Chapter 3

Tracking Down an Ancestor: What's in a Name?

In This Chapter

▶ Locating your ancestors with search engines

▶ Making the most of online databases

▶ Using mailing lists

▶ Posting queries

▶ Contacting fellow researchers

*A*s a budding genealogist, you may start to experience sleepless nights as the questions that dominate your life begin to change. Suddenly you have to know the maiden name of your great-great-grandmother, whether your great-grandfather really was the scoundrel that other relatives say he was, and just how you're related to the Queen (well, isn't everyone?). Well, okay, perhaps you won't have sleepless nights, but you'll undoubtedly spend a significant amount of time thinking about and trying to find resources that can give you answers to these crucial questions.

In the past, finding information online about individual ancestors was a question of finding a needle in a haystack. You'd browse long lists of links in the hope of finding a website that may contain a nugget of relevant information. Today, looking for your ancestors online is much easier. Instead of browsing links, you now use search engines and online databases to pinpoint information about your ancestors.

This chapter covers the basics of searching for an ancestor by name. It presents some good surname resource sites and shows you how to combine several different Internet resources to find information about your family.

Picking the Site that's Best for You

Your dream as an online genealogist is to find a website that contains all the information that you ever wanted about your family. Unfortunately, such sites simply don't exist. But don't despair: during your search you'll discover a variety of sites that vary greatly in the amount and quality of genealogical information, and some of them are likely to be useful. Before you get too deeply embedded in your research, taking a look at the type of sites that you're likely to encounter is a good idea.

Personal genealogical sites

The vast majority of genealogical websites that you encounter on the Internet are personal sites, established by individuals and families with specific research interests. These sites give information about the site maintainer's ancestry or about particular branches of several different families rather than about a surname as a whole. This doesn't mean valuable information isn't present on these sites – they just have a more personal focus.

You can find a wide variety of information on personal genealogical sites. Some sites list only a few surnames that the maintainer is researching; others contain extensive online genealogical databases and narratives. A site's content depends upon the amount of research undertaken by the maintainer as well as their computer skills. Some common things that you see on these sites are a list of surnames, an online genealogical database, pedigree and descendant charts (for information on charts, check out Chapter 8), family photographs and a list of the maintainer's favourite genealogical Internet links.

Personal genealogical sites vary not only in content but also in presentation. Some sites are neatly constructed and use soft backgrounds and aesthetically pleasing colours. Others require you to bring out your sunglasses to tone down the fluorescent colours or to use link shades that blend in with the background, making it quite difficult to navigate your way through the site. Also, remember that many personal sites use JavaScript, music players and animated icons, which can significantly increase your download times.

An example of a personal genealogical site is Graham Carter's family history site at `www.family.cleverwork.com` (see Figure 3-1). This site traces various lines of the Carter family and includes a surname list, name index, photographs and research resources used to compile the data.

After you've found a site that contains useful information, write down the maintainer's name and email address and contact him or her as soon as possible if you have any questions or want to exchange information. Personal genealogical sites have a way of disappearing without a trace because individuals frequently switch Internet service providers or stop maintaining their sites.

Figure 3-1: Graham Carter's website is an example of a personal genealogical site.

Although you may find some really useful information on personal genealogical sites, remember to check up on the accuracy of the information for yourself. There's no guarantee that the maintainer of the site has got the information right. You need to look at where the information came from and to verify every name, date and location before you can accept the data into your family tree.

One-name study sites

If you're looking for a wide range of information on a particular surname, a one-name study website is the best place to start. These sites usually focus on one surname regardless of the geographical location in which the surname appears. In other words, they welcome information about people with that particular surname worldwide. One-name study sites are also quite helpful because they contain all sorts of information about the surname, even if they don't have specific information about your branch of family with that surname. Frequently they provide information about the variations in spelling, origins, history and heraldry of the surname. One-name study sites have some of the same resources that you find in personal genealogical sites, including online genealogy databases and narratives.

Although most one-name study sites welcome all surname information regardless of geographical location, the information presented may be organised along geographical lines. For example, a site may categorise all the information about people with the particular surname by continent or country, such as the Goodhews of England or Canada. Alternatively, the site may be even more specific and categorise information by county, town or parish. So, you're better off if you have a general idea of where your family originated or to where they migrated. If you don't know, browsing through the site may still lead to some useful information.

The Rowberry family website at www.rowberry.org is a one-name study site that includes branches of the family in England and abroad (see Figure 3-2). The site is divided into several categories, including variations in surname spelling, the origin of the name, information about the author, reports of family gatherings, maps, an email list and details of the Rowberrys residing in Cornwall, Canada, Australia and the United States.
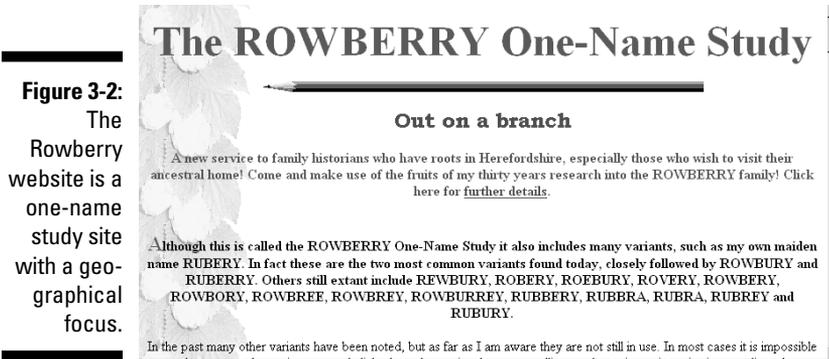
Figure 3-2:
The
Rowberry
website is a
one-name
study site
with a geo-
graphical
focus.

The ROWBERRY One-Name Study

Out on a branch

A new service to family historians who have roots in Herefordshire, especially those who wish to visit their ancestral home! Come and make use of the fruits of my thirty years research into the ROWBERRY family! Click here for <u>further details</u>.

Although this is called the ROWBERRY One-Name Study it also includes many variants, such as my own maiden name RUBERY. In fact these are the two most common variants found today, closely followed by ROWBURY and RUBERRY. Others still extant include REWBURY, ROBERY, ROEBURY, ROVERY, ROWBERY, ROWBORY, ROWBREE, ROWBREY, ROWBURREY, RUBBERY, RUBBRA, RUBRA, RUBREY and RUBURY.

In the past many other variants have been noted, but as far as I am aware they are not still in use. In most cases it is impossible

TIP

Maintainers of one-name study sites usually welcome any information that you have on the surname. These sites are often good places to join research groups, which can be instrumental in furthering your own lines of research.

The Internet directory in this book identifies some one-name study sites that you may like to visit. But in order to find one-name study sites relevant to you, you may have to search elsewhere. A site that can help you determine whether any one-name study sites are devoted to the surnames you're researching is the Guild of One-Name Studies at www.one-name.org.uk.

The Guild of One-Name Studies is an online organisation of registered sites, each of which focuses on one particular surname. The Guild holds information about many thousands of surnames. Use the following steps to find out whether any of the Guild's members focus on the surname of the person you're researching:

1. **Go to www.one-name.org.uk.**

2. **In the *Is your surname registered?* box enter the surname you're researching and click Search.**

   The results page contains entries from the database that match your search.

Family associations and organisations

Family association sites are similar to one-name study sites in terms of content, but they usually have an organisational structure (such as a formal association, society or club) backing them. The association may focus on the surname as a whole or on just one branch of a family. The goals for a family association site may differ from those of a one-name study site. The maintainers may be creating a family history in book form or a database of all individuals descended from a particular person. Some sites may require you to join the association before you can participate fully in their activities, but this is usually free of charge or calls for a small payment.

The Willingale family society site at `www.willingale.org/wfs/wfshome.htm`, shown in Figure 3-3, includes several items that are common to family association sites. The site's contents include a family history, the origin of the name, photographs of the village in which the earliest Willingales lived, information about their association with Epping Forest and information about Willingales overseas and other Willingale descendants.

The easiest way to find a family association website is to use a search engine or a comprehensive genealogical index. For more on search engines, see the sections 'Getting to grips with genealogically focused search engines' and 'Browsing Comprehensive Genealogical Indexes' later in this chapter.

Figure 3-3: The Willingale family society site.

Surnames connected to events or places

Another place where you may discover surnames is a website that contains a collection of names connected to a particular event or geographical location. The level of information available on these sites varies greatly, even among surnames on the same site. Often, the maintainers of such sites include more information about their personal research interests than about other surnames, simply because they have more information relating to their own lines.

Typically, you need to know events in which your ancestors were involved or the geographical areas in which they lived to use these sites effectively. You may benefit from the site simply because you have a general historical interest in the particular event or location, even if the site contains nothing about your surname. Finding websites about events is easiest if you use a search engine, a comprehensive website or a subscription database. Because we devote an entire chapter to researching geographical locations (Chapter 4), we won't delve into that here.

Taking the Plunge: Using Compiled Genealogical Resources

After you've decided on a specific person to research (for more on selecting a good research candidate, see Chapter 1), it's time to research online. But as we mention frequently in this book, you need to arm yourself with a few facts about the individual before you venture online.

For example, you may decide to research your paternal grandfather's line. You know that his name was George Fletcher and that he lived in Hull, in Yorkshire. From memory and a copy of his death certificate, you know that he died in 1969. From the death certificate, you've found the year of his birth, and you can find a reference to, and order online, a copy of his birth certificate. The information contained on these documents can be used to distinguish him from other George Fletchers that you come across online. (For more information about birth and death indexes online, and ordering certificates, see Chapter 5.)

At this point, you can take what you know and use online databases and family trees to see whether someone has already completed any research on George and his ancestors. Using online databases and family trees to pick pieces of genealogical fruit is wonderful. But of course you'll always want more. Your curiosity is aroused and you're keen to find out more about George Fletcher – more specifically, perhaps, who his grandfather was.

GENEALOGY LINGO

When someone publishes their genealogical findings, whether online or in print, the resulting work is called a *compiled genealogy*.

WARNING!

Compiled genealogies and online family tree databases can give you a lot of information about your ancestors in a nice, neat format. Finding a compiled genealogy with info relevant to your family – or even one that contains what appear to be whole branches of your family – can give you an overwhelming feeling of gratification, and rightly so. But don't get too excited yet. When using compiled genealogies, remember that you need to verify any information contained within them. Even when sources are cited, you'd be wise to get your own copies of the sources to ensure that the author's interpretation is correct and that no errors have occurred in the publication of the compiled genealogy.

Compiled genealogies can take two forms online. One is the traditional narrative format – the kind of thing you see in a book at the library. The second is in the *lineage-linked format*, which means that the database is organised by the relationships between people. This format is where an individual has exported and posted online information from their genealogical database and is creating their family tree on a website as an ongoing process. These websites are becoming ever more popular because they are clear and easy to use.

Narrative compiled genealogies

Narrative compiled genealogies usually have more substance than their exported database counterparts. Authors sometimes add colour to the narratives by including local history and other text and facts that can help researchers to get an idea of the time in which the ancestor lived. An example of a narrative genealogy is the Fite family homepage at `www.1fite.com/8f.html`.

To locate narrative genealogies, try using a search engine or comprehensive genealogical index. (For more about using these resources, see the relevant sections later in this chapter.) Often, compiled genealogies are part of a larger personal or family association website.

Compiled genealogical databases

Although many people don't think of lineage-linked online genealogical databases as compiled genealogies, these databases serve the same purpose as narrative compiled genealogies – they show the results of someone's research in a neatly organised, printed form. Even so, finding information in these databases can sometimes be challenging. No grand database exists that indexes all the individual databases that are available online. Although general Internet search engines have indexed quite a few, a number of very large

collections are still only accessible through a database search – something that general Internet search engines don't usually do. This section takes a look at a few of the larger collections.

Suppose you want to find out more about the ancestry of your grandfather, George Fletcher. You may be able to jump start your research by using a lineage-linked database in the hope of finding relevant information compiled by another researcher. From documents such as his birth and death certificates, you know that George's father was named Albert Fletcher and that George was born and died in Hull, Yorkshire. From interviews with family members, you discover that his father also lived in Yorkshire and that he was also probably born in Hull. Armed with this information, you can search a compiled genealogical database.

The FamilySearch Internet Genealogy Service at `www.familysearch.org` is the official research site for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). This free website enables you to search several LDS databases, including the Ancestral File, International Genealogical Index, Family History Library Catalogue, Research Guidance, census records and a collection of related websites, all of which are free. The two resources that function like lineage-linked databases are the Ancestral File and the Pedigree Resource File. You don't have to search these resources separately: a master search enables you to search all seven resources on the site at the same time.

To search the FamilySearch site, do the following:

1. **Open your web browser and go to `www.familysearch.org`.**

   The home page for FamilySearch contains four options on the toolbar: Home (which will return you to the home page whenever you like); Search (for your ancestors); Share (your information); and Library (the Family History Library System).

2. **Click the Search Records tab.**

   The Search Records tab takes you to a dropdown list. Click Advanced Search, which then takes you to a page showing several fields that you can fill in to conduct a search on the site. The fields form a small pedigree chart.

3. **Into the fields marked First Name and Last Name, enter the first and last name of the ancestor that you're researching.**

   To continue our previous example, enter **George** into the First Name box and **Fletcher** into the Last Name box. If you decide to include information on the spouse or mother or father and you don't receive adequate

results, try doing the search with only the name of the ancestor. You can also fill in optional fields such as Event, Year, Year Range, Country and Use Exact Spelling. (Bear in mind that filling in any of these fields may reduce the number of results that you receive.) If the name you're researching is particularly common, you can select the Exact Spelling option in order to limit the number of results. However, bear in mind that the same name is often spelt in several different ways, and that spelling is increasingly flexible the further back in time that you go. In this example, you can also narrow the search by selecting 'England' in the dropdown list of countries.

4. **After you've selected the search options, click the Search button.**

   The Results page contains links, with descriptions, to the resources that match your search criteria. Here, the search for George Fletcher yields 244 results. These results come from seven different resources on the site. The far-right column, Sources Searched, provides a breakdown of the number of results you received from each FamilySearch resource, as shown in Figure 3-4.

5. **Click the link of any result to see more information.**

   One result jumps out at you: at the bottom of the page you see a Pedigree Resource File (item 239) for George Albert Fletcher, who was buried in 1969 in Hull, Yorkshire.

If you select this option, which in this case comes in the section entitled Pedigree Resource File, you're taken to the Individual Record page. The amount of information revealed varies from file to file, but this page shows the sex of the individual, the names of his parents, the years of his birth and death (which matches the information provided on his birth and death certificates) and information about the submitter of the record. From this page, you can see that someone submitted a record revealing that George's parents were Albert Fletcher and Annie Elizabeth Webster. This matches the information on George's birth certificate, so you're confident that you're on the right track. The other links on the page enable people to inspect the individual records of both parents, which in turn reveal their birth and death dates and the names of their parents. And so the question is answered: George Fletcher's paternal grandfather was William Robert Fletcher (born about 1850 in Boston, Lincolnshire). These lines can be worked backwards by continuing to follow the links. Certain pages will contain a Pedigree link, which charts all generations of ancestors available in the file. However, the source information for these finds isn't here, so you may want to contact the submitter to locate the source of the information.

Figure 3-4:
The results
of a search
for George
Fletcher
at www.
Family
Search.
org.

Although the LDS Church is well known for its large genealogical collection, don't expect to find the complete collection online – the vast majority of LDS resources reside in their library and family history centres. (These are centres run by the LDS, dedicated to helping people trace their family history. For more about family history centres, have a look at Chapter 7.) Also, you need to verify your finds with the help of the *original* records. Much of the information currently on the site has been contributed by other family-history researchers, who may or may not have been careful in researching and documenting their family history. The site may not contain *all* the information available in a particular record. For example, you may find the name of a child who was baptised, along with a date and the names of her parents, on the LDS website. This information is taken from a parish record. But if you have a look at the original record (offline), you may find extra nuggets of information, such as a more precise location or the occupation of the father.

You can find another search site for the Pedigree Resource File component of the LDS site at www.findyourfamilytree.com. The site lets you order the CD-ROM that contains the results of your search.

Other lineage-linked collections may contain useful information for your search. Because these websites enable researchers to create new trees from scratch, and upload existing GEDCOM files (see Chapter 8 for more info), you can also check them to see if any of your data match those of other researchers, and link into their trees, too. The following list gives details of some of the better-known collections:

✔ **Ancestry Trees: www.ancestry.co.uk.** The family tree section is an area where you can link your tree into other trees if they match your research, and search through other researchers' files, exclusively in the

UK or extending your search worldwide. Currently, the database contains over 400 million names.

- ✓ **OneGreatFamily: `www.onegreatfamily.com`.** This site hosts a subscription-based lineage-linked database. The database currently contains over 190 million unique entries.

- ✓ **Family Relatives: `www.familyrelatives.com`.** This fast-growing site contains over 600 million records.

REMEMBER

Anyone can upload unverified information to these websites, so although the quality of some research is excellent, other research may contain significant errors. You need to check everything that you find before you adopt it for your family tree. For example, be wary of any reference without an exact date (genealogists refer to these as *ghost entries*) as it usually means that the researcher has found no proof. Any reference that includes the letters 'Abt' usually means that the contributor doesn't know the exact date and uses this abbreviation to mean 'about'.

Letting Your Computer Do the Walking: Using Search Engines

Imagine spending several hours clicking from link to link and not finding anything related to your research. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to just enter your ancestor's name and see whether any sites contain that name? Well, that's exactly what search engines enable you to do.

Search engines are programs that search vast indexes of information generated by robots. *Robots* are programs that travel through the Internet and collect information about the sites and resources that they find. You can access the information contained in search engines through an interface, usually through a form on a web page.

The real strength of search engines is that they can search the full text of web pages instead of just the title or a brief abstract of the site. For example, say you're looking for information about one of your ancestors, William Ramsbottom, who was born in the early 1820s in Lancashire. You can begin by consulting a comprehensive genealogical index site (for more about comprehensive genealogical indexes, see 'Browsing Comprehensive Genealogical Indexes' later in this chapter). There, you look for a website with 'William Ramsbottom' in the title or find an abstract of the site. But even if the comprehensive index contains tens of thousands of links, the chances of a website having 'William Ramsbottom' in its title or its abstract is relatively small.

However, by conducting a search through a search engine that indexes the full text of websites, you can find your William Ramsbottom on the Rhodes family website and find his date of birth and census details.

Different search engines are available, including genealogically focused search engines, general Internet search engines and general Internet meta-search engines. For a list of recommended search engines, have a look at the Internet directory in this book.

Getting to grips with genealogically focused search engines

Your first stop on a search for a particular ancestor should be a search engine set up for that purpose.

Genealogically focused search engines are sites that send out robots that index the text of only those sites that contain information of interest to genealogists. This means that you receive fewer extraneous results when you enter your ancestor's name as a search term. An example of a genealogy focused search engine is Genuki, at `www.genuki.org.uk/search`. This search database contains search engines covering all the website's own genealogical pages as well as those of the National Archives, the Society of Genealogists, the Federation of Family History Societies and the Guild of One-Name Studies.

1. **Go to `www.genuki.org.uk/search`. This page contains a field for you to fill with the relevant details. Enter one or more search terms.**

   Dropdown indexes enable you to choose whether to search for all as opposed to any of the terms, and whether to treat them as a *Boolean expression*. (A Boolean search involves using terms such as *or* and *not* to narrow your results.) You can also choose to search for your term(s) in only the title of the pages or to search both the title and a summary of the text.
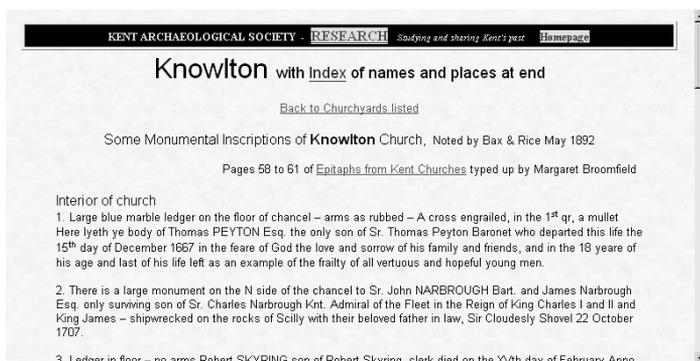
2. **Enter your research details into the relevant boxes and click Search.**

   For example, by typing in the name of a distant ancestor, Thomas Peyton, you see a link to Knowlton Churchyard.

3. **Click a link that interests you.**

   By following this link, you discover the text of a monumental inscription, from which you find out that Thomas Peyton – the son of a Thomas Peyton, Baronet – was buried at Knowlton in Kent in 1667 at the age of 18. The Results page (see Figure 3-5) shows the title of the page and an abstract of the site.

Figure 3-5:
Some of
the results
from `www.`
`genuki.`
`org.uk/`
`search` on
the names
Thomas and
Peyton.

Using general Internet search engines

General search engines send out robots to catalogue the Internet as a whole, regardless of the content of the site. Therefore, on any given search you're likely to receive a lot of hits, perhaps only a few of which hold any genealogical value – that is, unless you refine your search terms to give you a better chance at receiving relevant results.

You can conduct several different types of searches with most search engines. Looking at the Help link for any search engine to see the most effective way to search is always a good idea. Also, search engines often have two search interfaces – a simple search and an advanced search. With the *simple search*, you normally just enter your query and click the Submit or Search button. With a typical *advanced search*, you can use a variety of options to refine your search. The best way to become familiar with using a search engine is to experiment with a few searches and see what results you get.

One search engine that has proven successful for us when we search for genealogical data is Google (`www.google.co.uk`). To conduct a search on Google, do the following:

1. **Go to `www.google.co.uk`.**

   The Google home page is simple. It consists of a field where you enter search terms and two buttons marked *Google Search* and *I'm Feeling Lucky*. You can also choose to search the whole web or only pages from the UK.

2. **Enter your ancestor's name into the search field and click Google Search.** (We entered Thomas Peyton.)

   The Results page appears with a list of URLs (this stands for Uniform Resource Locator, which is the address of an Internet site) and an abstract of the site, showing the search term in bold (Figure 3-6 shows an example).

3. **Click a search result that looks as if it may relate to your ancestor.**

Figure 3-6:
Search
results from
Google.

TIP

If you're looking for additional leads, Google allows you to view other pages
that are similar to the results that you receive from your original search. You
can also refine your search by using quotation marks in order to search for
a complete phrase – for example, you can search for Thomas Peyton using
Thomas Peyton as your search term, which filters out results dealing with
the countless other Thomases in the world. For more search hints, click the
Search Tips link at the top of the Results page.

Looking at general Internet meta-search engines

Wouldn't it be nice if you never had to visit multiple sites to search the
Internet? This burning question led directly to the creation of *meta-search
engines*, which use a single interface or form to execute searches using sev-
eral different search engines. They then return the results of all the individual
search engines back to a single page that you can use to view the results.
The number of results from meta-search engines can be overwhelming, so
you need a good search term and to have several substantial facts about the
person you're researching. Then you can quickly determine whether a result
is relevant to your search. You also need to have patience because you may
have to trudge through several sets of results before you find something
useful. Below are some examples of meta-search engines:

- ✔ **Alta Vista:** `www.uk.altavista.com`
- ✔ **Dogpile**: `www.dogpile.co.uk`
- ✔ **Ixquick:** `www.ixquick.com`
- ✔ **MetaCrawler:** `www.metacrawler.co.uk`
- ✔ **Search.com:** `www.search.com`
- ✔ **Ithaki:** `www.ithaki.net/indexuk.htm`
- ✔ **Vivisimo:** `vivisimo.com`

Subscribing to Online Databases – the Gold Mines of Genealogy?

When you start researching your family history you may feel that you have something in common with some of your less fortunate ancestors – especially when you're tearing your hair out over your meagre finds in search engines. Your ancestors may have fought to put food on the table in the slums of the Industrial Revolution, but you're fighting for every morsel of information, driven by your appetite for knowledge about your great-great-grandmother's maiden name or her sister's 17 children. You're roaming from place to place in search of something to satisfy your curiosity – living from hand to mouth, occasionally receiving tantalising morsels but never seeming to strike it lucky and hit upon your genealogical feast. But don't lose hope. Riches may be awaiting you if only you can stumble upon the right site. And the right site may be in the form of an online subscription database.

Online subscription databases are repositories of information that you can retrieve by paying a monthly, quarterly or yearly fee. Some of them even offer limited free trial periods so you can get to grips with the information available.

Most online subscription databases are easily searchable and let you enter your ancestor's name and execute a search to determine whether any information stored in the database relates to that particular name. Databases can be large or small; they can focus upon a small geographical area or have a broad scope that encompasses many different areas. Each database may also have its own unique search method and present information in its own format.

You can find online subscription databases in many ways. You can find references to them through search engines (discussed in the section 'Letting Your Computer Do the Walking: Using Search Engines' earlier in the chapter),

comprehensive genealogical indexes (read more in 'Browsing Comprehensive Genealogical Indexes' later in the chapter) and links that appear on personal and geographically specific websites. To give you a flavour of the types of goldmines that are available, we take a look at a couple of the major online subscription databases.

Ancestry.co.uk

Ancestry.co.uk, at `www.ancestry.co.uk`, is a commercial site that contains information about millions of names, focusing on England, Wales and Ireland, and constantly adds new material to its databases. The site contains a lot of free content, including message boards and compiled family trees, but in order to access the full collection you have to be a member. (The site does, however, put the majority of its new databases online for free for a few days so you can try them out.) The major collections at Ancestry.co.uk include the following:

- ✔ UK census collection (except the 1911 census)
- ✔ UK and Ireland parish and probate records
- ✔ England and Wales births, marriages and deaths indexes 1837–1983
- ✔ Pallot's Marriage Index
- ✔ Irish immigrants: New York port arrival
- ✔ British Army service records from the First World War
- ✔ UK incoming passenger lists

TIP

You can also subscribe to Ancestry Worldwide, at `www.ancestry.com`, to search the millions of records available in other countries, including the US Federal Census returns.

Scotland's People

Scotland's People, at `www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk`, is the key subscription database for Scottish genealogy. It contains constantly expanding collections of genealogical data, as well as research guides, background information about the records and how to use them, help with understanding your results, discussion groups, frequently asked questions and much more besides. Its collections include the following:

- ✔ Birth indexes 1855–2006
- ✔ Marriage indexes 1855–1932

✔ Death indexes 1855–2006

✔ Old parish registers 1553–1854

✔ Census collections 1841–1901

✔ Wills and testaments 1513–1901

Browsing Comprehensive Genealogical Indexes

GENEALOGY LINGO

If you're unable to find information about your ancestor via a search engine or an online database, or if you want to find additional information, another resource to try is a comprehensive genealogical index. A *comprehensive genealogical index* is a site that contains a categorised list of links to online resources for family history research. Comprehensive genealogical indexes are organised in a variety of ways, including by subject, alphabetically and by type of resource. No matter how the links are organised, they usually appear hierarchically and you click your way down from category to subcategory until you find the link you're looking for.

Following are two examples of comprehensive genealogical indexes:

✔ **Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet (`www.cyndislist.com`):** This international site contains a lot of useful resources for the UK and is used almost daily by genealogists worldwide.

✔ **Origins Network (`www.origins.net`):** This site contains a plethora of resources that would otherwise be difficult to get hold of or to search. From here, you can select links to British Origins, Irish Origins, Scots Origins or you can choose to search the whole collection at once. Searching is done by name, and you also have the option to search for 'close variants' to that name, to allow for differences in spelling.

TIP

When you're searching for your ancestors in comprehensive genealogical indexes (or anywhere else for that matter), bear in mind that they may appear in some records under abbreviated names or nicknames. Felix John Ireland may be listed in some records as F Ireland, FJ Ireland, or even as John Ireland. Similarly, his sister Charlotte may be lurking in the records as Lottie Ireland.

TRY THIS

Try This

To give you an idea of how comprehensive genealogical indexes work, try the following example, illustrated in Figure 3-7:

1. **Go to `www.cyndislist.com`.**

   This launches the home page for Cyndi's List.

2. **Select a category, such as 'Surnames, Family Associations & Family Newsletters'.**
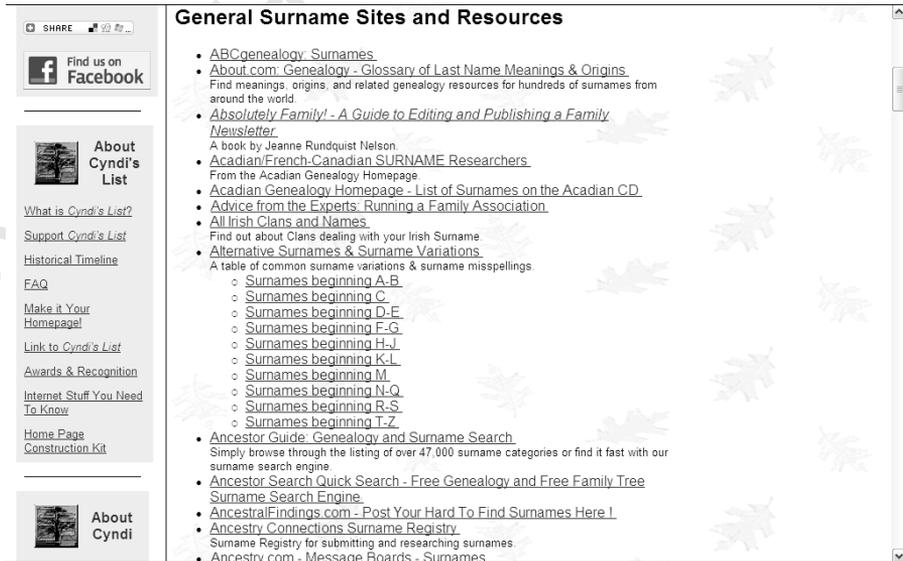
   Suppose you're searching for a page containing information about your ancestor William Eagle, of Norfolk. Two categories on the list may have this info: Surname Lists and Personal Home Pages. You may decide to try the Surnames category.

3. **Select a subcategory.**

   Click the link for General Surname sites and resources. This takes you to a page listing resources, websites and an alphabetical list of surnames. Click the link for the information that you're interested in. In this case, select Ancestor Guide: Genealogy and Surname search. This then takes you to another website, where you can enter the name you're looking for – Eagle, for example – and it then gives you a comprehensive list of websites and resources relevant to your particular name.

4. **Click on a promising link.**

Comprehensive genealogical indexes can be time-consuming to browse. You may need several clicks to get to the area in which the links that interest you are located. After several clicks, you may even find that no relevant links are present in that area. This may be because the maintainer of the site hasn't yet indexed a relevant site or because the site may be listed somewhere else in the index.

Figure 3-7:
Looking for Eagle resources on Cyndi's List.

General Surname Sites and Resources

- SHARE
- Find us on Facebook

About Cyndi's List

What is *Cyndi's List*?

Support *Cyndi's List*

Historical Timeline

FAQ

Make it Your Homepage!

Link to *Cyndi's List*

Awards & Recognition

Internet Stuff You Need To Know

Home Page Construction Kit

About Cyndi

- ABCgenealogy: Surnames
- About.com: Genealogy - Glossary of Last Name Meanings & Origins
  Find meanings, origins, and related genealogy resources for hundreds of surnames from around the world.
- *Absolutely Family! - A Guide to Editing and Publishing a Family Newsletter*
  A book by Jeanne Rundquist Nelson.
- Acadian/French-Canadian SURNAME Researchers
  From the Acadian Genealogy Homepage.
- Acadian Genealogy Homepage - List of Surnames on the Acadian CD
- Advice from the Experts: Running a Family Association
- All Irish Clans and Names
  Find out about Clans dealing with your Irish Surname.
- Alternative Surnames & Surname Variations
  A table of common surname variations & surname misspellings.
  - Surnames beginning A-B
  - Surnames beginning C
  - Surnames beginning D-E
  - Surnames beginning F-G
  - Surnames beginning H-J
  - Surnames beginning K-L
  - Surnames beginning M
  - Surnames beginning N-Q
  - Surnames beginning R-S
  - Surnames beginning T-Z
- Ancestor Guide: Genealogy and Surname Search
  Simply browse through the listing of over 47,000 surname categories or find it fast with our surname search engine.
- Ancestor Search Quick Search - Free Genealogy and Free Family Tree Surname Search Engine
- AncestralFindings.com - Post Your Hard To Find Surnames Here !
- Ancestry Connections Surname Registry
  Surname Registry for submitting and researching surnames.
- Ancestry.com - Message Boards - Surnames

Seeking Answers to Your Surname Questions

Even if you can't find any surname-specific sites on your particular family, you still have hope. This comes in the form of queries. *Queries* are research questions that you post to a particular website, mailing list or newsgroup so other researchers can help you solve your research problems. Other researchers may have information that they haven't yet made available about a family, or they may have seen some information about your family, even though they aren't actively researching that branch.

Web queries

One of the quickest ways of reaching a wide audience with your query is by placing it on a query site on the web. For an example of a query site, try GenForum:

1. **Open your web browser and go to `http://genforum.`**
    `genealogy.com/.`

2. **In the Forum Finder box, enter the surname you're looking for and click the Finder button.**

    Don't worry if your surname doesn't have a forum. The GenForum section is constantly growing and adding surnames, so check back every so often to see whether one's been added. Alternatively, you can request that a new forum is added for your surname: look for the link Add Forum near the bottom of the GenForum pages.

    You may also want to search other forums to see whether the name is included with a different spelling or to see whether someone else has mentioned the name in a passing reference in another forum, (more details in the next section).

3. **After you've found a forum you want to enter, click on the forum link. You can then read messages by clicking the links.**

    As soon as your browser loads the message board page, you see a list of bulleted messages to choose from. You can also navigate to other pages of the message board if the messages don't all fit on a single page. If you don't want to read all the messages, you have the option to see only the latest messages, only today's messages or any messages posted within the last seven days. These options are available at the top of the page.

4. **To post a new query, click the Post New Message button near the top of the message board page.**

   If you're not already a registered user of GenForum, you see a page containing instructions on how to register. After you've registered, a page containing the fields that generate your message pops up. This page includes the Name, E-Mail, Subject and Message fields, as shown in Figure 3-8.

5. **Complete the appropriate fields and then click the Preview Message button.**

   Make sure that your message contains enough information for other researchers to determine whether they can assist you. Include as much as you can of the following: full names, birth and death dates and places and where your ancestors lived.

   Clicking the Preview Message button is an important step because it lets you see how the message looks when it's posted. This option stops you from submitting an embarrassing message filled with factual errors and typos.

6. **If you're satisfied with the way the message looks, click the Post Message button.**

Figure 3-8:
Posting a new message to GenForum.

Don't be put off if you don't find what you're looking for straight away when you're placing or reading web queries. An answer to your message may come within a week, a month or longer after you post your message. Also, you may find that people post some of the messages from other countries, particularly the United States. But this doesn't mean you won't find useful material amongst them. You're now getting involved with the worldwide genealogical community.

Mailing-list queries

When we mention mailing lists alarm bells may start to ring as you picture an endless stream of junk mail. Fear not! The type of mailing list that we're talking about delivers only the mail that you request. Such mailing lists provide you with a means of posting queries and messages about your surnames and genealogical research in general.

Mailing lists are formed by groups of people who share common interests. In the field of genealogy, those interests may be surnames, specific geographical areas or ethnic groups. A list consists of the email addresses of every person who subscribes to the group. When you want to send a message to the entire group, you send it to a single email address, which in turn forwards the message to everyone on the list. To join a mailing list, you send an email to a designated address with a subscription message. You receive an email confirming that you've subscribed to the list and telling you where to send an email if you want to send a message to everyone on the list.

So how do you find a mailing list that interests you? One way is to consult the extensive list of mailing lists found on the Genealogy Resources site (`http://lists.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/findlist.pl`).

To find and join a mailing list for your surname, do the following:

1. **Go to http://lists.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/findlist.pl and enter the surname that you're interested in in the surname box – for example, Ramsbottom. Then click on Search.**

   You're taken to a page containing the information you need to subscribe to the Ramsbottom mailing list.

2. **Follow the subscription instructions for your mailing list.**

   The instructions for the Ramsbottom mailing list tell you to send an email message to the given address, containing only the word 'subscribe'.

3. **Start your email program and subscribe to the mailing list.**

   Within a couple of minutes, you receive a confirmation message welcoming you to the mailing list. The message includes information about how to use the mailing list, how to unsubscribe and how to switch between the mail and digest modes of receiving your mail. It is worth considering this option carefully. The *mail mode* option simply forwards email messages to you every time a message is posted on the mailing list. Although mail mode works well for small mailing lists, you may end up receiving hundreds of messages every week. To avoid this, you can

select the *digest mode*, which groups together several messages and sends them out as one large message. So, instead of receiving 30 messages a day, you receive only two messages, with the text of 15 messages in each.

4. **Read the messages without responding or posting your own messages for a while. Begin posting your own queries and responses to others' messages when you're ready to do so.**

Reading messages but not posting your own messages is called *lurking*. You may want to lurk on the mailing list to see what other messages look like and to become familiar with the general culture of the list. After you get a feel for the structure and nature of the messages, jump in and begin sending your own queries and messages.

Using Email to Get Help

In the section 'Seeking Answers to Your Surname Questions' earlier in the chapter, we discussed a couple of ways to research surnames through email by using queries. You can also use email to directly contact other researchers of your surname. You just need to discover where to find them.

WARNING!

Identifying potential email contacts by using online directories to find everyone with the surname you're researching, getting their email addresses and then mass emailing your research questions to all of them is a bad idea. Although mass emailing everyone you can find with a particular surname generates return email for you, we can almost guarantee that the responses will be unhelpful. You have a much better chance of success if you restrict yourself to genealogical sites, where you stand a good chance of finding other researchers interested in your surname.

A number of resources are available that use email as their primary communication tool. Searching the Rootsweb site (www.rootsweb.ancestry.com) you may discover a number of other resources connected to the name you're interested in. For example, after entering **Ramsbottom**, you see links to Ramsbottom archives as well as to the mailing list. In the same way, you may come across email addresses of specific family associations and newsletters.

Verifying Your Information

We can't abandon this chapter without once more offering you our favourite piece of advice, whether you're researching surnames or anything else:

don't believe everything you read! A pure genealogist may go so far as to say 'Don't believe *anything* you read!' Always verify any information that you find online by referring to primary records. (For more on primary records, refer to Chapter 1.) If you can't prove it through a census record, civil or parish record or some other authoritative record, then the information may be worth little or nothing. However, just because you can't prove it immediately doesn't mean that you should discard the information. At some time in the future, you may discover a record that does indeed prove the accuracy of the information.