

LHG Street Stories Research Training: February - May 2019

By Peter and Sarah Earl

We had done a very limited amount of research on previous owners of our house about 30 years ago at The Maltings, the previous home of the East Sussex Records Office. This had consisted mainly of sifting through the numerous Kelly's directories. Then our daughters arrived...

However, when the opportunity arose to go on LHG's House/Street History Research course, although we hadn't had street research at the top of our agenda, it ascended swiftly and we enrolled. We were particularly grateful that we could do the course together as it put us 'on the same page'. It is often more effective as implementation is more likely when the load is shared and there is mutual encouragement, as the research journey can be a bit lonely and frustrating at times.

Day 1

Day one of the course was at The Keep with 16 members present, each interested in investigating the story of a street or house.

Introductions. The first challenge was trying to fit in what street/house/area we were planning to research; what had inspired us; what hurdles we anticipated; and what we expected to learn from the course into a two-minute introduction; a tall order.

Three Street Story case studies were next, giving fascinating explanations of how they had tackled their projects. Chapel Hill's Mary Benjamin, Sun Street's Rosemary Page and Heather Downie of South Street took us expertly through the highs and lows of their unique research journeys. They were full of tips on how to avoid pitfalls. We admit we were slightly relieved that our area, East Street and Albion Street, only really started developing in 1790 and 1820 respectively, so we won't have to address the idiosyncrasies of earlier records, though it's all part of the fun for many.

We also began to realise, having done a bit of academic research before, that you really must think a few things through before you start, like how you are going to record your findings. Quickly we decided that we must get hold of the generic template forms developed by LHG members, rather than plough our own furrow. There was also another unexpected topic raised: how to handle sensitive information about living people or families that you might come across, e.g. in the 1911 census records for example. That had never crossed our minds.

Led by Ian McClelland, we then brainstormed topics and angles we could include in our projects. Again, this was all new to us.

After lunch, we were treated to a fascinating session from Andrew Lusted, an archivist with huge local knowledge, on how to do research and how The Keep could help us. For instance, he showed us Colin Brent's books of individual street records and for each person he had identified a relevant item to get us started.

For us, one of the most salient points Andrew made was about the importance of preserving documents for posterity, which made us think that the bonfire archives which we currently hold, should be deposited in the more secure environment at The Keep.

Day 2

The second day was also at The Keep, in groups of eight this time. It was a hands-on session using reference room PCs. Drew Boulton, the archivist, was incredibly well informed and experienced in this area and gave us confidence to set about exploring relevant areas on the internet. He covered how to use The Keep's online catalogue and ordering system and how to find the resources suggested earlier by Andrew Lusted. The aim was for everyone to order at least two original items to view and see the ordering process from start to finish.

For us this was fascinating and we managed to uncover some deeds for properties in East Street, and also some maps.

Day 3

The next part was a couple of hours in the Sussex Archaeological Society library. We climbed the creaky polished stairs of Barbican House to find another world of maps and books. The wonderful voluntary staff, Esme and Gill, shared their vast experience and knowhow so generously. It was especially interesting to learn the value of tithe maps and began to understand what we could glean from the many other maps SAS holds, and where to search for more in other repositories.

Old documents can be quite emotional to handle, like the 1901 census return for our own house that was given to us by Gill. You suddenly realise that you are only 'passing through' as generations have before you.

Day 4

The final afternoon was held at Lewes Library where we were warmly welcomed and accommodated by Michele Brooker and her assistant. On the recently refurbished upper floor, they took us round the local history section and showed the databases available for free: Find My Past, Ancestry and the British Newspaper Archive. This software overlaps with that available at The Keep and might allow us to work nearer home.

We were quite amazed at the wealth of resources still available, especially given the cuts. They are obviously operating with much-reduced staff levels and rely on volunteers to assist the public with research, but there is still a vast quantity of material.

We must conclude by saying how grateful we are to all the people mentioned, including Jane Lee, who did so much towards the logistics, and to any anonymous 'others' who worked behind the scenes to make this course happen. It was invaluable and we feel rather indebted, so much so, that we have agreed to put on a little exhibition in the Town Hall's Yarrow Room as part of Heritage Open Days on the 15 September. Thanks to everyone.

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