



Anglo-Celtic Roots

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***Illuminating the Past: Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for
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The British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa acknowledges that its activities take place in the ancestral homeland of Indigenous peoples who have inhabited these lands for millennia. We acknowledge the enduring presence here of all First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. We recognize the importance of bringing awareness and understanding of our diverse nation's past to all, and we promote research and education programs that bring us together as Canadians.

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Cover Illustration: Pictou Island East End Lighthouse, about 1905, with family of Andrew McFarlane who succeeded the Hoggas as keeper.
Source: Author's collection

From the Editor:

In this edition, Nancy Fraser recounts the life of Andrew Hogg, who was born in Scotland and, at 19, emigrated to Canada where he worked as a stonemason and keeper of the Pictou Island lighthouse in Nova Scotia.

Our WW I story from the No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station is about 2nd Lieutenant Earl Henry Mulley, a very young aviator who signed on at just 16 and was killed in action before he reached 18.

The Techniques and Resources section this time includes three articles—the first being Pam Cooper's review of Irish research resources in the Ottawa Branch OGS Library, including the exciting new *Townland Atlas of Ulster*.

The second is something completely different—an introduction to Artificial Intelligence (AI) for genealogists—written by AI!

And the final article looks at the research capabilities of *Ancestry* (the website and software), which together with *MyHeritage*, *Findmypast*, and *FamilySearch* make up the “Big Four” genealogy websites.



Paul Cripwell

From the President



In June we wrap up our 30th anniversary year. We celebrated by reprising some of the most popular talks from the past; these excellent and frequently recalled talks were not recorded at the time, which meant they weren't available for viewing. Presenting them a second time, and recording them, has preserved them in our video library. During the year we also shone a spotlight on BIFHSGO projects undertaken over the three decades, and we recognized the volunteers who spent so many hours working on them.

The year culminated with an Award of Merit, which we were delighted to receive in May from the National Genealogical Society (NGS) for "exceptional contributions to the field of genealogy over a period of five or more years that have significantly aided research or increased interest in genealogy." Organized in 1903 in Washington, D.C. and currently based in Maryland, the NGS was the first national genealogical organization to be established in the U.S.A.; it has a long history of leading the way in genealogy and genealogical education.

The citation reads:

"The British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa (BIFHSGO) is recognized for its outstanding work to connect, educate, share, and inspire people in the pursuit of genealogy. It supports researchers in Canada and beyond with effective research methods and practices focused on the British Isles. Its broad scope of programming includes in-person meetings, online education, publications, indexes to special populations of those of British Isles descent, and access to presentations of international speakers. The BIFHSGO continues to provide its members valuable content, a vibrant community of fellow researchers, and access to high-quality resources."

More information about the nomination—and the award—is on the BIFHSGO website.

Congratulations to all who contributed to that "outstanding work" over the last three decades and who continue to deliver the many activities recognized in the citation. This is your award.

On to the next 30 years!



Dianne Brydon

Andrew Hogg Seeks Opportunities: From Dumfriesshire, Scotland to Pictou, Nova Scotia, and Bytown, Canada West[©]

BY NANCY FRASER



Nancy has been researching family history since discovering a family Bible in her parents' basement long ago. She joined BIFHSGO while practising medicine in Yellowknife, when research required patiently awaiting microfilms and mail responses from archivists, librarians, and distant cousins. Having retired and moved back to Ottawa for the third time she is now turning to travel and writing.

In 1831, 19-year-old Andrew Hogg crossed the ocean from Canonbie Parish, Dumfriesshire, Scotland to Pictou County, Nova Scotia with his family.¹ His uncle, teacher James Hogg, had emigrated there about 15 years earlier and likely encouraged his family to join him.² Economic depression and social changes after the Napoleonic wars also motivated emigration during the Lowland Clearances.³ Andrew's cousin in Canonbie wrote about the problems of family tenant farmers, describing evictions and intolerable rent increases by their landlords:

But with all their improvements I do not think the Canonbie farmers are getting much richer but rather the other way. There is scarcely a Whitsunday comes that some of them are not losing their farms.

Your Aunt Betty has taken the Langholm Town Head again this year at £184. Last year it was £150. William Beattie, Clogger, took Bilman's Knowe five years ago and has had it every year since but he loses it this year. He has taken the Scotsdyke at £47 more than last year's rent.⁴

Fourth Child of Pictou Couple Born in Canada West

Andrew and his Irish-born wife, Jane Beaty (Figures 1 and 2), raised nine children in Pictou County, Nova Scotia, but surviving Nova Scotia



Figure 1: Andrew Hogg (1813–1885).

Source: Author's collection



Figure 2: Jane Beaty (1818–1895).

Source: Author's collection

marriage records, which are sporadic, did not reveal their marriage.⁵ Jane's family and journey to Pictou County were a mystery. Andrew and Jane's children were:

1. Eleanor A. Hogg, born May 1843, Pictou⁶
2. Robert Hogg, born April 1845, Pictou⁷
3. Susan Hogg, born 25 August 1850, Pictou⁸
4. Sarah Jane Hogg, born 13 July 1852, Canada West (now Ontario)⁹
5. James William Hogg, born 17 September 1853, Pictou¹⁰
6. Elizabeth Hogg, born 7 November 1856, Pictou¹¹
7. Isabella Ross Hogg, baptized 22 March 1857 and died, age 7, on 13 July 1864, Pictou Island¹²
8. Howard Primrose Hogg, born in 1859 and died, age 2, on 30 March 1861, Pictou¹³
9. John David Ross, born 27 Oct 1860 to Rev. Duncan Ross and Isabella Hogg (sister of Andrew). Andrew and Jane Hogg adopted him.¹⁴

The list of children reveals an anomaly: Sarah Jane was born in Ontario (then Canada West) while her siblings were born in Pictou, Nova Scotia. Was this a mistake? Four subsequent census enumerations support Sarah's Ontario birthplace,¹⁵ although the 1891 Census conflicts with the others, showing a birthplace of Nova Scotia (indicated by ditto marks), an age discrepancy of about three years and a wrong maternal birth country. The household domestic possibly gave

misinformation to this enumerator.¹⁶ The 1891 Census information is uncorroborated and not a significant conflict. Adoption from Ontario was not likely, as John David Ross is clearly marked as adopted on the 1871 Census and Sarah Jane's entry has no such notation.¹⁷ Sarah Jane was born in 1852 in Ontario.

Marriage in Bytown

The Hogs were Presbyterian.¹⁸ To help me with research on an unrelated line, I have a book of transcriptions of baptisms, marriages and burials at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Ottawa. On the unlikely chance that in all of Ontario (then Canada West) Sarah Jane was baptised at that church, I checked the index. No baptism was recorded—but, there was an entry for the 1836 marriage of Andrew Hogg and Jane Beatty [sic]!¹⁹ The City of Ottawa Archives supplied the original registration (Figure 3).

Jane, who was 18 at the time of her marriage, likely lived in Bytown with her family, but Andrew needed significant reasons to travel to Ontario. The trip from Pictou to Bytown in the early 1800s was onerous. Roads were nasty trails often barely passable by horses.²⁰ Railroads did not exist. Steamboat travel up the St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers was available only from May to November. The deck fare for the 900-mile journey was \$16, equivalent to about \$600 today.

Passengers could opt for a cabin for a 50 percent premium.²¹ At about five miles per hour the voyage would take at least eight days, not counting stops at ports en route, for weather events and to pick up wood to drive the engines. Immigrants from Britain remarked that the

Andrew Hogg of Bytown in the
Bathurst District of the Province of
Upper Canada, Mason, and
Jane Beatty of Bytown in the
District and Province aforesaid,
Spinster, were by Licence from
His Excellency the Lieut Governor
Sir Francis David Hood, Knight
to be married by me on
this seventh day of October,
eighteen hundred and thirty
six years John Priesthouse
Minister
Amy Christie
W. H. S. S.

Figure 3: Andrew Hogg and Jane Beatty [sic] marriage registration, 1836.

Source: St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church (Ottawa, Ontario). Digital image from City of Ottawa Archives

crowding, disease and drunkenness on the riverboats were worse than what they had experienced during the ocean crossing.²²

A Young Man's Death Connects Andrew to Bytown Kin

Investigation of an obituary unexpectedly revealed Andrew's motivation to make the trip to Bytown.

Researching my Pictou ancestors while living in Yellowknife in the 1990s, I developed relationships with keen local genealogist historians who found records beyond those I had located and requested, such as this obituary published in 1835 in Pictou:

On the 17th ult., at Bytown, U.C., in the 27th year of his age, Mr. William Hogue, a native of the Parish of Cannoby, Dumfriesshire. His conduct was regular and pious; he has left a widow and numerous acquaintances to lament their loss.²³

William Hogue and Bytown had no connection to my research at the time, but that obituary was a nagging loose end. The subsequent discovery that my Andrew Hogg, also of Canonbie, Dumfriesshire, had married in Bytown led to the identification of William.

William Hogg was born in 1808 in Canonbie Parish, Dumfriesshire, Scotland to John Hogg and Jannet Henderson.²⁴ John Hogg was actually Andrew's paternal uncle and in 1821 was one of the first settlers of Nepean Township in Carleton County, then in Upper Canada.²⁵ John died in 1831, leaving his wife and seven children.²⁶ Andrew witnessed his cousin William's marriage in 1834.²⁷ It is therefore likely that Andrew's family in the Bytown area encouraged him to move to what is now Ontario around that time to pursue work opportunities as a stone mason.

Only a few years before Andrew's arrival, Bytown was viewed by Europeans as a nameless frontier outpost. When the Rideau Canal was completed in 1832, it was a tough lumbering village. The 1,000 inhabitants included transient labourers who had worked on the Canal and in the bush and who patronized "numerous taverns, gaming houses and brothels."²⁸ In the mid-1830s, when Andrew and Jane married, community development was discouraged by fighting between the Irish "Shiners" and French Canadians to take over the lumber industry and Bytown itself.²⁹ Farmers were reluctant to deliver provisions. Roads were muddy trails. No ditches, fences or sidewalks were in place.³⁰ Cholera struck in 1832 and 1836.³¹ But peace and order had improved by the 1840s.³²

A Network of Scottish Stonemasons in Bytown

Andrew joined the Ottawa Valley stonemason network. Thomas McKay, a Scottish stonemason, was a major contractor in early Bytown, starting with the Rideau Canal locks. He built Rideau Hall in 1838, as well as many civic and industrial structures.³³ He preferentially hired Scots, likely including Andrew.³⁴ In 1840 Andrew Hogg leased a lot at the corner of Daly Avenue and Waller Street from Louis-Théodore Besserer. In 1848 Andrew transferred his lease for the lot to James Robertson, also a stonemason, who in turn paid Thomas McKay.³⁵

In 1843 Bytown citizens enthusiastically celebrated the opening of the new suspension bridge across the Ottawa River, after seven years of relying on ferries. Alexander Christie, witness to Andrew and Jane's marriage, was the masonry contractor for the project.³⁶

John Gordon, the other witness to Andrew and Jane's marriage, was also a stonemason and contractor from Portage-du-Fort, further up the Ottawa River in Quebec.³⁷ His wife was Sarah Beaty, probably Jane Beaty's sister. Their parents, buried in the same grouping as Sarah and John Gordon in St. James Cemetery in Portage-du-Fort, were likely Elinor McCracken and James Beaty. The Beatys were born in Ireland and probably emigrated to Canada around 1828.³⁸ The Beaty, Gordon and Hogg families observed baptisms, marriages and burials at Ottawa's St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church which was built by Thomas McKay.³⁹ Andrew and Jane likely met through their interconnected family, religious and occupational circles.

Return to the Town of Pictou

Andrew and Jane likely returned to Pictou before their first child was born in 1843. For about 20 years they lived in the well-established bustling town of Pictou or in the nearby rural area of Hardwood Hill where his father farmed and built stone houses. Andrew continued working as a stonemason.⁴⁰ Around 1852, Jane, with or without Andrew and their three young children, returned to Ontario where Sarah Jane was born. No document states her specific birthplace, but Bytown was most likely. Jane possibly went home as her parents in Portage-du-Fort were unwell, given that her widowed mother died there in 1859.⁴¹ Jane was back in Pictou by 1853 when her next child was born.

A Mid-Life Change: Keeping the Light on Pictou Island

The lives of the Hogg family changed radically in 1863 when Andrew purchased four lots on Pictou Island (Figure 4 shows island location and Figure 5 shows lots on the island) from his older brother William and succeeded him as keeper of the Pictou Island East lighthouse⁴² (cover illustration).

The isolated island, about six miles long and two miles wide, lying about four miles from mainland Nova Scotia, required its inhabitants to be self-

sufficient. In the mid-19th century, small private fishing boats carried residents to the mainland in summer, at the mercy of the weather. In winter, when the Northumberland Strait was heavily iced, larger

steamships travelling between Prince Edward Island and Pictou Town took passengers and supplies onto the shore ice where residents would meet the steamers.⁴³ The

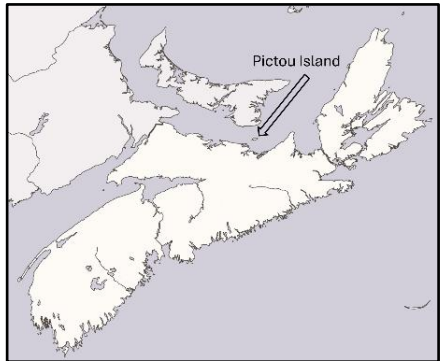


Figure 4: Location of Pictou Island.
Source: Wikipedia map

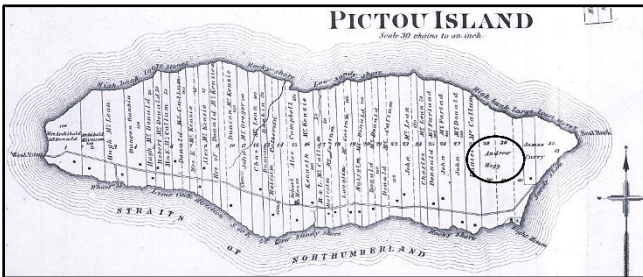


Figure 5: Map of Pictou Island, 1879. Source: PictouCounty.net at <https://pictoucounty.net/1879-pictou-island-map.php>

Island's 60 families sustained themselves through farming on 100-acre lots and fishing. Abundant lobsters were canned on the Island but were not favoured by the locals for eating. Plentiful apples, blueberries and cranberries were sold on the mainland for cash to buy flour, molasses, sugar and kerosene. Men cut wood for fences, lobster traps and houses. Women made candles, clothes and soap.⁴⁴ Children were homeschooled until a schoolhouse was built around 1865, when Andrew was a school trustee.⁴⁵

The Annual Report of the Department of Marine and Fisheries of Canada published Andrew Hogg's dramatic account of the night of 19 April 1876 at the Pictou Island East lighthouse. Andrew, Jane and three of their young adult children were likely present:

On the night of the 19th April, I lit the lamps at the usual hour, immediately after sundown. At half past-ten o'clock, I made my usual inspection of the lamps before going to bed. I found everything as usual. At 12 o'clock, a few minutes before my usual time of visiting the lantern, I was awakened by a loud explosion followed by several others. Upon rushing outdoors, I found the lantern one sheet of flame. After about twenty minute's hard work, we succeeded in subduing the fire, although we had scarcely any hopes of succeeding when we commenced. All the lamps are destroyed, the window glass broken, the ventilator blown off and broken, the stand burned down and the wood work charred. The copper metal on the floor is also destroyed. A piece of the lamp that exploded was thrown through the window a distance of about 40 yards. It weighed about 3 lbs.

Andrew retired in 1881, as knee arthritis prevented him from carrying out his duties.⁴⁶ After 18 years of service, his federal pension was \$165 annually, Andrew having earned an average yearly salary of \$460.⁴⁷ He augmented his retirement fund by selling his Pictou Island land to his son James, who became the third Hogg lighthouse keeper.⁴⁸

Retirement in Pictou Town

Andrew and Jane settled in Pictou Town for the rest of their lives. They owned lots on High (then Spring) and Coleraine streets in the town centre, close to the waterfront and the Prince Street Church.⁴⁹ Andrew died in 1885 and by 1891 Jane was living on Pictou Island again, in her son James' household with his wife and three "servants" who were likely employees of James' businesses—the lighthouse, a lobster canning factory and the farm.⁵⁰ After Jane died in 1895, their children, aside from Eleanor who died in 1903 in Trenton, Pictou County, scattered westward.⁵¹ James braved the Klondike gold rush then returned to Pictou.⁵² Sarah Jane and Elizabeth settled in British Columbia.⁵³ Susan had died in 1890 in Iowa.⁵⁴ Andrew, Jane and their son James, with his wife, are buried in Haliburton Cemetery, Pictou County.⁵⁵

Three Generations of Adventurers

Andrew Hogg embraced his family tradition of openness to new opportunities, moving from Scotland to Pictou, thence to Bytown and back to Pictou. His uncles previously paved the way from Canonbie in Scotland

to Pictou and Bytown. Jane travelled from Ireland to the Ottawa Valley before settling in Pictou. In 1862, in their late 40s, Andrew and Jane embraced new lives as lighthouse keepers and farmers on remote Pictou Island, retiring to Pictou Town 18 years later. After Andrew and Jane died, their children moved westward, continuing the Hogg Family's adventures.

©Nancy Fraser

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We Shall Remember Them[©]

BY MARCIA CLEMENT

Marcia is a retired federal public servant whose interest in genealogy began over 25 years ago, researching her own family roots. In 2018 she volunteered to work on the project documenting the lives of the soldiers who died at No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station in World War I. This biography is about an airman who lied about his age to enlist and whose service was very short.

2nd Lieutenant Earl Henry Mulley[©]

Regimental number: —

40th Squadron, Royal Air Force

born: 6 June 1901–died: 30 October 1918

Earl Henry Mulley lied about his age in order to join the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) as a cadet on 21 August 1917; he said he was 19 years and 11 months old.¹ In fact, Earl was just over 16 when he joined up. He was born on 6 June 1901, the son of Edmond Mulley and the former Mary Roney Dulea.² He was Edmond and Mary's second child, his sister Lillian Grace having been born in January 1899.³

Earl's father Edmond was born in Newfoundland in 1873; his mother Mary was born in the United States in 1875. Both were of Irish descent.⁴ They were married in Jackson, Michigan, on 9 April 1895⁵ before returning to Canada in 1898.⁶ The small family lived in the village of Norwich, Oxford County, in southwestern Ontario, where Edmond was a broom maker.⁷

By 1911, the family had grown considerably to include a brother, Wilfred Thomas, in 1903, and two more sisters, Edna and Eva, born in 1907 and 1910 respectively. Living with them also was Earl's paternal grandfather, Thomas Mulley, aged 76 at the time of the census. The family had also moved to the larger community of St. Catharines, Ontario,⁸ close to Lake Ontario.

When he joined the RFC in Toronto, Earl's attestation papers noted that he had previous military experience with the 19th Regiment.⁹ Authorized as the 19th Battalion Volunteer Militia (Infantry) in 1863, the unit became known as the 19th St. Catharines Regiment on 8 May 1900 and was redesignated the 19th Lincoln Regiment on 2 November 1912.¹⁰

Earl's previous civilian employment was described as a bookkeeper for a company in Thorold, not far from St. Catharines.

Earl undertook initial training in Canada.¹¹ After arriving in England in February 1918, he was promoted from cadet to probationary 2nd lieutenant in April. In May he was assigned to the No. 4 Training Depot Station at Hooten Park in Cheshire¹² and was confirmed as a 2nd lieutenant on 6 May 1918. Although it appears that he was assigned to No. 2 (Reconnaissance) Squadron in June, Earl was reassigned to the Central Flying School near Upavon, Wiltshire,¹³ on 3 September 1918 to be trained on the S.E.5, a biplane fighter aircraft.¹⁴

Earl was posted to No. 40 Squadron on 24 October 1918. Just six days later, on 30 October 1918, he was killed in a flying accident while on active service in France and was buried the following day in the Emerchicourt Communal Cemetery near Denain. His remains were later moved to Grave 15 at the Douai British Cemetery, in Cuincy, 30 km from Emerchicourt.¹⁵

In 1921 Earl's parents, Edmond and Mary, were living with his three younger siblings, Wilfred, Edna and Eva, at 29 Ambrose Street in St. Catharines,¹⁶ the home that Earl had shared with them before he signed up. No record could be found for the death of Earl's mother, but, by 1930, his father seems to have emigrated to the United States and was living in Wisconsin.¹⁷

In 1940 he petitioned for naturalization¹⁸ and by then had remarried, because he was living with his second wife, Augusta (Gustie).¹⁹ Edmond died in 1958 and is buried in Mountain Cemetery, Oconto County, Wisconsin.²⁰ Augusta died in 1974 and is buried beside him.²¹

Earl's elder sister Lillian married George Harper Buchanan on 30 June 1917 with Earl as a witness.²² Lillian (who preferred to be called Grace as a married woman) and her husband lived in St. Catharines for the rest of their lives; George died in 1961, but Grace lived into the 1990s. Both are buried in the Victoria Lawn Cemetery in St. Catharines.²³



Figure 1: Grave marker for 2nd Lieut. E. H. Mulley
Source: findagrave.com

George and Grace had one son, John, born in 1924,²⁴ who emigrated to the United States, where he died in California in 2000.²⁵

Earl's brother Wilfred, a bookkeeper, married Corinne Paquette, a photographer and widow, in Windsor, Ontario, on 26 October 1929.²⁶ By 1935, they were living in Toronto, where Wilfred was also working as a photographer.²⁷ By 1963, either Wilfred had passed away or he and Corinne were divorced, because Corinne was living on her own in the Windsor area.²⁸ She was still living there in 1974.²⁹

Edna Mulley moved to Buffalo, New York, as a student nurse at the Deaconess Hospital in 1929.³⁰ She married Jacob (Jack) Abraham Wolf (originally from Montreal, Quebec, but living in Buffalo) in Niagara Falls, Ontario, on 22 October 1933.³¹ Their daughter, Verona Joy, was born two years later.³² Jack served in the US Marines during World War II. He died in 1995 and was buried as a veteran in Willow Dale Cemetery in Bradford, Pennsylvania.³³ Edna lived in Buffalo until her death in 2005;³⁴ however, she chose to be buried in the Victoria Lawn Cemetery in her home town of St. Catharines. Her headstone is simply inscribed "Edna Mulley Wolf, 1907–2005, Daughter of Mary."³⁵

Earl's youngest sister Eva married Ralph Elmore Carbery in St. Catharines in 1934.³⁶ They had a son, whom they named for her brother Earl; he was born in Toronto on 9 January 1935 but died tragically of an accidental gunshot wound on 22 November 1944.³⁷ Eva and Ralph also emigrated to the United States; they were divorced in Volusia, Florida, in 1951.³⁸ Eva married Glenn M. Erick in Eden, New York, in 1952.³⁹

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- 10 "Guide to Sources Relating to the Canadian Militia (Infantry, Cavalry, Armored)," Library and Archives Canada (http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/Documents/RG9-58_EN-final.pdf: accessed 04 January 2019), entry for Ontario: The Lincoln Regiment, Page: 800.
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- ³² "1940 United States Federal Census," Ancestry (www.ancestry.com: accessed 21 January 2019), entry for Jack Wolf.
- ³³ "U.S., Find a Grave Index, 1600s–Current," Ancestry (www.ancestry.com: accessed 9 November 2018), entry for Jacob A. Wolf.
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Techniques and Resources

Exciting New Irish Resources at the Ottawa Branch OGS Library[©]

BY PAM COOPER

Pam volunteers with the Ottawa Branch OGS (Ontario Ancestors) Library.¹ It has three main focus areas reflecting the research interests of local family historians: Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec, the British Isles, and British Colonial America.

Over the past few months, many excellent resources have been added to the Ottawa Branch OGS Library, both via donations and by purchases made on behalf of BIFHSGO and the Ottawa Branch OGS. This article highlights some of the resources that are related to Ireland.

Townland Atlas of Ulster

The premier publishing event of 2024 for the genealogical community was the publication of the *Townland Atlas of Ulster* by the Ulster Historical Foundation (UHF), cover shown in Figure 1. The product of years of work, author Andrew Kane has produced an essential reference guide that will be of use to anyone researching the counties of Ulster.²

The hardcover atlas has 510 pages, with over 130 pages of full colour maps. Since its release in early December 2024, the first print run of the atlas sold out and a second run was available as of April this year. Dianne Brydon, BIFHSGO's president, contacted me in November to suggest purchasing the atlas for the Library. She had seen a prepublication proof on a recent research trip to Ireland and thought it would be a well-used resource in the Library. Having seen it, I am certain that it will be.

As Kane explains, the townland has been the basic building block of Irish administration since the 17th century. The *Atlas* catalogues and maps all of the more than 16,000 townlands in the nine historic counties of Ulster, including Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Monaghan and Tyrone. The key contribution of this book is how it identifies all the townlands and integrates them with the administrative units and systems into which they have been organized, including churches, estates, wills, voter registration, courts, workhouses, civil registration and more. This makes the *Townland Atlas of Ulster* an invaluable resource for family history researchers.

An introductory chapter outlines the history, significance and evolution of the townland as the smallest administrative unit of land in Ireland for centuries. The other administrative units, which the Atlas links to townlands, are introduced and explained; these include baronies and counties, civil parishes, tithes (reflected in the tithe applotment books), estates, registration districts and poor law unions, Ordnance Survey maps, Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic parishes and dioceses, and Griffith's Valuation survey, reflecting land ownership between 1847 and 1864. For each of these administrative systems, a detailed list or index is provided.

Finally, the maps and the list of over 16,000 townlands is the centrepiece of this work. The list of townlands cross-references each townland with

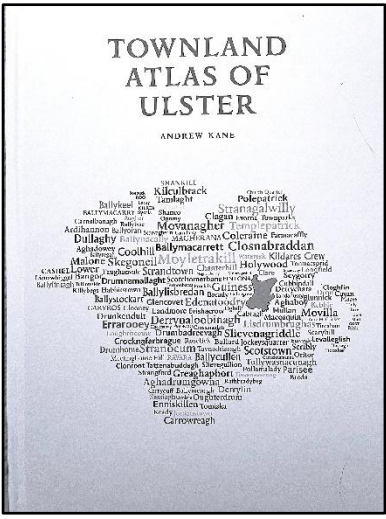


Figure 1: Cover of *Townland Atlas of Ulster*
Source: Author's picture

the map on which they are found, the county, civil parish, registration district, Ordnance Survey map, acreage of the townland, the name of the historic estate to which it was attached, the Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland parishes, and the landlord at the time of Griffith's Valuation. Knowing these for the townland of origin for someone you are researching will enable you to know where to look for other records, such as those held by civil or ecclesiastical administrative units, using the detailed lists mentioned above.

The *Atlas* concludes with a very helpful select bibliography of resources, copies of a number of which are held in the OBOGS Library collection. Other resources in the bibliography, particularly those published over 100 years ago, are out of copyright, so digital copies may be found online.

The resources included in the bibliography of the *Atlas* or referenced in its text that are already in the Library's collection include:

- *Every Stoney Acre has a Name: A Celebration of the Townland in Ulster*, edited by Tony Canavan, Federation for Ulster Local Studies, Belfast, 1992
- *Townlands in Ulster: Local History Studies*, edited by W. H. Crawford and R. H. Foy, UHF, 1998, in association with the Federation for Ulster Local Studies
- *A New Genealogical Atlas of Ireland*, 2nd ed., Brian Mitchell, Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., Baltimore, Maryland, 2002
- *The Northern Ireland Place-Name Project: Place-Names of Northern Ireland* - in eight volumes, Belfast, 1992–2004; the OBOGS Library holds six of the eight volumes in this series
- *The Scottish Migration to Ulster in the Reign of James I*, M. Perceval-Maxwell, UHF, 1999
- *The Plantation of Ulster: British Settlement in an Irish Landscape 1600–1670*, Philip S. Robinson, UHF, 1994 and 2000
- *Men and Arms: The Ulster Settlers, c.1630*, edited by R. J. Hunter, UHF, 2015
- *The Ulster Plantation in the Counties of Armagh and Cavan, 1608–1641*, R. J. Hunter, UHF, 2016
- *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland*, edited by Angélique Day and Patrick McWilliams, Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, Belfast and Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, Ireland, 1990–2002. The Library holds all 40 volumes in this series and the index volume.

The *Townland Atlas of Ulster* from Andrew Kane and the UHF is truly a masterpiece. I am certain that it will be a well-used reference book in the Library for many years to come.

Annual publications

The Library has also added the 2023 edition of two annuals published by the UHF: *Familia*, No. 39, 2023; and the *Directory of Irish Family History Research*, No. 46, 2023.

Familia is an annual volume with interesting and varied feature articles and book reviews showcasing the latest in Irish family history research. The 2023 volume joins 24 other volumes in this series held in the Library, ranging from 1986 to 2023. Among the articles in the latest volume are:

- “The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland: Reflections on a Century of Archiving,” and
- “Four nineteenth-century County Down pioneers in British Columbia.”

The annual *Directory of Irish Family History Research* is another mainstay from the UHF. While half of each volume is a list of the research interests of the members of the Ulster Genealogical and Historical Guild, the other half includes articles about and transcriptions of record sets not generally available. A sampling of these from the 2023 issue are:

- “Antrim congregation session book,” including register of marriages and baptisms, 1674–1778, and
- “The 1775 Caledon estate catalogue,” with a transcription of the details of 268 properties within the estate, listing the tenant’s name, number of acres held, the annual rent, the duration of their tenure rights, and the names and ages of those whose lives were associated with the tenures (or leases) for each rented parcel of land.

Both of these series are well worth an afternoon or two of browsing. The Library now holds over 100 publications from the Ulster Historical Foundation, so those researching Ulster, and Ireland in general, are bound to find useful resources in our collection.³

Irish journals

In September 2024, the Library received a significant donation of relatively long runs of three historic Irish journals from the OGS head

office. These journals had been donated to the OGS by members or their families. The journals have brought added depth and range to our Irish resources. The Library's description team has been working to add descriptions to the catalogue entries for each issue of the following journals, thus enabling researchers to more easily find articles of interest for their research.

The Irish Genealogist: Official Organ of the Irish Genealogical Research Society, London, England, vol. 1, no. 12 (1942) to vol. 9, no. 1 (1994) - 29 issues, published annually, and several indexes. These indexes include an index of persons for volume 3 (1956–1967) and an index of persons for volume 4 (1968–1973).

This society was founded in 1936 as a learned society devoted to Irish genealogical research, being described by John Grenham in one of his weekly columns in 2011 in *The Irish Times* as the “great granddaddy of all Irish family history societies.”⁴ Information about the society and its work can be found at: <https://www.irishancestors.ie/>. 052.0050 IRE IGRS [v # year].

The Irish Ancestor: published by Miss Rosemary ffolliott, Dublin, Ireland, vol. 2, no. 1 (1970) to vol. 18, no. 1 (1986) - 31 issues, generally published twice a year, with supplements for 1969 and 1972.

This represents almost the complete run of this journal which was privately published from 1969 to 1986 by Rosemary ffolliott, a renowned Irish genealogist. A subsequent compilation and consolidation of all of the issues of this journal described its aim as “the collection and publication of original source material and other items of interest concerning Irish genealogy, biography and domestic history.” A name index for persons mentioned in *The Irish Ancestor*, including the names of 45,000 individuals, is on the website of the Irish Genealogical Research Society.⁵ 052.0050 IRE IANC [v # year].

Irish and Economic Society History: Journal of the Economic and Social History Society of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland, vol. 1 (1974) to vol. 10 (1983) - 10 issues, published annually. Information about the Economic and Social History Society of Ireland can be found at <https://www.eshsi.org/>.

Each volume of this annual journal includes several substantive articles, a feature on original documents and sources, thesis abstracts, a bibliography, a number of book reviews and short articles, all

providing excellent resources for examining the economic and social context in which your ancestor lived. 052.0050 IRE IESH [v year].

Either search in our catalogue or, better still, plan to come in for a morning or an afternoon to browse through these journals.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted some of the exciting new and new-to-us resources for Irish family history research added to the Library in recent months. New materials are also being added for Canadian research, as well as research related to England and Wales, Scotland and British Colonial America. Through both donations and purchases, the Library continues to grow and develop as an excellent resource for local and visiting family history researchers. Our holdings now total over 13,600 items, with about 30 per cent of these being journal issues. The description team is working to make the collection more accessible by adding descriptions of each book or journal to the catalogue, thus helping researchers find material that may be useful in their research.

We look forward to seeing you in the OBOGS Library in the City of Ottawa Archives Reference Room. For questions, suggestions or assistance, please contact the OBOGS librarian at ottawalibrary@ogs.on.ca.

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Reference Notes

- ¹ The Ottawa Branch OGS Library (OBOGS) is a family history reference library housed in the Reference Room of the City of Ottawa Archives at 100 Tallwood Drive, Nepean. The library catalogue can be found at: <https://ottawa.ogs.on.ca/researching/indexes/library-catalog/>.
- ² See the information on the website of the Ulster Historical Foundation, including a description of the book and several short YouTube videos describing the *Atlas*: <https://ulsterhistoricalfoundationcom/shop/products/townland-atlas>. Click on the thumbnail images on the left-hand side of the screen for the *YouTube* videos.
- ³ To find the Ulster Historical Foundation materials already in the OBOGS Library collection, enter UHF in the catalogue search box.
- ⁴ <https://www.irishancestors.ie/history>.
- ⁵ The index of names mentioned in *The Irish Ancestor* can be found on the website of the Irish Genealogical Research Society at <https://www.irishancestors.ie/the-irish-ancestor>. The index can be downloaded as a pdf in three parts.

2025-2026 Speakers Program

BIFHSGO is setting the speakers for the next year.

Do you have a research story that you can share? It could be a full feature talk, or a shorter presentation.

Have you heard a speaker that our members would like to hear?

Is there a topic you would like to know more about?

All suggestions are welcome!

Contact programs@bifhgo.ca

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

INTRO BY PAUL CRIPWELL

Artificial Intelligence, or AI, is a hot topic of late. Some of us have already tested aspects of it in our family history research, but it is still very new and we are finding that it has both advantages and disadvantages. I think it's timely to introduce the subject to members who are not yet familiar with its application so you can judge for yourselves.

I decided to let AI speak for itself. This I did by creating a request designed to demonstrate how AI could benefit the family history researcher. I then made that request to several different AI engines and reviewed all the results, after which I selected one such response that is included here.

With the help of John Reid, we first identified the following AI sites that would be used for this experiment:

- ChatGPT¹
- Claude²
- Gemini³
- Grok⁴
- Perplexity⁵
- DeepSeek⁶

Here is the request I made:

Write an article for a peer-reviewed journal that describes how AI could assist the family historian or genealogy researcher to write a description of the everyday life of their ancestors from rural England in the 17th century. The article should be about 4,000 words long and include appropriate references for any sources used. The emphasis of the article should be on the techniques available to the researcher.

While the six engines listed above were used for the purposes of this article, they are not the only ones available. In fact, many more engines are coming online all the time and most are now dedicated to specific tasks, for example, code generation, data analysis and creative writing to name a few.

AI is developing and changing by the day. You may therefore find that, as new information is made available to each engine, the results you obtain from any single query may not be the same tomorrow as they are today.

On 19 April 2025 I submitted the above statement to the six AI engines listed above. Below is the word-for-word response generated by one of these engines. While it has been formatted to fit the layout of this journal, it has not been edited in any way.

Following are my brief comments about each response and the one I ultimately picked. All responses are available so, if you would like to see the others, please send me an email at acreditor@bifhsgo.ca.

- *ChatGPT* produced a response that was only 855 words and 4 pages long. (I had requested about 4,000 words.) The format was mostly in outline form and I considered it too light on details for publication.
- *Claude* produced a very long and comprehensive response that was more than 5,300 words and 13 pages long, including 4 pages of references. I checked a few references to see if they existed—some did and at least one didn't. This response contained a lot of information and I consider it too intense for this journal, though it is available if anyone would like to see it.
- *Gemini* produced a good response that was 2,875 words and 9 pages long. It provided good coverage on the topic, though no references were provided.
- *Grok* also produced a reasonable response of 2,166 words and 7 pages. This included some references and some examples.

- *Perplexity* produced a response that was also short—only 805 words and 4 pages long. Like *ChatGPT*, it was primarily in outline form.
- *DeepSeek* also produced a short response of 1,998 words and 3 pages. It included a few references, though the actual write-up was limited in scope.

1 Developed by OpenAI, <https://chatgpt.com/>

2 Developed by Anthropic, <https://claude.ai/>

3 Developed by Google, <https://gemini.google.com/>

4 Developed by Elon Musk and formerly known as TruthGPT, Grok was developed after Musk left OpenAI around 2023, <https://x.ai/grok/>.

5 Developed by Perplexity, <https://www.perplexity.ai/>

6 Developed by Hangzhou DeepSeek Intelligence, <https://www.deepseek.com/>

AI Response

The article that follows was generated by Gemini on 19 April 2025.

Illuminating the Past: Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Reconstructing Everyday Life in 17th-Century Rural England

Introduction

The allure of genealogy lies not only in charting familial lineages but also in connecting with the individuals who shaped our heritage. For those whose ancestry traces back to 17th-century rural England, a world both familiar and strikingly different awaits exploration. This era, marked by significant political and social upheaval, also encompassed the quiet rhythms of agricultural life, the intricate social structures of village communities, and the daily struggles and triumphs of ordinary people. However, accessing the intimate details of their everyday existence presents a considerable hurdle for the modern researcher.

Unlike later periods with more widespread literacy and personal documentation, the 17th century in rural England left behind a fragmented tapestry of records. Parish registers primarily document births,

marriages, and deaths. Wills and probate inventories offer glimpses into material possessions but often lack contextual detail. Manorial court rolls provide insights into land tenure and local disputes but rarely delve into personal narratives. While these sources are invaluable for establishing genealogical connections, they often fall short of painting a vivid picture of daily life – the tasks performed, the food consumed, the social interactions experienced, and the beliefs held.

The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers a promising avenue to overcome these limitations. AI, with its ability to process vast amounts of data, identify patterns, and extract meaningful insights, holds the potential to revolutionize how family historians approach the study of their ancestors' lives. This paper argues that by strategically employing various AI techniques, researchers can move beyond the skeletal framework of genealogical records and begin to flesh out the contours of everyday existence in 17th-century rural England. We will explore specific AI methodologies and their application to the types of historical records commonly encountered by genealogists, emphasizing the practical techniques available to researchers seeking to connect with the daily realities of their forebears.

The Landscape of 17th-Century Rural England

To appreciate the potential of AI in this context, it is crucial to understand the key characteristics of 17th-century rural England. This was a predominantly agrarian society, with the vast majority of the population engaged in farming. Life revolved around the agricultural seasons, with long hours of manual labor dictated by the rhythms of planting, tending, and harvesting crops. The open-field system, though gradually being enclosed in some areas, still characterized much of the landscape, with communal farming practices and shared resources.

Village life was tightly knit, with social hierarchies often based on land ownership and status. The local church played a central role, not only in spiritual matters but also as a community hub. Markets and fairs provided opportunities for trade and social interaction beyond the immediate village. Domestic life was characterized by close-knit families, often living in modest dwellings with limited material possessions. Diet was largely based on locally sourced agricultural produce, with variations depending on social standing and the success of harvests. Superstition and traditional beliefs coexisted with the burgeoning influence of religious and scientific thought.

Understanding this context is essential for framing the research questions that AI can help address. For instance, how did agricultural laborers spend their days? What were the common household tasks? What did families eat? How did social interactions vary across different social strata? What were the prevailing beliefs and customs that shaped daily life? These are the types of questions that AI can assist in exploring by analyzing the available historical data through new lenses.

AI Techniques for Genealogical Research

Several AI techniques hold significant promise for enriching our understanding of 17th-century rural English life. These include the following.

Natural Language Processing (NLP)

NLP focuses on enabling computers to understand and process human language. In the context of genealogy, NLP can be applied to various textual sources:

Analyzing Wills and Probate Inventories

These documents, while primarily concerned with the transfer of property, often contain descriptive language about household goods, occupations, and social relationships. NLP techniques such as entity recognition can automatically identify mentions of specific items (e.g., "a feather bed," "a brass kettle"), occupations (e.g., "yeoman," "weaver"), and relationships (e.g., "my loving wife," "my eldest son"). Sentiment analysis could potentially be used to gauge the emotional tone of these documents, although this might be more challenging given the formulaic nature of some legal texts. Topic modeling can identify recurring themes within a collection of wills, revealing common concerns or patterns in bequests. For example, analyzing a corpus of 17th-century wills from a specific region might reveal the prevalence of certain agricultural tools or household items, offering insights into the material culture of the time.

- **Technique:** Employing libraries like NLTK or spaCy in Python to tokenize text, identify named entities (people, places, objects), and perform part-of-speech tagging. Custom dictionaries tailored to 17th-century vocabulary would enhance accuracy.
- **Example:** An NLP algorithm could scan a will and identify all instances of furniture mentioned, categorizing them (e.g., beds, tables, chairs) and quantifying their frequency across a set of wills to understand common household furnishings.

Extracting Information from Manorial Court Rolls

These records detail local governance, land disputes, and minor offenses. NLP can be used to extract information about common agricultural practices, local customs, and social interactions within the village. Relationship extraction techniques could identify individuals involved in disputes or witnessing events, shedding light on community dynamics. Event extraction can pinpoint recurring types of incidents, providing insights into the social fabric and potential challenges of daily life.

- **Technique:** Training a custom NLP model on a sample of transcribed manorial court rolls, focusing on identifying keywords related to agricultural activities, social interactions, and local customs. Regular expressions can be used for pattern matching of dates, names, and common phrases.
- **Example:** An NLP system could identify entries related to "encroachment on common land," allowing a researcher to understand the pressures on shared resources and the social tensions they might have created.

Interpreting Parish Registers (Beyond Basic Data)

While primarily structured, parish registers sometimes contain additional notes or descriptions. NLP could be used to analyze these free-text entries for information beyond the standard dates and names. For instance, a note about the cause of death or the social status of the individuals involved could be extracted and analyzed across a large dataset.

- **Technique:** Applying NLP to transcribed parish register entries, focusing on identifying keywords and phrases related to occupations, social status (e.g., "gentleman," "widow"), and causes of death (using historical disease terminology).
- **Example:** Analyzing a set of parish registers with NLP might reveal a higher incidence of deaths attributed to "ague" during certain periods, potentially linking to environmental conditions or disease outbreaks.

Image Analysis

While photographic evidence is absent for the 17th century, image analysis techniques can still be valuable:

Analyzing Maps and Illustrations

17th-century maps, even if not perfectly accurate by modern standards, can provide insights into land use, settlement patterns, and the physical environment in which ancestors lived. Object detection algorithms can identify features like fields, forests, rivers, and buildings. Image segmentation can delineate different land types, offering clues about agricultural practices and resource availability. Analyzing illustrations from contemporary sources (e.g., agricultural manuals, social commentaries) using style transfer and content-based image retrieval can help researchers visualize tools, clothing, and daily activities, even if these images don't directly depict their ancestors.

- **Technique:** Utilizing libraries like OpenCV or TensorFlow to process digitized maps and illustrations. Training object detection models on relevant historical imagery (e.g., depictions of plows, domestic interiors).
- **Example:** Analyzing a 17th-century estate map might reveal the presence of a common pasture, suggesting that an ancestor who was a smallholder likely had access to grazing land for livestock.

Examining Material Artifacts (Photographs and Drawings)

While not directly from the 17th century, surviving artifacts from the period, such as tools, furniture, and clothing, can offer tangible connections to the past. Analyzing photographs or detailed drawings of these artifacts using 3D reconstruction techniques (from multiple images) can provide a better understanding of their form and function. Material classification algorithms can help identify the materials used, offering insights into available resources and craftsmanship.

- **Technique:** Employing software tools for photogrammetry and 3D modeling. Training image classification models on datasets of historical artifacts with labeled materials (e.g., wood, iron, textiles).
- **Example:** Creating a 3D model of a 17th-century plow found in a museum can help visualize its size and complexity, providing a better appreciation for the physical demands of farming.

Data Mining and Machine Learning

These techniques excel at uncovering hidden patterns and relationships within large datasets.

Aggregating and Analyzing Large Genealogical Databases

Platforms like Ancestry.com and FamilySearch contain vast amounts of genealogical data, including transcribed records. While privacy concerns are paramount, anonymized and aggregated data could be used to identify demographic trends, migration patterns, and the prevalence of certain names or occupations within specific regions during the 17th century. Clustering algorithms could identify communities with similar characteristics (e.g., occupational profiles). Time series analysis could reveal changes in family size or lifespan over time.

- **Technique:** Utilizing statistical analysis software and machine learning libraries (e.g., scikit-learn in Python) to process aggregated and anonymized genealogical data.
- **Example:** Analyzing marriage records from a specific parish might reveal the average age at marriage and whether there were seasonal patterns in wedding ceremonies, potentially linked to agricultural cycles.

Predictive Modeling for Missing Information

In cases where records are incomplete, machine learning models could potentially be trained on existing data to predict missing information, such as likely occupations based on family history and location, or the probability of certain life events occurring within a specific demographic group. This should be approached with caution, as predictions are not definitive facts, but they can offer plausible scenarios for further investigation.

- **Technique:** Training classification or regression models on datasets with complete information to predict missing values in incomplete records. Feature engineering (creating relevant input variables from existing data) is crucial for accurate predictions.
- **Example:** A model trained on a dataset of 17th-century landholders might predict the likely size of landholdings for individuals with similar family structures and locations, even if their own land records are missing.

Network Analysis of Social Connections

Genealogical data can be represented as a network, with individuals as nodes and family relationships as edges. Graph mining algorithms can identify influential individuals or families within a community, reveal patterns of intermarriage, and map social connections within a village.

This can help researchers understand the social fabric of their ancestors' lives and identify potential avenues for further research through related families.

- **Technique:** Using network analysis libraries like NetworkX in Python to create and analyze genealogical graphs.
- **Example:** Mapping the marriage connections within a village over several generations might reveal the existence of strong kinship networks that played a significant role in social and economic life.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

While AI offers immense potential, it is crucial to acknowledge the ethical considerations and limitations inherent in its application to historical research:

Data Bias

Historical records are inherently biased, reflecting the perspectives and priorities of those who created and preserved them (often the elite). AI models trained on such data may perpetuate these biases, leading to skewed interpretations of everyday life. Researchers must be aware of these limitations and critically evaluate AI-generated insights.

Interpretation and Context

AI can extract and synthesize information, but it cannot provide the nuanced historical context necessary for accurate interpretation. Human expertise remains essential for understanding the social, economic, and cultural forces that shaped the lives of 17th-century rural English people.

Privacy Concerns

Utilizing large genealogical databases raises significant privacy issues. Researchers must adhere to ethical guidelines and legal frameworks regarding the use and sharing of personal information. Anonymization and aggregation of data are crucial for responsible research.

Accuracy and Reliability

AI-generated insights are not infallible. Errors in the underlying data or limitations in the AI algorithms can lead to inaccurate conclusions. Researchers must critically evaluate the output of AI tools and corroborate findings with traditional historical methods.

The "Black Box" Problem

Some advanced AI models, particularly deep learning algorithms, can be difficult to interpret, making it challenging to understand why they arrive at specific conclusions. This lack of transparency can be problematic in historical research, where understanding the reasoning behind an interpretation is crucial.

Practical Techniques for Researchers

Integrating AI into genealogical research need not require advanced programming skills. Several practical techniques and resources are becoming increasingly available:

Utilizing User-Friendly AI-Powered Tools

Some genealogy software and online platforms are beginning to incorporate AI features, such as automated record transcription, entity recognition, and potential relationship suggestions. Researchers should explore these tools and understand their underlying methodologies.

Leveraging Cloud-Based AI Services

Platforms like Google Cloud AI or Amazon Web Services offer pre-trained NLP and image analysis models that can be accessed through relatively simple APIs. Researchers can upload their digitized historical documents and leverage these services for tasks like text extraction and object recognition.

Collaborating with Digital Humanists and AI Experts

Interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial for advancing the application of AI in genealogy. Researchers with genealogical expertise can partner with digital humanists and AI specialists to develop and implement tailored solutions for specific research questions.

Focusing on Specific Research Questions

Rather than attempting to apply AI to all aspects of 17th-century life simultaneously, researchers should focus on well-defined research questions that are amenable to AI analysis. For example, "What were the most common agricultural tools mentioned in probate inventories from a specific region?" or "Can we identify patterns in the causes of death recorded in parish registers during periods of high mortality?"

Iterative Approach

Integrating AI into research is often an iterative process. Researchers may need to experiment with different techniques, refine their data, and critically evaluate the results to achieve meaningful insights.

Case Study: Reconstructing Diet in a 17th-Century Rural Parish

To illustrate the practical application of AI, consider a researcher interested in reconstructing the typical diet of families in a specific rural parish in the mid-17th century. Traditional methods would involve painstakingly reading through hundreds of probate inventories, noting down food items mentioned, and then attempting to infer dietary patterns based on these fragmented lists.

AI could significantly enhance this process:

- **NLP for Food Item Extraction:** An NLP model trained to recognize 17th-century food terminology could automatically extract all mentions of food and drink from a corpus of digitized probate inventories from the target parish. This would create a comprehensive list of dietary items.
- **Data Mining for Frequency Analysis:** Data mining techniques could then be used to analyze the frequency of different food items mentioned. This would reveal the staples of the local diet and identify any variations based on social status (as indicated by the overall value of the estate).
- **Image Analysis of Contemporary Illustrations:** Illustrations from 17th-century cookbooks or agricultural manuals depicting food preparation and consumption could be analyzed to visualize how these ingredients were used and presented.
- **Linking to Agricultural Records:** Information on crop yields and livestock ownership from manorial records (analyzed using NLP) could be linked to the dietary data from probate inventories, providing a more holistic picture of food production and consumption.

By combining these AI techniques, the researcher could move beyond simply listing food items to developing a more nuanced understanding of what their ancestors ate, how their diet varied based on factors like wealth and the seasons, and the agricultural context that shaped their foodways.

Conclusion

The application of Artificial Intelligence holds transformative potential for family historians and genealogy researchers seeking to understand the everyday lives of their ancestors in 17th-century rural England. By

leveraging techniques such as natural language processing, image analysis, and data mining, researchers can unlock new insights from fragmented historical records, moving beyond basic genealogical facts to reconstruct the daily routines, social interactions, and material culture of their forebears. While ethical considerations and limitations must be carefully addressed, the practical techniques and emerging tools offer exciting opportunities for enriching our understanding of the past. As AI continues to evolve, its role in illuminating the lives of those who came before us will undoubtedly grow, offering a deeper and more meaningful connection to our family histories. The future of genealogical research lies in the synergistic integration of human expertise and the analytical power of artificial intelligence, allowing us to paint a more vibrant and detailed picture of everyday life in centuries past.

So, what do you think? Is the information provided accurate or realistic? Does AI have a place in family history? If so what aspects of your research might benefit from applying this tool?



Do you have a story?



Sure you do!

You can share it with other members.

Write it – then share it through the Anglo-Celtic Roots Journal.

Doesn't have to be long, a page or two for the ACR.

Everyone is welcome!

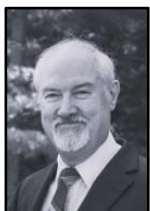
Contact acreditor@bifhsgo.ca

Need help? Members are available. Just ask!

Tech Talk

Major Genealogy Research Websites

BY PAUL CRIPWELL



This is part of the planned series of articles designed to help address one of BIFHSGO's Education goals, namely, to take advantage of technology in family history research. Articles will cover a variety of topics within this wide-ranging subject. Suggestions are welcome and volunteers to write articles on a topic of their choice would be greatly appreciated.

The title “major genealogy research websites” describes web-based applications that have the capacity to research records, build family trees, incorporate any records as sources for a person’s profile, generate reports, and import and export trees, amongst many other features. Four such sites—*Ancestry*,¹ *MyHeritage*,² *Findmypast*³ and *FamilySearch*⁴—are often referred to as “The Big Four.”

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of one of the major genealogical websites—namely, *Ancestry*. I will use a generic approach, as in many instances the points raised also apply to other such websites. Everything in this article reflects my own opinion and not necessarily the views of BIFHSGO.

I will not be commenting on *MyHeritage*² and *Findmypast*³ as I am not sufficiently familiar with them to do them justice. However, my experience with software applications leads me to conclude that all these sites will have similar features and capabilities. One main difference will be the user interface (see later). These three sites all use a multitree format, that is, each user controls their own tree(s).

Other major sites base their genealogical approach on a single world tree; these include *FamilySearch* and *WikiTree*.⁵ While *WikiTree* does not have a record search capability, *FamilySearch* does and is therefore included in The Big Four, although I have not used it sufficiently to comment further.

The pros and cons of these two approaches—multiple trees versus a single tree—will be the subject of a separate article, as there are many aspects to consider.

The following topics will be covered here with respect to *Ancestry*:

- Cost
- Record coverage
- User interface
- The family trees of other users
- Features of *Ancestry*
- Backup
- Outputs
- DNA
- Limitations
- Conclusion.

Cost

Like most sites, *Ancestry* starts by offering free access, but to do any worthwhile research, including viewing original record scans, a paid subscription or other payment method is required. Subscription models vary considerably between the sites but it is not for me to judge how you determine what costs are acceptable to you; also, some of you may wish to have access to a single genealogical website, while some might choose to pay to access multiple sites.

The different sites may also offer further record sources and services. As examples, an *Ancestry* subscription includes free access to *Find a Grave* and to some of the newspapers at *Newspapers.com*, as well as to the services found on *RootsWeb*, while *Findmypast* includes access to the *British Newspaper Archive*.

Ancestry also has subscription pricing that is based on areas of coverage. There are seven *Ancestry* domain names: United States (.com), United Kingdom (.co.uk), Canada (.ca), Australia (.com.au), Germany (.de), Netherlands (.nl), and New Zealand (.co.nz). These sites are all related and a tree created on one is accessible on all. It is at the country level that you can target your subscription and therefore geographic area(s) of coverage. Regardless of the site accessed, the records available are worldwide. The subscription controls what you can view, rather than what you can search.

When I started using *Ancestry* I opted for the worldwide coverage, as there are many countries I needed to cover in my research. I now realize that continuing at this, the highest subscription level, is no longer necessary and I will be scaling back to cover only the United Kingdom-based record collections. Note that to do this, I will have to log on (you use the same log on credentials for all sites) to the UK site (ancestry.co.uk) and pay my subscription in GBP. The drawback to this approach is that I will no longer be able to view actual records from outside the UK—the information will be blurred out.

Record Coverage

At the basic level, *Ancestry* (and all other sites) allows for the entry of a person's profile data in tree form and supports the addition of source records and media for each piece of information. A good researcher sources everything, right?!

Looking at coverage, *Ancestry* (and all the other sites) have collections comprising billions of records and more are being added on a regular basis. Subscribers are informed of new indexes, catalogues and other information as they are added. While *Ancestry* has many billions of records, their coverage is not complete. What I have heard about other sites is that they also have billions of records and there is therefore a significant overlap between websites. However, some sites include records that others do not. So, if you can't find something on one site, it may be available on another.

One recent example of this is the 1921 UK Census, which became available in January 2022. *Findmypast* had obtained the exclusive contract to digitize these records and make them available on their site under subscription and other pay-per-view options. This year *Ancestry* announced that this census would now be available on their site.

I believe that each site does its own transcription of records and this means that the spelling of surnames, for example, may differ between sites. This sometimes makes it possible to find records by searching on a different site—one reason you might want to subscribe to more than one site.

The coverage offered by these sites is not restricted to indexed, and therefore searchable records. There are many additional documents with minimal or no indexing that can also be reviewed and attached to a person's profile.

User Interface

The term “user interface” refers to the interactions between you, the user, and the software of the website. How the software displays the information on your ancestor, how to perform modifications on their data, and what buttons to push to activate what functions are all part of the user interface. The interface developed by *Ancestry* is unique to their sites and the developers who built it. There is no best or perfect user interface. Some might suit your style and approach better than others. The only way to determine which site is best in this respect is to try out each one. Hopefully you can accomplish this at the free access level, although you can always take out a subscription and cancel it at any time.

This brings up the concept I call the “philosophy” of an application. Much like the user interface, there is no best or perfect method of handling genealogical data. How to display multiple marriages, step-children and parents, biologic versus adoptive parents, source information and records, or issues of assigning and reassigning gender are some of the topics for which the developers will have to create a solution, but their solution may not be easily understood or followed by users. The philosophy behind the site you choose must align with or be close to your way of thinking. If it is not, you will be fighting with the application and, unfortunately, you will lose every time. If you cannot adapt to their approach, it is best to switch to another site.

The Family Trees of Other Users

The search functions of these sites also browse through the profiles and records found in other users’ family trees. This can provide either valuable information for you—or incorrect information that can send your research in the entirely wrong direction. Not every researcher is as careful as they should be in locating the correct sources and applying the Genealogical Proof Standard when developing their family tree. So always treat the information from other family trees as suspect—until you can independently verify it for yourself.

Being able to contact the owner of another tree through *Ancestry* offers you a valuable opportunity. Anonymous messaging services through the website allow you to initiate contact. You’ll find that either the person never messages back, or a dialogue with another researcher is established. In the former case it is best to consider the information from their tree as unreliable. In the latter case you will have found a

researcher with whom you can compare notes and results, and perhaps develop a level of trust in the information in their trees.

Features of *Ancestry*

The features included with *Ancestry* are based on user feedback and the creativity of its developers. You can be sure that all other sites will be monitoring *Ancestry* (and each other), watching for any new features that are being deployed. If they believe that a particular feature is worthwhile, then they will add it to a later version of their own software. The site you choose may appear to lack a feature, but it is likely that it will appear in a future release, probably in an improved form.

One such example is external or mobile access. *Ancestry* has an application which can be downloaded to any mobile device, meaning you can access your family tree from any location having data service. This can be very handy in a wide variety of situations.

The *Ancestry* mobile application can also do searches, edit profiles and add source information, much like the main website, although you may find certain capabilities or features somewhat limited, like the following examples:

- *Ancestry's* search operation is more streamlined in the mobile version and, because it relies on a smaller screen area, the comparison function is a bit more difficult to use.
- The mobile site does not include any reporting functionality.
- Handling your account is better done on the website, as there are more options there as well as the ability to change to a different country specific *Ancestry* site.

Backup

This is an important consideration when dealing with family history data. While all the paper and physical memorabilia must reside in one place, your electronic data can be replicated many times. *Ancestry* maintains its own backup systems, so there is little or no danger of your data being lost when it is "in the cloud." If you want to back up your files locally, you can always export GEDCOM⁶ files. However, this format does not permit the inclusion of any media files. Therefore, if you wish to store all your electronic work locally, you will need to back up the media files separately.

When using standalone applications (the subject of another planned article), having sufficient backups is a more important consideration.

Outputs

Finally, you might also want to consider what outputs, like reports and charts, are available from your chosen genealogical website. Again, this is a personal consideration that only you can determine; it is more a function of your goals and the planned end products of your research. What is the purpose of your research? What types of reports do you need? Do you want the site to produce a useable document as a final product? Are you preparing materials for presentation or distribution amongst family? Would companion sites or applications with additional charges be required?

Output types are as varied as the number of researchers. There are standard reports and tree diagrams that many find useful. In addition, reports like family group sheets and graphical representations such as multigenerational fan diagrams in a variety of orientations are widely available.

In my opinion, *Ancestry* rates very low on this feature. In 2018 when I first started using *Ancestry*, I recall that a variety of reports was available. Now, however, virtually all the reporting is covered in a separate area that requires a further subscription! You can still print family group sheets, individual profile information and the whole tree.

DNA

I am not reviewing *Ancestry's* DNA capabilities, as I have not undertaken any DNA research and am therefore not qualified to comment on this subject.

Limitations

Does *Ancestry* or any other major genealogical site offer the user everything they need in order to research all aspects of their family history? Unfortunately, the answer to that question is: No.

Ancestry and the other major sites appear to be built around the creation of basic family trees, that is, finding and documenting ancestors and relatives based on births/baptisms, marriages and deaths/burials. What they are not particularly good at is filling in the day-to-day lives of the people in our trees. To help us achieve this, they do have some useful records in their catalogues, many of which are not indexed, that can be searched relatively easily, including newspapers

and other reference materials. Many other documents remain in libraries and archives for researchers to locate and consult while constructing the lives of ancestors and relatives.

Conclusion

You can see from the foregoing that choosing one particular website as your primary research tool is not always straightforward. My suggestion is to pick one and stick with it for a period. All of the major websites used to produce family trees will produce a transportable file of your family tree (GEDCOM or similar) that you can use to move your tree to another site if you wish. Note that such files will not include the media files, so these must be handled separately and, if you have a lot of them, this could be a significant task.

In summary, in my opinion *Ancestry* is an excellent tool for conducting basic family history and genealogical research and for recording information, although I am not necessarily suggesting or recommending its use. As mentioned in the introduction, other sites may be equally as capable. But using an application like *Ancestry* is just the beginning of your family history journey! As we have frequently heard in BIFHSGO's monthly presentations, there are always many more sources of information that need to be researched to get the most complete picture of your family history. Not all of these are online or available to the major genealogical websites.

You might want to do further investigation before selecting a site. I suggest using your favourite search engine to try reviews that compare the "Big Four" genealogy websites. This should return a number of articles that cover this topic in several different ways.⁷

References

- ¹ www.ancestry.com, bought by The Blackstone Group in 2020, headquarters in Lehi, Utah, USA.
- ² www.myheritage.com, headquarters in Or Yehuda, Israel
- ³ www.findmypast.com, owned by DC Thomson, UK, headquarters in London, England.
- ⁴ www.familysearch.com, sponsored and operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints, headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA.
- ⁵ www.wikitree.com, is a free site founded by Chris Whitten and supported by volunteers.

- ⁶ GEDCOM is the *de facto* standard file format for the storage and transfer of genealogy data, <https://www.gedcom.org/>. The latest version is GEDCOM 5.5.5, October 2019.
- ⁷ One such review may be found on the familytreemagazine.com website—“Genealogy Websites Comparison: Ancestry.com, FamilySearch, Findmypast and MyHeritage,” by Sunny Jane Morton (<https://familytreemagazine.com/websites/genealogy-website-comparison/>).

BIFHSGO News



Conference

Conference



Save the Date

October 18-19, 2025

England and Wales Conference

Details to follow

Volunteers needed



Conference

Conference

Conference



Conference

Conference



BIFHSGO Board of Directors 2024–2025

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The Society

The British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa (BIFHSGO) is an independent, federally incorporated society and a registered charity (Reg. No. 89227 4044 RR0001). Our Mission is to encourage family history research, and its dissemination, by people interested in ancestry in the British Isles. We do this by:

- connecting BIFHSGO members with each other and other like-minded persons,
- educating both beginning and more experienced family historians by promoting and demonstrating trusted research methods and best practices,
- sharing members' knowledge readily with other researchers, and
- inspiring others through educational presentations and members' published stories.

We publish genealogical research findings and information on research resources and techniques, hold public meetings on family history, and participate in the activities of related organizations.

Each year members enjoy four issues of *Anglo-Celtic Roots* (ACR) and ten family history meetings, plus members-only information on bifhsgo.ca, friendly advice from other members, and participation in special interest groups. Membership dues for 2024–2025 (individuals or institutions) are \$50 (with electronic ACR) or \$60 (with printed ACR).

BIFHSGO Calendar of Events

Saturday Morning Meetings

In-person—Geneva Hall, Knox Presbyterian Church,
120 Lisgar St., Ottawa

Online—on Zoom, **registration required**

†13 September 2025 Education Talk:

Carol Annett will give a step-by-step demonstration of how she uses Google Lens as a tool for genealogy research and finding information for family stories. The focus of the talk will be using Google Lens to search for matching images of objects such as family heirlooms and mementos.

Feature Talk:

Not one talk but several small moments. These short stories will be from various members.

†11 October 2025 The program for these meetings is under development. Keep an eye on the website for up-to-date information.

†8 November 2025 date information.

Meeting Schedule

9:00 – Education Talk

10:00 – Feature Talk

†Hybrid meeting

Check our website at www.bifhsgo.ca for up-to-date information on our monthly meetings, education talks, registration for online attendance, and details of special interest group meetings.

Articles for *Anglo-Celtic Roots*

Articles and illustrations for publication are welcome. For advice on preparing manuscripts, please email acreditor@bifhsgo.ca. The deadline for submissions to the Fall issue is 22 July 2025.