

Brickwalls: they frustrate us, infuriate us, stretch our skills to the limit and sometimes defeat us, but they also provide those wonderful ‘Wow!’ moments in our research. And they are one of the aspects of family research that keep us hooked and coming back for more. **Mary Evans** gives advice on how to tackle them and reveals how such challenges can actually improve our family history...

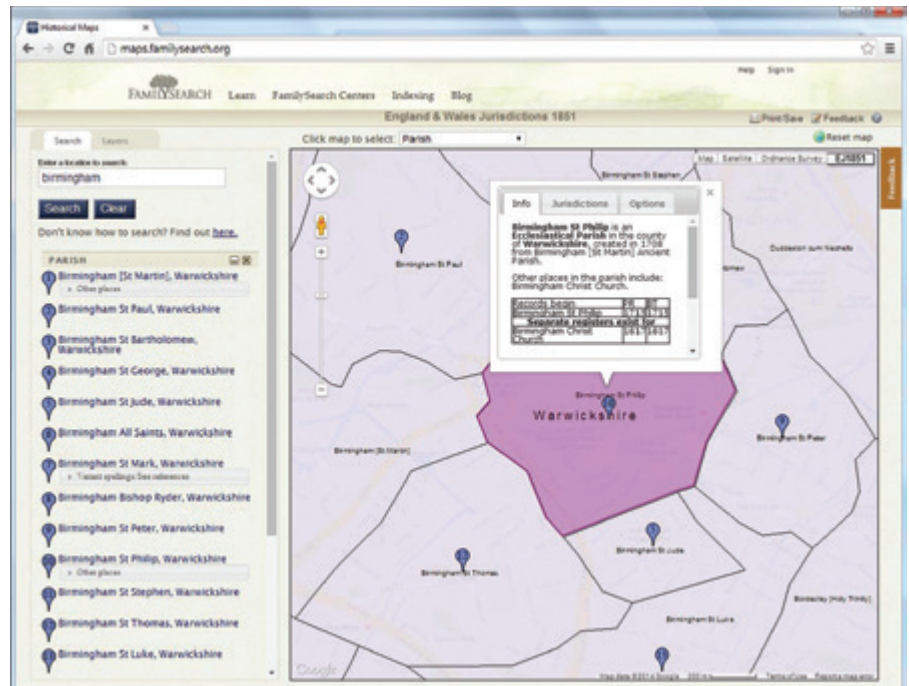
For all their frustrations, brickwalls should be seen as a positive force and an opportunity to learn new skills, explore new sources, make contact with other family members and generally make us better researchers.

My first brickwall seems insignificant now that I look back on it, but it nevertheless taught me something that I still put into practice today some 35 years later.

I was born in Birmingham, as were my mother and her father. I had borrowed *Family Patterns: A Personal Experience of Genealogy* by John Patrick Abbott from our village library and found it utterly absorbing, especially as the research was based in places with which I was familiar. At the time we were living near Birmingham so, having talked to my mother and her sisters and written down all their information, I enlisted grandparents as childminders for a day and headed for Birmingham’s Central Library and Archives.

Take time: consider the details

I never knew my maternal grandfather, James Cope, who died before I was born, but my grandmother, whom



I had known well, had talked to me about him. I knew that his birthday fell on 21 December and that he was two years older than my grandmother who was born in 1874. I knew that he was 24 at his August marriage in 1896 and 65 when he died in March 1937. All this gave me a birth year of 1872.

In the archives I took the baptism register for St James-the-Less, Ashted,

For clues about English parishes in the past (changes in name and use, and the coverage of surviving parish registers for instance), see sites such as maps.familysearch.org, genuki.org, and the relevant family history society website.

and started searching from the beginning of 1870 as I knew there was a brother, Charles Edward, two years older than my grandfather. It was my first bit of research and I was so pleased to find Charles Edward baptised on 2 October 1870, an entry that gave me my hitherto unknown great-grandparents. I skipped quickly to December 1872 and looked carefully for grandfather’s baptism but the weeks, months and years went past on the pages until, in 1877, I found the baptism of his younger sister, Mary Ann. But I hadn’t found my grandfather.

This bothered me on and off for months until, presumably after more experience, it suddenly hit me that because his birthday was in December he hadn’t actually had his birthday for that year at the time of his marriage

Family Patterns: A Personal Experience of Genealogy by John Patrick Abbott is now out of print, but that needn’t be a stumbling block. Check out abebooks.com, for instance, for second-hand copies.

