

## **The secret life of Ernest Oldham: researching and writing your family history - RT9388** Dr Nick Barratt

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### Overview

This presentation uses an extended case study to challenge the audience to think about how they can turn their research into compelling narrative text. The case study is interrupted for observations about key research techniques, or tips that encourage the genealogist to move from fact-based chronological presentation towards a more engaging writing style.

### Introduction

Some overall guidance about writing styles, and ways you can publish stories or essays about your ancestors or research journeys; coupled with an introductory 'family anecdote' that illustrates how not to tell a story!

### Section 1: The early life of Ernest Oldham – from Edmonton to Paris

A quick summary of 'standard' background genealogy research into the background of the case study, Ernest Holloway Oldham, and his involvement in the First World War, with breakout information on searching for army service history, unit war diaries and records of military intelligence; leading to Oldham's involvement with the Paris peace conference that resulted in the Treaty of Versailles – unpacking some of the Foreign Office papers and published memoirs from the time.

### Section 2: A career in the Foreign Office

The background to the main story, which traces Oldham's career as he moved through the Communications Department in the Foreign Office; his role was to ensure secure coding of top secret material as it was despatched around the world. This narrative is overlaid with wider political history covering the rise of the Soviet Union as an ideological threat to the West, with tips about layering story-telling to put the lives of our ancestors in wider context.

### Section 3: Espionage in Whitehall

A dramatic moment, as the narrative switches from London to Paris and the revelation that a Briton had attempted to sell cipher codes to the Soviets in 1929. As Oldham is put in charge of finding out who was responsible, we follow the cat and mouse chase around Europe as Soviet agents try to

unmask the mysterious man known only as 'Charlie'. The section ends with the dramatic revelation that Charlie is none other than Oldham himself, and that he had been betraying his country for money.

#### Section 4: Treachery

With Oldham unmasked by the Soviets, we switch back to England and follow his decline and fall. The research behind the final revelations is also described, reliant on a key document at The National Archives – KV 2/808 – which is an MI5 surveillance file that was started in July 1933 as Oldham was forced by the Soviets to break into the Foreign Office to steal the cipher codes. We discover Oldham's final downfall, and reflect on the aftermath for his family and country in the decades that followed. Once again, some of the research techniques are explored, along with further advice about writing accurate but dramatic history.

The file can be downloaded for a small fee from The National Archives.

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C11050122>

#### Conclusion

There's time for a final reflection on the impact of the story on the author, the contributors and the audience – as well as one final revelation!

For those interested in reading the whole story, you can purchase 'The Forgotten Spy' by Nick Barratt.