

Humour in Genealogy Chris Broome

Our Speaker for May was the talented Chris Broome – a professional genealogist and researcher based at Leiston. He is a graduate of the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical studies, Canterbury where he also lectures. Chris may be known to some of you as Chairman of the Alde Valley Family History Society.

Chris treated us to a light-hearted walk through a variety of genealogical records, reinforcing the value of scrutinising original documents. He showed us a selection of examples that he had collected over the years via various sources.

In 2010 his beloved father, Trevor's last wishes were for Chris to investigate the background to his Dad's adoption. It transpired that the woman known to Chris as Auntie Vi was actually his grandmother. The mysterious Mr Palmer was his granddad, but the trail stopped there. But this sparked in Chris a new interest in genealogy.

Trevor's sense of humour was evident in the letters he wrote to his family to be opened on the event of his death. Chris showed us clips from his Dad's favourite comedians, Tommy Cooper being his number one. Chris also found humour in his illness, having been diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer last year. His sister misheard a phlebotomy appointment as the need for a lobotomy!

He began by showing us funny entries in Parish Registers. A baby named Ann Pepper had 24 middle names, using each letter of the alphabet. Another baby being baptised was called What You Please. The parents had told the vicar to call him what you please. Another entry showed a child born on horseback!

Marriage records can also be humorous, although Chris showed us a touching entry of an occasion when a note explained that a bride had no arms so the wedding ring was put on a toe and she signed the register with her foot. Burials and epitaphs can display black humour. Spike Milligan's grave stone simply states 'I told you I was ill.' Whereas a stone captioned Ireland's oldest man was actually a milestone- 193 Miles from Dublin.

The National Census, published every ten years since 1881, is a rich source of humour. Some were intentional wisecracks such as Occupation – International Playboy or including pets, Name Tabby-servant and mouser. Another entry elsewhere showed- Occupation of daughter- Does as she pleases. Occupations can be strange or made up. Examples included tailor – knight of the thimble and knocker-upperer. We were shown a photo of a woman using a pea shooter to target certain windows to wake the occupant for work. A funny example of name/occupation link was Rose Bloom –Florist. Intentional defacing of the form was common in the 1911 Census by people supporting the Suffragette movement. We saw one example with VOTES FOR WOMEN written across it and another said Disenfranchised! Transcription errors can be amusing when handwriting is difficult to read- Lovers Lane instead of Sierra Leone. Another said Destination Mars (actually Marseilles) Wills can be humorous. One stated 'Being of sound mind, I spent all the money'. Also newspaper articles- one headline read Hefty girls wanted for Police Force.

Chris finished on a serious note by giving us hints on searching for ancestors:

- Look at original documents
- Look for clues
- Don't rely on one index
- Know the reach of records
- Perspective

Legacy – write an account of your family background and stories for your descendants.

A lively question and answer session followed, and everyone agreed that it had been most interesting.

Ann Sanderson

Membership number 1292