

Help with dental history research

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If you are new to dental history research it can be difficult to know where to look for the information you need – and quite daunting. Below is a list of some of the many available resources. I have found that it is worth exploring as many online and hard copy avenues as are open to you. For example, if you think your subject has a connection with a particular university/organisation in another country then email their library or archive department for information. You never know what might turn up. Recently I emailed SOAS on the off-chance that they might be able to help with an image and ended up receiving a file of original letters relevant to my research! Remember there is no time limit when you are setting yourself a research task so don't rush to write something if there are resources that you should really have checked. On the other hand, at some point, you will have to leave the joys of online research surfing and knuckle down to actually collating and writing your article.

If you discover any useful resources that are not mentioned here then please contact me so that they can be added to this list.

Free resources

Hathitrust - <https://www.hathitrust.org/>

HathiTrust is a partnership of academic and research institutions, offering a collection of millions of titles digitized from libraries around the world. It includes online access to a vast collection of out of copyright dental journals, books, theses and (mostly American) university publications.

You can use "full text" searching – or go directly to a particular journal title and look at particular issues that are available.

It includes:

Transactions of the Odontological Society of Great Britain -
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000047119>

Dental Record up to 1897 -
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000060730>

Internet Archive - <https://archive.org/>

Internet Archive is a non-profit library of millions of free books, movies, software, music, websites, and more. Again, this contains a number of dental journals and books. Sometimes when only limited access is available on Hathitrust to a title it can be found on Archive.org. For example, the Transactions of the British Society for the Study of Orthodontics which cannot be viewed on Hathitrust are fully available on Archive.org. The platform is not quite so easy to search as Hathitrust and it is often better searched initially by using Google to put your search term in followed by "archive.org".

Forgotten Books –

<https://www.forgottenbooks.com/en/Medicine/Dentistry>

A mixture of books and journals – not necessarily complete runs. Not a particularly good search engine. If you subscribe then you get access to everything online. If you don't subscribe then some items are completely free and for others you will see a number of pages blanked out (so it can be frustrating!). All pdf downloads have to be paid for. This is from the site: "Forgotten Books is a London-based book publisher specializing in the restoration of old books, both fiction and non-fiction. Today we have 1,294,206 books available to read online, download as eBooks, or purchase in print."

Dental Cosmos, a Monthly Record of Dental Science - <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dencos/>

A national American journal which ran from 1859 until it merged with the Journal of the American Dental Association in 1926. This is freely available back to the very first issue in 1859. Although it is an American journal it is always worth checking if you are researching a UK-based topic because this may have been reported on.

PubMed Central –

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/journals/>

This contains a number of old medical journals including:

BMJ from 1857 up to 1988 -
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/journals/3/>

Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine/Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine Vol 1 1809 up to the present - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/journals/269/#procrsmed>

The Statue of Liberty – Ellis Island Foundation

<https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/passenger-result>

This contains lists of passengers arriving in New York which include distinguishing features such as height, eye colour, family members in country or from home country.

For example, from these you can discover that Lilian Lindsay on arrival in New York in 1933 was aged 61, female, a widow, a retired dentist, her passage was paid for by the American Dental Association, she was 5' 4" with a fair complexion, grey hair, grey eyes and her brother, FJS Murray lived in Bedford.

They can be very useful for discovering other family members, ages and addresses.

Family Search -

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/>

A good way to discover a variety of family records including some worldwide records that are not available with a UK only Ancestry or Findmypast subscription. Free to register.

Plarr's Lives of the Fellows -

https://livesonline.rcseng.ac.uk/client/en_GB/lives

This is the Royal College of Surgeons of England's collection of biographies of deceased fellows from 1843 up to date and includes a number of dentists.

Angle Orthodontist -

<https://meridian.allenpress.com/angle-orthodontist/issue/9/1>

Online right back to the first issue in 1931.

Online books library -

<https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/>

This lists a number of websites where full text publications may be found from around the world – not all of these are free publications

Chronicling America –

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Covers American Newspapers full text between 1770-1963. These tend to be the smaller local newspapers rather than the large national titles. But can prove useful.

History of Dentistry and Medicine -

<https://historyofdentistryandmedicine.com/>

An online encyclopedia created and written by Dr Andrew Spielman it includes a history of individual tools, instruments, materials, agents, interventions, specialties, providers or patients, and anything related to dentistry and dental practice. Each entry comes with a wealth of references.

To search for abstracts to articles

Pubmed – <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>

Contains citations from MEDLINE, life science journals, and online books. Citations may include links to full text content from PubMed Central and publisher web sites.

Subscription-based resources

British Library Newspaper Archive -

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

Indispensable to a researcher – and often free to access in public libraries.

Newspapers.com

<https://www.newspapers.com/search/> [an American site that also includes some English newspapers such as The Times from 1785 onwards which is not on the British Library site] Without a subscription you can see the OCR version of pages which sometimes can be readable.

Newspapers are a mine of information for biographical details, details of people's houses, furniture, belongings, adverts for businesses, criminal proceedings, inquests, events, weather, examination results, job appointments etc etc.

Ancestry UK - <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/>

Contains the UK censuses up to 1911 plus the 1939 register, parish records, birth and death registers, marriage records; various directories such as Kelly's Directory; some Electoral Registers; Freemasonry Lodge Records useful for addresses between censuses and finding friends/family of the subject. Passenger manifests – again useful for addresses and discovering family members (only

for travel to and from the UK from places outside of Europe)

Most importantly for the dental researcher it includes:

Dental Registers up to 1942 -
<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/61101/>

Medical & Dental Students Register -
<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/61100/>

UK & Ireland Medical Directories up to 1942 -
<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/61053/> [sometimes prior to 1921 a dentist with a medical qualification would register here and not bother with the Dentists Register]

It can be difficult to find the relevant directories that you want to search from within the site. It is easier to go to Google and type in, for example, "Ancestry UK dental records" or "Ancestry UK freemasonry" or "Ancestry UK marriage records" etc.

Incidentally marriage certificates are useful because they contain the profession of the father and the witnesses can sometimes be of interest. Birth certificates can also be useful apart from being a record of birth because they are listed with the maiden name of the mother. Baptism records are useful for finding other siblings, sometimes the date of birth and parents. Probate records are useful for exact dates of death. A will can also add some interesting information and can be ordered very cheaply from the Probate office -
<https://www.gov.uk/search-will-probate>.

If you are looking for documents/records outside of the UK you can purchase a Worldwide subscription which would give you access to records from America and a selection of other countries.

Findmypast - <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>

Contains a collection of similar records to Ancestry but it only has the dental registers between 1887 and 1906.

At the moment it is the only database that includes the 1921 UK census.

Again, you can pay more for a Worldwide subscription.

Resources held at the BDA Library

Index to Dental literature 1875-1966; Dental Registers from 1879 up until it was last published in 2004; some BDA and Incorporated Dental Society membership lists.

Packages (folders) of articles on the history of dentistry covering: Anthropology, Egyptology, Famous persons, Folklore, Anaesthesia articles 1921-66, Anaesthesia articles 1967 to date, Ancient history, 10th-17th century, 18th-19th century, 20th century onwards, Education, Instruments technology equipment, Materials, Organisations, Art and literature, War, Endodontics, Notable dentists, Oral hygiene, Pedodontics, Periodontics, Prosthetics, Orthodontics, Museums

Large collection of journals including the complete BDJ, Dental Cosmos, Dental Record, British Journal of Dental Sciences, Monthly Review of Dental Surgery, Transactions of the BSSO, Transactions of the EJO, and rare early dental journals such as the American Journal of Dental Science (incomplete) and The Forceps (see our A to Z listing); books (search the catalogue); rare book collection (view the rare books list).

All BDJ obituaries are listed on the library catalogue.

The BDA Archive – not currently listed online so email library@bda.org to see if we have anything of value.

Other tips

Find a museum online local to where you need some information and contact them to see what they have. Often, they may be able to supply you with scans of various documents or point you to other resources.

If the person you are researching attended a dental school, then contact it to see if they have any records from the time they were there – or later if they went back as an academic.

When searching large databases, you often need patience to scroll through a large number of records to winkle out the best results.

Try not only searching using a name, but also just an address – sometimes this will bring up different results. Also, when searching censuses and having no luck try just searching on the first names

of various household members – sometimes the surname will have been mistranscribed. For example, I could not find Harriet May Eaton on the 1891 census and after using this method to find the household discovered that “Eaton” had been transcribed as “Merchen”!

Don’t just search a full name, for example, Alfred Cookman Lockett, but different variations, for example, “AC Lockett”, “A C Lockett” or even just “C Lockett” – or just Lockett. And don’t forget using misspellings, e.g., “Locket”.

If you have any tips for other researchers, please email them to library@bda.org with the subject line “Tips for dental history researchers”