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Considering Age Variations when researching your Ancestors

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Ancestry Genes Roots History

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Why!

So why is 'Age' so important, after all its just a number!

Age is tied up with dates, if you don't get the age of your ancestor right, you wont get the dates for those vital records right. Likewise the other way round if you get a date wrong, you can get the age wrong and then other events are also effected.

Age is an important fact to get right, it is as important as the spelling of names and locations your ancestors lived in.

But as facts go, it is also the one fact that causes the greatest amount of errors in ancestral trees. Due to this, it is also the main reason why so many people connect the wrong individuals as their ancestors.

Reasons for Age Variations

For this talk we will look at the main areas of time and the most common mistakes made, which most effect 'Age' in ancestral trees.

- Key dates in history.

- 1538-1837.

- Current records.

- Common mistakes.

- Time line of events.

- Problems with documents.

- Perception and honesty.

- Hints and Tips.

- Underused website.

Dates in History

Here is a list of the main dates in history that are being covered today with regards to considering 'Age' when researching your Ancestors.

- **1538** - church records compulsory
- **1753** - Marriage Act
- **1837** - Certification Introduced
- **1841** - Census Introduced
- **1870** - Education Act
- **1929** - Marriage act changed
- **1936** - First Computer
- **1991** - Internet as we know it
- **2022** - Marriage act changed

1538 to 1837

Parish Records

These were created in 1538 when a law was passed by Henry VIII to record baptisms, marriages and deaths. In 1599 Elizabeth I started Bishops Transcripts.

Age of marriage had been the same since Anglo Saxon times. Set at 12 for a girl and 14 for a boy. In Tudor time the average age of marriage was 24 for a girl and 27 for a boy. It stays pretty static from then on with boys being mainly married between 24-29 and most girls were 23-27 years old.

Age of adulthood known at the time as 'Majority' or 'Full age' was set in Norman times as 21 for boys and 14 for married girls 16 if they were single.

Calendar year change

1752 saw the change from Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar that was already in use in some parts of Europe since 1585.

Marriage Act 1753

This changed the rules governing marriage, to prevent clandestine marriages. This replaced Canon Law, which had been in place up to this date. Only marriages in a church were now legal.

Legal age of consent

Two types of marriage were introduced, you could be married by 'Licence' or by 'Banns'.

Licence was used in your local church and parental/guardian consent was required under the age of 21 years. Banns were for marrying in other churches and didn't require consent, as long as banns were read over 3 consecutive weeks they were binding in law and could not be voided by parents/guardians at a later date.

Clergy Liable

The legislation made clergy liable if they didn't obtain consent for a marriage under licence, the penalty was 14 years deportation. This law was removed when deportation of colonies ended.

Current Records

This is the terminology used for records since the introduction of Civil Registration which introduced birth , marriage and death certificates.

Civil registration 1837

Introduced on 1st July 1837 it was compulsory for all. Events before this date appear in parish records

Births Certificates

Meant to make proving age easier. But until the invention of computers and specifically the internet, it was too easy to claim lost or destroyed or even that details such as place were different so records could not be found

Marriage Certificates

Early records see age on some substituted with 'full age' or short 'full' a terminology dating back to Norman times, originally referring to men gaining the age of 21. However after 1752 it is used for those not requiring parental /guardian consent.

Death Certificates

These records were often filled out by grieving relatives or people that didn't know the exact age i.e. tenants, neighbours, wardens etc. So errors often occur in the period prior to computers / internet.

Census Records

The 1841 is referred to as the first census. The census since this date have included age, though not always accurate. 1939 is the first to include date of birth.

Enlistment 1st and 2nd World War

Age of enlistment, was flouted by many joining up below age. This was achieved by claiming birth certificates were lost. Letters from an adult confirming age could easily be forged. Men even signed up technically too old to fight pretending to be younger so they could go to war.

Marriage Age Changed

In 1929 the age for both genders was raised to 16 years. In 2022 it raised again to 18 years .

Common Mistakes

Baptism not Birth

Often baptisms are recorded on trees as births, before 1837 they are baptism records. This could happen months even years after and could be done as a family group so age will not be accurate.

Events too Young

You could not marry before the legal age of 12 - girls, 14 - boys, if you have a marriage that is before this date it is wrong. Average age though meant most were not marrying till well into there 20's. It is not possible to have a child under the age of 10 or for that matter over the age of 55 so always check on your trees the mothers age at time of births

Hints and Tips Added Without Doing Checks

Most sites offer these now however they are just a guide and need checking. Don't ever just add them otherwise you can land up with trees that are not only inaccurate but in a complete muddle

Life too Long

Everyone dying young is a miss conception it depended on events at the time, civil war for instance also on lifestyle and family genes. Equally though, ages of above 60 years old were not uncommon and people can be found even in the 1800's living to 100 years old it but this was rare. If you have someone older than this it will be an error.

Written Numbers

Parish records start off in Latin and contain Roman numerals which can be miss read. The symbols we use for number today start to be used when English is written in records. The numbers 4 and 7 are often miss transcribed.

Education

Before the Education Act of 1870 only landed gentry had an education, within this only boys were normally taught. 1870 Act saw all 5-10 year olds receive tuition in their 3R's. When doing your trees you need to be aware that your ancestor might not have known their numbers or how to write them.

Census Ages

The 1841 census is the earliest. Being new they were aloud to round up or down 'Age' by 5 years. When looking you need to be aware of this, as age shown may not be correct. This was not allowed on later censuses but examples can be found on all later versions. 1939 was the first census that included both age and date of birth which prevented age rounding.

Quarters on Civil Registration Records

These records are recorded in year quarters. If a record appears in the 1st quarter Jan—Mar it may have actually happened or taken place in the 4th quarter of the previous year.

Graves

These are great sources for age and dates but errors can occur, especially in transcriptions. Also damage to stones and nature can obscure dates. Those transcribed on websites can be burial dates rather than death dates.
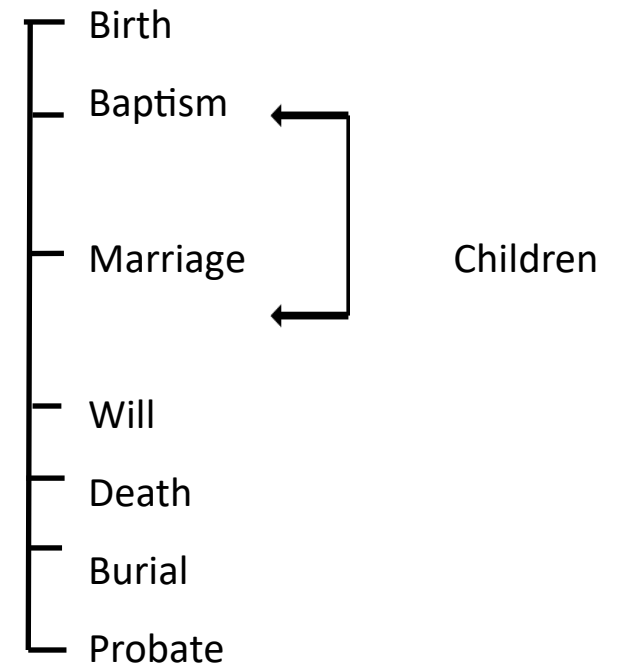
Events out of order

Within life there is a certain order in which events can happen. The time line on the next page shows this. It is impossible for someone to be born after they have married or died before they were born, mistakes we often see. Others include burial before death and the even a marriage after this date. It can get really messy.

Children being born are the exception as often children were born before marriage and sometime on rare occasions marriage would not even happen.

Wills could be written by someone going off to war at a young age but normally they wouldn't be written until someone had created their family. More often than not written only weeks even days before death.

Time line for events

Getting timelines in order of age and dates is really important

- Birth
- Baptism
- Marriage   Children
- Will
- Death
- Burial
- Probate

Problems With Documents

Transcription errors

Often miss read due to the condition of the records. Transcribing is not new, records were not always written at the event time so for instance Bishops records may be different.

Numbers in margins

Dates and ages are normally at the beginning or end of a row. When at the beginning they are sometimes missed when scanning as they are in the fold of the book.

Faint / Smudged

Due to the age and ink used, records are often faint or smudged and therefore can be hard to read and are often miss read.

Damaged Pages

Old documents are often damaged and it's the edges of the pages were most are torn or suffer water damage. Therefore dates and ages are often missing or only part remains.

"Age is an issue of mind over matter, its just a number, if you don't mind, it doesn't matter!"

Mark Twain

1835 –1910

Perception and Honesty

Importance

Always taken as of lesser importance for its accuracy. No matter which century.

Socially disrespectful to ask someone their age.

No real way to check before computers and internet so was easy to get wrong.

Became the but of jokes with '21 again' often said at time of a birthday.

Falsifying

People didn't like to divulge there 'Age' it was private and they felt it was wrong to ask even rude that they were being controlled by asking for it.

Records were often falsified to cover wrong doings especially if you looked young to avoid an adult sentence. Other reasons included vanity and saving face especially if there was a gap in marriage age. Often the 'Age' would be recorded as similar or the man as older even if he wasn't, this was to stop ridicule and jokes about the marriage.

Tips and Hints

- **Use age range** - use range around date, larger the range the better.

- **Be aware of time period** - events and laws that happened.

- **Calendars** - Be mindful of year calendars changed and aware if events appear in both formats.

- **Type of Event** - check that the right event are happening in the right period of time.

- **Look at timelines** - always check your not mixing up your timeline of events and age for events

- **Original records** - always a must to check accuracy and look for possible missing information.

- **Handwriting** - Look around a document to make sure your numbers are right and that the right year has been transcribed.

- **Other record sets** - always use as many different record types as you can to confirm the age.

Underused Website

Within current records sets there is one that in recent years has become more valuable but is little used. That is the death records held by the General Records Office or GRO.

Though death record index's do appear on many of the paid transcription sites they only state name and location. Often people know the name and a possible area for death and will attach the first record they find. The problem here is that without checking the death age you could be easily attaching the wrong person. Index records on the GRO contain the age of person at death. The site is very easy to use.

"Always

Keep an open mind and think outside the box"

Davina Wilcock 2021 ©

Recap

So to recap it's a good idea to keep these points in mind when doing your trees.

- Don't fixate on a year

- Use a year range when searching

- Be aware ages can be recorded wrong.

- Always check original records were possible

- Check which calendar is in use

- Bear in mind the period your researching

- Use multiple sites

- Always use multiple record types

- If death is after 1837 check age of death on GRO