

We are all a mixture of features from our ancestors, courtesy of their combined DNA - mother's colouring, granddad's ears perhaps and great-granddad's chin. How far back can they be identified? It could be that a pronounced feature has skipped a generation and re-emerged.

All this is part of the reward for research into one's family history as identified by Dr Diane Brook to Penarth Computer Club. She concentrated what finding what our ancestors looked like.

The accuracy of images has varied through out time. Cave drawings were mentioned in passing, providing very little information, but crude effigies were eventually improved by death masks and better sculpture. Things moved on to drawings, paintings and silhouettes.

As the skills of the artists improved, so did the opportunity to use that skill to flatter the subject. As the subject of a portrait was mostly high-ranking and/or wealthy and influential, the temptation to improve on the original is understandable. The practice was perhaps confirmed by Oliver Cromwell who felt it necessary to instruct that he be shown "warts and all". Rather than be improved.

Things changed around 1840 when photography arrived. Now not just the rich and powerful could be recorded, but the 'lesser folk' also. Although some gentry had previously commissioned paintings of their servants, the camera was now able to deal with groups economically.

The camera recorded ordinary people and events, although the people in the picture might not be identified, you might know that great aunt Maud was a maid to Lady someone and find her in a picture of the house staff taken at a special occasion.

The present-day researcher is constantly frustrated by having a shoe-box full of photographs that carry no date or identification information on the back. As time passes, there is less chance of putting names to faces.

Today the widening use of digital cameras means that many photographs never get printed. They can be displayed on-screen or on-line, but if the files are lost, the records are lost.

Also lost can be some of the camera's honesty as people learn how to manipulate the results digitally. We've been here before! The technology has advanced, but a person's wish to look good stays the same.

For the sake of future generations, and researchers, please print off a selection of photographs and record who, when, where and why on the back.

During her talk Dr. Brook mentioned several image sources and that more are cropping up as records are digitised and made available on-line. Club members suggested a few more. Many are group photographs and could include an ancestor of yours for whom no other photograph exists. Photographic archives range from West Glamorgan with 3700 images to the Imperial War Museum with 11Million.

