

Genealogy report for August

The June topic was “How do I know I’m right?”.

When tracing your family back, especially before the census and civil registration, the researcher is often faced with two (or more) possibilities, for example, which Thomas was the father of great great great grandfather Thomas. Once I’ve selected the one I think most likely, how do I know I’m right?

In genealogy little is certain – the saying “It is a wise child that knows his own father” goes back to Homer – but the Genealogical Proof System (GPS) condenses best practice to ensure that any conclusion will stand up to investigation or, alternatively, when to admit that there is uncertainty and why.

The GPS consists of five elements:

- 1. Reasonably exhaustive research;
- 2. Complete, accurate citations to the source or sources of each information item;
- 3. Tests—through processes of analysis and correlation—of all sources, information items, and evidence;
- 4. Resolution of conflicts among evidence items
- 5. A soundly reasoned, coherently written conclusion.

Genealogical proof reflects what evidence shows after any conflicting evidence is resolved. Such proof, therefore, cannot be overturned by “might-have-beens”. Possibilities for which no known evidence exists do not discredit a ‘proved’ genealogical conclusion. New evidence can overturn a proved conclusion.

The subject is better fitted for a full course but was introduced by the example of two Thomas Swindells who each had a son also named Thomas baptised in Burton upon Trent in the 1820s. Which was the son who married an Ann Eliza Price? Research into baptisms, marriages, census records and some brain twisting analysis provided a clear favourite but people lie about their age (or don’t really know) and present their status in the most favourable light. It took the application of the GPS to reach a defensible conclusion.

Since this talk was first presented DNA testing has entered the picture. To cut a long story short a group of Australians found that they were interrelated but also related to a group of Mormons in the USA. Further investigation showed that the Americans were descended from Thomas’s aunt, which was only the case for one of the possibilities – the one chosen through the GPS fortunately!

The next meeting of the Genealogy Group will be on Thursday 7th September at 2 p.m. at Enterprise House. This will be another ‘Helping Hands’ meeting where anyone is invited to pursue their research with the assistance of their neighbour or, indeed, the whole group!

Alan Swindale