



**Presenters:** Brian Donovan, Jen Baldwin and Myko Clelland

This power hour will provide you with a rapid deep dive into the core concepts and methodology to achieve success in British and Irish research. Each of the presenters, all Findmypast Experts, will address specific challenges in:

- Getting your research ready for success
- British research
- Irish research

Findmypast is the premier resource for tracing your British and Irish family history. At our site you will find billions of records you won't find anywhere else, including:

- Twice the number of Irish records of any site online
- The largest collection of English parish registers
- The largest collection of British & Irish newspapers
- The premier resource to trace your military ancestors
- The most comprehensive DNA test for the British Isles available

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## Set Yourself Up for Success in North America

Before beginning your research in the British Isles, it is very important that you understand everything possible about your immigrant ancestor and their lives in North America first. This deep and comprehensive study of their new lives will lead to greater success as you start to access the records of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

- Attempt to **identify the origin** county – or even better, the town – of your ancestor. You can approach this in a variety of ways, but one technique that works very well is to create a timeline. Think about every facet of their life and try to find a piece of historical evidence to support that. Whether it was their occupation, their political belief, or how they felt about their in-laws, there is no piece of documentation that should remain untouched. In order to accomplish this, it is vital that we as researchers delve deeply into both online and offline materials.
- **Records timeline:** You will need to know what you can actually access and how, so that your expectations are set. Utilize record collection descriptions, finding aids, and online catalogs – such as the [Findmypast A-Z Directory](#) – to get an understanding of what records might be available.
  - For example, if you are searching for records of a silversmith in 1800 Birmingham, England, you should seek out all the possibilities: the guild records currently available on Findmypast, the local historical society, and the regional library.
  - If your ancestor was involved in the British Army, then identify all the records for that timeframe from the Army and make sure you hit them all. A good place to start is The National Archives; peruse their catalog for all relevant titles and read the descriptions to find those which are online. Many have been digitized and made available on [Findmypast](#).
- **Geography:** The organization of the English and Irish landscape is vastly different from that across the United States. As a result, their records are in a variety of locations. You need to take the time to understand the difference between your parish and your civil registration district, as a base minimum. Historical maps and almanacs can be an essential tool, as is the map feature on [FamilySearch](#) ([maps.familysearch.org](http://maps.familysearch.org)) which allows you to display a variety of political boundaries at one time.
- **Try Everything:** Depending on the time frame of interest, you will want to explore collections that do not appear at first glance to be relevant. For example, the Sacramental Registers of the Roman Catholic church from Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York include numerous examples and mentions of non-Catholics. Do not let the titles fool you! Record collections identified from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania include religious registers from numerous states in the Mid-Atlantic region; the lesson here is that if the collection is from the general area and the right time frame, then you should look at it.

Everyone should feel encouraged to dive into the full Findmypast collection no matter how much research they have done in the origin country. That is, after all, part of the fun! As you work, however, do not allow common surnames and unknown pieces of data to discourage you. Continue to learn about the vast array of records available from the British Isles while you continue to utilize our unique North American sources for those essential clues.

## **Common Assumptions in British Research, but How True Are They?**

### **I know where my ancestors came from**

- Different records that originate in different time periods have different descriptions of the same areas. Get a map, but not just one. Look at maps of the same area over many years. Keep these maps with you whenever possible.
- There were 15,600 parishes in 1851, but only 623 civil registration districts, and there are 86 historic counties, all of which may overlap. The borders have changed often. Sometimes you'll find your family in different places despite them never having moved homes!

### **My ancestors didn't move around very much**

- They did, but it was usually all contained within a small radius of twenty miles or less (aside from in the case of large events). Most farm labourers or servants were employed for a year as seasonal workers, and often moved to another parish each spring. In the 18th century, almost half of the population did not die in the parish they were born

### **My ancestors were part of the Church of England**

- After 1753, all marriages (other than Quakers and Jews) had to take place in Church of England until 1837. You may find a Parish marriage in addition to a non-conformist marriage.

### **My ancestors would have married in their local church**

- Provided you had the right kind of license (and in the 1500/1600s, 30% of all marriages were by license), or at least one of the parties was resident in a parish for three weeks (long enough to have the marriage banns called), the ceremony could go ahead. Many even fled across the border to Scotland where they could marry without these requirements.

### **My early ancestors probably married young, and once**

- Medieval marriages *could* occur at as young as 12, and in 1763 the minimum age of marriage was set at 16 unless a couple had a bishop's permission. This was not the norm, and usually only for those of high status. Research has shown a large proportion of women married between the ages of 18 and 22. Urban girls married slightly later (early to mid-twenties), with rural girls marrying in their late teens to early twenties.
- In the 1500/1600s, 30% of marriages were remarriages following the death of the first partner. Notably also, 25% of people who survived beyond the age of 40 did not marry.

### **My ancestors' records were destroyed, or don't exist**

- Between 1700 and 1800, 5% of children died within the first few days of birth and 20% died before the age of 10. Many infants who died at birth or shortly afterwards were not baptized.
- Between 1640 and 1660, an estimated 1/6 of all baptisms are missing from records, but a lot of these people baptized after the restoration, in 1660.
- Second copies exist of parish records in the form of Bishop's Transcripts. Many records can fill in gaps where the obvious may not apply (Bastardy bonds, wills, and more).

## **Common Assumptions About Irish Research, but How True Are They?**

### **The Irish records were all destroyed**

- In 1922, during the Irish Civil War, the Public Record Office in Dublin was destroyed. This act of vandalism incinerated most pre-1901 census records, ~50% of Church of Ireland (Episcopalian) parish registers, the records of the central courts, and almost all pre-1700 records.
- Despite that Irish civil registers of BMDs; tax, estate and local court records; poor relief registers; and most parish registers from Catholic and other denominations; and many others *survive*.

### **My ancestors migrated during the Potato Famine**

- Roughly 9 million people left Ireland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Around 2 million before the Famine, 1 million during the Famine (1845-52) and 6 million afterwards. So unless they migrated 1845-52 they are not Famine immigrants. Moreover, the impoverished and starving migrants during the Famine mainly arrived in Canada, not the USA.

### **My ancestors were all Catholic**

- In 1841 38% of the country were not Catholic. Despite deep sectarianism and intolerance, Ireland was still a pluralist society with many religions living side-by-side. People *did* change religion and marry into different faiths, irrespective of what their church wanted them to do.

### **My ancestors were forced out of Ireland by the British**

- While there were a number of flashpoints when significant numbers of Irish rebels migrated (e.g. the Fenians in the 1860s), the overwhelming majority of migrants in the 19th century were economic migrants.

### **My ancestors spelled their name this way, and that's the way it's always been**

- Your ancestors probably didn't know how to read or write, and even if they did their first language was possibly Irish, not English. Moreover, most records are written by someone else and are likely to reflect what was heard. For example the surname O'Connor, is spelt Ó Conchobhair and pronounced "Ee Krehooer" in Irish!

### **My Irish ancestors were slaves too**

- While many Irish immigrants experienced lives of hardship and trauma this is not the same as slavery. Frederick Douglass travelled to Ireland during the Famine and was shocked by the poverty he saw, but he wrote how this was still very different from the horror of chattel slavery.

### **Essential Sources for Irish research at [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com)**

- Census records (1901, 1911, 19<sup>th</sup> century survivals)
- Civil register of births, marriages & deaths 1864-1958
- Catholic parish registers 1675-1918
- Griffiths Valuation 1847-64
- Landed Estates Court Rentals 1850-85
- Valuation Office Books
- Petty Sessions Court 1828-1917
- Irish Prison Registers 1790-1924
- Poverty Relief Loans 1821-1874
- Workhouse registers