

Keeping it in the family

Relatively speaking, as it were, most of us wish that we knew more about those who populated our distant family history. Terry Neale speaks to Kathy Gillen, whose company specialises in providing the answers to our questions about the past

HAVE you ever wondered just what your great-grandfather did during the war? Or even, perhaps, who your great-grandfather was?

They are questions that flit across the minds of many curious folk from time to time but comparatively few will ever discover the answers. Even an attempt at digging into the past can appear daunting. While the internet may have made searching for information much easier, knowing how and where to start will be off-putting for many.

Fortunately, there is professional help at hand. Kathy Gillen Genealogy is a Jersey business that specialises in opening up mines of family details. Having just

celebrated its fifth anniversary, the company has also expanded to embrace a wealth of other services for those seeking background knowledge of their relatives.

“I find it exciting that, over the years, our services have broadened,” said Kathy, the company’s founder and principal. “We now digitise and preserve old family photos and memorabilia, arrange DNA testing and analyse the results to reveal the family’s geographical origins, connecting them with biological relatives worldwide, which helps to resolve long-standing family mysteries.

“We also record the memories of elderly relatives – stories of their own lives and of parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents often reaching back to the last quarter of the 1800s.

“These personal recollections transform a family tree into a living narrative, turning names into real people, which become a priceless legacy for generations yet to come.”

Another vital aspect of the work undertaken by Kathy and her team is to assist clients in obtaining their EU passports – primarily Irish but with a recent application for Malta. This is done by combining in-depth research expertise to uncover the required documentation. The work also involves strong administrative skills to coordinate the application process.

“The authorities’ standards are rigorous,” Kathy explained, “but we are proud to say that our passport team has a 100% success rate.”

Making up the company’s investigative team are researchers and support staff based in Jersey, the UK and the Far East. Their ages range from the 30s up to staff in their 80s.

“The technological strengths of our younger members play a vital role in contemporary research, complementing the depth of experience across the team and enhancing what we are able to deliver,” Kathy said.

Just like the researchers, Kathy’s clients are also drawn from Jersey, the UK and overseas. All of them share a deep curiosity about their family origins.

“Recently, we carried out ‘Big Reveals’ of our findings to families in Arizona and Toronto, moments that were genuinely thrilling to be a part of. Reveals are occasions when families discover that their ancestors are far more than names on a family tree. They are lives that have shaped the present.

“Laughter often mingles with quiet emotion as the ancestors take their rightful place in the family’s collective memory. What begins as inquisitiveness becomes connection and a profound realisation that the past is not gone; it lives with us.”

The work brings other moments on which Kathy is happy to reflect. “It has been particularly gratifying to support local charities along the way,” she said. “These include Jersey Hospice Care, EYE-CAN, Dementia Jersey, Age Concern, Beresford Street Kitchen, JAAR, the Jersey Christmas Appeal and Maggie’s Cancer Support.”

Kathy spent most of her professional life in the trust and corporate sector, working extensively with families. This experience has stood her in good stead for dealing with the sensitive and sometimes sad situations that can arise when recounting the lives of ancestors to their descendants.

“I took A-level history, specialising in social history. My intention was to read this subject at university. I was told that there would be many career opportunities available to me – including as a researcher or working in a library. Neither appealed to my 18-year-old self.

“Instead, I came to Jersey to stay with family for the summer and loved it so much that I remained here. My first job – after briefly working in a hotel as a chambermaid – was in the book department at de Gruchy’s, before moving into finance.”

In later life, Kathy became involved in researching family histories as a hobby. Friends then began asking her to

look into their families, which she was happy to do in return for a charitable donation.

“When Covid came along, I quickly tired of jigsaw puzzles and making banana bread and so I decided to pursue formal training instead. I enrolled on an excellent online genealogy course with the University of Strathclyde, which was much more interesting.”

The catalyst for starting her business came when she was invited to submit a lot for the Jersey Christmas Appeal Auction. As people would be paying good money, she realised that it would be necessary to demonstrate her credibility and credentials.

“With the help of my family, we created a website and business cards. That was over five years ago and the rest, as they say, is history.”

When conducting research for clients, Kathy’s team members collaborate with history groups and other researchers in the relevant locations.

“We were researching a family whose grandfather had come to the UK in the early 1900s from Riga, Latvia. We approached the Latvian Genealogy Group who were incredibly helpful in giving guidance on how to find records for him and his family in that country. Other recent successful international collaborations have occurred in Malta and South Africa.”

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Not surprisingly, the tasks undertaken by Kathy and her team frequently uncover astonishing stories which fascinate the researchers as much as they do the clients who commission the work. The stories unearthed are many and varied.



■ Kathy Gillen Genealogy also helps clients to obtain their EU passports

Picture: ROBBIE DARK (41765736)



■ Kathy Gillen, owner of Kathy Gillen Genealogy, a business which helps people to trace their family history
Picture: ROBBIE DARK (41765758)

Referring to one client, whose grandfather had been rather uncommunicative during his lifetime, Kathy's team established that he had been born in 1901 and was illegitimate. Both of his parents had died in the workhouse when he was about 13 and he had left his home town in the north-east of England and travelled to

a mining village some ten miles away where, at the age of 14, he became a miner.

“In his early days he was a pony putter, which was a hard job,” Kathy explained. “He lodged with his future wife’s family and they eventually married and had 71 happy years together. He died, on his birthday, at the age of 98.”

The man’s grandfather had been a seaman who sadly drowned in 1881 when his ship sank near Malmo, Sweden.

“We were delighted to unearth an image of the ship, as well as a newspaper cutting reporting its loss – he had been the cook and steward on board.”

But the revelations did not end there. “We discovered that his two-times great-grandfather, born in the 1780s, was from Dundee in Scotland – the family had no idea that they had Scottish blood – and that he was a sea captain in Whitby, aboard whaling ships travelling to the Arctic.

“We were pleased to connect with a distant relative who had a trunk full of memorabilia and he provided photos of the captain, with other captains and his wife, a copy of his indentures, a photo of the family home in Whitby and a book about his ship.”

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A satisfactory result, then, and there has been a host of similar happy outcomes over the years.

Another family keen to track down a missing grandfather hoped to find his military records from World War One. Curiously, they also believed that he may have been imprisoned in the Tower of London.

“After much searching, we eventually uncovered his military records and soon understood why the family had encountered difficulties,” Kathy revealed.

“We found that he had enlisted using the name of his older brother, falsely claiming to be over the legal age of 18 – he was in fact 16 – in November 1916. Notably, his

brother had been killed in action just a few months earlier, in July 1916, at the age of 18, during the early stages of the Battle of the Somme.

“His records did not suggest that he had endured imprisonment in the Tower of London – hardly surprising as the tower had primarily been used for enemies of the state and, especially, German spies. We did, however, find a connection with that famous London landmark.

“It transpired that the family’s grandfather had served in the Grenadier Guards and, as part of a rotation, they protected the Crown Jewels at the Tower and also participated in longstanding traditions such as the Ceremony of the Keys, dating back centuries, in which the fortress gates are ceremonially locked each night.”

When it comes to family history, then, there is no limit to the number of fascinating buried secrets just waiting to be unearthed and brought back into the light. It is a fascination which never fails to enthuse the team at Kathy Gillen Genealogy.

“It is incredible to reflect on how far we have come from our modest beginning,” Kathy said. “Seeing the pleasure that our work brings to others makes all our efforts worthwhile and we truly love what we do.”

But let’s just return for a moment to the story of the grandfather whose ancestor was a Scottish sea captain

living in Whitby and whaling in the Arctic, for there is an unexpected twist in this tale.

The gentleman also turned out to be a part of Kathy's own family history – and she didn't have a clue.