

Writing Local and Family History

Before you start to write

The framework of your written piece will follow naturally from the facts behind it. Make sure you have collected those and have recorded them accurately. As you start to write you may discover that there is a gap in your knowledge. That is quite normal, as you often don't realise what it is that you don't know until you start trying to tell the story. Research doesn't end when you start to write, it just enters a different phase.

There are numerous books that can help you to find sources, including many on specialist topics. The following books are useful general guides (unless indicated, all the books mentioned in this guide are available in different editions):

W.B. Stephens, *Sources for English Local History*

K. Tiller, *English Local History: An Introduction*

S. Fowler, *Tracing Your Ancestors: A Guide for Family Historians*

M.D. Herber, *Ancestral Trails*

The art of deciphering old styles of writing is known as palaeography. If you are struggling to read some records, a useful guide is:

H. Marshall, *Palaeography for Family and Local Historians*

Before 1733 many records were written in Latin. There is no need to panic if you have never studied Latin, as the scribes were not necessarily very good either. Each of the following books provides a step-by-step guide to almost all you will need to know to translate your documents:

E.A. Gooder, *Latin For Local History: an Introduction*

D. Stuart, *Latin For Local And Family Historians: A Beginner's Guide*

Many commercial organisations are digitising records for family historians, some of which are also useful to local historians. This is a fast-moving area, with more records being placed online regularly, often through subscription databases which might be available at your local library or county record office. Finding out what exists can save you a lot of time. Many guides to online records have been published, but they very quickly get out of date, so you need to use a recent publication. The bookshop at The National Archives has a good selection of general and specific publications, and can be found at <http://bookshop.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Content

Local history can be considered in themes, with each theme treated chronologically. It is probably no coincidence that David Dymond, in *Researching and Writing History: a Practical Guide for Local Historians*, suggests seven themes and the parish histories published in the *Victoria County History* volumes now also have seven sections, for that is about the right number of substantive chapters for a book. Either system provides a structure and ensures you won't omit any key areas.

Dymond	<i>Victoria County History</i>
Landscape/topography	Landscape/topography, settlement and population
Population history	Manors and landholding
Economic history (including landholding)	Economic history
Social history (including welfare and charity)	Social history (including schools, charities and leisure)
Political history (secular and ecclesiastical administration)	Religious life
Cultural history (including leisure and schools)	Local government (including welfare)
Intellectual history (including religious creeds)	Buildings

Family histories do not have common themes in the same way, but they should still be structured in chapters. Although your family may be well known to you, other people's families can get confusing for readers, who can't quite remember who George was, and how he relates to the person you are now talking about. It gets even more confusing if the same name is repeated in several generations. Draw out a family tree and position it somewhere where it can easily be found, perhaps as the first page of the book. Consider repeating sections of your tree in individual chapters, as reminders.

Avoid the temptation of including everyone in your tree unless you are publishing your information on a carefully constructed website. Even if you have traced all 32 of your great-great-great-grandparents and all their descendants, it will be almost impossible to talk about all of them in a single book without the reader getting very confused. The best family histories focus on a single line, and have a chapter for each generation, with just one main character as the focus of each chapter (although of course brothers and sisters will often be mentioned).

A very well structured family history that is worth reading to learn from its structure and style as well as for its content is:

J. Titford, *The Titford Family, 1547-1947* (Phillimore, Chichester, 1989)

This book covers a single branch of the author's family, with each chapter devoted to one person, who is given a memorable moniker, such as Thomas the Calvinist or Charles the Cheesemonger. If you follow this pattern, the character will stick in the mind of the reader. If two chapters later, you wish to refer to the grandfather of the person concerned, instead of just saying 'his grandfather George', you can say 'his grandfather George the alehouse keeper', and the reader instantly remembers who George was.

Context

Whether you are writing local or family history, what you write should also be set into an external context, as nothing happened in a vacuum. Events were shaped by external factors that also influenced what was happening in other towns and villages, and in other families. Read around your topic, so you can recognise if the events you are describing were typical, in which case you do not need to go into the minutest detail, or atypical. If the latter, point this out and try to explain why a different route might have been taken by those concerned. Wide reading, especially of books which have footnoted their sources, will also help you to identify sources that you might have missed.

Writing style

Style is very personal, but if you want others to read your book, it is also very important. An excellent book with useful tips about style as well as content is:

D.P. Dymond, *Researching and Writing History: a Guide for Local Historians* (note, an earlier edition is subtitled *A Practical Guide for Local Historians*)

Although written primarily for local historians, the points it makes are equally relevant to those who want to write about their family history. This book includes sections such as 'writing humanely' and 'choosing words and framing sentences'. It also provides detailed critiques of short pieces from published histories, to help you to think about the different styles that can be adopted.

Think about the reference system you will use. You might personally hate footnotes, or find them intrusive, but endnotes do help others and also add authority to your work. People are given confidence that what you are writing is based on fact, and if they read something interesting that might also apply to their local community or family, your reference may lead them to a source they might have spent years trying to find. Whether you choose footnotes, endnotes or internal referencing within the text, be consistent in how your references are laid out, in terms of capitalisation, italics, use of brackets, inclusion or exclusion of publisher's name, etc.

Finally

When you have finished writing, and before publication, you should not only read through your work again, but also let others read it. It can be disheartening to spend years researching and writing a book and then discover a vital piece of information a week after the book has been printed, or to receive a poor review after publication. Whether you are writing a local history or a family history, ask someone who knows about the county where the history is set, or mostly set – a county archivist, a member of the county history or records society, the county family history society, or someone on the county Victoria County History team, for example. See if they can suggest someone who might be willing to read your book and provide you with some constructive feedback.

Once you have taken that feedback on board you are ready for the next stage of your journey. Another guide in this series 'Publishing your findings in print' can help with that.

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