

Local History Research and Talk Preparation: Some notes

This Brief note is written to help anyone get started with local history research, as well as some suggestions on preparing your material to give a talk.

It is based on a History Workshop run by Sheila Currie and Janie Verburg as a follow-up to talks we made to the Cromarty History Society about the histories of their houses in March 2018. We were keen to help others avoid some of the pitfalls we fell into, and to share some of the things we learned about doing it.

It does NOT try to tell you how and where to find information or how to use databases. There are many excellent 'How To' publications about Family History Research and all the data/records websites tell you how to use them. And the Highland Archives staff are super-friendly.

The note is mainly about helping folk to ask yourselves the right questions as you go through the process.

- 1) Why are YOU doing this?
- 2) What information do you ALREADY have?
- 3) What EXTRA information do you need?
- 4) When is ENOUGH information?
- 5) Which STORY are you choosing to tell?
- 6) HOW will you tell the story?
- 7) How will you PRESENT your information
- 8) Visuals and Images

Here goes! ***There is no right way of doing this...***

1) Why are YOU doing this?

For us, having foolishly agreed to do a talk at the History Society, we had a deadline to do the research and write the talks, we had a format of how to present it, and we had an audience in mind to hear our stories. We were both interested in finding out more about our homes; and the pressure of promises made us actually DO it.

You will each have your own various reasons and interests: A family lineage? Famous people? Social history? Links to important events? Gathering and recording information while people are still able to share it?

And likewise we all have different potential audiences in mind: Your family? Neighbours and community? Special interests relevant to your house or those who lived in it? Do YOU want to do a History talk yourself? (I'll help you if you do!!!)

Whatever your interests and reasons for doing research, identifying what they are and keeping your audiences in mind when you are slogging through yet another difficult-to-read old document will remind you why you're doing this and will help to keep you going.

2) What information do you ALREADY have?

Sometimes the problem is that you don't know anything; and sometimes there is just so much it's difficult to know where to start...

Step 1

The first thing to do is to work out HOW you are going to work. What works for you?

Do you like lists? Do you prefer more visual ways of recording stuff? Do you want to tape yourself talking? Take photos? Collect artefacts?

Whatever, you will need to be (or become!) organised.

You may already have - and certainly will end up with - lots of bits of notes, comments, images, scribbled ideas... How will you collate this in ways that you can find again?

Janie used a timeline approach, with a vast notebook/sketchbook allowing her to write comments where they fitted as she went along. Sheila (after some false starts of keeping lots of bits of paper) made a vast spreadsheet for all the houses in her street with columns for every document source (eg Valuation Roll 1975, Census 1911 etc, so she could attach facts to specific places and times). You could use the back of a roll of wallpaper and multi-coloured post-it notes.

All are simply ways of making a grid that you can add information onto - what works for you is right.

Do you work best in bursts of solid concentrated effort, or are you better at fitting in an hour a week? Choose the way of working that means you'll actually do it. Set yourself deadlines, milestones, lists whatever.

Step 2

What do you already have: Deeds to a house? Old photos? Ancient recipe books? Invoices and Receipts? Gather it all together. Sort it out into relevant piles (by date? By person? By theme?)

You need to get the information off those 'primary sources' and into whatever type of information system you've chosen.

For old deeds (esp if handwritten) it helps enormously to transcribe them. Type the words out onto a computer. This will take a long time and it may not make much sense and there will be words you do not understand or can't read. No matter.

Once you have a Word document, you can go through it and highlight people's names, the stuff you don't understand, write comments in the margins etc etc. You become in control of the material.

For other documents, you might want to write down the key facts (date, names, topics etc) so that you can FIND THE INFORMATION AGAIN without always having to search through piles of stuff.

We found that this initial phase of research was just recording everything we could; like sponges we soaked up all sorts of information that we didn't know was important or could be that killer fact that ties the whole thing together.

As you do this, some of it will lodge in your brain, and you'll notice certain names or dates or other snippets cropping up and starting to make connections. Let them come and don't try to force connection where there are none - the main cliché of genealogy is convincing yourself something is true because you want it to be so but you have no evidence to justify it.

Step 3

Write down in your 'to do' book all the things you need to check up, clarify, confirm, understand, find out.

Well done! You're on the trail and have completed the first and most confusing phase.

3) What EXTRA information do you need?

You will have gaps. You may not know yet what the gaps are, or you may have an idea of some stories emerging; but even though you probably don't know what you don't know, you'll certainly need more information.

Using your 'to do' lists, you can start looking. Where does this new info come from? Is it in the Highland Archives? Is it in the Courthouse Archives? Do local people have this info? Is it online (Scotland's People, Register of Sasines, specialist archives? And you can google old Scottish legal terms. Ask the Internet where types of information are stored.

Try not to bounce all over the place, but focus on one type of material or search at any time.

Again and again, we realised we hadn't written down some key info (eg from Census returns) and so had to go back to the sources and look again. You don't know what you will need later, so write it all down.

Some information is confidential, and is not made publicly available for set numbers of years. Censuses are released 100 years after (so 2021 will see the release of 1921 census returns). Prison records (for example) are also embargoed for many years, but you can get a redacted report showing information on a family member by submitting a Freedom of Information Request.

4) When is ENOUGH information?

You could spend the rest of your life gathering information. If that's what you want to do, go for it! But if you have any plans to bring the information together and share it with people in some way; you'll need to stop gathering and USE all the information you've gathered to start shaping your story or stories.

We found that meeting up occasionally and sharing what we'd found was very helpful. Not only did it reassure us that we were getting somewhere, it helped us see the gaps that needed filling and held us practice telling the different stories.

Research buddies are a great way of motivating yourself and having someone to share with.

5) Which STORY are you choosing to tell?

As we discovered in our own research, there were lots of POTENTIAL stories we could tell about our houses, the people in them, society around them, the wider world. It's impossible to tell them all and to find out all the details of all the stories; so choices will have to be made. Some of the choices are made for you – you just can't find the details that you need to tell one, perhaps – but some will become more or less intriguing for you and your various audiences.

For Janie, it seemed to be the links with Hugh Miller and the stories written at the time about the building itself and a key period in the middle 19th Century.

For Sheila, the discovery that her house had been occupied for 50 years by a succession of Coastguard families told a story about migration and social changes.

There will be stuff that doesn't fit your story. But maybe that could be another story for another time and another study?

Both of us separately decided that we should stop our stories at the point where we could be talking about living people or people who folk alive remember. History doesn't stop at a particular date, but privacy is essential. Also, most recent information is not available for data protection reasons.

6) HOW will you tell the story?

An old house will have 100 years or more of history: people, events, mishaps, disasters and happy times. Will you tell things in strict time order? Will you bundle the story into themed chapters? Will the story be led by objects? By ideas? By individuals? By sweeps of social change? How much of the outside world is relevant to what you want to tell?

However you frame your story, it must be interesting to your audience. A list of dry facts will have people snoring. How can you make the people come alive? What other material can you bring into the story to make it sing?

Are you telling the story of what you found out, or are you also telling the story of your journey of discovery? Are you also telling the story of what was hidden as well as what was found?

7) How will you PRESENT your information

We created talks. We both scripted the words we'd say and we chose images to amplify or support the words.

We scripted, so as to make sure we kept (mostly) to time and to make sure the key facts were properly presented – a History Society talk needs to be grounded in provable facts after all. And it's useful to add in notes to self about eg when to show the next slide.

You could write a book, with illustrations. You could produce a series of paintings, or a website. You can include sounds and video.

Try it out on friends or people who will tell you where it's dull and needs a spark.

8) Visuals and Images

For any talk, the visuals must ADD to the talk: Strong images, clear and simple messages, as few words as possible. Powerpoint is the easiest way for a talk, but don't overdo on the flashy effects!

Photographs of people, objects, documents. Photograph your house! Maps are good, showing changes over time.

Can you lighten the mood without distracting from the story? [photo of the Onedin Line, anyone?]

But please – no great slabs of words that you will either read out or expect the audience to struggle to read.

We've attached our scripts and PowerPoints to this Note, in case any of it gives ideas. We'll be lodging copies of the documents we hold or found with the Courthouse, for any future researchers.

We are both happy from time to time to show you our workings or help you if you're stuck, but we're not able to be an ongoing support act for your projects.

Do find research buddies to share the journey with – we both learned from each other's ways of doing things.

Good luck!