

Adoption and Illegitimacy

Maybe not a brick wall – hope to give you pointers as to how to approach Adoption and Illegitimacy

Adoption

Scenarios

Searching for Natural Parents of an adoptee

Searching for the Adoptive Parents knowing the Natural Parents

Living Adoptees

As Family Historians we are not in the business of tracing parents of ‘present day’ adoptees – there are many specialised agencies better equipped to handle this from a technical and even more importantly emotional and Traumatic perspective

If you were born before 12th November 1975 (18th December 1987 for Northern Ireland), you have to have an interview with an adoption counsellor.

This is because birth parents prior to that date gave their children up for adoption on the good-faith promise that their offspring couldn't trace them.

The counsellor, assuming that the interview is satisfactory, will obtain what birth and adoption records are available, and provide you with the ones you need. Sometimes this will be the whole set of records; sometimes it will be filtered by the counsellor, out of respect for still-living parties other than you.

If you were born after that date, the interview is optional: you can obtain the full set of records without any intervention.

Speaking personally, I don't recommend this route. A counsellor can help prepare you for consequences you hadn't expected, can help to interpret the information that is presented, and will act as a go-between to help to make contact with members of your birth family. They may also have a lot of knowledge about how to trace your family tree, and will have a great deal of experience of how to manage family reunions. It's a free service, so do consider taking advantage of it. If you go it alone, and botch it, you may destroy any chance of meeting your birth family.

Background to Adoption

Formal adoption, as we now know it, did not exist in England and Wales until 1927. Before then, adoptions were usually informal. In a few cases there was some legal documentation, but no central register.

In 1927, the official registration of adoptions was introduced in England, with similar systems brought into Scotland in 1930 and Northern Ireland in 1931.

Post 1927

General Register Office holds

Adopted Children Register

The Register contains the particulars of adoptions authorised by order of a court in England or Wales on or after 1 January 1927.

The only information that is available from the Adopted Children Register is a certificated copy of an entry, which is the equivalent of a birth certificate for an adopted person.

Adoption Contact Register

The register is a linking mechanism between an adopted person and their birth relatives, where both parties so wish.

The public indexes to these records are available at

Manchester City Library

Birmingham Central Library
Bridgend Reference and Information Library
The British Library
City of Westminster Archives Centre
Plymouth Central Library
Newcastle City Library

Accessing birth records

Restrictions apply for under 18.

Birth details known:

Order a copy of the original birth certificate from the General Register Office.
For adoptions outside England or Wales you need to contact the General Register Office where you were adopted.

Birth details unknown

An application for Birth Certificate Information Before Adoption (BIBA) is needed.

Full details at : <https://www.gov.uk/adoption-records>

Pre 1927

Prior to the Adoption of Children Act 1926 adoptions were mainly informal affairs conducted between the child's parents or guardians and the adoptive parents.

Often the child would be taken in by other family members, friends or neighbours.

Some adoptees would retain their original name whilst others might take the family name of the adoptive parents.

As these "Adoptions" were informal you are unlikely to be able to find any official records of them.

Some pre 1927 adoptions were arranged by adoption societies such as the Church of England Children's Society, who maintained records of the adoptions that they arranged. Boards of Guardians also prepared reports but unfortunately very few remain.

Consider why might someone be adopted?

Discovering that someone in your family tree was adopted in or out can present problems when you are trying to discover their ancestors or descendants. Before starting your quest to learn more about them it is important to know a little bit about the adoption process and the relevant laws that will dictate what you can or are likely to be allowed to discover.

Social, such as death of a parent (or both parents), illegitimacy, divorce, desertion or abandonment.

Economic, parent(s) being unable to support the child etc. In the 19th and early 20th centuries many parents actually advertised, seeking adoptive parents for their children. They did so in the hope that by doing so the child might stand a chance of a better life.

Whatever the reason, the child themselves were very rarely in any way to blame for their own adoption.

Solutions

Family Lore - Any stories in the Family?
Paperwork – Certificates, Letters, Diaries
Family and Neighbours – likely candidates
Adoption Societies
Opportunity for Illegitimacy
Newspaper adverts?