



*Absolute Beginners...*

# CLUES FROM YOUR OLD PHOTOS

Faced with an old shoebox full of photos and no idea of their dates? Audrey Linkman gets out her magnifying glass and shares her tips for dating family pictures

**EXPERT  
ADVICE**  
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**L**ucky you! You are new to family history and you have just discovered some old family photographs. Even now – and I have looked at thousands of photographs – I still get that tingle of excitement at seeing pictures of our ancestors in the flesh. The camera reacted to the light that fell on their actual figures and faces. But what exactly do old photos reveal about your relatives' lives and experiences?

Usually, in the case of very old photographs, they come down to us without any accompanying documentation, so we cannot even identify the subject(s) with any certainty. As family historians, our prime concern is identification, and this depends on having a reasonably accurate

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*As family historians, our prime concern is identification, and this depends on having an accurate date for the picture*

**INFORMAL PHOTO:** A postcard taken by Charles Howell, Official Photographer, at Blackpool Pleasure Beach. The picture is dated 1929

**HOLIDAY FUN:** A family group posing formally between the wheels of a bathing machine, possibly from the 1890s



### WHAT'S THE OCCASION?

## A breath of fresh air

Outdoor portraits can be much more informative than studio pictures, as we get to see those pictured in the context of their actual surroundings

**STATUS:** The house confirms the lady's working class status. A mid-terrace lacking prestigious bay windows, it nevertheless does boast a small front garden surrounded by railings to mark it off from the street. Pretensions to respectability are further confirmed by the window curtaining with their full lace drapes. Is this why the photographer has chosen to include both the upper and ground floor windows?

**COMMISSION:** This lady, resplendent in her best clothes, endows the photograph with dignity and authority. She may even be dressed for some special occasion. A wedding, perhaps? This would suggest that she commissioned the local photographer. In which case she paid extra since outside visits took more of the photographer's time.



**EMBOSSSED DETAIL:** This cabinet mount is made of thick cardboard with an embossed floral decoration. Such mounts were popular in the Edwardian period and suggest a date of c1905. You will notice that the photograph does not actually fill its allotted space, as there is a white border all around it. The photographer has used a postcard rather than the larger cabinet size image for which the mount was designed.

**BACKYARD:** Outdoor portraits like this could either be taken by itinerant photographers going from door to door, or commissioned from a local studio proprietor. Photographers sometimes carried portable backdrops and householders sometimes brought out rugs, tables, chairs and potted plants. Together they attempted to recreate the studio in the backyard.

**NEW BUSINESS:** Mrs Dearden has recently taken over Greenwood's studio and is clearly using up old stationery. Her method of announcing the change of ownership suggests a business where economic considerations outweighed concern about artistic appearances. If the Middleton trade directories were regular and comprehensive, this could be one of those unusual examples where we could get a close date.

date for the picture. Fortunately, there are ways in which we can arrive at an approximate date, although it is rare to be able to assign a precise year. It would be wrong to imply that is an easy task. It isn't – but then neither is identification impossible.

### PHOTOGRAPHS, FORMATS AND DATES

We need to begin by acquiring a basic knowledge of the most common styles of family photograph and their period of currency. In the early years photographs came largely from commercial suppliers. There are five main types:

#### [1] 1840s DAGUERREOTYPES

The daguerreotype was the first commercial process and it was sold in Britain throughout the

1840s and early 1850s. Photos created this way always came cased or framed, as the delicate image needed protection.

Daguerreotypes are easy to identify. Support the case in both hands and watch carefully as you move it about. As the image catches the light its appearance will change between negative and positive. You really need to see this happen, but once you have, you will never have any difficulty identifying this type.

In Britain prices for daguerreotypes never fell to the point where they reached the popular market. If you have one in your family collection, your ancestors were relatively well off.

#### [2] 1850s GLASS POSITIVES

A new product, known in Britain as wet collodion positives

(ambrotypes in America), came onto the market in c1853. These photographs were usually supplied in a case or frame similar to a daguerreotype, but the comparison stopped there.

In this process a glass negative was converted to a positive by chemical bleaching – a very simple technique that did not involve printing. Consequently more people took up photography and studios became more common. As competition increased, prices fell.

By the end of the 1850s glass positives sold for sixpence – frame and case, two pence extra!

By the early 1860s the card formats (see below) had driven

the glass positive off the high street and into the tents and travelling vans of itinerant photographers who operated in the street, at the seaside and in the fairground. Glass positives could be produced while you

waited within a matter of five or six minutes. The cheap glass positive was available until the 1890s when it finally gave way to the ferrotype.

#### [3] 1860s CARD FORMATS

If the glass positive brought photography

to the popular market, it was the card formats which heralded the arrival of photography for the mass market. At some point around 1859-1860 British

### TIP COMMERCIAL PHOTOS

● The pattern of photography's commercial development varied in different countries. What happened in Britain did not mirror what happened abroad. In America, for example, you could buy four daguerreotypes for a dollar from the early 1850s!



## WEDDING BELLS

# Newly weds

This cabinet portrait dates to the early 1890s – a typical Victorian period wedding portrait

**STUDIO BACKDROP:** Newly married couples posed for their portraits against the standard backdrops and accessories, which were the stock in trade of all commercial studios. Here we have the interior setting with drapery and potted plants.

**HEIGHT:** As the photographer needed to bring two heads into a relatively narrow field of focus, the question of who stood or sat down was usually decided by the relative heights of the couple. A tall man was seated to bring his head in a suitable position in relation to his lady. Unfortunately I cannot make out what the man is holding in his right hand, but it was clearly important if it was introduced into the photograph.



**COMPETITION SUCCESS:** Charles Reid is advertising his success in competitions between 1886 and 1891. Therefore, the mount must date to 1891 or later. Entering competitions was an important means of establishing a photographer's artistic aspirations and enabling a studio to price itself above the average. This suggests that his customers were financially comfortable and saw themselves as discriminating in their choice of photographer.

**GOLD PAINT:** The cardboard mount is moderately thick and has bevelled edges picked out in gold paint. This suggests a date in the 1880s or later. The photographer has refrained from the standard practice of using the same colour paint for his name and location – in this case, I think, to underline his artistic pretension.

**THE RING:** It was usual for one partner to stand resting one hand lightly on the shoulder of the seated partner. Note that by resting her right hand on his shoulder, her left hand is free to display the all important ring. The wedding ring was a symbol of a woman's virtue and success in finding a husband.

photographers began selling the so-called carte de visite which originated in France in 1854.

Cartes were sold in quantities of half dozen, dozen, 20 or even by the 100. Specifically designed photograph albums were introduced for the first time to house these new card formats.

The carte proved so popular, a larger version called the cabinet was introduced in 1866. The carte and the cabinet formed the mainstay of the Victorian family collection and were available until World War I.

### [4] 1870s FERROTYPES

The ferrotype (less accurately known as tintype) was produced in much the same way as the glass positive except that a thin

sheet of iron coated with enamel replaced the glass. It didn't take off in Britain until the 1870s.

Ferrotypes were available from popular studios on the high street in the 19th century but they came to be particularly associated with cheap seaside and fairground photographers. They were still on sale in the early 1950s and usually have to be dated by image content. Many of you will have ferrotypes in your family collections – they're easy to identify: use a magnet!

### [5] c1902 POSTCARDS

Although pictorial postcards emerged in the 1890s the format was not regularly used for commercial portraiture until very

early in the 20th century. And since there was no mount, the postcard became cheaper than existing card formats. Typically a dozen postcards cost 1/6d, as opposed to 3/6d for a dozen cartes, so people could afford to visit the photographer more frequently.

The postcard was the most popular commercial format until the 1950s when the professionals ceased to have any significant impact on family photograph collections (apart from wedding albums), and amateur snaps came to predominate.

### DATING CARTES AND CABINETS

Card formats dominated the Victorian market for 50 years and some can be difficult to date. The further reading section mentions a few reference books which provide useful guidance.

Manufacturers, for example, had to introduce changes in the appearance and design of the cardboard mounts to maintain interest and these changes can assist dating. The information printed on the mounts can also be very helpful, showing adverts or studio addresses.

A particularly helpful piece of self-promotion was the pictures of awards and medals which usually were accompanied by the date the success was achieved. The latest dated award provides a date after which the mount was printed. And if you are very lucky some mounts carry manuscript information, sometimes even a date. Just be aware that this can sometimes be the date the photograph was given to another, and not the date it was actually taken.

### VISUAL LITERACY

Obviously our old photographs tell us what our ancestors looked like at a particular time in their lives. But we can gather more information if we learn how to 'read' the image. To acquire skills

**GOLD DETAIL:** This lady's jewellery has been picked out in gold, c1850  
**COLOUR:** In this daguerreotype from the 1840s, colour has been added to the sitter's face and hands



**CARTE DE VISITE: Naked babies on rugs appeared in commercial portrait photography in c1900**

in visual literacy we need to understand the purpose these photographs served.

Both photographers and sitters in the past accepted without question that the fundamental purpose of the photograph was to present the family as it would ideally wish to be seen, rather than as it functioned in real life. This notion affected the occasions when people chose to be photographed as well as how they were pictured.

In photographic studios, sitters – dressed in Sunday best – adopted formal poses and unsmiling expressions on stage sets used to suggest expensively furnished interiors and exclusive outdoor settings. These conventional practices were intended to suggest that the sitters enjoyed an elegant lifestyle and the manners that went with it.

## SPECIAL OCCASIONS

In keeping with this notion of idealisation our ancestors courted the camera to celebrate special occasions and events that reflected credit upon themselves or the family. The special occasions most commonly celebrated in photographs were rites of passage: christenings, breechings, confirmations, coming of age, engagement, marriage and anniversaries.

Some rites, such as christening and confirmation, required special dress, so they remain easy for us to identify today. The white wedding dress, however, was only worn by the very rich, so most Victorian brides wore the best day dress they could afford. Studio photographs provide clues such as the pose, wedding rings or flowers on the dress, that will identify a picture as the wedding portrait.

Happily for us, not all Victorian photographers confined themselves to studio portraiture. Many operated outdoors, seeking speculative work in the street (going from door to door), or pitching at the seaside, fairground or other traditional holiday venues. Outdoor portraits are obviously more informative as they show our ancestors in the context of



their own home or chosen location. A seaside portrait also tells us that a person could afford the expense of a holiday, be it a day excursion or longer.

Though this may appear to be a lot of information to take in all at once, you will find that your knowledge of photographs will increase as you pursue your family history research. Indeed, a painless way to start is to read the photo analysis features which appear each month in *Your Family Tree*. ■

### BY AUDREY LINKMAN

In the 1980s, with the help of many colleagues, Audrey created an archive of some 80,000 family photographs, housed at the Greater Manchester County Record Office.

## CONTACT

### FURTHER READING

#### THE VICTORIANS: PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS

Audrey Linkman, London, Tauris Parke Books, 1993, ISBN: 1850437386

This looks at studio conventions and their meanings, the portrait cycle from birth to death and the work of itinerant photographers

#### THE EXPERT GUIDE TO DATING VICTORIAN FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

Audrey Linkman, Manchester: Greater Manchester County Record Office, 2000, ISBN: 0952189720

In spite of its pompous title this is a useful booklet of just under 50 pages. It looks at the various formats in some detail and then offers ways of dating card formats.

#### DATING OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

Robert Pols, Newbury & Birmingham: Countryside Books in association with the Federation of Family History Societies, 2nd edition, 1993, ISBN: 1853062316

In fact, this book of just under 100 pages extends beyond dating and includes useful sections on looking after early photographs. It also looks at the question of dating by dress.

#### THE CLASSIC SLUM

Robert Roberts, Penguin, 1973, ISBN: 0140216928

This isn't a book about photography. It's a biographical account of a child growing up in Edwardian Salford written by the sharp-eyed son of a corner shopkeeper. In addition to being a good read, this book is excellent for describing the values people attached to material possessions at that time. For example: "Window curtaining had significance; full drape being a necessity for any family with class."

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## 7 GOLDEN RULES

If you're new to family history, these principles will help you get the most from your pursuit

### 1 WORK BACKWARDS

Whatever you do in your research, start with yourself and work backwards generation by generation. This will ensure that you have verified your sources at each stage.

### 2 BE ORGANISED AND HONEST

You must be systematic and organised, as you'll inevitably collect a lot of information. Start with a simple filing system using A4 binders with loose-leaf pages and subject dividers, and an index card file for each of the family names/members and events. Have somewhere to keep certificates and other documents. While your record keeping may be methodical, it must also be honest. There are always skeletons in the cupboard to a greater or lesser degree – do not ignore them.

### 3 START WITH YOUR RELATIVES

Assemble all the information you can from relatives. Gather together – or take copies of – all the available birth, marriage and death certificates of family members, or ask for the approximate dates of birth, marriage and death. Talk to as many relatives as possible, including the eldest. They will all have information – some that they'll readily tell you – though they may be reluctant with revealing certain events. Make comprehensive notes.

### 4 SET YOUR SIGHTS

An early decision needs to be made on where to concentrate your researches. Don't aim to research your total ancestry – the data could soon overwhelm you. It's better to start with yourself, moving to your parents and grandparents, then choose a branch to follow.

### 5 UNDERSTAND SURNAMES

Surnames are usually derived from one of four basic roots: a place, occupation, a nickname or a patronymic relationship. The less common the name, the easier searches (usually) are.

### 6 CLASSES & SOCIETIES

It's always worth joining a family history society – or more than one. You'll get a good grounding in the essentials of family history research and you may well meet people with a similar interest and drive. Check the full list of family history societies with the FFHS at [www.ffhs.org.uk](http://www.ffhs.org.uk) or visit the LDS Church.

### 7 USE TECHNOLOGY

Use of technology is not a necessity but it can be a great help, and you'll find that more and more resources and organisations are gearing up to take advantage of it. A computer is an efficient tool for storing, copying, sharing and presenting data, and – along with word processors, email, internet, scanning and printing – there are programs specifically designed to help you draw up and publish your family tree and history. The internet is home to lots of useful information, too.