

People have been putting in a lot of time to make family history research easier to do.

Guest speaker, Dr Diane Brook, took the members of Penarth Computer club through the methods of tackling a family project from start to finish. Except that there is never a finish as there are always more avenues to explore and fascinating details to discover.

The starting point is to talk to the family and write down the information and family legends for verification. Collect any information available from family papers such as saved letters, cards, diaries and wills.

You might come across another family member who has already done some research into their branch of the family. Then there are the birth, marriage and death certificate registers and the national census.

Many other sources include Parish registers, newspapers, court proceedings, leases, pedigrees and monumental inscriptions.

Dr Brook explained how the Web had grown as a source (and still is). Census records can now be viewed on-line and more and more official archives are being digitised and made available.

Various groups of enthusiasts have been transcribing records into a form more suitable for putting on the web and the mass of information is growing all the time. Sometimes it is a bit patchy, but getting better.

There followed a tour of the best known web sites and what they are capable of doing. Some are completely free to use and others require some payment - usually, but not always modest. They are named (with a web link) in the PowerPoint presentation that can be downloaded from our website at penarthcomputerclub.co.uk.

During her telling of her researches Dr Brook gave a few tips on things that might work if you search seems to hit a buffer. A favourite is to check a census for those living near the person you are tracking. This often turns up other family members who still live close by as frequently families clustered in a small area of town.

There are websites that can add 'colour' to the bald information. Examples included language translation and literary traditions. On such sites those with specialist knowledge happily and helpfully offer answers to questions.

Somewhat strangely the service records from the first world war appear to have survived after being declared lost; then found but declared burnt; then found to have been only a little burnt around the edges and now largely intact. One slide shows an example.

Because record-keeping is a human activity, the records are not always perfect. It is possible that birth dates or places are incorrect. Several instances were given where in the process of cross-checking sources it was possible to make corrections to the official record.

The process of making family history research easier is continuing.

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In Brief

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