

I was an early subscriber to Friends Reunited and found it of considerable benefit. In common with many users, I let my subscription lapse after the initial year.

When they launched a sister site called Genesconnected, I was more sceptical (and there weren't any occurrences of my "Name" listed!) so didn't register. This year they re-branded as Genes Reunited (GR), and having heard some favourable tales, I decided to give it a go. The service has evolved over the last six months. Some features have improved (such as personal security), some have been added, and others have been trimmed. What follows is, I believe, the latest situation.

The purpose of the site is to enable individuals to "publish" their family tree, find connections with other researchers and share data. It also provides various forums for mutual help & advice.

Basic home page

Some of the information on the home page changes periodically, so it will not always be identical to the illustration (see Figure 1). One snippet that appeared whilst preparing this was the fact that there were 22,516,862 ancestors on the site. I assume they mean entries, as many of the ancestors will clearly be duplicates of someone else's.

From the basic (free) home page you can search for an individual by forename AND surname only. I tried John Smith and there were 7,059 entries. It won't let you see the details of the entries unless you Register, which is free.

I tried using wild cards for searching, but it wouldn't have it. Well, actually, it did – it said there were four entries for "* Smith"! I tried my usual trick of putting in three spaces followed by an asterisk (it works on some sites) for forename, with Smith as the surname. Again, it wouldn't accept it, but did come back and tell me there were 21,3021 entries for Smith. Clearly, a lot of people out there need help. It goes on to say that over 250,000 entries are added each week. A check for my registered name revealed that there were 198 entries. I know already that this represents about 60+ individuals, increasing by about two per week.

You can start building a family tree from the basic homepage, but I'm not sure what value this has. I started one as directed, and when I clicked on the appropriate button I got an "error on page" message. I assume that unless you register, this information is discarded.

Registration

There is not a lot you can do on the site without registering, but that is free, easy and seems to be secure. I certainly haven't had any unwanted mail as a result. Registration requires some personal data to be entered, but there are no checks and you can more or less put what you like (but so can everyone

webwatch

INTERNET SOURCES
FOR ONE-NAMERS

Genes Reunited site aimed at the beginner but still has much to offer for one-namers

else). Having registered, there are many more menu options available (see the side panel in Figure 2.) One nice feature is the free downloadable charts in PDF format which were all quite usable when printed out. There is a six-generation fan chart, a four-generation pedigree chart, and a family group record sheet that is one of the better ones I've seen.

At this stage it is also possible to start entering data and building a family tree. There is a facility to import & export GedCom, but this has not been evaluated. I think I've worked out how the site operates: a large, lineage-linked database of individuals, indexed by surname and other details. If I entered my own tree just for my one-name line, it would be about 1,200 individuals – about 20% of

my ONS. Of these, about 700 have my registered name and would, therefore, swamp those entries of the other subscribers.

I also have about 500 other surnames which I am not particularly interested in, mostly the spouses of distant branches. However, the prospect of anyone searching for those names (including Smith) and finding me listed as apparently interested made me (selfishly perhaps!) decide to keep my entry to a minimum and I resisted the temptation to add more than my own basic details.

When you search you can select by first name, surname, year of birth (with range) and place of birth. Wildcards are still not allowed. A search for John Toll brought up 10 matches and indicated that there were a further 34 listed under variants, which it had found using something called NameX® and which it claims to be superior to Soundex. It then goes on to say that it doesn't check all spellings under which your ancestors name may appear.

Clicking on any of the names gives you the forename and membership number of the person who submitted the information, complete with a summary of the details they submitted on their ancestor. It also invites you to subscribe for £7.50 per annum, so you can contact the submitter.

Subscription

Subscription is online by popular credit and debit cards or by cheque. There is a link at the bottom of the screen for details. They have cheekily ticked the box to make it a Repeat Transaction Authority, renewing your subscription automatically in future years, but there is a note telling you that you can untick the box if you don't want to do that.

Benefits of full membership include, say GR:

- Contact members and discover your family history.
- View other members' family trees.
- Post messages on all message boards.
- Add photos to your family tree

For me, the first is the most useful. Clicking on a name's individual brings up a screen similar to the one before, except now you can send a message to the submitter of the individual concerned. At this stage you only know the submitter's forename (that which they registered with) and their membership number. If you write a message in the annoyingly small box provided and send it, the recipient gets an e-mail advising them they have a message. You have them automatically added to your personal contacts

list (see Figure 3 on page 16) facilities. A copy of the message is placed in your "sent messages" list and the individual is marked as "contacted" in future search results list.

Recipients of messages have to visit the GR site and log in or click a link in the notifying e-mail they receive to read the message, which is located in their personal inbox. In this way, each party can carry on a discussion without revealing their email address to the other. You can, of course, reveal your true contact details in a message to enable discussion to continue outside GR, for example to swap images of records or post to printouts.

Your contact list provides a historical log of all the messages via GR and you can use it (or your message



By KEN TOLL

Figure 1 – the homepage of Genes Reunited

Figure 2 – registered user home page

lists) to contact submitters again. On your messages list you can mark entries for deletion – but once it's gone it's gone!

I haven't found a way to export messages but you can copy and paste them into other programs such as Word or Notepad. You can edit the basic information about individuals stored in your family tree and supplement it with additional genealogical data – even a photograph. However, I haven't actually used these facilities (but am in contact with people who have). You can choose to share your family tree with specific subscribers, and not with others. You can also request others share

their tree with you.

There is another facility which they don't list as benefit which I find extremely useful, and that is to be e-mailed periodically when new people with your name(s) of interest have been added. You can also have a list of people who have been added in the last few days, which can be set to up to 14 days.

Personal experience

When I find a new entry has been added for my name, I send a message via GR explaining who I am, what I do and the sort of data I hold. Some of them are very surprised! I try to tailor each response for best results, depending on whether I recognise the individual(s) listed from my records.

I have had a much higher degree of success than I expected, given that many of those contacted will only have a passing interest in the name. Overall, "No reply" is about 15-20%, but I have modified my approach slightly and now seem to be faring considerably better.

When confronted with a long list of individuals whose submitters I've not contacted, I start the contact process to see who submitted the entry. I note the individual, submitter name & membership number (e.g. in a spreadsheet), and cancel the process. I repeat this for each name submitted.

Sorting the information by membership number, you can see who has made multiple entries and who has made single ones. The former are likely to have

done a certain amount of research – and the earlier the dates, the more they might have done – and be interested in your one-name study. The others seem to fall into two basic groups:

- Those who have the name on a distant branch. Some of these have been quite helpful.
- Those who have just put their own name in to see what happens.

The latter are often very interested and provide useful information of the current generations in exchange for data on their ancestors. I have helped many who were just starting out on their family history. I now give my contacts the option of drip-feeding information to help them along their way, or "all at once" for those who have only a passing interest in the subject.

"Lost" individuals

I'm not sure whether it is a co-incidence or not, but a significant number of the contacts I've made are related to individuals I've "lost" in my own research. Often this is because they relocated within the UK or Colonies, and somehow eluded the various census indexes. I'm also collaborating with other contacts on tracing their Toll ancestors who seem to appear from nowhere. This is helping me to target future research to mutually helpful areas.

If I made any mistake, it was contacting too many people at once. I was like a kid in a candy shop, firing off messages, perhaps 10 a day. Then the replies came back and I was faced with quite a heavy workload to satisfy the expectations I'd created! If doing it again, I would endeavour to select perhaps five submitters who appeared to be from the same family. Once those had been resolved, I'd move on to another five or another family.

I haven't found an easy way to add those branches of my ONS that are not related to me. I suppose I could register as a deceased individual from one of those lines, giving my e-mail address, but I'm not sure of the value of doing so. I have yet to find a way to de-register and remove my information, though I'm sure it must be there.

Summary

GenesReunited is definitely aimed at the beginner and has some very annoying adverts, not even relevant to genealogy. Has it been worthwhile? Definitely! For about the price of one English BMD certificate I have received data in abundance, particularly from abroad.

One very kind person extracted a huge amount from locally held records in Australia. I have also had the satisfaction of providing significant help to about 30 people.

In less than six months I have been in contact with more people interested in my Guild-registered name than through any other method and might now have enough contacts to start a one-name group. ○

The screenshot shows the 'Message centre' interface on the Genes Reunited website. It features a navigation menu on the left with options like 'Welcome back Ken', 'Full member Until 10 Jun 05', 'Messages', 'Sign out', 'Your homepage', 'Account details', 'Build Your Tree', 'Your Names', 'Name Summary', 'Immediate Family', 'Your Relations', 'Your Ancestors', 'Your Contacts', and 'View trees'. The main content area is titled 'Message centre' and has tabs for 'Inbox', 'Sent messages', and 'Your contacts'. The 'Your contacts' tab is active, displaying a table of contacts. The table has columns for 'Contact name', 'Regarding', 'Date', and 'Tree permissions'. The contacts listed are:

Contact name	Regarding	Date	Tree permissions	
Show all		(dd/mm/yyyy)	Their tree	Your tree
Michelle	Vant	05/09/2004	Request	Remove
Paul Ackerman	Toll	26/11/2004	Request	Allow
Sent Re - Joyce Toll 07/12/2004				
Received Re - Joyce Toll 07/12/2004				
Sent Re - Joyce Toll 06/12/2004				
Received Re - Joyce Toll 06/12/2004				
Sent Re - Joyce Toll 26/11/2004				
Sent Re - Joyce Toll 26/11/2004				
Fiona Armstrong	Toll	07/09/2004	Request	Allow
Matthew Armstrong	Toll	03/06/2004	Request	Allow
Augusta Arnold		18/07/2004	Request	Allow
Brooke Ashlin	Toll	18/07/2004	View	Allow
Nicola Austin		10/08/2004	Request	Allow
Neil Badger	Toll	27/11/2004	Request	Allow
Michael Bailey	Toll	03/06/2004	Request	Allow
Brian Berry	Toll	03/06/2004	Request	Allow
Michael Body	Toll	06/09/2004	View	Allow
David Booth	Toll	03/06/2004	Request	Allow
Valerie Campion	Tole	05/07/2004	Request	Allow
Elaine Carter	Toll	25/11/2004	Request	Allow
John Cartwright	Toll	30/07/2004	View	Allow
Stephen Clarke	Toll	03/06/2004	Request	Allow

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Figure 3 – the contacts page