

Genealogy – the relatively entertaining and enlightening new hobby

Jim Buchan digs deep in Barrhead to find his family roots in the fertile fields of rural Angus.

It's unlikely that any of us will discover that one of our flesh and blood was a Russian spy. But TV genealogy expert Dr Nick Barratt did just that when he delved into his own family history.

When Nick visited East Renfrewshire recently to give a talk on his involvement with the popular TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?*, I managed to have a brief chat with him about genealogy and its growing appeal.

I asked if he had done any research on his own family and he admitted that working on celebrity's family trees took up so much time that he only managed to dabble in it.

But what he did find was truly astonishing. He found evidence that a great uncle had spied for the Soviets in the 1920s and 1930s and he also discovered that a family friend, a Mr Chase, was one of the American dynasty who founded Chase Manhattan Bank.

Nick told his audience at Giffnock Library that to produce one hour-long episode of the programme, over 100 hours of footage had to be filmed with five researchers working for three months to research each celebrity's family tree.

Like so many people, I found the programme fascinating and watching celebrities like Jeremy Paxman and Bill Oddie explore their family histories spurred me on to find out more about the Buchans.

I first became interested back in the 1980s when I found an old tartan suitcase full of old sepia tinted family photographs under a bed in the family home in Montrose.

Keen to know who the people in these photos were, I sat my dad down one wet afternoon and we went through them one by one.

We had to be ruthless in editing what was there. If dad couldn't name who was in a photo it was binned. Photos of people he could identify were kept and I carefully detailed names, locations and approximate year the photo was taken.

There were dozens of Kodak Instamatic snaps of my brother Ian and I at various stages of our childhood on caravan holidays in Devon and Cornwall and later sporting curly mullets, flares and platform shoes.

But much more interesting were the older photos of our dad at 18 resting his foot on the running board of a 1930s car looking as if he had stepped out of a gangster movie.

However, the years went by and other things, like bringing up a child and work, took priority. The photos remained out of sight and mind for over 20 years and it was not until *Who Do You Think You Are?* came along that I was spurred on to organise all this valuable material.

At the end of each programme co-ordinator Dr Nick Barratt would explain to viewers where to get information and what they needed to make a start. He explained how modern technology and the internet had made information on our ancestors much more accessible.

When I interviewed him he was delighted to hear that East Renfrewshire Council was now providing an internet linked service to the public from its genealogy centre based in Barrhead registrar's office.

Budding genealogists can now book genealogy sessions with a staff member who will operate the computer for just £15 a day or £10 for a half day.

Since the genealogy centre opened in November 2006 they have had 60 bookings and they have some regular clients who have become hooked.

Registrar Patricia Mathieson said: "Clients find that one appointment is not really enough time to do a full family history and I advise them that it could take a few more sessions to cover all the branches of their family.

"We have generated a number of new clients due to John Osborne, a regular visitor who has been urging his friends to come to the genealogy centre because he has found it so interesting and informative.

"Sometimes research throws up some surprises. A member of staff, Alison Irvine, was amazed to find that the client she was assisting was in fact a relative of her great, grand father's sister. Also people are constantly astounded that their origins began in parts of the UK well away from Glasgow, Barrhead or Paisley. People are also amazed when they discover some of the occupations held by their forebears," added Patricia.

To help me research this article Patricia invited me to the genealogy centre in Barrhead with my ragbag collection of photos and scraps of information I had gleaned from my dad all these years before.

What I didn't appreciate was that your family does not have to have come from this area. You can search for information from all over the country from the comfort of the office in Barrhead.

My family are from the north east of Scotland and with my dad's birthdate and place of birth Patricia, with a few taps of the keyboard, was able to

make my dad's birth certificate appear on the screen in a matter of seconds.

To make a session worthwhile you really need to do your homework before you go. Look out your own birth certificate and any other family certificates you may have.

Jot down in a notebook names of your immediate family, your mum and dad, brothers and sisters, maiden names, dates of birth, marriages and death of family members. I would stress the importance of talking to your older family members and writing down what they can recall about their parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts etc.

All that information is vital to putting the pieces of the puzzle together.

My brother came along with me and with the information I had gathered from talking to my dad we were able, within a few hours, to get as far back to 1790, the year our great, great grandfather was born. We soon found out from the census records that for many generations the Buchans were farm labourers and tenant farmers.

Although no major skeletons were unearthed, such as a family member being sent to the colonies for stealing a sheep, we did come across an alarming and rather disturbing revelation.

Firstly, I need to explain what life was like when I was a youngster growing up in Montrose. As with many small towns located close to each other, there was rivalry between us 'Gable Endies' and nearby Forfar and Arbroath but there was an even greater contention between Montrose and Brechin. Maybe it was because Montrose was a humble Royal Burgh, while the much smaller Brechin, by virtue of it having a cathedral, was deemed a city.

Even school football matches between our Academy and their High were contested with the intensity of an Old Firm cup final. And my dear sister in law Isobel has had to endure 30 years of slugging from her husband and me for simply being a Brechiner.

But as we sat staring at the Dell monitor in front of us in Barrhead that Friday afternoon, the words on the screen screamed at us from the 1871 census records.....our great, great grandfather, a tenant farmer, lived with his family in a cluster of cottages called Careston, five miles from.....BRECHIN!!!!

The sweat rolled down our stricken faces as we looked at each other in total disbelief. "Cannae be!", "Must be a mistake!" and less printable utterances filled room.

So be prepared to find out some things that may rattle your cage and stir up some emotions. But don't let that put you off. It is great fun and incredibly interesting but it can become very absorbing and addictive and can take over much of your spare time.

If you want to find out more about how to get started give Patricia Mathieson a call on 0141 577 3551.