

THE QUAKER FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY DIGEST INDEXING PROJECT

The Quaker Family History Society (QFHS) and the Friends Historical Society (FHS) have two things in common:

- they are both celebrating anniversaries, though in your case it is much more important at 100 years than ours at 10 years
- they both cater for Friends and non-Friends

The QFHS

It started 10 years ago with members joining from autumn 1993, the Society's existence becoming formal on 1 January 1994, when it gained membership of the Federation of Family History Societies, and the founding AGM in June 1994.

The objects of the society include the promotion and encouragement of the study of British and Irish Quaker family history and genealogy. A magazine, "Quaker Connections" is published three times a year and a web-site is maintained (www.qfhs.co.uk), from which there are links to the Friends House Library and Britain Yearly Meeting web-sites among others.

In the ten years of its existence the QFHS has had about 500 members of whom about 200 are current.

The Digest Indexing Project

At a one-day conference at Reading in October 1997 Ted Milligan, Robert Clayton and Harold Greenwood outlined ideas for indexing the Digests of Births, Marriages and Burials. Harold had already, single-handed, transcribed the digests for Essex Quarterly Meeting; they were printed out in strict order of surname, forenames and date, unlike the digests in which the sequence is apt to be confusing. Thus there came into existence genuine indexes, although they contain all the data from the digest entries. They have not been checked against the digests, however.

The QFHS was so impressed with what one person had achieved that it was resolved to adopt Harold's work and, with many willing volunteer hands, complete the coverage of England and Wales as

soon as possible. This clearly needed funding that the society could ill afford, but it received, through Ted Milligan's good offices, a magnificent grant from the Edith M. Ellis grant.

The planned process

1. Photocopy digest pages from the microfilm in Friends House Library (Harold had worked direct from a copy of the microfilm on short-term loan from the Society of Genealogists)
2. Transcribe the entries at the volunteer's home into computer
3. Print out the result
4. Check the print-out against the photocopies
5. Resolve queries and make corrections
6. Publish

The actual process

1. The copying was started by Malcolm Thomas but was complicated by the replacement of the microfilm printer at Friends House Library by computerised equipment which took some mastering. Malcolm's retirement came before he had completed copying the Suffolk digests (I believe he was doing this in his spare time) and also before any QFHS volunteer had learned how to use the equipment. However, with Josef Keith's invaluable help, we now have two volunteers who have been successful in making satisfactory copies, one of whom (our honorary secretary) lives within easy reach of the library and is doing a wonderful job.
2. The transcript is a laborious task and it can take half-an-hour to input one page of digest. The data is entered much as found, the names and dates exactly so, but with some abbreviation in the residence and description columns in order to save space.
3. Printing out the data is not as simple as one might expect – it has to fit on to A4-sized paper, using type that is not too much of a strain on the eyes of the checker. It must be borne in mind that most of the digest pages are twice the size of A4, and the digest clerks used quite small handwriting.
4. The checking is a tedious job but one for which it has been easier to find volunteers than for data entry. It is also the one task which has turned out to be very much as expected.

5. Queries have been resolved by reference to the microfilm if possible. In some details that is not sufficient, particularly the book and page numbers which provide a link to the original registers in the National Archives, as they were sometimes hidden from the camera in the binding of the digest book. The Librarian at FHL has kindly allowed us to refer in such cases to the actual book; this is also necessary where the ink has faded and the legibility of the microfilm is inadequate. Researchers are always advised to get back to primary sources. The registers are as near as we can get to primary, although some of the entries were copies or made retrospectively; the digests can be considered to be secondary and our indexes must be considered tertiary – any user ought to verify important information against a better source.
6. Publication has also presented problems. Harold's Essex indexes are an inch thick and they weigh almost three pounds – and that is for only a medium-sized digest. So publication on paper seemed too unwieldy and also too expensive in terms of postage. Microfiche seemed the obvious choice instead, but there are several drawbacks; few members have microfiche viewers, many people find consulting microfiche tricky, they have to be produced by professional, expensive, bureaux and quantities have to be ordered and stocked before sale. As more and more people have home computers, which now always have devices for reading CD-ROMs, this method of publication emerged as the best option. The size and weight of the Suffolk CD are negligible – much bigger digests could be accommodated on the same sized disk. The disks can be created by us and when required, so no stocks need to be kept. If the need arises a revised version of one already published can easily be produced. The drawback of course is that a computer is needed to use the CD, but they are readily available in public libraries nowadays.

The prospects for completion of the project

It seems that if we produce indexes to two Quarterly Meetings a year we shall be doing quite well. There are 26 QMs to be done. Then we can produce a consolidated index, which is the ultimate objective. After that there are the entries for 1837 onwards. We are not short of work!

The registers and digests – some thoughts arising from coordinating the project

After producing guidance for our volunteers I wonder:

- what guidance was given, and by whom, to those responsible for making the original register entries; how often did it change (there are periods when much effort was expended on recording the parish in which the event took place, others when causes of death were given). Perhaps delving into minute books would provide some answers.
- who designed the digests? the person who oversaw the compilation is known – did he also design them?
- what guidance was given to the digest clerks?
- how on earth did they manage to do it, even if their attempts to bring together in sequence the entries from several Monthly Meetings were attended with varying success?

Discoveries in the digests

- there are errors in the digests, some simple but others not, such as a marriage entry which gives the wrong person as the spouse; there must surely also be omissions (as there are known to be in the registers)
- there are duplications – more than one entry identical in every detail – which we shall omit from the indexes
- there are entries made in the wrong digest, such as birth among the burials, or under the wrong initial letter of the surname – which we shall also omit from the indexes
- there are puzzling comments added by the digest clerk, such as “a true copy of the original” (perhaps a detail was seen to be impossible or inconsistent with another) or “crossed in the original” (perhaps reference to the register would explain these)
- there are curious forenames, such as “Freezer” (surnames, of course, were often pressed into service but that does not look like one) and Appalinas (which does not sound like a classical or biblical name to me)
- there are some odd causes of death, perhaps the oddest so far being “died by a fall out of a door of a chamber” – I keep wondering what happened.

Volunteers

The whole project depends on volunteers. They are vital and without plenty of them the work will take a very long time to finish. More of them are always welcome. They are the salt of the earth – unlike the dietary sort, we cannot have too much of it.

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*Paper given at Friends House, London, on Saturday 20 September 2003,
to celebrate the centenary of the Friends Historical Society.*

EDITOR: Howard M Knight informs me that two CDs have been published. That for Suffolk has been available since 2003 and that for Norfolk can now be ordered. It is expected that Essex will follow in 2005 but, as at January 2005, 24 Quarterly Meetings remain to be completed. The need for volunteers remains essential for the Project to make good progress. Please contact Howard M. Knight at the above address.