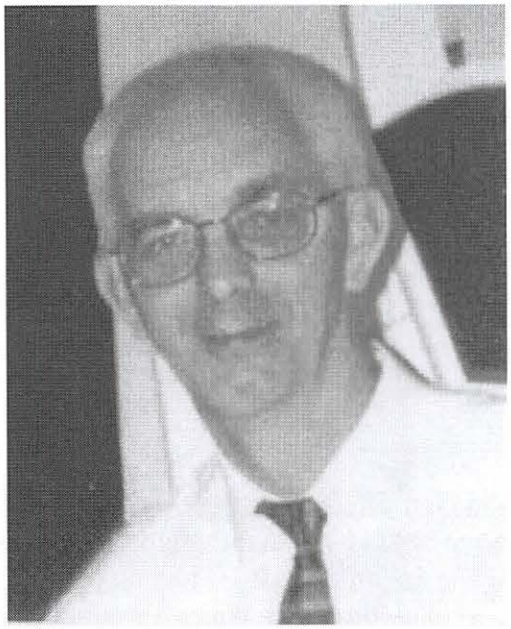

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DON GRANT LECTURE - 2001

IT GETS EASIER EVERY DAY

Michael Gandy

This lecture was first given in 2000 and has been republished without alteration. See how many items you can spot which were right up-to-date only eight years ago but have already been superseded!

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Like a lot of people these days I spend a lot of time in a darkened office sitting in front of a computer screen. I press a button and up whirrs the screen; windows come up and go down and blocks of words move about from one file to another.

Most of my research is in London. At the Family Record Centre I go upstairs and key into the IGI or the 1881 census on CD-ROM. The other censuses, wills and nonconformist registers are on microfilm. Downstairs I can sit at another computer and key into the Scottish Birth, Marriage and Death Indexes, ordering my certificates without getting off my chair. Only two hundred yards away almost every Church of England register in London is on microfilm, together with Bishops Transcripts, Poor Law material, Boards of Guardians records and a complete run of Trade Directories all on open access. Shelves of history books will help me fill in the background and thousands of other documents are two floors down waiting to be ordered. For more than thirty years the archivists and volunteers have been trying to make it easier for me to find what I want.

The same situation is repeated in archive after archive. The Guildhall Library, the Historical Manuscripts Commission, the British Library, local studies libraries, specialist archives and the list goes on and on. I can go over to the Mormon Library and search through the Irish indexes or the registers of Jamaica, Barbados or Mauritius. I can order films for the Protestant registers of France or the parishes my Swedish ancestors came from. At the Society of Genealogists I can see pretty well every record publication ever produced in the UK and almost every film which is for sale. I can even check New Zealand material to see where my missing cousins have got to!

At the Public Record Office the majority of the most used sources are also on open access in microform. The calendars to an enormous number of other documents have been computerised so that I can turn up entries at the touch of a button which no amount of casual searching would ever have found.

When I used to marvel at progress a few years ago people would always say: 'Well, that's OK if you can get to London'. Since the arrival of the Internet a great deal of this material can be searched, not only without coming to London but without leaving your own home. In Australia you can now search many of the London sources as easily as I can. We can all call up answers on screen which, only a couple of years ago, would have needed a letter and when I first became interested would have needed a couple of weeks boat trip.

The magic of computers never fails to impress me. I haven't got the least bit blasé about them yet. I still think to myself - What a wonderful world!

I began tracing as a child. I was a Londoner and my mother's ancestry was almost all in South East London, where I came from, or only a few miles out in nearby Kent and Surrey. I had to make distant excursions to Tottenham in North London, which was a very long way to go, and later on, I had the dubious achievement of being the only person in England who didn't watch England win the World Cup in 1966. I left all my friends round the telly and spent the afternoon in Edmonton Parish Church going through the registers.

On the other hand for me my father's ancestry, from Lancashire and Cheshire, was basically impossible. Nothing was copied, nothing was available, I would have had to go north and I couldn't. That side just had to wait - for years!

In those days almost all registers were still in the churches. I had to phone round almost every Vicar, persuade him to let me see the registers, make a date and cycle out there. Each parish was different. One Vicar - no names, no pack drill - sat me down with some of the registers and went looking for one which I needed and he couldn't find. Suddenly he found it - under a corner of the piano where one of the castors had come off!

Sometimes visiting the churches worked to my advantage. One churchwarden was a man in his late 70s - older than my grandfather. He sat with me - that was the rule - and found out who I was looking for. In his youth he lived in the same street as my grandfather's grandparents and was at school with various cousins. He was able to tell me all sorts of things about the family, the street and the town. It slowed down searching the registers - but who cares!

In those days, of course, there were no photocopies. Everything had to be written out by hand and a fair copy made at home. There were hardly any indexes either. When you found out the mother's maiden name or married off one of the sisters - you just had to make another appointment and go over all the ground again.

All the other parish material - poor law, tithe maps, glebe terriers - was in the parish chest. We still use the phrase 'parish chest' as an image but these were the real thing. Sometimes they were metal and fairly modern but usually they were a big, heavy centuries-old wooden chest, somewhere towards the back of the cold church.

At Somerset House certificates were only 3s 9d with 1s 6d for a five year search. Our old money may not mean much to you but in the mid 60s my pocket money was 10 shillings a week to cover bus fares and school dinners as well as enjoying myself. The galleries with the volumes of indexes were fairly empty but the births from the 1880s and 90s were in a corner and if three people were trying to use them you had a crush.

Not that most family historians were using them. Being in their 60s or 70s themselves they were born in the 1890s so that period didn't count as family history to them. I fortunately still had plenty of elderly relatives born in the 1880s, some in the 1870s. My great grandparents were all dead but a number of their brothers and sisters were still alive. On every side there was reliable information back to the 1820s and on some lines much further. On a couple of lines I didn't make any more progress for years. It took me thirty years to find the marriage of William and Ann Gandy. Ann's birth date was in a book we had - but not her maiden name! One great aunt told me her grandmother's maiden name. She was wrong, and I soon found that out, but it wasn't until the 1881 census index came out that I found a sister who had

married someone with that name. Everybody on one side of the family said that John Martin was press-ganged and served on the *Victory* - I still can't find him.

As regards the census the only ones available were 1841, 1851 and 1861. You searched the originals and there were no indexes. Searching a village, of course, was no more trouble then than it is now. We now have excellent indexes to 1851 (and 1881) but this is an area where searches can still be long and unrewarding. There are still very few name indexes to the great cities in 1861 and 1871 - but at least we have excellent street indexes.

Bishops Transcripts and other ecclesiastical material were in the Diocesan Record Office. Some of these were well enough organised but one - again, no names, no pack drill - was run by the diocesan lawyer and the offices were in the Cathedral Precincts. The managing clerk would take you up to the portcullis room to fetch what you wanted - if you could find it. Half-unwrapped paper parcels were all over the dusty floor from the last time anyone had looked for anything. You could have what you could carry and a secretary moved her typewriter over so you could work on a corner of her desk. If you wanted anything else you probably couldn't have it: it depended whether the clerk had a client in or was just 'busy'. The charge for half a day was half a guinea.

On the other hand they gave you a cup of tea while you worked and I dare say you could have smoked.

The great changes came in the 1970s. First of all - photocopies. Most of my old ones have faded now but what a boon at the time! Then microfilms, family history societies and the Mormon IGI. The first one was tiny compared to the one we have now but it was still a godsend. There was a computer problem even then. An enormous number of London marriages were said to have taken place at West Drayton, a country parish now more or less covered by Heathrow Airport. There were similar blips in other counties. Lots of Berkshire events were said to be recorded at Thatcham Independent Chapel.

Then Mormon Family History centres began to open. Suddenly we had access to the great collection at Salt Lake City and you could send for films so cheaply it can hardly have covered the cost of postage. In the 1960s and early 70s I had slowly gathered my Swedish ancestors by sending a few pounds to Sweden at a time and letters in broken Swedish. Suddenly I was able to look at the census registers themselves, the marvellous year-by-year *husforhorslangden,* and follow up the descendants of the brothers and sisters on lines I couldn't possibly have afforded to pay for.

In 1979 the *Parochial Measures Act* encouraged parishes to deposit their old material in the County Record Offices. Only a very small number of parishes complied with the strict standards required to keep their own registers. All at once you could do a ten-year blanket search of twenty small parishes in a morning.

The new family history societies had now begun to get their projects under way. Gravestones were usually the priority and a very large number of country churchyards were copied. This work has largely died away. In the towns we still have vast cemeteries where no attempt has been made to copy the stones. This is a pity but at least the cemetery registers are available, often microfilmed and sometimes indexed. We can find the family plots without having to browse the whole cemetery.

In the 1970s many marriage registers had been systematically indexed. Some of these indexes have been superseded by the IGI but Mormon coverage is still very low in some counties.

Strays indexes were also set up and the National Strays Clearing House published a number of fiche. This work goes on steadily and produces odd entries in places you would not have thought to look. The Hertfordshire Strays Index recently produced two of my ancestors marrying in one of the City of London churches in 1710. They both gave their home parishes and their children were all born in Hertfordshire. I shall probably never know why they got married in central London.

Until the 1970s the only genealogical societies in England were in London and Birmingham. Their magazines both offered the standard Members' Interests but in 1971 Frank Leeson and Malcolm Pinhorn revived the idea of an 'International Genealogical Directory'. In 1976 the *Siouthern Counties Register* brought together the interests of a number of societies. This was followed by the National Genealogical Directory in 1979 which was itself superseded some years later by the vast Australian Genealogical Research Directory. This was the first truly nternational work and marked the point at which everybody recognised that we all have the same ancestors, whichever country the descendants now live in. A few years later John Perkins developed the idea of advertising family interests in terms of where the ancestors lived rather than which societies the descendants had joined. In the early 1990s there was an attempt to advertise the families you know about, rather than the families you want to know about. This did not work quite so well and all the means of exchanging information between researchers are being revolutionised by the Internet.

In the early 1980s as wel, Michael and Mary Armstrong established Family Tree Magazine, a straightforward glossy available through newsagents. This was welcomed and, despite a few competitors, continues to be the best expression of informal opinion. *Practical Family History* caters systematically for beginners.

As to the home-computer revolution, desk-top publishing, CD-ROMs, everything is going so fast it is hard to keep up. The Mormons recently brought out a new Vital Records Listing which I bought by post for £13.00, the price of an ordinary meal out. It arrived one morning and stole three days of my life. So many South Lancashire registers had been indexed. New ancestors were rushing at me from every corner and when I had finished going through the Mormon material I had to hurry off and follow up the leads. Five generations of Hursts in Billinge and Upholland, two more generations of Daniels in Warrington; another generation of Plumptons at Huyton, not to speak of the Hertfordshire families which I still haven't had time to go into. I'm only human; I have to sleep sometimes.

In 1980 a BBC television programme called *Discovering Your Family Tree* brought tens of thousands of people into the hobby and their enthusiasm meant two things

- Record Offices began to see which side their bread was buttered. Not only did family historians justify expanded budgets, but the sheer numbers of people coming in to ask the same questions and use the same material meant that record offices had to re-organise in ways which were more user-friendly, with better catalogues, improved production times and late evening opening. On the other hand most original registers were withdrawn and microfilmed... Not always a blessing.

- Sheer person-power now meant that energetic societies could start big projects. Monumental Inscriptions and census indexes were the main ones. The Society of Genealogists began to expand its range of guides and the Federation of Family History Societies, fuelled by the commitment of Jeremy Gibson, began to produce its great stable of source guides. An unbelievable amount of work went into the little Federation guides to Record Offices, Local Newspapers, the Militia, Marriage, Census and other indexes, the

Hearth Tax, Bishops Transcripts, Coroners' Records, the Poor Law and so on but the work only needed doing once and has stood the test of time.

More and more private individuals also began indexes; coastguards, shoemakers, bargees, all the 101 specialists categories works that we can hardly keep track of. These all added to the work of the parish register societies, county record societies and the local history societies - hundreds of them - whose world had expanded along with ours - all concentrating on the common man - our ancestors.

Up until the 1960s most work had been on gentry and middle class families and on the records which were easily available, especially wills and marriage licences. Moreover, for the reason referred to before, almost all work was before 1837. The massive job, and the logistics of searching parish registers kept most genealogists fully occupied until the Mormons suddenly arrived on the scene and did so much of the work for us. Many people just didn't realise that poor people in the towns could be traced and families which had come up in the world didn't necessarily want to go delving in what Bernau had originally called 'The Genealogy of the Submerged'.

The release of the later censuses opened up research in the 19th century and we can now run easily from a new census entry to the birth certificates or baptisms of the children. We can get at the parish registers, the poor law records, the military records, even newspapers are beginning to get a little more accessible. Only the original registers of births, marriages and deaths are as inaccessible as ever, and even that is only a question of money. You can have as many certificates as you like if your pocket is deep enough.

So now every day we get something wonderful. Sources we could not possibly have searched are suddenly indexed and take no time at all. Plenty of baptisms and marriages after 1837 are on the IGI so that we don't have to work completely in the dark even where the GRO indexes are involved. They themselves are on microfiche (so no more hernias) and available all over the world.

The same applies to the indexes to post 1858 wills; here again our complaints are about cost, not accessibility.

Almost the whole of the 1851 census is now indexed and the wonderful national sort for 1881 is producing ancestors in places we never dreamed of. It's ideal for finding young people away from home. For me it has produced one ancestor in hospital, another as a housekeeper miles away from her home territory, a policeman living near Trafalgar Square and endless lost brothers and sisters. Someone I know was delighted to find a missing ancestor, despite the fact that he was in Parkhurst, a national prison for serious offenders! Family historians don't care what their ancestors did as long as their birthplace is stated!

I have already praised the Mormon IGI to the skies. Yes, I know its shortcomings. Use it carefully but if ever you get impatient go and search a couple of years of baptisms in Manchester Cathedral and remind yourself what research used to be like. Indeed, go and search a couple of years of burials in Stepney, East London, and remind yourself what research still is like sometimes.

The biggest problem remains finding burials. The Federation of Family History Societies' National Burial Index is the most exciting development we have to look forward to. It will revolutionise city work - though we shall probably find that half the people we think we're descended from died young!

In the services too, there have been marvellous developments. Many years ago Jim Beckett indexed all Chelsea Pensioners 1806-1838. Now we have every soldier who lived to discharge 1760-1854 in one enormous index. Every mid 19th century merchant seaman on one series of microfilms, 40% of First World War soldiers in a series of microfilms which will cost an estimated 40 million pounds. The 1881 census project cost 22 million pounds - and we all gave our time free! Who would have imagined that a hobby like ours could command such sums of money.

Every soldier who died in the First War is now on CD-ROM. Every Commonwealth War Grave can now be accessed through the Internet.

At the Internet the mind boggles. Everyone I meet and every journal I read gives new sites. At first, everything I wanted to log onto said 'Cannot make the connection' and every question I asked got 'We have found 9800 possibilities. Here are the first ten' but that happens much less now.

Are there any disadvantages? Yes, I'm afraid there are. The most dangerous seems to me the proliferation of bad research. People are putting together trees from indexes, especially the IGI, as though they were complete, linking entries without proof just because the screen brings them up. This is especially true for people who don't know the geography and haven't done their historical background reading. Family history is full of intelligent people who ran successful careers but they were teachers, engineers, doctors, insurance agents. That doesn't mean they make good historians.

Too many go-getting genealogists are in a hurry. Rush, rush: magic words, computer, internet, e-mail attachment, print-outs, look, my family goes back to William the Conqueror and I only logged on half an hour ago.

Oh, God, Grandma, are you still tracing our ancestry? Boring! My friend got his off the Internet last night.

Evaluate, absorb. There is no point downloading it into your computer if you haven't downloaded it into your brain. Take your time. Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest. Anyway, what's the point if someone else gave you the ancestry. The fun is doing it yourself. Would you like to be given a book of crossword puzzles - with the answers all filled in!

Some activities are meant to be done, not finished.

The increased interchange of information means that more people are sending each other rubbish. High quality technology does not mean high quality research. If you traced it yourself you know why it's right. But if someone else sent it to you, you don't know whether it's right or not. The more they send you, the less you read it.

Unfortunately the later editions of the Mormon IGI, especially the Addendum, have a lot of pure guesswork. You see different guesses by different descendants indexed next to the actual fact fed in from a parish register. The fact that you have an age at death does not allow you to state the year of birth. Some computer programmes won't allow for alternative dates (e.g. 1741/2) which compounds the problem.

The birth years given in the 1881 census index are an example. They are deduced from ages which may not be accurate and, as the census was taken in early April, statistically about a

quarter of them are certain to be wrong. Why build in guesswork with such a high rate of error? Because they created a computer programme which demanded a birth year but was quite happy with a wrong one.

Most of the records we use weren't made for family history. Some give definite facts - wills, gravestone, leases for three lives. Censuses give some firm facts but, for example, the wife of the head may not be the mother of the children. Parish registers are our most important source before 1837 but they are intrinsically untrustworthy. We get a series of baptisms with the same parents and assume they are brothers and sisters, then we find a marriage five months before the first child and assume it is the marriage of the parents. Any lawyer would drive a coach and horses through most of our trees. When you go to the IGI you don't get a tree; you get a theory. Your earliest ancestor is the earliest one you have proved. You are not descended from people just because you'd like to be.

Indexes create errors. We use transcripts and indexes and they help us cover the ground really quickly. But what if they're wrong? Entries are missed out; entries are misread; last-minute editing on screen means that the index says page 96 but the entry has been pulled forward to page 95.....

Everything has mistakes. Some are fatal. In a recent transcript of 17th century records every entry in 'in' has been read as 'ni'. Robnison, Parknison, Hodgknison, Wnistanley, even Smipkni. Are you descended from the ancient Lancashire family of Smipkni? No, neither is anyone else.

The 1881 census national sort is a great eye-opener. We really took trouble over that. Now every entry for the whole country is in one index - and there are still people we can't find. This is not the place to go into the difficulties of handwriting, just to point out that *in context* we could probably tell whether a name is Barton, Borton or Burton; in an index we are dependent on someone else's decision. A Hemming I was recently looking for turned up under Flemming. In another census the family are given as Hemms - but I know it is the right family. In the baptism registers some of them are recorded as Emin, which is what they would have actually said.

Indexes are marvellous when they find what you're looking for but they can't be trusted as evidence of what isn't there. As regards English General Registration Michael Foster has recently shown how faulty the early indexes are. Peter Park showed how many false entries there are and Josie McCann showed how many deaths may not have been registered during epidemics because everybody else in the family was ill as well. We realised many years ago how many births weren't registered in the early years and how many marriages took place after (some of) the children were born (though we can't blame the record makers for that!).

Nor can we blame the record makers for the fact that ages at death are unreliable. One of my ancestors died in 1903. Her death certificate says she was 73, the memorial card says 81 and the newspaper obituary says 97! In the context of a small village she was easy to find because I *didn't* have to recognise her through the GRO indexes. I would certainly have discounted a woman of 73 as being too young to have married in 1840, as I knew she did.

One thing computers haven't done is eliminate paper. I went to a talk recently where a photographic expert was showing the marvellous things you could do to old photographs. Many of them were fundamentally dishonest - inserting people from one photograph into another, adding and removing moustaches and so on but he also made it clear that none of the wonderful technology is going to last. The photographs will fade, the computer programs will

be outdated and the computers themselves will go on the scrap-heap. How will you read a CD-ROM when they stop making the machines?

Print everything out. Get it on paper - or one day, very soon, you'll lose it.

Some people throw their hands up: 'I've got a pile of paper this high!'. I am not impressed. If you've got a pile of paper this high then you've got teenage bedroom syndrome and it's time you tidied up. Take charge of your family history before it takes charge of you. Throw away most of what you've got.

What do you need?

What are we doing this for? Ourselves, for our own interest. Most of us also have a sort of feeling we are doing it for the rest of the family. They don't seem very grateful but every now and then they take a bit of an interest. Family history for your grandchildren is like any other Christmas present. You have to give people what they want, not what you want them to want.

One day your sister or your son is going to ask 'How's the research going? Found anything interesting?' They don't want to know much and you've got about a quarter of an hour maximum before it's time for somebody else to talk about their holiday or their new car or their illness.

In my opinion you need the following. Obviously it's going to develop and change but keep the material up to date and basically you should have this more or less to hand at any time:

- The tree. This is what they want to see. An old fashioned tree like in history books. Not too big and not too much on it and they won't care about distant ancestral families they've never heard of. Their name; mum's name, tree showing descent from someone famous or interesting. What do you most want to tell them? Have your spiel ready and have the right tree available. If you have to go upstairs for twenty minutes to print it out then you've lost the opportunity. I keep my trees in a nice display case. Looks impressive to have lots but just show them a couple. How much do you want to know about their hobbies?

- A full ancestry chart. Parents, grandparents etc. 2, 4, 8, 16, 32 etc. How far back does it go? How would we do at a pedigree dog show? This may not be very impressive if you can't get beyond Grandpa on one side but you don't have to have one of the printed trees which show up the gaps. Draw your own and design it so that the illegitimacies don't show.

- The evidence. No-one is interested in this except you and other family historians but it has to be drawn up properly. Certificates, censuses, parish registers, other extracts. Each family's evidence kept separately. You know you could prove the tree - but none of your relatives will ask you to. They'll take it on trust. They won't mind hearing about one problem you're working on at the moment - but only one, so make it interesting and short. Remember we have different standards from ordinary people. We don't mind what our ancestors did as long as they get in the records - but a lot of people don't feel like that. Not everybody thinks bastardy and cholera in slums is fun. If you tell them something they don't like, they won't ask again.

- The heirlooms. The juicy bits. Are there photographs, medals, a diary? Copies are fine. Old documents are interesting but here again, just a few. Put copies in the right place with your evidence and keep the originals together so you can bring them out at a moment's notice. Basically, prepare your presentation in advance.

- Lastly, the family history. This isn't something to bring out at a party. You write this slowly over a period of time. Don't write a historical novel. Say what they did but don't say why they did it or what they thought about it unless you have direct evidence. Put in background history but don't write a History of the English-Speaking Peoples and How Our Family was Present at Every Major Event including the Birth of Jesus. Picture of a typical soldier; picture of the dockyard; map of the area. If you write too much they won't read it. Nice clear trees but not too much genealogy. Those reports that computers generate are so uninteresting even we can't be bothered to read them. If anyone sends me a cascade tree I don't even unfold it.

The last chapters are the most personal, because they are about you. Lots of people intend to write something about themselves one day but never get round to it because they don't know where to start...

It doesn't matter where you start. You are not being tested. Write a number of short essays on wet afternoons; any order; anything you think of. Start yourself off with a good sentence and then just go for stream of conscience.

I went to such and such a school....
Our neighbours....
The day I started work.....
I didn't like it much in the Army....
I had lots of boyfriends before I met your father....
My best friend when I was young....
We used to visit Grandma every Saturday....

Anything will do to start you off and strangely enough I think this is the nicest part of the work. Don't tell your children. Put the notebooks away in an envelope and mark it. 'My Life History: not to be thrown away'. They'll keep it and in thirty years time they'll probably enjoy reading it. This is their real family history. They'll be your age and they'll look at things quite differently. Maybe for the first time in their life, they'll actually listen to what you have to say.