A Guide to Tracing Your Family History in Belfast and Northern Ireland
During the last three centuries hundreds of thousands of people left Ulster (the six counties of Northern Ireland plus the three border counties of Monaghan, Cavan and Donegal in the Republic of Ireland) to seek new lives around the world. They included hundreds of thousands of Scots Irish Presbyterians who settled in North America from the early 18th century and great numbers of Irish Catholics who emigrated there in subsequent centuries. Many left for other countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada. Today, many descendants of these Ulster migrants are returning to these shores to find out more about their roots. They are joined by many local people whose curiosity about their ancestors is just as great. But how do you go about tracing your family tree? Where do you start? Who can help, advise, or even do the work for you? This brochure is intended as a simple guide to tracing your ancestors in Belfast and Northern Ireland.
There are a number of options available. You can decide to conduct the entire search yourself; pay for some preliminary advice before you set out; or choose from a number of organisations that will conduct full reports for an agreed fee. In each case one factor is common, the more information you can provide at the outset, the more successful your search will be. Bear in mind that searches are time-consuming and can take several months or more to complete, even with professional assistance.

There are a number of institutions in Belfast that provide access to important records or hold material of interest to those seeking their family history. These include the General Register Office, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), the Linen Hall Library and Belfast Central Library.
The more information you can supply about your ancestors the easier it will be to check records. The most important details you will need are names, places of abode (such as townlands, parishes and counties) and dates of birth, marriage and death (and, if relevant, the date of emigration). The religion and occupation of your ancestor may also be of use.

If you do not have this information to hand, try and find out as much as you can from relatives. It’s always worth checking old family photographs which may have names and dates written on the back, or family bibles which often have important details, like births and deaths, inscribed inside. Local people could also check family gravestones for information. If you are overseas, there are various online databases that may offer useful information too. PRONI and the Ulster Historical Foundation, for instance, have databases on their websites. Some organisations, such as the Ulster Historical Foundation, will offer preliminary advice to start you on your way for a small fee and allow access to their own databases (see Assisted Searches).
In Belfast, your first step should be a visit to the General Register Office in the city centre. The main records held here are the statutory registers of births and deaths in Northern Ireland from 1864 and marriages from 1922. Marriage registers dating from 1 April 1845, for non-Roman Catholic marriages, and 1 January 1864, for all marriages, are available at the District Registrar’s offices. It is advisable to book a search place in advance on +44 (0)28 9025 2128 or email gro.nisra@dfpni.gov.uk. There are fees for assisted searches and index searches of their computer database.

General Register Office,
Oxford House, 49/55 Chichester Street,
Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT1 4HL
Tel: +44 (0)28 9025 2000.

Website: www.groni.gov.uk
Appointments necessary
Opening times: Monday to Friday 9.30am - 4.00pm
The institution where you will need to spend most time is the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). Staff will advise you on how to begin your search and access records but do not conduct research on your behalf. Their main sources for genealogical research include records for nearly every church in Ulster; wills (from 1858); the 1901 census; tithe applotment; Griffiths Valuation; school records, poor law (workhouse) records and estate papers. PRONI also has microfilm copies of original deeds for the purchase or sale of land in Ireland dating back to 1708. Researchers are encouraged to prepare as much as possible before visiting PRONI and it is recommended they study the information on the PRONI website first.

PRONI,
66 Balmoral Avenue, Belfast,
Northern Ireland BT9 6NY
Tel: +44 (0)28 9025 5905
or email: proni@dcalni.gov.uk
Website: www.proni.gov.uk

Open to the public (ID required)
Monday to Friday 9.00am - 5.00pm
(except Thursday 10.00am - 9.00pm)
The Linen Hall Library has an excellent genealogy collection with many important primary and secondary sources, including books on individual family histories and a card index of births, deaths and marriages in the Belfast News Letter between 1800 and 1863.

The Linen Hall Library, 17 Donegall Square North, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT1 5GB  
Tel: +44 (0)28 9032 1707  
Website: www.linenhall.com  
Open to the public  
Monday to Friday 9.30am - 5.30pm  
Saturday 9.30am - 1.00pm

The Belfast Central Library has a substantial collection of Northern Irish newspapers that date back to the first Belfast News Letter, which was published in 1777.

Belfast Central Library,  
Royal Avenue, Belfast,  
Northern Ireland, BT1 1EA  
Tel: +44 (0)28 9050 9167  
Website: www.ni-libraries.net  
Open to the public  
Please contact them directly for opening times
There are a number of organisations in Belfast and Northern Ireland that will conduct a search on your behalf and provide facilities to help you. These include:

The Ulster Historical Foundation. For a small fee they will offer preliminary advice on your search and allow access to their database. If you want to commission a full report, their research team will agree a budget with you and conduct a search on your behalf. Their computerised database includes virtually all pre-1900 Catholic records for counties Antrim and Down and civil marriage records for the same counties from 1845 to 1921.
They also have a large number of records for the city of Belfast, and a register of those buried at Belfast City Cemetery starting in 1869. They publish a range of genealogical publications to aid research. By joining the Foundation you have access to over 500,000 genealogical records online, as well as reductions for search fees and their list of publications. They organise lecture tours of the US, Canada and Australasia; workshops and conferences in Northern Ireland; and can also help in tracing living relatives.

Ulster Historical Foundation, Unit 7, Cotton Court, Waring Street, Belfast BT1 2ED Tel: +44 (0)28 9033 2288
Website: www.ancestryireland.com
Open to the public
Opening times: Monday to Friday 9.00am - 5.00pm

(Descendants of Scots Irish migrants should also visit www.1718migration.org.uk, a website created by the Ulster-Scots Agency in association with the Ulster Historical Foundation and the Centre for Migration Studies and the Institute of Ulster-Scots Studies).
Family Ulster

Family Ulster offer a number of services, ranging from simple birth, marriage and death checks to providing assisted research at any of the main record centres such as PRONI, and at locations such as villages and graveyards, to conducting full searches on your behalf. A budget is agreed upfront and research can be directed from overseas. They also offer a guided tour service to take clients to sites associated with their ancestors such as towns, villages, homes or graveyards, and, if they uncover a living relative during their search, they will arrange a meeting on request. They provide booking assistance for accommodation.

Family Ulster,
24 Moyne Park, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT5 7QT
Tel: +44 (0)28 9079 8551
email: info@familyulster.com
Website: www.familyulster.com

Please contact them directly for opening times and information.
The centre is a branch of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City Utah, run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons). It provides access to most of the extensive records kept at their central library. Staff members do not conduct research on your behalf but will offer assistance in using the facilities. Everyone is welcome.

Family History Centre,
403 Holywood Road, Co Down, Northern Ireland.
Tel: +44 (0)28 9076 9839

Website: www.familysearch.org

Only open to the public
Wednesday/Thursday 10.00am - 4.00pm
& Saturday 10.00am - 1.00pm
OTHER USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
The society has books on Presbyterian history and culture in Ireland.
The Presbyterian Historical Society, Church House, Fisherwick Place, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT1 6DW Tel: +44 (0)28 9032 2284 Website: www.presbyterianireland.org

ASSOCIATION OF ULSTER GENEALOGISTS & RECORD AGENTS,
c/o The Secretary, Glen Cottage, Glenmachan Road, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT4 2NP Website: www.augra.com

SOCIETY OF GENEALOGISTS NORTHERN IRELAND
email: secretary@sgni.net Website: www.sgni.net

CENTRE FOR MIGRATION STUDIES
Ulster American Folk Park, 2 Mellon Road, Castletown, Omagh, Co Tyrone, Northern Ireland, BT78 5QY Tel: +44 (0)28 8225 6315 Website: www.qub.ac.uk/cms

For further information contact:
Tourism Development Unit, Development Department, Belfast City Council, Cecil Ward Building, 4-10 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BP Tel: +44 (0)28 9032 0202 email: murtagho@belfastcity.gov.uk Website: www.belfastcity.gov.uk

For information on Belfast visit www.gotobelfast.com or Tel: +44 (0)28 9024 6609