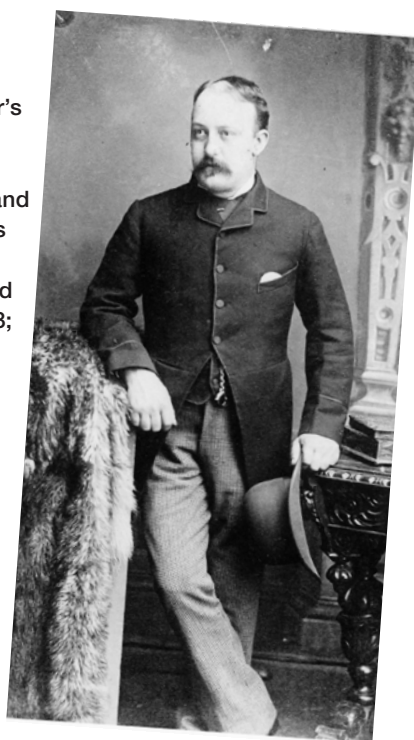


# Glimpses of the past



Graham Barker's 2x great-grandfather, Martin Collis, and Elizabeth Collis with children Ada, Martin and Leonard, c1893; and Martin by himself.



It can be difficult to know where to start with writing your family history, but **Graham Barker's** suggestions – using sources you'll be very familiar with – will soon see you putting pen to paper.

by biographer Midge Gillies: Does every fact deserve to be there? Are my facts right? Is there anything I don't understand? Have I varied the pace? Is the writing as crisp as it could be? Have I used too much jargon?

View these activities as tools, and choose the ones that relate best to your material: maybe use the 'Snapshots' activity to curate a selection of family album images, or the 'Census' activity to interpret family homes from one decade to the next.

However you choose to tackle it, be resourceful in your searching, engage your imagination, and before long you'll have a series of compelling 'glimpses' into your own family history.

## 1. Snapshot

### Get started with a family portrait

If you're fortunate, you'll possess a Victorian family photo album with *cartes de visite* and cabinet prints tucked inside. Whatever you've tracked down – stiff studio poses or sunshiny holiday snaps – family photos are a fruitful resource.

Figuring out why a particular picture was taken can provide a natural storyline: boys' breechings, coming of age, family gatherings, engagements, weddings, holidays and anniversaries have all traditionally triggered a photographic record.

As dress historian Jayne Shrimpton observes in her book *How to Get the Most from Family Pictures*: 'More immediate and engaging than any official documents or registers, old portraits are unique genealogical records – enigmatic and thought-provoking images that bring us literally face to face with our own history.'

● Now try this: Choose an interesting family photo. When, where and why

**F**irst things first: we're not aiming to write an end-to-end family history, but instead to create a series of vignettes or 'glimpses' into your ancestors' lives. It's easy to find excuses not to start writing up our discoveries: our research isn't quite complete, we can't find the time, our ancestors weren't exciting enough, we just don't see ourselves as 'writers'. But by focusing on one or two key resources, and only aiming to write a few, well-crafted paragraphs, it can become a more realistic project – something to try out during a spare hour or two.

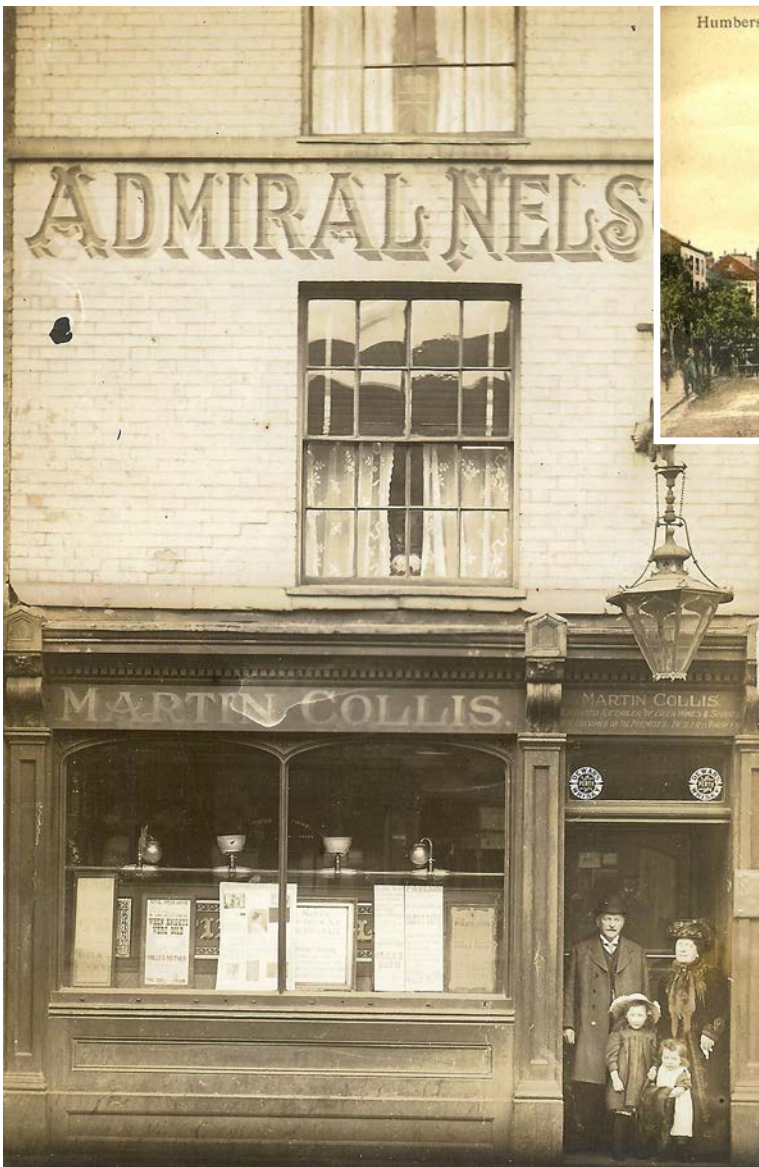
Each of my suggested writing activities uses one family history resource – a portrait, census return, heirloom or newspaper snippet – as the stimulus. The case studies all relate to my 2x great-grandfather,

Martin Collis, of Leicester. They're standalone pieces, but it's not difficult to see how a series of such 'glimpses' could snowball into a fuller biography.

To capture a sense of immediacy I've chosen to write each scene in the historic present tense, but they could work equally well in the past tense – it's worth experimenting. Either way, keep it vital – each 'glimpse' is only 200 words or so. You're looking to engage your readers, not overwhelm them with dates and factual information. Heavier factual information can always be bundled separately, as an aside to your main narrative.

Expect to work through a few drafts – jotting down a basic outline, then re-working it. Read it out loud, how does it sound? As you review it, use this handy six-part checklist, devised





was the photo taken? For studio portraits, describe what the subjects are wearing, imagine how they're feeling. For photos taken in context – at school or home, outside the family business – investigate the location as well as the people depicted.

**Snapshot:**  
**Outside the Admiral Nelson (1911)**  
It's spring 1911 and five-year-old Edna Collis wears a straw hat and an inquisitive stare. She stands with her grandparents Martin and Elizabeth Collis in the doorway of their pub, a few steps from Leicester's central Clock Tower. Business at the Admiral Nelson is prospering and they're all in their Sunday best – Martin in a bowler hat, wing collar and smart overcoat; Elizabeth in her decorated black bonnet, with an ostentatious fur. Youngest



granddaughter Mabel finally stands still for the photographer, clutching her grandmother's fur muffler. The window billboards reveal that 'Milly's Mother' and 'When Knights Were Bold' are playing at the Opera House. Two circular Dewar's Whisky signs over the door are the only sniff of alcohol, yet this stretch of Humberstone Gate is packed with pubs and inns. On weekdays the pavements here are crowded with pedestrians and every now and then an electric crimson-and-cream tram rattles by, heading out along the Humberstone Road.

**2. Heirloom**  
**Take inspiration from a family item**  
Heirlooms provide us with a tangible link to our ancestors. They are objects that our relatives acquired, treasured, bequeathed. Very often they have little intrinsic worth, yet they're packed with value to the family historian. Edmund de Waal, in his riveting



family history, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, uses an inherited collection of 264 netsuke – delicately-carved wood and ivory Japanese belt fastenings – as the thread for his storytelling: 'I pick one up and turn it round in my fingers, weigh it in the palm of my hand... There is a slight split, an almost imperceptible fault line on the cicada. Who dropped it? When and where?' Penelope Lively follows a similar

vein in her memoir *Ammonites and Leaping Fish*: 'My house has... the accretions of a lifetime. Not many of them are valuable; some of them are eloquent. People's possessions speak of them: they are resonant and betraying and reflective.' So, your heirlooms hold stories, just waiting to be released. ● Now try this: Whether you have a wedding ring, tea service, or a well-

thumbed book, heirlooms can make an intriguing theme for a family story. Study the object's texture and workmanship. When and where was it made? In what circumstances did your ancestor acquire it? What did it mean to them?

**Heirloom:**  
**Martin Collis' tool chest (1880s)**  
Lift the lid of the heavy tool chest and peer into the working life of Martin Collis. As an engineer's pattern maker at a Leicester iron foundry, he fashions mahogany into models, ready for sand casting with molten metal. This is precise work, a task of fine tolerances and exacting standards: 'measure twice, cut once'.

As his weekly savings allow, Martin populates the wooden chest with tools: dovetail and rip saws are inset into the lid, chisels, gouges and planes sit in the pull-out trays, with set squares and sharpening stones in the space below. As he hones his craft, his tools develop a familiar grasp – the turn of the gouge, the bite of the saw, the sweep of the plane. In the foundry they make a name stamp – and he wallops 'M COLLIS' into each boxwood handle. He's in the pattern-making trade to stay.

**3. Census**  
**Recreate a sense of time and place**  
We've all done it; in the excitement of pursuing an ancestor, we gallop through the census returns, from one decade back to the next, without giving them more than a cursory look. Yet census returns can tell us so much – they represent a dovetailing of person, time and place.

If the family home is still standing, then make a site visit or take a 'street view' on Google Maps. Whether or not it has been demolished, use old maps and trade directories to build a picture of the surrounding streets and walk in the footsteps of your ancestors. Let's face it, the facts we know about our ancestral homes can be sparse, so we might need to rely on dashes of local and social history to shape a story. Archive images, wills and inventories, and newspaper listings can all add to the picture. ● Now try this: Start with your family household, and then radiate out along the street or through the neighbourhood. Consider the style of





CAPTURE SCENES FROM FAMILY HISTORY

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The undermentioned Houses are situate within the Boundaries of the

Civil Parish (or Township) of

Municipal Borough of

Municipal Ward of

Parliamentary Borough of

Town of

Village or Hamlet, &c., of

Local Board, or Improvement Commissioners, District of

Ecclasiastical District of

St. Margaret

Leicester

East

Leicester

Leicester

Leicester

St. Martin's

No. of Schedule	ROAD, STREET, &c., and No. or NAME of HOUSE	HOUSES Un- in- hab- ited or ed (H.)	NAME and Surname of each Person	RELATION to Head of Family	CON- DITION	AGE of Family	Rank, Profession, or OCCUPATION	WHERE BORN	Whether 1. Deaf-and-Dumb 2. Blind 3. Imbecile or Idiot 4. Lunatic
	170 Kent St.		George R. Benson	Son	✓	9	Scholar	Leicester	
			Oliver M. D.	Son	✓	14	Do	Do	
			Thomas L. Benson	Son	✓	20	Do	Do	
114	22 Upper Kent St.	1	William White	Servant	✓	16	Domestic Servant	Leicester	
			George Benson	Head	✓	54	Valuator	Leicester	
			Henry F. Benson	Son	✓	25	Assistant of Market Draining	Do	
			James F. Benson	Son	✓	23	Do	Do	
			Thomas M. Benson	Son	✓	17	Domestic Servant	Leicester	
			Madeline Benson	Son	✓	14	Do	Do	
115	24 Upper Kent St.	1	Thomas James	Servant	✓	17	Servant	Leicester	
			William	Head	✓	28	Black Agent	Leicester	
			Emma	Wife	✓	27	Do	Leicester	
			Madeline Benson	Son	✓	8	Scholar	Leicester	
			Henry Benson	Son	✓	1	Do	Leicester	
116			Henry Shipley	Head	✓	27	Chair Maker	Leicester	
			Emma Benson	Wife	✓	29	Do	Leicester	
			Emma Benson	Son	✓	9	Scholar	Leicester	
			Henry Benson	Son	✓	1	Do	Leicester	
117	20	1	Thomas Benson	Head	✓	28	Domestic Servant	Leicester	
			Madeline Benson	Wife	✓	28	Do	Leicester	
			James Benson	Son	✓	3	Do	Leicester	
			Elizabeth Benson	Son	✓	28	Do	Leicester	
			Thomas Benson	Servant	✓	10	Domestic Servant	Leicester	
4	Total of Houses...	4	Total of Males and Females...	12	✓				

UPP

STREET DIRECTORY.

Upper George St. (Bedford St.)

Upper Hill St. (Humberstone St.)

Upper Kent St. (Keston St.)

Upper King St. (St. Martin's St.)

Upper Fox St. (Fox St.)



architecture, the topography of the landscape, the mix of local residents. Use your senses: can you hear children playing, is that a malty smell from the brewery nearby?

**Census:**  
**Martin Collis, Spinney Hill Tavern (1871)**  
As Martin Collis lays in the back bedroom he can hear the chatter from the tap-room below. The Spinney Hill Tavern is lively this Friday night with

wage packet drinkers.

The pub sits on the eastern side of Upper Kent Street, sandwiched between Garendon and Berners Streets. Stand on the front step and the view slopes away towards the railway goods sheds and workhouse. Martin climbs this hill every evening, weary after labouring as a pattern maker's apprentice.

These solidly built, red-brick terraces are home to hosiers and mantle makers,

clerks and railway porters. Martin is on nodding terms with builder Reuben Beaver at No 12. And next door neighbour Henry Shipley – a chair maker – comes in for a pint most evenings. Life hasn't been the same since Martin's mother died six months ago; they're slowly adjusting to life without her. His sister Mary Ann now manages the domestic arrangements, and they've taken on a servant – Thomas James – to



TO LICENSED VICTUALLERS, BREWERS, AND OTHERS.

THE OPERA HOTEL,

TOWN HALL-LANE, LEICESTER.

H. and F. TARRATT and SONS

Are instructed by the owners

TO SELL BY AUCTION,

On Wednesday, Oct. 11th, 1893, at the Midland Auction Mart, Market-street, Leicester, at Seven o'clock in the Evening prompt, and subject to Conditions of Sale,

THE Well-known FULL-LICENSED HOUSE, called the

OPERA HOTEL,

No. 12, Town Hall-lane, Leicester, in the occupation of Mr. Samuel Frith, containing two entrances on front, well-lighted and spacious vaults, smoke-room, bar, tap-room, with cooking range; excellent billiard-room, bagatelle-room, large sitting-room, three bedrooms, stock-room, small yard, with opening for barrels; wash-house and coal-place, kitchen, and three splendid brick arched cellars.

The Property has been considerably altered and improved, and now affords every facility for the requirements of the trade, being centrally situated, and in an improving neighbourhood.

Mr. Frith, the occupier and joint owner, is retiring from the business, and will give early possession to a purchaser. The buyer will be required to purchase by valuation all tenant's fixtures and trade utensils, a portion of the Furniture and Stock-in-Trade, as per Inventory, which will be produced at the time of Sale.

For further information apply to the Auctioneers, Market-street; or to

Mr. R. E. BLACKWELL, Solicitor, Bishop-street, Leicester.

wa1762

help in the bar. Yesterday, as he returned from work, he saw his father George in the front bedroom, surveying the sunset to the tick-tock of the oak case clock.

**4. In the news**  
**Add a new angle to your sense of family**  
Local newspapers can provide a rich seam of material for family historians. And now – thanks to [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) – it's easier than ever to track down useful snippets. Searching newspapers used to be a needle-in-the-haystack experience. These days, you can quickly chance upon the unexpected.

It's somewhat serendipitous – school results, sporting achievements, bankruptcies and street brawls are the bread-and-butter business of local newspapers. News coverage doesn't necessarily provide a rounded view of the family, but it can add vibrancy and fascinating detail to your history.

Even if you're not able to find personal references to your relatives, you'll probably unearth interesting nuggets about their homes and workplaces. More generally, newspapers provide a gauge of the social, political and religious scene in periods and locations that interest you.

● Now try this: Find a family event recorded in a newspaper. Describe the setting – the chilly village church, the hush of a courtroom – and some of the characters involved. Consider the time of year, the weather. Imagine how your relative felt, and what changes resulted from this event.

**In the news:**  
**The Opera Hotel is auctioned (1893)**  
Mr Tarratt steps up to the lectern, the hum in the auction mart subsides, and on the strike of seven o'clock the business commences. Martin Collis stands at the back, surveying the crowd;



Writing: in four easy steps

it's a full house tonight at the Market Street auction rooms.

On his way here, this mild October evening, Martin detoured to take a last look at the Opera Hotel in Town Hall Lane. It's just the opportunity he's seeking. He leafs through the sales particulars: 'two entrances on front, well-lighted and spacious vaults, smoke-room, bar, tap-room, with cooking range; excellent billiard-room, bagatelle-room ...'

The auction room buzz reminds him of some three years earlier – he'd been selling their first pub, the Fox and Hounds on Humberstone Road. He still has the *Chronicle* clipping: 'The lot was started at £2,000 and, after a spirited bidding, was knocked down for £4,690.' Good times. Now – after brief stints at the Royal Oak and Cross Keys Inn – he's looking for a new venture.

'Gentlemen, who will start me at £3,000?' And so the bidding bats around the room. There are many speculators, but Martin keeps his nerve. 'Going once, going twice... sold to Mr Collis.' The gavel whacks down and Martin breaks into a smile. He's the new owner of the Opera Hotel.

About the author

Captivated by researching his ancestors – from ne'er-do-wells to entrepreneurs – Graham Barker wrote his first family history booklet as a teenager. He now writes 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' for the Leicestershire & Rutland FHS journal, and is researching the biography of a boom-and-bust Victorian builder in London. Find out more at [www.auntiemabel.org](http://www.auntiemabel.org).