

Using AI for

Family History

How Artificial Intelligence can help you discover your ancestors

A Beginner-Friendly Introduction

What is Artificial Intelligence (AI)?

A Simple Explanation

AI is software that has been trained on vast amounts of information — books, websites, documents — so that it can:

- Understand plain English questions
- Spot patterns in data
- Summarise and explain text
- Translate languages
- Recognise faces and handwriting

Think of it like...

A very well-read assistant who never tires, never sleeps, and can instantly search millions of pages of information to help answer your questions.

You don't need to know how it works — just how to use it!

Why Use AI for Family History?



Saves Time

Analyse and summarise large amounts of historical documents in seconds.



Finds Patterns

Spot connections across records that a human might miss after hours of searching.



Reads Old Handwriting

Decipher faded, cursive, or foreign-language handwriting in old documents.



Explains in Plain English

Ask any question in your own words — no special skills needed.



Restores Photos

Enhance, sharpen, and even colourize old family photographs.



Crosses Languages

Translate records in Latin, German, Welsh, Polish, and many other languages.

Types of AI Tools Available

General AI Assistants



- ChatGPT (OpenAI)
- Claude (Anthropic)
- Gemini (Google)
- Copilot (Microsoft)

Answer any question, help write, research, and explain.

Genealogy Platforms with Built-in AI



- Ancestry Hints
- MyHeritage AI
- FamilySearch
- Findmypast

Specialist sites that use AI to suggest records and matches.

Specialist AI Tools



- Transkribus (handwriting)
- Google Lens (images)
- DeepL (translation)
- MyHeritage In Color

Purpose-built tools for specific tasks.

General AI Chatbots — Your Research Assistant

These free tools let you type questions in plain English and get instant, helpful answers. Think of them as a very well-read research librarian.

- ***"What records would exist for a farm labourer in 1880s Yorkshire?"***
→ Gets a list of relevant archives and record types instantly.
- ***"Can you explain what this old occupation means: Cordwainer?"***
→ Explains historical jobs, terms, and social context.
- ***"Help me write a short biography of my great-grandmother based on these dates."***
→ Drafts a readable family story from facts you provide.
- ***"I found this text in Latin — what does it mean?"***
→ Translates and explains old documents.

Genealogy Platforms — AI Built Right In

Ancestry — Record Hints

Ancestry's AI quietly compares your family tree with billions of records and suggests matches — census entries, birth certificates, ship manifests — you might never have found on your own.

MyHeritage — Smart Matches & AI Photos

MyHeritage uses AI to match your tree against other users' trees worldwide, and offers tools to restore old photos, animate portraits, and add colour to black-and-white images.

FamilySearch — Free & Powerful

Run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, FamilySearch is completely free. Its AI tools help index handwritten records, and its hints system draws on hundreds of millions of records globally.

Reading Old & Difficult Handwriting

One of the most exciting uses of AI in genealogy — deciphering documents you simply could not read before.

Key Tools



Transkribus

Purpose-built AI trained on millions of historical documents. Paste an image and it produces typed text.



Google Lens

Point your phone camera at a handwritten document and Google Lens will attempt to read it.



ChatGPT / Claude

Upload a photo of a document and ask it to transcribe the handwriting.

Tips for Best Results

- Use a high-resolution scan or photo
- Good lighting — avoid shadows
- Scan flat — don't photograph curved pages
- Try more than one tool if the first fails
- Double-check names against other records

Translating Old Documents & Languages

Many ancestors lived in a time when records were kept in languages we no longer read. AI makes this barrier much smaller.

Latin

Church records (births, marriages, deaths before 1800s)

ChatGPT / Claude — paste the text and ask for a translation with explanation.

Old German

Kurrent / Sütterlin script — very common in German records

Transkribus for transcription, then DeepL or Claude for translation.

Welsh / Irish

Census and church records in Wales and Ireland

Claude or Google Translate handles modern Welsh well; historical Welsh needs specialist tools.

Polish / Yiddish

Common in Eastern European Jewish ancestry records

JRI-Poland online + Claude for translation assistance.

Restoring & Enhancing Old Family Photographs

AI can bring old photographs back to life — a wonderful way to connect with ancestors.

Colourise

MyHeritage In Color

Upload a black-and-white photo and receive a realistic colourised version. Often free for a limited number of photos.

Animate

MyHeritage Deep Nostalgia

Animates a still portrait — eyes blink, head turns slightly. Astonishing to see an ancestor appear to 'come alive'.

Restore

Adobe Firefly / Remini

Sharpens blurry or damaged photos, removes scratches, and enhances detail in faces.

Enhance

Google Photos

Built-in AI tools to enhance contrast, sharpen, and brighten old scanned photos — free and easy to use.

DNA Testing & AI — A Powerful Combination

How DNA + AI Works Together

- 1 You take a DNA test (AncestryDNA, 23andMe, MyHeritage DNA)
- 2 AI compares your DNA against millions of other test-takers to find relatives
- 3 Algorithms predict how closely you're related and which family lines match
- 4 AI tools like the Leeds Method sorter group your matches into family clusters
- 5 You can upload results to free tools like GEDmatch for deeper analysis

Good to Know

- DNA testing is optional — AI is useful without it
- Results can reveal surprises — prepare family members
- Privacy: read the terms before testing
- AncestryDNA is the largest database (UK)

Writing Your Family's Story with AI

AI can help you turn dry dates and facts into a readable, engaging family history — no writing experience needed.

"My great-grandfather William was born in 1882 in Whitechapel, London. He was a docker, married in 1905, and emigrated to Canada in 1912. Can you write a short biography?"



AI produces a rich, readable paragraph placing William in historical context — life in the East End, the docks, the great wave of emigration.

"Here are the facts about my grandmother's life. Can you write a chapter for a family history book in a warm, personal style?"



AI drafts the chapter, which you then edit and personalise. A tremendous time-saver.

"What was daily life like for a coal miner's family in South Wales in 1910?"



AI provides historical context and colour to bring your family's world to life.

Getting Started — Five Easy First Steps

1

Visit ChatGPT or Claude

Go to chatgpt.com or claude.ai. Create a free account. Ask a simple question about your family history. See what happens!

2

Try a Handwriting Sample

Find a census page or old letter you've struggled with. Photograph it and upload it to Claude or ChatGPT — ask it to transcribe the text.

3

Explore Your Existing Platform

If you use Ancestry, MyHeritage, or FamilySearch — look for the Hints section. These AI suggestions are already working for you.

4

Restore an Old Photo

Visit myheritage.com/incolor and upload a black-and-white family photo. Free for your first few images.

5

Ask for Historical Context

Pick an ancestor and ask AI: "What was life like for a [occupation] in [place] in [decade]?" — then add this context to your family history.

Dos and Don'ts When Using AI

✓ Do

- Verify AI findings against original records
- Use AI to generate ideas and starting points
- Ask follow-up questions if an answer seems vague
- Use AI to explain unfamiliar historical terms
- Keep notes of which AI tool gave which result
- Enjoy experimenting — you cannot break anything

✗ Don't

- Don't treat AI output as fact without checking
- Don't share sensitive personal data (living relatives' details)
- Don't rely solely on AI — archives and experts still matter
- Don't be put off by occasional wrong answers
- Don't pay for AI tools before trying the free versions
- Don't copy AI text into your family history unedited

Important Limitations to Be Aware Of



AI Can Be Confidently Wrong

AI sometimes produces plausible-sounding but incorrect information — including invented names, dates, and even records. Always verify genealogical facts against original sources.



Privacy Matters

Avoid entering full names, addresses, and birth dates of living people into AI tools. Read the privacy policy before using any service.



AI Is Not an Archive

AI does not have access to unpublished or restricted records. It knows what's been digitised and publicly available. Original archives still hold information AI cannot see.



Results Need Interpretation

DNA matches, photo colourisation, and translated documents all require human judgement. AI provides a starting point — not a final answer.

Useful Tools & Resources

General AI Assistants

- chatgpt.com (ChatGPT — free tier)
- claude.ai (Claude — free tier)
- gemini.google.com (Gemini — free)

Genealogy Platforms

- ancestry.co.uk (subscription)
- myheritage.com (free & paid tiers)
- familysearch.org (completely free)

Handwriting & Documents

- transkribus.eu (free limited tier)
- Google Lens (free, via phone camera)
- findmypast.co.uk (UK focus, subscription)

Photo Tools

- myheritage.com/incolor (colourise)
- remini.ai (photo restoration)
- Google Photos (enhance, free)

Translation

- deepl.com (excellent free translator)
- Claude / ChatGPT (Latin, old languages)
- Google Translate (broad language support)

DNA

- ancestrydna.com (largest UK database)
- myheritage.com/dna
- gedmatch.com (free cross-platform tool)

Key Takeaways

- AI is a tool — not magic. Use it to save time and open doors, then verify what it finds.
- You don't need any technical knowledge. If you can type a question, you can use AI.
- Start simple — one question to ChatGPT or Claude, one old photo to MyHeritage.
- The best genealogical discoveries still come from human curiosity and persistence.
- AI and traditional research work best together, not instead of each other.

Questions & Discussion

Asking Better Questions

The Art of Prompting

01

Assign a Role

Tell the AI who it should act as (e.g., "Act as an expert genealogist").

03

Specify Output

Tell the AI how to present the answer, such as in a table or a narrative story.

02

Clear Instructions

Explicitly state what you want done (e.g., "Create a checklist for a brick wall in 1820s North Carolina").

04

Use Reasoning Modes

For complex tasks like transcribing difficult handwriting, use the AI's "thinking" or "reasoning" mode for better accuracy.

Avoiding Pitfalls

Key Risks to Watch For

AI can be a powerful ally, but only when used with care and critical thinking.

→ Verify Everything

Treat AI answers as **clues or suggestions**, not final conclusions.

→ Beware of "Hallucinations"

AI can sound very confident while being completely wrong or making up "fictional" ancestors.

→ Ask for Sources

Prompt the AI to explain "how" and "why" it reached an answer to see its logic.

→ Keep Chats Organised

Separate unrelated family branches into **new chat windows** to prevent the AI from mixing up details.



Documents & Photo Analysis

Handwriting Recognition

Advanced AI can now transcribe historical cursive that standard scanners cannot read.

Photo Restoration

AI can sharpen blurry images, remove damage, and **colorize black-and-white portraits**.

Animating Ancestors

Tools like **Deep Nostalgia** or **Incarn** create short, realistic videos of ancestors smiling or moving their heads.

The Uncanny Valley

Be aware that animated photos are "synthetic" simulations and can sometimes feel "creepy" or "creepy" or unsettling.

Using AI as Your Personal Tutor



Technical Troubleshooting

Ask the AI how to use other tools (e.g., (e.g., "How do I pin a place on Google Google Maps?" or "How do I crop a photo?").



Learning Concepts

Use AI to explain complex genetic genealogy topics like **centiMorgans** or **centiMorgans** or the **Leeds Method**.
Method.



Research Strategy

If you are stuck, ask for a list of records records likely to exist for a specific time time and location.

Ethics & Best Practice

Protect Privacy

Avoid putting the names or data of living individuals into AI into AI tools.

Transparency

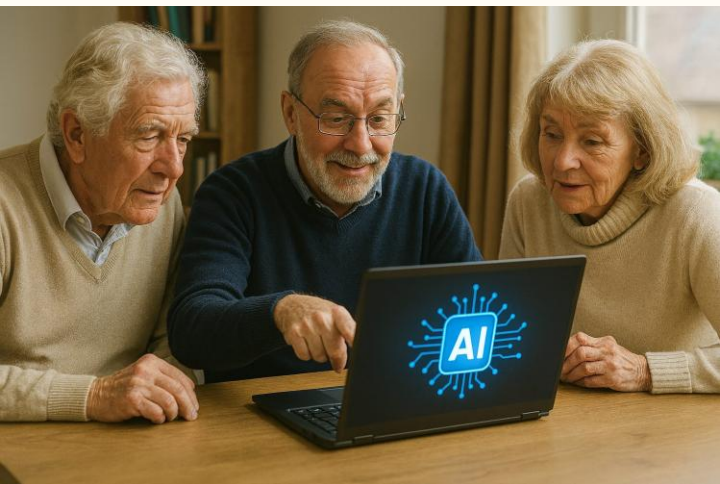
Disclose when you have used AI to generate or modify modify content in your reports or stories.

DNA Anonymization

Use pseudonyms or ID numbers when analysing DNA match match lists to safeguard private info.

Human-Machine Partnership

Your **genealogical judgment** must always oversee the machine's processing power.



Why not?....

Try it!

Gemini (Google), Claude (Anthropic), ChatGPT (Open AI).

Find out more

Why not book to come on one of our Free AI Workshops? The next are May 15th June 19th

Use my number one tip:

At the end of a complex prompt type “Before you start, ask me any questions one by one, until you are until you are 95% certain that you can carry out this task.”

Look for Further information

<https://www.family-tree.co.uk/how-to-guides/ai-for-genealogy>

Google “ai for family history” , or even better....

Ask Claude, or Gemini, or ChatGPT !