

Black Sheep and Bad Seeds!

SOME OF OUR MOST interesting family stories revolve around those deemed “black sheep” or “skeletons in the closet”. Don’t overlook these notorious individuals; they can be fun to research and add some “color” to your family.

BLACK SHEEP INDEX (UK ONLY)

I was researching my UK roots when I came across this entry on the Black Sheep Index, <http://www.blacksheepindex.co.uk>: Wolfenden John, Hatter, Hollinwood, 1882.

This was very interesting since part of my research was of a Wolfenden family who were hatters in Hollinwood, a suburb of Manchester, England during the 1800s. There was a John, brother to my ancestor, James — was this him? I was so intrigued by this entry that I ordered a copy. When I received the entry, with a title like “Death from Drink”, I figured it would at least be interesting.

It’s more sad than anything, and yet it told me something important about John and his family. It also encouraged me to not limit my research to the records of the “nice” people in the family tree and ensured that I looked at other types of records as well.

The focus of the Black Sheep Index is exclusively UK events and people. The website contains indexes of the available data and if an entry interests you, you can purchase the associated record, as I did. In addition to records of criminals, it

Diane L. Richard shows you how to unearth your infamous ancestors.

Don't be afraid to unearth those "black sheep" ancestors. They add spice to your family history!



includes those of the victims and many interesting people associated with them. The index topics include:

- The Black (and White) Sheep Index — 200,000 Villains, Victims & Virtuous People
- Body and Soul — 8,000 Doctors & Churchmen

- The Police Index — Reports of 60,000 men and some of the cases they dealt with
- Masters and Mates — 8,500 Royal and Merchant Navy Men including Shipowners
- Railway Index — 35,000

Railwaymen in accidents

- Lags and Screws — 4,000 Gaolbirds and Guardians of the Law
- Mining Index — Over 20,000 miners involved in Accidents
- 20,000 small reports of Black Sheep/Police/Miners/Railwaymen

These are all accessed from the main page. When you click on each link, you are directed to a page filled with a series of alphabetical files (in PDF format) that list the relevant information for that category, such as I found for John

Wolfenden.

BLACK SHEEP ANCESTORS (US, UK AND CANADA)

Since my introduction to the Black Sheep Index, I’ve shifted to US and Canadian research and discovered Black Sheep Ancestors, www.blacksheepancestors.com.

First, let’s talk about how the site is organized.

On the main page there is a geographical breakdown of the US, Canada and the UK. For each geographic area, there are subtopics for the various record types, which include: Prisons & Convicts, Outlaw & Criminal, Court Records, Executions and Insane Asylums. The international records focus on pirates and buccaneers.

The US records are typically organized first by

DEATH FROM DRINK.—An inquest was held at Hollinwood yesterday before Mr. Coroner Molesworth, on the body of John Wolfenden, who terminated his existence by hanging himself on the previous day. Deceased's wife stated that he had been married 26 years. Her husband was a journeyman hatter by trade, but had not worked for 12 years. He had been drinking heavily for a fortnight, and she did not think he had tasted food in that period.—William Wolfenden, son of deceased, found him hanging from the bed-post on Monday evening dead. He had been left alone during the afternoon, and had taken this opportunity of committing the rash act which ended his life. The jury returned a verdict that deceased committed suicide while of unsound mind.—*Manchester Courier*, Aug. 9.

A notice in the Manchester Courier shed light on the unfortunate events surrounding John Wolfenden's death.

record type and then by state. Though, if you click on a particular state, you will be taken to a page which has all of that state's records, regardless of which "record type". For Canada, the records are organized first by type and then by province. And for the UK, they only seem to be organized by record type with no geographical break down.

Some of the records are stored on the website, while most are links to information held elsewhere. At the time of writing this article, many of the US links give you a "not found" error, mostly due to a mass migration of local GenWeb sites from RootsWeb to other servers. Don't let that stop you from finding those black sheep ancestors — just use your favorite Internet search engine to find the records.

Be aware that there is no site-wide search engine. Though the pages include search boxes, these are associated with Google, eBay, Ancestry, WorldVitalRecords, et al. In order to explore this website, you must choose a research country and then investigate the listed records.

For the US, in addition to a large number of "Execution Records" that cover just about every state, there are many intriguing categories, such as the Salem Witch Trials.

Some other interesting ones are:

- WV State Hospital for Colored Insane, 1930 Index of Inmates
- Prisoners of Alcorn County MS for 1888-92
- NY State Prison Pardons, Commutations & Reprieves — 1877 index of names
- Inmates of the TN State Penitentiary 1831-1850
- Record of the courts of Chester County, PA 1681-1761

For Canadian ancestry, there



are records like:

- Convict Deaths in the Kingston Penitentiary, 1835-1915
- Cobourg Gaol Inmates, Index of prisoners 1832-1848
- Convicts Shipped from Lower Canada (Quebec) to Australia, 1788-1855
- Quebec Coroners' inquests
- 19th century jail logs of Quebec City prisons
- Convict Deaths in the British Columbia Penitentiary, 1875-1916
- Prisons of British Columbia for the Year Ending 31st October 1884
- Boot Hill: Stories from the British Columbia Penitentiary Cemetery

The UK is represented mostly by lists of prisons and prisoners and includes information on convicts who were transported to Australia.

MORE ABOUT BLACK SHEEP ANCESTORS

Have a black sheep in your family? Consider joining the International Blacksheep Society of Genealogists, <http://ibssg.org/blacksheep/> — an online gathering place where you can either celebrate or commiserate with others whose family trees contain

these colorful characters. Additionally, given the variety of ways in which families react to news of nefarious ancestors, this provides a forum "to help find alternate routes to information sources, and to 'normalize' the view of the black sheep as a person, who has a place in the factual history of the family, without regard to behaviors."

More about the value of black sheep ancestors is discussed in an article titled "They Came from the Family Tree: Finding Scoundrels, Misfits, and Other Colorful Ancestors", at

<http://www.ancestry.com/learn/library/article.aspx?article=11145> and some helpful research hints and perspectives are provided in "Our Black Sheep Ancestors: How to Approach Them", http://www.aigensoc.org/aigs/Black_Sheep.pdf.

Though I have not been "fortunate" enough to find many scoundrels or scallywags in my family tree, I have spent many hours researching others in court and newspaper records — and finding their names frequently mentioned. Given a choice between no record or learning about a black sheep, it's better to know what they did than to let them disappear!

DFH

Diane L. Richards has been doing genealogy research for over 20 years. Only a few minor black sheep dot her family, adding not nearly enough spice. She currently does professional research in North Carolina and can be found online at www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy

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