

# *Footsteps*



**Port Macquarie & Districts  
Family History Society Inc.**

## SOCIETY ORGANISATION AND CONTACTS

### EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

*President:* ..... Diane Gillespie ..... president@pmdfhs.org.au  
*Vice-President:* ..... Sue Brindley  
*Treasurer:* ..... Clive Smith  
*Secretary:* ..... Jennifer Mullin ..... secretary@pmdfhs.org.au  
*Society Contact Number:* ..... 0475 132 804

### SUPPORT COMMITTEE

Janet Brown  
Bernice Darby  
Helen Hoare  
Karen Quinn  
Rex Toomey

### Areas of Responsibility ~ 2024–2025

Acquisitions/Archives ..... Clive Smith  
Find a Grave ..... Carol Smallman  
*Footsteps* Journal ..... Leonie Hiles.... editor@pmdfhs.org.au  
General Meetings Roster ..... Joy Wignall  
InfoEmail ..... Diane Gillespie / Jennifer Mullin  
Journals ..... Helen Hoare  
Library Assistant ..... Pauline Hincksman  
Library Roster ..... Janet Brown  
Membership/Minutes ..... Jennifer Mullin  
Museum Heritage Group ..... Diane Gillespie  
NSW & ACT Association – Delegate ..... Clive Smith  
Public Officer ..... Clive Smith  
Publicity/Facebook ..... Karen Quinn / Pauline Every  
Research Co-Ordinator ..... Peter Day  
Ryerson Index Transcribers ..... Lis Hannelly / Kay Browne  
Social Coordinator ..... Dawn Stephens  
Website ..... Rex Toomey  
Welfare ..... Margaret Blight

### SUPPORT GROUPS

Convict Studies Group ..... Clive Smith  
DNA Support Group ..... Pauline Every  
Family Search ..... Robyn Denley  
Family Tree Maker/Ancestry ..... Sue Brindley  
Research Support Group ..... Clive Smith  
Writers' Group ..... Diane Gillespie

### CURRENT PROJECT COORDINATORS

Port Macquarie Rate Books ..... Rex Toomey  
Port Macquarie People ..... Rex Toomey  
Indexing of *Footsteps* ..... Anne Powell

*Life members: Terry Browne, Kay Browne*

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### COVER PHOTO

A selection of photographs which Julie **Bleasdale** inherited. See her story, 'I'm a Beginner Family Historian' on page 6.

### NEW & RETURNING MEMBERS

We hope you enjoy your association with our Society and that you will benefit from the resources, meetings and workshops that are available.

A warm welcome is extended to:

Will **Jamieson** (returning), Yippin Creek  
Rhonda **Madden**, Port Macquarie  
Rachael **Thorpe**, Canberra

Kerry **Jones** (returning), Laurieton  
Gaylene **Hartley**, Port Macquarie  
Bill **Waller**, Port Macquarie



## PRESIDENT'S TWO CENTS WORTH

*Diane Gillespie*

At the beginning of National Family History Month in August, Port Macquarie & Districts Family History Society were delighted to be awarded second place in the Nick Vine Hall competition for the best family history journal/newsletter in Australia and New Zealand.

This competition, conducted by AFFHO is awarded annually to member societies (in two categories based on membership) to encourage its member societies to produce quality journals/newsletters, and to honour Nick Vine Hall AM. Congratulations to our editors, Wendy **Haynes** and Leonie **Hiles**, for their editorship of our journal, *Footsteps*.

This issue of *Footsteps* examines some of the changes that have occurred in family history research over the past few decades. More experienced researchers will recall the scarcity of secondary records and how one's family history was based on family knowledge; birth, death and marriage records; and visits to libraries, cemeteries and State Archives.

Reading hard copies of local newspapers provided some depth to research but the availability of the newspapers was limited. With the advent of Trove in December 2009, digital issues of historic Australian newspapers became accessible to family historians as well as academics and other history buffs. Trove is certainly a treasure trove containing digital issues of many newspapers. The collection continues to expand as more regional newspapers are being digitised. Trove does not only contain newspapers but also gazettes, magazines and chronicles. It is easily key-word searchable and is basically only limited by one's imagination of search terms. It often pays to think outside the square when searching for information about family members.

The introduction of the personal computer in the 1980s led to the establishment of online databases that can be accessed from the comfort of one's home. While providing easy access from across the world there is also a benefit to be gained from field trips so one may walk the cemetery or explore the area in which one's ancestors lived, worked and worshipped.

I recently saw a post on social media where the contributors were discussing the changes in Ancestry after their biggest rollout in 24 years. Some were wary of the changes, some embraced them, but the post that resonated with me was one that said change is good for our mental alertness. The post reminded us that we know what we want to do, because we've been doing it for years. Now we need to find where Ancestry has put that button. Mental gymnastics!

We are in a state of change with family history research now, as DNA is opening other avenues of research and either proving or disproving our paper trails. AI is now at the forefront of discussions within groups, and time will tell if these developments are embraced by the family history community.

As we near the Christmas Season, the committee would like to thank you for your support of them and the society in 2024. As we enter the twenty-fifth year of the 2000s we remember the beginning of this century when some thought that change would be detrimental to our lives.

May I wish everyone a Happy Christmas. I hope you are able to spend time with family and to make more family history memories.

## FROM THE EDITOR

Leonie Hiles



The Honourable Leslie **Williams** MP, State member for Port Macquarie, met with our society representatives at the Port Macquarie Library on 21 August 2024, to formally recognise and congratulate our society for our achievement. Left to right: Wendy **Haynes** and Leonie **Hiles**, Editors; Diane **Gillespie**, President; Narelle **Milligan**, Publicity; and Leslie **Williams**. (Photograph courtesy of Rex **Toomey**.)

The Nick Vine Hall Award is awarded annually by the Australian Federation of Family History Organisation, (AFFHO), for the best family history journal in Australia and New Zealand. Our society has been awarded runner up in Category A for 2023-24.

We were judged on our November 2023 *Footsteps* No. 169 edition. Judges' overall comments included, '... excellent layout with impressive range of information and significant range of substantive content.' Judges made special mention of Kathy **Robison**'s article, 'A Place to Call Home: A Letter to John **Cooper** and Mary **Welding**'. Judges commented, 'This is an interesting story written in a particularly engaging way'.

The theme for this current edition is the 'process of research'. Within the lifetime of many of our current members, huge changes have been made. As a first-time contributor to *Footsteps*, Karen **Quinn** joins other regular contributors, Diane **Gillespie** and Lis **Hannelly**, who each document their past experiences. Another first-time contributor to *Footsteps*, Julie **Bleasdale**, gives us an account of her recent experiences as a new member of our society and as a new family history researcher. Julie and also Robyn **Anderson** describe how they have used photographs as a focal point to start their research.

The advent of computer usage and online researching has given us an ease of access that is unprecedented. As well, DNA testing for the purpose of family history research, and the industry this has generated, has revolutionised the family history industry. Lyndall **Nairn** describes the impact that having access to her DNA matches has made to her research.

Genealogy vendors have already been using AI (Artificial Intelligence) technology for years, however another type of AI that is beginning to impact on our family history research community is the use of LLMs (large language models). These are types of AI programs that can recognise and generate text, among other tasks. They are trained to use huge sets of data. In this issue of *Footsteps*, Peter **Day** writes about the future of family history research. Peter, who has a special interest in AI programs, explains and demonstrates the process he has used in producing his article in this *Footsteps* edition. He uses prompts to generate a response from different AI programs. His comments and assessments concluding his article are thought-provoking and insightful.

## I'M A BEGINNER FAMILY HISTORIAN

*Julie Bleasdale*

I am still working three days a week, so I have had limited time to spend on my emerging family history obsession. In recent years, my parents have both passed on and when I was preparing their house for sale, I came across an old suitcase. It contained photographs and mementos that had been stored away. I opened the suitcase and — you probably know what happened to me — my spark was ignited!



Some family photographs from the old suitcase.

I thought back, and vaguely remembered Mum & Dad talking about their lives; where they grew up, where they went to school, and what their lives were like. I remember going on car journeys with them whilst they showed me where they both grew up, and they told me stories, but like most children, I was not that interested. How I regret my disinterest! However, now I can turn my regrets into my story.

In 2021 when I visited the PMDFHS (Port Macquarie & District Family History Society) Family History Room at the public library in Port Macquarie, I was welcomed by the two volunteers. How lucky was I! The first people I met were Diane & Jennifer. They were so helpful. 2021 was during COVID times. The library had just reopened, and it was in the days of compulsory face mask wearing. I could tell, just by their kind eyes that these two ladies were gold.

What I have discovered about family history is that one often ends up like Alice in Wonderland, falling into several magical holes that lead this way and that way as you explore on the internet. The computer, along with its many avenues and platforms to use for research, is mind-blowing.

I take my hat off to the old-school family historians who had to rely on writing letters and waiting for replies that sometimes took weeks to months. I feel like I would have given up. However, in saying that it was probably simpler. I am a pen and paper person so learning to navigate the computer and different platforms has been quite the challenge for me.

I find I can get overloaded with too much information, and I get bogged down and lose track of where I am up to. Being organised and keeping on task will be imperative to me on my journey of my family history story. I would like to mention Sue, a member of PMDFHS. I am sure her middle name is ‘organisation’.



PMDFHS Research Room

Earlier this year (2024) I attended a PMDFHS Beginners Course, and recently followed up with the Next Steps Course. Both courses have been invaluable to me. Thanks to Amanda, the Trove legend; to Rex for introducing me to IrfanView and computer shortcuts; to Lyndall — her storytelling has me mesmerised. I have met so many lovely people. I try to attend the PMDFHS Support Group information sessions which are on offer at the library during each month. The monthly PMDFHS General Meetings are fantastic to attend, to be with like-minded people and have a chat and listen to the presentations on offer is fabulous.

A huge learning point for me has been discovering the Colonial Secretary’s Letters and the NSW State Archives Collection; thanks to the amazing knowledge of guru, Clive, of PMDFHS. The NSW Colonial Secretary's Letters refer to a collection of official correspondence that was sent to and from the Colonial Secretary of New South Wales during the colonial period, particularly from 1788 to 1856. The Colonial Secretary was one of the most senior officials in the administration of the colony and acted as a key intermediary between the Governor, various government departments, and private individuals.

These letters are a significant historical resource because they provide detailed insights into the administration of the colony, including issues related to governance, law enforcement, land grants, convict management, immigration, public works, and interactions with Indigenous peoples. The collection includes letters from government officials, private citizens, and institutions seeking government assistance or addressing administrative matters.

These letters have been preserved in archives, particularly at the Museum of History NSW which is the official government authority responsible for preserving, managing, and providing access to the historical records of New South Wales. These records include documents, files, letters, maps, photographs, and other materials created by the NSW government, its departments, and agencies dating back to the earliest days of European settlement in Australia. The Museum of History NSW plays a crucial role in preserving NSW’s historical and cultural heritage, ensuring that the state’s history is documented and accessible for future generations. I am anticipating a visit to the State Archives Reading Room at Kingswood NSW sometime in 2025 when PMDFHS is planning to organise this.

I look forward to filling my time of retirement from paid work with many new and interesting things to learn, areas of research to explore, places to visit and as well, to meet with plenty of enthusiastic people with whom I share my interest.

# THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH: MY STORY

*Julie Bleasdale*

I commenced my research by using the Pedigree Chart and Family Group Sheets which come in booklet form and are available from PMDFHS. As I have said previously, I am a pen and paper person, and I will use this way until I get the hang of things. However, I am slowly learning how to implement the magic of computers, as most information and records are now digital and easily stored on the computer on available platforms.

It is up to you, how you start off. I use the booklet as my go-to reference.

Pedigree Chart available from PMDFHS.

Family Group Sheet available from PMDFHS

I have also purchased Family Tree Maker. This software program lets you easily grow your family tree with simple navigation, tree-building tools, and integrated web searching. I am planning, that once I have worked out the who, what, where and how of everyone in my tree, then I may subscribe to a dedicated genealogy and family history website. They range from small and specialised to huge and all-encompassing. Each one has its own unique spin, resources, and record collections. Some are free, some require a subscription.

I have recently done a DNA test with Ancestry. As part of the DNA package, I was able to take advantage of a special offer of a 3-month subscription for a small fee. I am currently waiting on my DNA results.

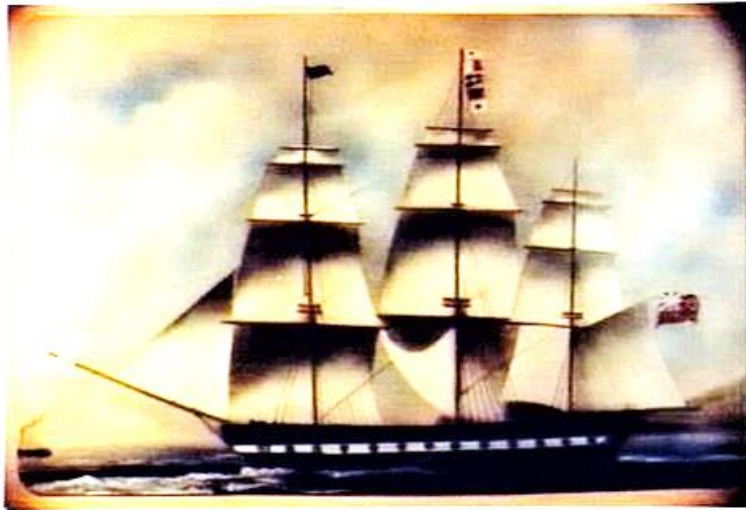
Researching family history can be a rewarding experience, and there are numerous methods to explore your ancestry.

- Online Genealogy Databases: Websites like Ancestry, MyHeritage, and FamilySearch offer extensive records, including census data, birth and death certificates, and immigration records.
- Local Archives and Libraries: Many towns and cities have historical societies or archives with local records, newspapers, and family histories that can provide valuable insights.
- Census Records: Analysing census data can help you track family members over time and gather information about their living conditions.
- Church and Cemetery Records: Religious institutions often keep baptismal, marriage, and burial records, which can be crucial for tracing family lines.
- DNA Testing
- Family Interviews: Speaking with relatives can yield personal stories, anecdotes, and details not found in official records.
- Military Records: If any ancestors served in the military, their service records can provide insights into their lives and times.
- Land and Property Records: These documents can show where ancestors lived and how their wealth changed over time.
- Historical Newspapers: Obituaries, wedding announcements, and news articles can provide context and details about family members.
- Social media and Online Forums: Engaging with genealogy groups on platforms like Facebook or Reddit can connect you with others researching similar lines.
- Genealogy Software: Programs like Family Tree Maker or Legacy Family Tree can help you organise and visualise your findings.
- Ethnic or Cultural Resources: Some organisations focus on specific ethnic backgrounds and can provide unique resources relevant to your heritage.
- Wills and Probate Records: These documents can reveal family connections and information about inheritance.

Have I missed anything? So, what have I found out so far?

My father's paternal side are of German descent. In 1852, under the Assisted Bounty Immigration Scheme, they emigrated to Australia from Germany on the ship, *Reiherstieg*. Others came under private contract. Most of my ancestors settled around the area of Kellys Plains, just south of Armidale, New South Wales. My father's maternal side are of English & Irish descent.

I am excited to say that I have found a convict. He was Irish and transported to Australia on the ship, *Mangles 2*, in 1822 for being a political agitator. He gained his Certificate of Freedom on 16 March 1829.



The Convict Ship 'Mangles'  
Victorian State Library Collection

<https://www.slv.vic.gov.au>

The 1820s were a transformative period in New South Wales, marked by expanding settlements and increasing agricultural development. Convicts played a crucial role in this growth, laying the groundwork for future communities.

Over time, some convicts, were granted tickets of leave or pardons, allowing them to integrate more fully into colonial society.

My father was born in Kellys Plains near Armidale and lived in the area until the 1960s. He married my mother in 1961 then moved to Sydney with the

Australian Army. Kellys Plains is a small rural locality situated about eight kilometres southwest of Armidale, New South Wales. The settlement is at an altitude of about 1,044 metres on the Northern Tablelands in the New England region of New South Wales, Australia.

In the 1860s, German emigrants escaping economic hardship and instability in their own country were attracted to Australia, by the promise of land opportunities. German settlers played a significant role in the development of Kellys Plains, and they contributed to the agricultural landscape, bringing with them knowledge of farming techniques and crops, particularly in areas like wheat and livestock. Their skills in viticulture also influenced local agriculture, as they established vineyards and fruit orchards.

Despite facing challenges, such as adapting to the Australian environment and sometimes encountering prejudice, German settlers established a lasting presence in Kellys Plains. Their contributions helped shape the local economy and community structure, leaving a legacy that is still recognised in the region today.

My mother's paternal side descend from England and Ireland. I can trace them back to the 1700s. Her maternal side descend from England, Scotland, and Latvia. My mother was born in Bundarra, a small town on the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales. This town is located on the banks of the Gwydir River, on Thunderbolts Way between Armidale and Inverell. In the late 1800s to 1900s, Bundarra was a bustling agricultural hub, with both crop farming and grazing being the backbone of the town's life and economy. It was characterised by community spirit of the locals as well as those living in the fertile lands of the surrounding region.

The grazing of sheep and cattle was particularly prominent, as the area became known for its wool production. This contributed to the broader pastoral industry in New South Wales, which was vital for the colony's economy. Grazing properties were often sizable, and landholders engaged in sheep shearing and wool exporting, led to a thriving local economy.

As I mentioned previously, using the booklet as my worksheet, I can see on the Pedigree Chart that I have reached up to my 2x great-grandfathers and 2x great-grandmothers on both the paternal and maternal sides of each of my mother and father. That is a total of sixteen people for whom I need to gather individual information, statistics, and stories. I am planning to use the Family Group sheets to organise their stories.

To begin researching your family history using a pedigree chart and family group sheets, follow these steps:

### 1. Gather Existing Information

Start with what you know: Fill out your pedigree chart with your name, your parents, grandparents, and any known ancestors. Use family group sheets to record details for each family unit, including names, births, marriage, and death dates.

### 2. Interview Relatives

Talk to family members to gather stories, names, and any documents they may have, such as birth certificates, marriage licences, or family bibles.

### 3. Organise Your Research

Keep your Pedigree Chart and Family Group Sheets updated with new information. Use binders or digital tools to organise documents and notes.

### 4. Use Online Resources

### 5. Visit Local Archives

Check local libraries, historical societies, and government archives for records such as land deeds, wills, and military records. Consider visiting cemeteries for gravestones, which can provide valuable information.

### 6. Join Genealogy Groups

Connect with local genealogy societies or online forums. Engaging with others can provide tips and support in your research.

### 7. Document Sources

Keep track of where you find information. Documenting your sources is essential for verifying facts and ensuring accuracy.

### 8. Expand Your Research

After filling out your immediate family, start looking further back in your Pedigree Chart. Focus on one ancestor at a time to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

### 9. Stay Organised and Patient

Family history research can be complex and time-consuming. Stay patient and organised.

Be Amazed!

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## Have you visited these websites lately?

Port Macquarie & Districts Family History Society Inc. — <https://www.pmdfhs.org.au>

National Archives of Australia — <https://www.naa.gov.au>

British Newspaper Archive — <https://britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>

National Library of Australia — <https://www.nla.gov.au>

Trove — <https://trove.nla.gov.au>

State Archives Collection — <https://mhns.wa.gov.au>

Land Registry Services — <https://www.nswlrs.com.au>

## ON AND OFF

*Karen Quinn*

I've been researching my family history for over thirty years, on and off, as I have the time and the inclination. When I started looking into my family history, most of the records to search were either the original books and papers, or microfiche. Microfiche is a flat piece of film containing copies of the original documents, which can only be viewed with a microfiche reader.



Microfilm reader and some equipment used to project and magnify images stored in microform to readable portions. Implemented as a means to preserve records. <https://digitalcollection.tyndale.ca>

The Society of Australian Genealogy, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and St Catherine's House in England, were the only organisations holding family history records, other than the original records kept all over the world. There were few places that had microfiche readers. Usually the larger libraries in the cities held them so I had to make a special trip to a large library in the hope I would find something to keep me going.

It was very important then to keep track of what I had done each time because it could be a while before I got to search again, and I needed to know where to continue and not go over records I had already looked at, and so waste time. Most of the microfiche records I was looking at, came from St Catherine's House as my ancestors were English. When I found what I wanted on microfiche I then still had to send away for the document, which took time (up to eight weeks or longer if it was overseas) and money. In that time I could lose interest.

There was not a lot of help to show me where to go next other than just getting the birth, death, and marriage certificates and following these dates. It was hard to get any other details about the people.

To find any christening records or cemetery records I had to visit the churches in the area. Wills were hard to get. Some shipping records were available but not all of them. To search newspapers I had to go to the library in the relevant area or the newspaper office itself and look at their saved original newspapers. The newspapers were generally stored in date order and there was no indexing. Of course there was always the possibility that flood or fire had already destroyed many papers, and there was no back up.

LDS created the Family Group sheets and the Family Tree documents that I first filled in, and they look very much the same as the Family Group Records we use now. These were all kept in files that had to be protected from damp, bugs and from getting lost. You could write to other organisations and family history groups, requesting someone there to look for you. Of course,

in England and Europe there were many family history organisations already operating and trying to keep the original records from deteriorating.

I researched a few times on and off over the years. I usually started looking for a certificate, then found the record and sent away for the document. While I waited for the document to come back, I lost interest; other things in my life took over.

I stopped researching for many years and when I started again there were many changes to the study of family history. When I had stopped, searching on computers was just beginning to be used in the area of family history, and programs were still very new. Computers have made an enormous difference to family history research. I still had my paper records that could easily be transferred to Family Tree Maker. Now I am connected to the internet, and I can see who else is looking for the same people as I am. This helps me find more information. I can contact those people and discuss the searches they have done, and we are able to help each other.

So many other search options have opened up, since many of the historical records are now digitised, and they are available online for everyone to access. Newspapers, cemetery records, shipping records, probate and just about anything else you want to find is online. This makes it faster and more rewarding to trace family members. The other massive thing to help with family history searching is a DNA search. I will start down this path now and see where it takes me.

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## DNA, A USEFUL TOOL FOR FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

*Lyndall Nairn*

My DNA results have proved useful in building my family tree. However, it took me some time to come to that conclusion. When I first received the results of my Ancestry DNA test in 2016, I felt overwhelmed because I could identify only three people near the top of the shared matches list, that is those on the Ancestry database with whom I share the highest number of centiMorgans. (A unit of measure for measuring genetic linkage.) I had no idea who the thousands of others were. How could I be related to so many strangers?



DNA Double helix structure

For about a year, I sat on these results, not knowing how to analyse them. Then gradually, by attending Family History DNA Support Group meetings, watching webinars, and reading books and articles about DNA, I was able to learn some techniques for analysing and categorising my matches, which in turn meant that I could build my tree.

Now I have identified the common ancestors of over four hundred of my shared DNA matches, so I have been able to trace their lines of inheritance and place the common ancestors and the living matches in my tree.

The coloured dots that Ancestry provides for categorising matches have been helpful. Once I identified my eight pairs of 2x great-grandparents, I assigned each couple a different coloured dot. I kept another two dots for matches that I could see were either paternal or maternal, but I was not sure exactly which line they belonged on. Once I had assigned as many dots as I knew were correct, then I clicked on the shared matches and assigned them the appropriate matching-coloured dots. The family groups started lining up!

However, some matches were still mysteries, so then I used the Leeds method, which helps to identify to which grandparent's and great-grandparent's lines the unknown matches belong. As I put the siblings of my parents, grandparents and great-grandparents into my tree, I was able to build the lines of descent through their children, so my tree was expanding outwards as well as backwards in time.

Using the hints in the Ancestry tree, I was able to build the lines of descent down to my matches who have done DNA tests and are living today. Then I used Ancestry's linking tool to connect a particular match to the appropriate name on my tree. By doing that, I am providing Ancestry with some data so that Ancestry can then give me more hints. Of course not all the hints are correct, but as I collect more information on my ancestors, I am in a better position to discern which records are reliable and which are not.

DNA is assigned randomly, with a baby receiving 50% of each of his/her parents' DNA. Because I am an only child, I have no siblings to provide me with access to the other half of my parents' DNA that I missed out on, and my parents did not do any DNA tests before they died. Therefore, I asked my maternal and paternal cousins if they would let me manage their DNA test results and insert their ancestors into my tree. I was in luck because seven of my cousins agreed. Then I started grouping my cousins' matches and linking them to their names in the tree. I could see some overlap between my matches and my cousins' matches, but they have many matches that I don't have, so that has provided a lot more data for building the tree.

Ancestry provides a messaging system, so I have been able to contact some distant cousins who know more about the ancestors in their direct lines than I do. Although many people do not respond to Ancestry messages, enough of my third, fourth and fifth cousins have answered, so we have been able to collaborate and help each other build our trees.

Another effective technique has been to upload my Ancestry DNA results to other genealogical sites, like MyHeritage and GEDmatch. By 'swimming in all the pools', I have been able to identify other matches who had not tested with Ancestry.

Other helpful online tools include DNA Painter, WATO (What are the Odds?) and Auto Clustering. First, DNA Painter provides a tool for 'painting' a map of the 22 chromosomes in an autosomal test, like Ancestry's, to clarify which segments of which chromosomes are shared by multiple matches. This technique confirms the family groups that have previously been identified with Ancestry's coloured dots and disproves any outliers.

Second, the WATO tool uses centiMorgan data to test hypotheses about the likely relationships between a match and the owner of the DNA results. Third, the Auto Clustering tool on the MyHeritage website generates a spreadsheet that automatically puts matches into their overlapping groups, so that is another way to verify the family groups identified with Ancestry's coloured dots.

Building my tree using information from DNA sources has led to many previously unknown ancestors. For example, I have discovered seven convicts whose existence my grandparents and great-grandparents managed to hide for more than 150 years. That's not to mention the numerous convicts whom I have found in my indirect lines as brothers, uncles and in-laws.

But the best outcome from the point of view of this family history detective has been unearthing many stories about my ancestors' lives. Most of my ancestors were not famous or wealthy, but they certainly lived interesting lives and faced daunting challenges. The fact that I have inherited some of their DNA is inspiring.

## STRANGERS IN THE BOX

Come, look with me inside this drawer,  
In this box I've often seen.  
At the pictures, black and white,  
Faces proud, still, serene.

I wish I knew the people,  
These strangers in the box.  
Their names and all their memories  
Are lost among my socks.

I wonder what their lives were like,  
How did they spend their days?  
What about their special times?  
I'll never know their ways.

If only someone had taken time  
To tell who, what, where, or when,  
These faces of my heritage  
Would come to life again.

Could this become the fate  
Of the pictures we take today?  
The faces and the memories  
Someday to be tossed away?

Make time to save your pictures.  
Seize the opportunity when it knocks,  
Or someday you and yours could be  
The strangers in the box.

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keepsakepix.com

## WHAT CONSTITUTES RESEARCH? AND RESEARCHING MY PHOTOS

*Robyn Anderson*

We begin to explore our tiny speck of this enormous universe from the moment we are born. At birth, our brain is comprised of some 100 billion neurons that form clusters. The tens of thousands of neurons in each cluster communicate with other clusters via a network of paths or links called synapses. The more we explore and learn, the more complex our network of synapses.

While our early synapses are busily communicating our need to breathe, regulate our heartbeat and respond to our senses, our neurons are craving knowledge. In order for our neurons to facilitate this acquired knowledge new synapses need to form. Just in the first two years of life our brains will create billions of synapses between clusters of neurons. In fact, a two-year-old will absorb more knowledge and subsequently need more synapses than the average adult.

From adolescence we tend to slow our learning. As our urge for knowledge lessens and the need for some synapses wanes, our brains perform synaptic pruning. Like a rarely used garden path the brain allows the rarely used synaptic paths to breakdown until, like the overgrown garden path, they are no longer available. We lose up to 50% of the synapses we had as a two-year-old. Basically, if you don't use it you lose it.<sup>1</sup>

So where am I going with this human biology? Back to my original question — What constitutes research?

For me, research is anything my brain craves to know, to learn, to explore. It does not have to be in a classroom. It is all about an individual's want or need to learn each and every day, but what does this have to do with family history research? The answer is simply ... everything.

As amateur or professional family historians we strive to learn. We endeavour to solve problems. We aim to build a tree of knowledge, a family tree of history, and with each miniscule effort we make, we keep one or more of those precious synaptic paths alive and active.

Some years ago, very dear precious family members died, leaving me their photos. I inherited four generations of photos and had to decide what to do with them. Most were in boxes or albums that were slowly breaking down. I was originally going to just put them into new archival albums and store them, but I could not see an advantage in this. It was a complete waste of time if future generations could not make sense of the images. I am one of the last in my generation that has any idea of who or what some of these images depict. It was time I asked the 'Five W's'.

Who – is in the photo?

Why – are they in it?

Where – are they?

When – was the photo taken?

What – are they doing?

I had to answer the 'Five Ws' for each photo to the best of my ability, but where should I start?

I begin by using a dedicated flatbed scanner to digitally record each photo before placing it into a specialised plastic envelope to preserve it by reducing exposure to dirt, dust and human sweat. Flatbed scanners can provide more detailed images when enlarging and printing. Most of my scans start at 1200 dpi, with some even higher.

I am not an expert, but when looking at old photos I have found four basic qualities – sepia, painted, black & white (B&W), and colour. Sepia photos are mostly shades of brown. Painted photos have been partially hand painted by the photographer or printer. Black and white photos are shades of grey with pure black and white. Full colour photos are mostly contemporary photos. This is important when trying to place them in batches.

Where possible I group photos using batch numbers found on the reverse of many older images. If unavailable, I might use the printer's name, quality of the image, location, clothing worn, people, buildings or vehicles depicted. The best information can sometimes come from the background. They are then placed in a labelled paper bag and stored flat in a location with low humidity, stable temperature and indirect sunlight before being covered to exclude all extraneous light.

It's now time to look at notes that may be on the back — dates, locations and names. It can be useful to know who wrote the information to know how 'accurate' it might be. A comment written ten years after the event may be accurate to the writer but not necessarily in fact.

I have found that there is no hard and fast rule for doing the next step. My best advice is to use both hemispheres of your brain and to 'look outside the square'. Websites dedicated to the creation of family trees will help, but they are not the means to an end with photos. Here are just some of the resources I have used to answer the 'Five W's'.

- Photos — critical comparison of a photo with others can help identify individuals, ages and locations.
- BDM records — especially if you're not familiar with the depicted people.
- Cemetery websites — Australian Cemetery Index, FindAGrave, BillionGraves, Rookwood and Carlton cemeteries, etc.
- Electoral and census rolls
- National Library and 'Copy Direct' for rare publications and articles
- TROVE, PapersPast, British Newspapers/FindMyPast, Mitchell Library, etc.
- Ancestral websites — when relationships need confirmation
- Hardcopy atlases, street directories and maps
- Google Earth, online interactive maps, HLRV for old parish maps, state-based tourist maps e.g. TasMaps
- National and State Archives — for service records, immigration, etc.
- Postcards, letters, cards and other memorabilia (to identify handwriting, locations)
- Documents you have inherited — e.g. rates notices, insurance papers, loan documents
- Australian War Memorial, Hyde Park Barracks, Virtual Memorial, other service sites
- Army battalions, nursing training hospitals, unions, local and national museums, historical societies
- National Film and Sound Archive — for online newsreels
- Printer or Photographer — if the photographer's name (or address) is visible, research them to determine a suitable time period or location.

- Books, books and books — on history, locations, and if lucky, people
- Online council rate books, HLRV (Historical Land Records Viewer) for land purchases, Sands (Sydney) and Sands & McDougall (Melbourne) Directories — for addresses
- Employment records — e.g. ‘NSW Museum of Fire’ provided service records for two men, which gave me context to their service photos.
- Car Clubs — confirmed vehicle make, model and production dates
- Dictionary — helped me distinguish vehicle styles (limousine, landaulette, tourer, etc.)
- Any relative who might know something — I’ve gained invaluable help from two relatives with advanced dementia. I loved, I listened, and I learnt from them.
- Internet searches — use as many search engines and devices as possible. Using one term on one device can give you different results on another, especially when using a different search engine. Can’t find a person? — Look for a close relative.
- Old fashion phone calls — I rang a company visible in the background of a 1954 photo. The owner’s son remembered the storefront and confirmed the location was Tamworth.

I scanned my primary school atlas. Using a basic drawing program I traced over roads I wanted. I then used old NRMA paper maps to fill in missing locations. Once labelled, I had a simple map of places visited over Christmas in 1950. I suggested a possible route based on postcards sent to my grandfather’s mother. I was guided by a map of Cradle Mountain from TasMaps when drawing another map of a walking trail followed in 1955/56. These simple maps give the photos context.

I’ve used Google Earth to follow roads looking for old buildings. This is not foolproof but can be useful when eliminating locations, e.g. a building in Gladesville was not Queanbeyan.



There is no handwritten information on the photo above. I scanned, enlarged and looked at every face. I recognised my grandfather. I know he never served in any war, so why is he in military uniform? He looks young so it seemed highly likely the photo was taken during World War I. He was aged 16 years and 5 months when the war ended. When enlarged, I could read ‘27<sup>th</sup> Battery, c. sub. Sec’.

I searched the Australian War Memorial website. The 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion was established in South Australia, but my grandfather lived in Gladesville, NSW. I had a second photo that appeared

to be similar in age. He wrote on the back: 'Old militia corps squad about 1915-16'. Looking at faces in both photos I concluded they were the same group of people. The NSW Department of Environment website has history of a militia group based at Gladesville. They were known as the Hunters Hill Reserves. I now had most of the 'Five W's' answered, but what do I do with the information? The archival album I am using has little room for handwritten history, so I made a booklet, a reference document, for the entire photo album.

As each photo was put into the album it was given a code. This photo was given 'AB 08-02 1915-16 militia'. 'AB' refers to my aunt as she gave me this collection of photos. '08-02' says the eighth photo in the album can be found on page 2. '1915-16' is the estimated date of the photo and 'militia' is a short description. If a batch number was on this photo it would be inserted before the description and prefaced by 'B' e.g. B123. I saved the scanned photo with this code before listing it in the booklet with a mini photo and what I knew about it.

Below is a copy of the section of my document this photo appears in. AWA3 is my abbreviation for my grandfather. This is explained on the first page of the document.



AB 06-02 1915-16 militia – "Old militia corps squad about 1915-16". "Dad is there somewhere? 1<sup>st</sup> in kneeling row". First sentence written by AWA3. Second group was written by daughter Barbara. I'm more inclined to think AWA3 is the second from the right in the kneeling row. No other information available.

According to the NSW Dept of Environment ([environment.nsw.gov.au](http://environment.nsw.gov.au) - Gladesville Drill Hall), the site that was known as the Gladesville Drill Hall was used to train civil militia as early as the 1870's. The actual Drill Hall was built in 1900 and opened in 1901. The facilities included a rifle range which is possibly where this photo was taken. Originally they were called the Hunters Hill Reserves. The militia groups, or reserves, had many names prior to and after WWI including K Company and F Company. The K Company address was even published in the 1896 Sands Directory. By the beginning of WWI, the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been formed and was based in the grounds of the Drill Hall and was very closely associated with the St Joseph's College Cadet Corps. Two groups existed within the corps – a junior group of cadets and a seniors group of civilian militia, which together included a machine gun company. By the end of WWI the hall was headquarters to the 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion until 1941, which also included a machine gun company.



AB 07-02 1917-18 AWA3 – No information on this photo. I believe AWA3 is standing on the left of the image. It is probably his very good friend \*\*\*\*\* on the right.



AB 08-02 1915-16 militia – No information on this photo. AWA3 is in the third row, tall person in the centre. I suspect this is the company photo related to photo AB 06-02. I cannot explain the label "27<sup>th</sup> Battery, c. sub. Sec." as the 27<sup>th</sup> Battery is apparently a battalion that was established in South Australia and served at Gallipoli amongst other locations. My enquiry with the Aust War Memorial provided no other information of use. Also, AWA3 does not have a record held by defence confirming he never saw active service. In 1918 when the war ceased, AWA3 would have only been 16 yrs and 5mths.

When my niece inherits this work, she will know who her great grandfather was and some of what he did. I could write a short essay on each person, but for me, documenting this photo spoke more about the man than anything I could write as a third person writing a mini biography. While I do remember him, I was only five years old when he died.

Research has to have purpose. It needs to answer the 'Five W's' as much as possible and it needs to exercise our brain to maintain those synapses into our final years. Documenting photos definitely exercises my brain as it forces me to think outside the square and, in my opinion, it is a great way of providing both context and history of our ancestors. It has purpose and is worth the hard slog.

<sup>1</sup> UK Trauma Council website – Early childhood and the developing brain; How the brain develops. <https://uktraumacouncil.org>

## THE RESEARCHING OF MY STAUNCH FAMILY-ORIENTED GRANDFATHER

*Lis Hannelly*

I was born so much later than my three siblings, and by the time I was born, sadly three of my four grandparents had already passed away. There were also no living great-grandparents. By the time I realised that family stories were a thing missing from my life, my only Grandad was in his early 80s, and while many people say, ‘Oh, I wish I’d asked someone!’, I asked! I tried! Sadly, he had little to share.

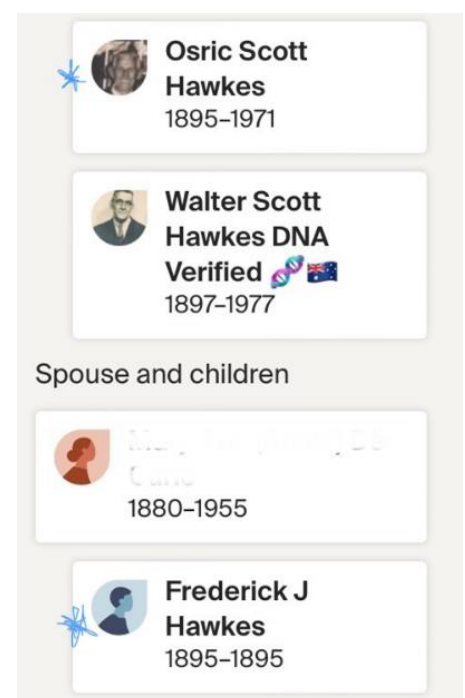
But there was one light at the end of my research tunnel — the Privacy Act was yet to become law<sup>1</sup> (introduced in 1988), so I spent hours at the ages of nineteen and twenty trawling through cards and microfiche at the NSW State Library and the local libraries. It was before mobile phones with cameras at my fingertips, so I wrote copious notes on reams of notebooks.

How many of us have done a double take and thought, ‘Oh my, what did that record say?’

It was all there for anyone who cared to look. Among the many, many ordinary records, was where I first discovered that my great-grandfather had two sons<sup>2</sup> within a few months of each other in two different towns of NSW in 1896. Hmmm! Sadly, this illegitimate child only survived a few months.

The youngest son, my Grandad, was the next and final child born to my great-grandfather and my great-grandmother, his wife of ten (of his eleven) children. Great-Grandma died three years later, leaving my Grandad as a three-year-old with a very distant father and little access to family stories. And so, that left my research source as hard copy public records.

This extract from Ancestry shows my grandfather’s two older brothers who were both born in 1895. The youngest son, my grandfather, was born two years later in 1897.



My research confirmed with a marriage certificate, that the young lady, who Great-Grandfather brought into the home to care for his large family, was the very same girl who had given birth to his illegitimate son. She was the same age as one of his daughters, and of course this was treated by his older grown-up children as scandalous.

But what of my husband’s family? I decided a few years ago to research my husband’s great-grandmother who lived to 96 years of age and was a treasure. She was an extremely devout Catholic and still at 96 years old had her very broad Scottish accent despite arriving in 1922; as well, she kept her shroud in her wardrobe for when she met her maker.

She had always said she had come to Australia from Scotland with just her three children — no mention of their father. Research! Oh dear! Not *only* did I find shipping passenger lists<sup>3</sup> showing the husband was onboard the ship and that the family were settled into rural NSW!

Freely accessible online Trove newspaper archives told the story in NSW Police Gazettes<sup>4</sup> of her chasing him for desertion and non-payment towards the family’s existence.



## ... AND THEN ALONG CAME TROVE: MARY PATERSON

*Diane Gillespie*

Tracing a family tree for any period of time allows one to know, or think they know, the members of one's family. We search for appropriate birth certificates, marriage certificates, and death certificates as a basis for research. To this mix, we add snippets from family or from friends who know or knew the family in the past, but these recollections are all tinted with the shadow of time and the dimming of the memory.

I was sure that I had learned as much as I could about my 3x great-grandmother, Mary **Paterson**, née **Machonachie/McEachnie**, who was born in 1811 in Co. Argyll, Scotland<sup>1</sup>. Both Mary and Malcolm's families were living at Auchdashnaig on the Isle of Mull, off the coast of western Scotland. As an assisted emigrant, in November 1836 Mary left her homeland with her husband, Malcolm, on the *City of Edinburgh*, arriving in Sydney on 31 August 1837.<sup>2</sup>

My great-aunt had spoken fondly of her grandmother, though Mary had passed eight years before the aunt was born, she was remembered by family members as being a stalwart within her community.

I learned that Malcolm, and later Mary, held various publican licenses for hotels in NSW. Their first known licence was for 'The Royal Prince' in Carcoar in 1842. They were well-known in the Bathurst area, having raised a large family there. In later years Mary lived with her son, Malcolm, and his family, at the Currajong Hotel at Merri Merrigal near Hillston, before moving to the mining settlement of Mount Hope.

It was here that Mary died on 10 May 1892 in a house fire. Her death certificate, obtained ninety years later (1982), confirmed the cause of death<sup>3 4</sup>. One ancestor done and dusted! That was what I expected to find — no mysteries, no mishaps, no murders. Just as my great-aunt had predicted and of which she was so proud. Mary's death certificate stated she had given birth to three males and one female, but no details could be discerned from the coroner's report.<sup>5</sup>

When I took up my research again, I consulted the old registers or baptisms of the NSW BDM indexes to determine if the above facts were correct. These were not available when I first began my research in the 1970s. First correction. There were actually four boys — Samuel Curtis, Malcolm, Allan, and Angus. There were also five girls — Mary Ann, Christina, Teresa, Janet, and Catherine.

**Then in December 2009, along came Trove:** I checked the digital copies of the papers for the arrival and voyage of the *City of Edinburgh*. It was during this voyage, eleven weeks from arriving in Sydney, Mary gave birth to her first son, Samuel Curtis, which gave him an approximate birth date of early June. I cannot imagine setting sail on a small emigrant ship, being visibly pregnant and giving birth in the steerage section of the ship.

Mary was certainly 'made of stern stuff'! The couple broke with family tradition and the baby was not named for his paternal grandfather, but rather the surgeon on the ship who delivered him.<sup>6</sup> Determining the name of the doctor and hence the name of the baby was done by drawing conclusions from information gleaned from Trove. Passengers travelling on the *City of Edinburgh* had taken up a collection to thank Dr Samuel **Curtis** for his expertise in keeping the passengers healthy during the voyage.<sup>7</sup>

Malcolm and Mary and their eleven-week-old infant, Samuel **Curtis**, arrived in a burgeoning colony and took up employment for their sponsor, William **Bowman**, who had several land holdings within the colony — at Richmond, Jerry's Plains and on the plains near Bathurst. Malcolm had emigrated as a farmer and was accompanied by his brother-in-law, Robert **McKay**, as a farm servant. Robert's wife, Christina, was Mary's sister.

After his tenure to William **Bowman** was complete, Malcolm moved from farming to the more attractive prospect of becoming a licensee for a hotel in Carcoar, 'The Young Prince', obtaining a publican's licence in 1842<sup>8</sup>. Their growing family were all duly baptized except for Catherine. The baptisms of the children are the only proof of their births as the children were all born prior to the introduction of civil registration in NSW in 1856.

It was from Trove that I learned about their daughter, Catherine, as her baptism was not recorded within the NSW indexes to Births, Deaths and Marriages. A tiny article that mentioned Teresa and 'her sister, Catherine' appeared in the *Bathurst and Free Press* newspaper.<sup>9</sup>

This caused me to investigate further, and I found that Catherine had later married James **McNab**. She had three children to him before the marriage broke down and she 'took up' with Peter **Taylor**, who was a violent individual, which led ultimately to Catherine's death by glassing in 1871 at the Willandra Hotel that was run by her mother, Mary **Paterson**, née **Machonachie**.

Trove also provided information on a woolshed fire for which Mary **Paterson** had been arrested and taken to court<sup>10</sup>. She was acquitted of involvement in this incident but reading the account of this was something of which my great-aunt had known nothing.

Consulting more than vital records of birth, death and marriage has allowed me to enhance Mary's story, adding 'meat to the bones' so to speak. Trove and other sources can give another dimension to our ancestors. As I saw recently, 'you are the epilogue to your ancestors' stories and the prologue to your descendants' story.' Be sure you are worthy to link both.

<sup>1</sup> 'Scotland Births and Baptisms, 1564-1950', database, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XYHY-P4F: 11 February 2020>), Mary **McEachnie**, 1811

<sup>2</sup> NSW Shipping Records: [https://search.records.nsw.gov.au/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=INDEX3100016&context=L&vid=61SRA&lang=en\\_US](https://search.records.nsw.gov.au/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=INDEX3100016&context=L&vid=61SRA&lang=en_US)

<sup>3</sup> NSW Death Certificate for Mary **Paterson** 8570/1892

<sup>4</sup> 1892 'Fatal Fire at Mount Hope.', *Goulburn Evening Penny Post* (NSW: 1881-1940), 14 May, p. 6., viewed 27 Jan 2024, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article98480305>

<sup>5</sup> New South Wales, Australia, Registers of Coroners' Inquests, 1821-1937; State Archives NSW; Series: 2224; Roll: 344

<sup>6</sup> 1837 'Shipping Intelligence', *The Colonist* (Sydney, NSW: 1835-1840), 7

<sup>7</sup> Trove: Memorial for Samuel **Curtis** as surgeon of City of Edinburgh: 1837 'To the Cabin Passengers of the ship City of Edinburgh.', *The Sydney Times* (NSW : 1834-1838), 16 September, p. 3., viewed 27 Jan 2024, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article252653381>; 1837 'To Samuel **Curtis**, Esq., Surgeon of the Ship City of Edinburgh.', *The Sydney Times* (NSW: 1834-1838), 16 September, p. 3., viewed 27 Jan 2024, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article252653383>

<sup>8</sup> New South Wales, Australia, Certificates for Publicans' Licences, 1830-1849, 1853-1899 Butts of publicans' licences, 1830-1849. NRS 14401, reels 5049-5062, 1236. State Records Authority of New South Wales, Kingswood, New South Wales, Australia

<sup>9</sup> 1855 'No title', *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* (NSW: 1851-1862; 1872; 1882; 1885-1897; 1899-1904), 31 March, p.2., viewed 18 Oct 2024, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article62052580>

<sup>10</sup> 1877 'HAY QUARTER SESSIONS.', *The Riverine Grazier (Hay, NSW: 1873-1954)*, 4 August, p.2., viewed 18 Oct 2024, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article141202057>

## HOW AI IS REVOLUTIONISING GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH

*Peter Day*

‘Would you write a story about artificial intelligence (AI) and family history?’ asked our Editor, Leonie. Sure, I blithely said. But when I thought about how to approach this subject, I was stuck.

So, naturally, I turned to AI for help, because I think writing is one of the better uses of the new large language models. Specifically, I turned to Claude AI, which many people, me included, think has better writing skills than, say, ChatGPT.

However, all the images in this article were generated by Ideogram, which I think generates more realistic images than, say, ChatGPT, whose images I usually think cartoonish. Each prompt for Ideogram was the paragraph next to which the image sits, except the first one, for which the prompt was ‘create an image to accompany an article on the application of AI to family history’.



Ideogram generated four images for each prompt, and I chose the best. I have not undertaken any further processing of the images even though one has a small flaw, which I have left for the reader to find.

These are the prompts I gave Claude (specifically Claude v3.5 Sonnet). I have omitted Claude’s output for the first four prompts:

1. I have to write an article for my local family history magazine on the application of AI to family history research and writing. Please give me some topics for inclusion in the article.
2. Please elaborate on these topics and give examples.
3. Please provide more detailed examples. Please distinguish between what is currently possible and what may be possible in the near future.
4. Please comment on the possibility of AI powered agents that, once furnished with some basic data about a person and login details for genealogical sites such as Ancestry and FamilySearch, archival sites such as The National Archives (United Kingdom), and online repositories of books and newspapers such as The Internet Archive, could scour the Internet for all potential facts related to that person and provide these as output, together with references.
5. Please provide a draft article incorporating all the material you have provided.

This whole process, including the draft article, took less than thirty minutes, and nearly all of that was me reading and thinking about what Claude provided. On the following pages is the final article provided by Claude. Other than formatting, I have resisted the urge to edit so you can see what is possible. I will add some comments after Claude’s article.

## Claude's Article:

In recent years, artificial intelligence (AI) has been making significant inroads into various aspects of our lives, and the field of genealogy is no exception. From deciphering old handwriting to predicting where our ancestors might have lived, AI is transforming the way we research and understand our family histories. This article explores the current applications of AI in genealogy and peeks into the exciting possibilities that lie just around the corner.

### CURRENT AI APPLICATIONS IN GENEALOGY

#### 1. Document Transcription and Handwriting Recognition

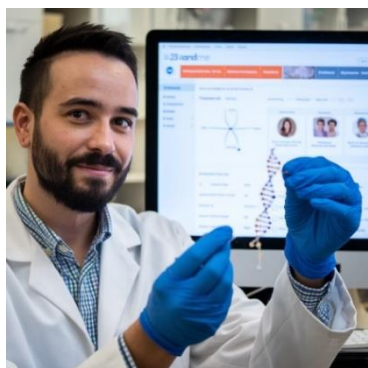
One of the most time-consuming aspects of genealogical research is transcribing old documents. AI-powered tools like Transkribus are changing the game by accurately transcribing handwritten documents. Imagine uploading your great-grandmother's diary from the 1920s and receiving a typed transcript within minutes!

#### 2. Automated Record Matching

Platforms like Ancestry.com and MyHeritage use sophisticated AI algorithms to sift through millions of records, suggesting potential matches for your family tree. These systems can identify relevant census records, military service files, and other documents with remarkable accuracy, saving researchers countless hours of manual searching.

#### 3. Photo Enhancement and Colorization

AI is breathing new life into old family photos. Services offered by MyHeritage can sharpen blurry images, repair damages, and even colorize black-and-white photos. These enhancements often reveal details that were previously obscured, providing new insights into our ancestors' lives.



#### 4. DNA Analysis and Ethnicity Estimation

Companies like 23andMe employ machine learning algorithms to analyse genetic data, providing detailed ethnicity estimates and identifying potential relatives. These AI-driven analyses can pinpoint specific regions of ancestral origin and uncover connections you might never have known existed.

#### 5. AI-Assisted Translation

For those researching immigrant ancestors, AI-powered translation tools like Google Translate have become indispensable. These services can quickly translate old letters, records, and documents from the original language to your preferred language, making previously inaccessible information understandable.

### THE NEAR FUTURE OF AI IN GENEALOGY

As exciting as the current applications are, the potential future developments in AI-assisted genealogy are even more tantalizing:

#### 1. Advanced Narrative Generation

Imagine inputting your raw genealogical data and receiving a compelling, historically accurate narrative of your family's journey through time. Future AI systems might craft engaging family histories, complete with contextual historical details, bringing your ancestors' stories to life.



## 2. Predictive Genealogy

AI could analyse patterns in your family tree and vast historical databases to predict where missing ancestors might be found. It might suggest, "Based on migration patterns and occupational data, there's a 75% chance your missing great-great-grandfather lived in Chicago between 1880-1900."



## 3. Virtual Reality Reconstructions

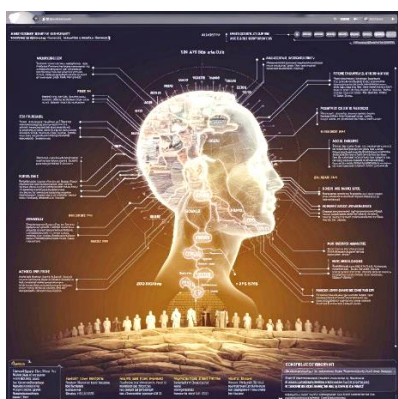
While still in its infancy, the combination of AI and virtual reality could create immersive experiences for family historians. You might one day "walk through" a historically accurate reconstruction of your great-grandparents' 1920s farmhouse, with AI filling in likely details based on historical records and architectural data of the period.

## 4. Advanced Image Analysis

Future AI might analyse family photos to not just identify people, but also estimate relationships, dates, and locations. It could suggest, "This photo likely shows your grandmother's high school graduation in 1955, based on the clothing styles, her apparent age, and the background details."

## 5. Holistic Data Integration

Imagine a system that integrates genetic data, historical records, and family narratives seamlessly. An AI could analyse your DNA, your family tree, and historical migration data to create a comprehensive visualization of your family's journey over centuries, highlighting key events and decisions that led to your existence.



## The Potential of AI-Powered Research Agents

Perhaps one of the most exciting prospects on the horizon is the development of AI-powered genealogical research agents. These autonomous AI systems could revolutionize how we conduct family history research.

Imagine providing an AI agent with some basic information about an ancestor and login credentials for various genealogical and archival websites. The agent could then scour the internet, accessing multiple platforms simultaneously, to compile a comprehensive report on that individual.



Such an AI agent could:

- ◆ Conduct intelligent searches across multiple platforms, adjusting its parameters based on initial findings.
- ◆ Cross-reference information from different sources to verify facts and identify discrepancies.
- ◆ Understand historical context, interpreting outdated terms and accounting for variations in spelling or naming conventions.
- ◆ Evaluate the reliability of different sources, prioritizing official records over user-submitted information.
- ◆ Compile findings into a structured report, complete with source citations and confidence levels for each piece of information.

While this level of AI assistance isn't currently available, many of the component technologies are already in development. However, significant challenges remain, including data access restrictions, the need for nuanced interpretation of historical records, privacy and security concerns, and the ongoing requirement for human oversight.

### Ethical Considerations and Future Challenges

As AI becomes more integrated into genealogical research, it's crucial to consider the ethical implications:

1. Privacy concerns: How do we balance the desire for comprehensive research with the need to protect personal information, especially of living individuals?
2. Data accuracy: While AI can process vast amounts of data quickly, it may not always interpret nuanced or contextual information correctly. How do we ensure the accuracy of AI-generated family histories?
3. The role of human researchers: As AI takes on more tasks, how do we maintain the crucial elements of human insight, intuition, and emotional connection in family history research?
4. Accessibility and equality: Will AI-powered tools be accessible to all, or could they create a divide between those who can afford advanced AI assistance and those who cannot?

### Conclusion

The integration of AI into genealogical research is not just enhancing our ability to uncover our family histories; it's revolutionizing the entire field. From making sense of old documents to predicting where our ancestors might have lived, AI is opening up new possibilities that were once the realm of science fiction.

As we look to the future, it's clear that AI will play an increasingly significant role in how we discover, interpret, and share our family stories. While challenges remain, the potential benefits are enormous. AI could democratize access to in-depth genealogical research, uncover connections that might otherwise be missed, and help us build more comprehensive and accurate family histories.

However, as we embrace these new technologies, we must also remain mindful of the ethical considerations and the irreplaceable value of human insight in interpreting our shared past. The future of family history research is bright, and AI is helping to illuminate the path forward.



### PETER'S COMMENTS:

I think this is a pretty good draft. It covers the main current AI applications, except for writing family history stories (which is a general AI application rather than family history specific) – and I did not add extra prompts to improve the finished product. I would not normally use models such as Claude to write my family history without editing, but I think, as do many, such as the AI commentator and educator Ethan **Mollick**, that they can help one become a better writer, suggesting different approaches, styles and language.<sup>1</sup>

To near future AI applications, I would add:

- Automated oral history analysis: Future AI might transcribe and analyse recorded family stories or interviews, extracting key information, dates, and relationships. It could potentially even identify emotional patterns or recurring themes across generations of family narratives; and

- Handwriting style analysis: AI could potentially identify the author of unsigned letters or documents by analysing handwriting styles and comparing them to known samples from family members.

In case you think that the idea of an AI-powered genealogical research agents is far-fetched, I can say that such agents already exist in other fields – they just aren't as wide ranging as the one described above.<sup>2</sup> For family history research, the base technology already exists – it is used to produce, for example, Ancestry hints.

Can we get to the more advanced of the future AI applications that Claude listed? There are several challenges to be overcome:

- Accuracy — producing correct and precise answers with fewer or more predictable hallucinations: the recently released ChatGPT o1 model is a big step forward, but still not quite there;<sup>3</sup>
- Scaling — each step change in LLMs (large language models) performance seems to require an order of magnitude increase in inputs, and thus cost. It has been estimated that state-of-the-art models such as GPT-4 cost about USD100 million to train, whilst the next generation such as GPT-5 might cost USD1 billion (or more). The next generation after that, for release in a couple of years, might cost USD10 billion.<sup>4</sup> It's a gold rush, and as always, the makers of picks and shovels, such as chipmaker Nvidia in this case, are coining it.

Can these challenges be overcome? According to Ethan **Mollick**, 'Even the people training AI systems are divided between believing exponential growth in capability is possible for the foreseeable future and those who think large language models have run their course already.'<sup>5</sup> So we do not know. Whatever the outcome, I think the journey is going to be very interesting.



But will AI take the fun and the joy out of family history? I expect it will do some of that: there may be fewer moments of triumph when persistence pays off and one finally finds some elusive ancestor or fact because AI has found it for us.



However, we should get a deeper and richer family history experience, with more facts, more historical context, better images and better writing. At least, I hope so!

<sup>1</sup> Ethan **Mollick**, 'How to... use ChatGPT to boost your writing', *One Useful Thing*, <https://www.oneusefulthing.org/p/how-to-use-chatgpt-to-boost-your>, posted 11 January 2023, and 'Embracing weirdness: What it means to use AI as a (writing) tool', <https://www.oneusefulthing.org/p/embracing-weirdness-what-it-means>, posted 5 September 2023, both accessed 28/9/2024,

<sup>2</sup> Cem **Dilmegani**, 'A genetic AI: 8 Use Cases & Real-life Examples in 2024', *AIMultiple Research*, <https://research.aimultiple.com/agent-ai/>, accessed 25/9/2024,

<sup>3</sup> Mark **Humphries**, 'Why OpenAI's New Model Might Change Everything for Researchers', *Generative History*, <https://generativehistory.substack.com/p/why-openais-new-model-might-change>, accessed 15 September 2024,

<sup>4</sup> Ethan **Mollick**, 'Scaling: The State of Play in AI', *One Useful Thing*, <https://www.oneusefulthing.org/p/scaling-the-state-of-play-in-ai>, accessed 17/9/2024,

<sup>5</sup> Ethan **Mollick**, 'Confronting Impossible Futures', *One Useful Thing*, <https://www.oneusefulthing.org/p/confronting-impossible-futures>, accessed 23/7/24.



During 2025, Port Macquarie & Districts Family History Society will be celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding. We intend to celebrate this milestone event with a few events during the year.

As part of the celebrations, we have decided to devote space in the four issues of *Footsteps* to each of the decades. **We would like to hear from previous members** as we will be highlighting the significant events and people who have made the Society what it is today.

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### ***FOOTSTEPS* CONTRIBUTIONS**

The next edition of *Footsteps* will be published in February 2025. The deadline for contributions will be **15 January 2025**. Members are encouraged to submit stories and articles to [editor@pmdfhs.org.au](mailto:editor@pmdfhs.org.au). Our next issue calls for the theme of:

**‘I was told this story. Was it really true? Does it matter?’**

Alternatively, have you had any interesting research breakthroughs or funny snippets or what you have found out about your ancestors?

We all enjoy reading about how you tracked down your elusive relatives or about any significant incidents or special activities in which you and your ancestors have been involved.

Articles should be limited to between 1500-1550 words with up to four photos, or up to 1800 words without photos. It is always important when researching to cite your references and sources. When inserting the references or sources in your articles, it is requested that you use numbers i.e., 1,2,3, etc. (not Roman Numerals) and that you place them as ‘endnotes’ not ‘footnotes, positioned at the end of the text’.

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## Society Membership Fees

	Renewals	New Members*	
	Payable at 1st July each year	1st July to 30th June	1st Jan to 30th June
Single	\$30.00	\$35.00	\$20.00
Family	\$40.00	\$45.00	\$25.00
<i>Footsteps</i> Journal editions—November, February, May, August	4 issues included in Membership fees		
	Subscription is available to Non-Members at \$15.00 for one year.		

**\*Includes a one-off \$5.00 joining fee.**

### FAMILY HISTORY RESEARCH

The Society will undertake family history research for an initial fee of \$20 for two hours and will include a list of records used, entry into *Footsteps* (where appropriate) and suggestions regarding other resources. There may be an additional fee for further research.

Please make your initial enquiry to the Research Officer at [secretary@pmdfhs.org.au](mailto:secretary@pmdfhs.org.au) and include as many details as possible about the person/family and any other relevant information including sources already researched. Alternatively, enquire via mail and include a business size, stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Research Officer, PO Box 1359, Port Macquarie NSW 2444.

#### *InfoEmail*

Our Society newsletter, *InfoEmail*, is emailed on a regular basis to members who have provided an email address. Remember to keep your email address up to date so you do not miss out. Please email us if you are not receiving the *InfoEmail*.

If you do not have an email address, but have a computer with internet access, the *InfoEmails* are available on our website at [www.pmdfhs.org.au](http://www.pmdfhs.org.au) to download and read. Journal reviews now have their own separate tab on the left side of the Society's website.

### RESEARCH ASSISTANCE

General assistance with family history – local, Australian, and overseas – is available for members and non-members in the Local Studies Room at the Port Macquarie Library. Our volunteers are normally on duty to help on most Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 10 am to 3 pm, with a break over Christmas.

### RESEARCH SUPPORT GROUP

The Research Support Group for members is held at Port Macquarie-Hastings Library, in the Library Meeting Room, from 1 pm to 3 pm each month on the Wednesday following our general meeting.

The topic is advertised in the latest *InfoEmail* and at the most recent General Meeting.

## Publications for Sale

Publication Name	Member Price	Normal Price	Weight
Port Macquarie's Last Convicts; The story of the end of the convict establishment in 1847, 204 pages, soft cover	\$18	\$20	737g
Tile Tales; Stories behind the names on the front wall of the Port Macquarie Swimming Pool, 752 pages, hard cover	\$60	\$60	2kg
Cemetery Trail; Port Macquarie – Hastings Full colour, 224 pages (glove box sized)	\$27	\$30	425g
Can You Remember? Memory Joggers for writing a Life Story (A5 booklet – pink cover – 16pp)	\$3	\$3	25g
Starting Your Family History (A5 booklet – yellow cover – 20pp)	\$3	\$3	30g
Pedigree Chart & Family Group Sheets 1 chart, 16 group sheets (A5 booklet – blue cover – 40pp)	\$5	\$5	54g
Certificates of Freedom Records for PM Convicts: Runaways, Robbers & Incurable Rogues (CD-ROM)	\$8	\$12	n/a
Port Macquarie Index to Colonial Secretary's Papers 1796-1825 (CD-ROM)	\$8	\$12	n/a
Harvesting the Hastings – Farming Families (CD-ROM in colour)	\$17	\$20	n/a
Sydney Gaol Records for Port Macquarie Convicts April 1821-1826 (CD-ROM)	\$8	\$12	n/a
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Note: All CD-ROM purchases include postage

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However an order form is also available at: <https://www.pmdfhs.org.au> – please complete the order form and send with your payment to: The Secretary, Port Macquarie & Districts Family History Society Inc. PO Box 1359, Port Macquarie NSW 2444.

Cheques and money orders should be made payable to Port Macquarie & Districts Family History Society Inc. Alternatively, please send an email to [secretary@pmdfhs.org.au](mailto:secretary@pmdfhs.org.au) to obtain the Society's banking details to direct deposit into our account via the internet. Pre-payment is required; however Local Government Libraries can be invoiced.

## **PORT MACQUARIE & DISTRICTS FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY INC.**

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### **Our Research Home**

Local Studies/Family History Room  
Port Macquarie-Hastings Library  
Corner of Grant and Gordon Streets  
Port Macquarie NSW 2444

### **Our Meeting Room**

CC Mac Adams Music Centre  
Gordon Street  
Port Macquarie NSW 2444  
(between Port Macquarie Olympic Pool and Players Theatre)

### **Port Macquarie & Districts Family History Society is affiliated with:**

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Parramatta Female Factory Friends  
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