upload process is free and means that you will get additional matches with the company who you upload to. There is a small fee required to unlock some of the tools, however, you will always get a match list for free.

The upload process is very simple and can make a big difference to your research and help you prove ancestral lines within your family. You can access simple instructions on how to do a free DNA upload here:

<https://www.nifhs.org/dna/uploading-your-dna/>

It is better to have your DNA in as many of the above companies' databases as possible as you will find unique matches in each of them that you won't find elsewhere.

What genealogical gold awaits discovery in your DNA?

Martin McDowell is the DNA specialist on the executive of the Family History Federation and will write periodical articles to help readers develop their DNA skills. He regularly lectures on DNA to family history societies, and he is Education Officer for North of Ireland FHS.





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News from the Federation



Let's Celebrate Fifty Golden Years!

The Federation is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 2024.

Can you help the Federation continue its work for the benefit of family historians and family history as we move into the next half-century?

Share your expertise by joining the executive committee and help to lead the way!

Want to talk about it? Please email Steve at chairman@familyhistoryfederation.com

If you belong to a local FHS—join their committee and help out!

REALLY USEFUL Family History Shows **LIVE**

Groups of neighbouring family history societies are getting together to run live regional events in 2024 as part of the celebration of fifty years!

The Federation has set funds aside to assist with venue hire costs and promotion.

Get your local FHS involved. Let us know what you are planning.

Saturday 20 April

RUN BY EAST ANGLIA GROUP OF FHS

at



The Burgess Hall

Westwood Road, St Ives,
Cambridgeshire PE27 6WU



Saturday 15 June

RUN BY EAST MIDLANDS GROUP OF FHS

at



Nottingham University

Studio 7, Lenton Lane,
Nottingham NG7 2NR



Really Useful Bulletin

Useful Websites



GENUKI provides a virtual reference library of genealogical information of particular relevance to the UK and Ireland. It is a non-commercial service, maintained by a charitable trust and a group of volunteers. www.genuki.org.uk/

Of particular interest to *Bulletin* readers will be the tab *Genealogical Events*, often referred to as **GENEVA**.

All groups associated with family history are encouraged to add their events to **GENEVA**. Shows, fairs, courses, webinars...in fact any activity which will be of interest to family historians. Family history societies and groups can also link their programme of regular talks via this website thus promoting core activities beyond their current membership.

An additional advantage of using **GENEVA** is to avoid clashes of events! After several years with few live activities open to all, it is to everyone's advantage that as few as possible clash! Check what is listed before confirming your event date!

Encourage all programme and event organisers to add details to Genuki's **GENEVA**. It is simple to do via the *Event Submission* link.

Add your event today, so others know what you are running!

Are you looking for an event to join or visit? Then take a look at [GENEVA](#).

Federation members can also promote their meetings on the Federation's website.



Free Database 1867-1919

Tyne Theatre and Opera House is a beautiful Grade I listed building in central Newcastle.

The theatre has recently developed a performance calendar to hold details of all performances from the theatre's opening in 1867 until 1919 when it was converted to a cinema. Thanks to a fantastic team of volunteers who have researched over 24,000 newspaper adverts, programmes and day bills, there is now a searchable database of over 3,500 events.

These years were the heyday of touring theatre. National companies such as D'Oyly Carte and Carl Rosa Opera Company visited, famous actors such as Henry Irving and Ellen Terry trod the boards, and the theatre was used by local groups such as the Newcastle Amateur Dramatic Society and the Tyneside Sunday Lecture Society.

Entries for each production include the dates of every performance, along with information where possible on the type of performance, writers, composers, cast and crew.



To access the database, visit www.tynetheatreandoperahouse.uk/about/performance-calendar-database/ If you have any issues with access, or would like more information, please contact rachel.snape@tynetheatreandoperahouse.uk



Really Useful Back Page

Family History Research Aids from the Experts



Parish Chest, a service from the Family History Federation, has over sixty family history societies and some twenty-plus traders, at a one-stop online shop, offering a wide range of family history materials in some sixteen categories including:

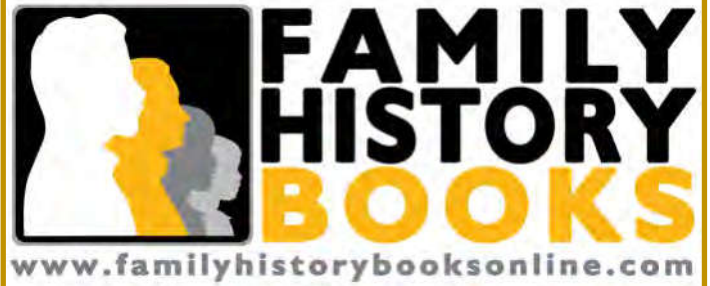
- Parish register transcriptions and more from local FHS
- Memorial inscriptions information from gravestones across the country, compiled by local FHS
- Nonconformists: Baptists, Wesleyans, Independents, Quakers and many more nonconformist lists
- Wills and Probate Indexes of wills and administrations
- Folders, printing facilities, giftware
- ..and more!

Societies and suppliers regularly add new lines, so visit to see what is there to help you add to your family tree.

www.parishchest.com

Societies and others interested in joining Parish Chest should initially contact:

admin@familyhistoryfederation.com



Family History Books (FHB) is an online bookshop and publisher; it is owned by the Family History Federation and the aim is to provide a service to the genealogical community. Family History Books offers a range of relevant titles relating to family history research.

A collage of recent titles available online along with



hundreds of others! Great presents for Christmas! Make sure your list for Santa includes those titles you would like to receive in your stocking!

In addition to its online shop FHB can also be found at major live family history events around the country along with some regional hobby and craft shows where we promote family history societies along with the bookshop. Come and visit us and see all the latest titles available. The stall is always very popular!

Happy browsing!

Please explore the range, and place your orders, at

www.familyhistorybooksonline.com

The REALLY USEFUL Family History Show

2024—will be 15 & 16 November

2023 ticket holders: talks open until 1st December

Great reviews coming in from participants!

www.fhf-reallyuseful.com



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