

Tracing Your Italian Ancestors

COMING TO THE UK

The story of Italians in Britain goes back to Roman times, but modern immigration began with merchants, financiers, churchmen, academics, artists and aristocrats from the 13th century. This became a tide of economic migrants in the 19th century, the majority coming from the mountain villages of the North, often as seasonal workers walking overland to French ports.

From the 1820s to 1851 estimates put the Italian population of England at around 4000, half living in London; most came from the valleys around Como, and Lucca. By the 1870s the main source of Italian immigration was the valleys of Parma and the Liri; after the 1870s the regional demarcations became less rigid. Increasing numbers stayed beyond the season either bringing their families with them, or marrying local women and started families here.

The centre of the Italian community in Britain from the nineteenth century to the present day is 'Little Italy', in Clerkenwell. Victorian commentators have left us with colourful descriptions of the harsh, cramped and unsanitary conditions which the Italians shared with the Irish and other members of the English underclass, until they saved enough money to move out.

As numbers increased Italians spread to the north of England, Wales and Scotland, although never in great numbers. In 1891 the majority of the 80 -100 Italians in the city were organ grinders and street sellers. The 500-600 Italians in Manchester were mostly Terrazzo specialists, plasterers and modellers, while in Sheffield 100-150 Italians made cutlery.

Of the 1000 or so Italians in Wales at the end of the nineteenth century, it is estimated that one third of them worked as seamen on British ships, a third worked in jobs that serviced shipping, and the rest worked in the coal mines. In 1861 there were 119 Italians in Scotland, mostly Glasgow, by 1901 there were 4051. The Italian communities in Scotland were becoming more affluent, with small food or ice cream shops or fish restaurants and were moving to the smaller cities.

Italian immigration reduced to a trickle with WW I only increasing again after WW II. Some Italian PoWs chose to stay, often taking local brides.

The post-war boom in the catering trade attracted more workers. By now many of the original immigrants and their descendants had established small businesses throughout the UK and preferred to employ fellow-countrymen. In the 1950s a new wave of immigrants arrived to carry out the post-war reconstruction, mainly from southern Italy and Sicily, establishing new communities in places such as Bedford, Peterborough and Nottingham.

RESEARCH IN THE UK

Starting Out

Note all the events and dates that you and your family are certain about, working backwards in time. Search out all the family documents that you can; letters, photographs and especially official documents, birth, marriage and death certificates. Persuade as many of your relatives as will cooperate to reminisce, especially the older ones. Show them family photographs to prompt their memories and go prepared with a list of questions arising from your research.

When you have all the information from relatives it will be time to consult official records; the basic ones are birth, marriage and death certificates and census returns. There are many books available that will help you (see Further Reading) and many web sites where you will be able to track down further information (see Websites, below).

The problem of surnames

You have you start with what is known and work backwards but when tracing Italians there are added difficulties to contend with. All surnames change with time, with Italian names the problem is compounded because they were unfamiliar and frequently became severely mangled or were anglicised. When searching be very flexible with spelling.

Births, Marriages and Deaths

The system of civil registration of births, marriages and deaths began in England and Wales in 1837; before then the events will be found in church registers. Because it was not the parents' responsibility to register births until 1875 many were not recorded in the early years, but almost all marriages and deaths were. Details were entered in registers which were sent to the Registrar General in London for indexing. The registers are not available for consultation; the details can only be obtained by purchasing a copy of the certificate. To do this you need to consult indexes on line (FreeBMD, FindMyPast, Ancestry, etc.) or copies held by local record offices and elsewhere. Birth certificates give date and place of birth, parents' names, including the mother's maiden name, and father's occupation.

Marriage certificates give the bride's and groom's names, occupation and address at the time of the marriage and the names and occupations of their fathers. Death certificates are usually less helpful as they give less information (date, cause and place of death, name and address of informant) and are less reliable, not having been completed by the person concerned!

Italians, it seems, were particularly bad at registering children in the early years of civil registration so it is often necessary to refer to church baptism records. Since they were predominantly Roman Catholic few are to be found in the International Genealogical Index (IGI) and many Roman Catholic registers are still held by the Parish Priest (see Further Reading, Gandy). When searching church records remember that the Italians lived in close-knit family groups so the names of sponsors at baptisms and witnesses at weddings can often give clues when a name has become misspelt.

Censuses

Censuses have been taken every ten years starting in 1841. The information they record has varied over the years but it always includes names, ages and occupations and place of birth of everyone at a specified address; usually there is some additional information. They are thus invaluable in helping to identify the siblings of your ancestors and give clues to dates of birth and marriage. The census details are not available until 100 years after the event so the latest one that can be consulted today is from 1911. All available censuses can be searched on line (FindMyPast, Ancestry, The Genealogist) but most sites are subscription or pay per view; however, some census information is available online for no charge at FreeBMD and LDS Family Search and many county libraries also offer free access. Census returns can be seen on microfilm at LDS Family History Centres and elsewhere; many are now being published as images on CD ROMS. Some family history societies have published transcriptions of the returns in their areas of interest (NB see *The problem of surnames*, above).

Other Official Records

Naturalisation, immigration and shipping records can be worth checking but there can be no guarantees of finding your ancestor. In the nineteenth century only the wealthy could afford naturalisation; the poorer members of society didn't bother. Until the Aliens Act of 1905 all aliens were required to register on entering the country, but the law was rarely enforced and most records have not survived. Ships' passenger lists exist from 1878 but they only apply to vessels whose voyages began outside Europe and it can be very difficult and time-consuming to find records.

Naturalisation papers can be found in the catalogue of The National Archives and many passenger lists are available through Ancestry and FindMyPast. During WW I aliens over the age of 16 were required to register with the local police.

County archives will hold any surviving records, though many have been destroyed. Bedford's collection is the most comprehensive.

The majority of records of prisoners of war, internees and deportees exist and are held by the National Archives, with some contained within the quarter sessions records held in county archives. See Kershaw and Pearsall for further details.

Other sources

If your ancestor was in trade or business it is always worth checking Post Office or Kelly's Directories, available at county Local Studies Centres and archives and on CD ROM. There are a number of specialist publications that can help (see Further Reading).

WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

Narrowing down the place of origin to a very small area in Italy is vital for research in person because the most useful records in Italy for family historians are the *Stato Civile* (vital records – BMD records) held in each *Comune* (Township) at the *Municipio* (Town Hall). There are no centralised records in Italy. Without the name of a village, town or at least province, searching Italian records is like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

To narrow the search you can look for various clues. Occupations can often indicate regional origins; the effects of chain migration led to enclaves from the same villages so check whether place of birth is given for neighbours, family members or others with the same surname. The date that they came to Britain may also be an indicator. Many surnames have very specific origins; try searching the Italian surname mapping facility at www.gens.labo.net. It is also worth searching for the surname in the Ellis Island records – many people from the same villages went to America, and their place of origin is recorded in the manifests, available online at <http://www.ellisland.org/>

RESEARCH IN ITALY

Introduction

A visit to the place your ancestors came from is to be highly recommended for giving a flavour of their lives, the local food and architecture, the cemeteries, the churches, war memorials and more. However, researching primary records requires a lot of preplanning; you may need to research at town level (*comune*), in the provincial archives (*archivio di stato*), or in the local parish – often all three.

There is very little interest in family history in Italy though, predictably most of the noble lines have been carefully catalogued (the Society of Genealogists has a small collection of books relating to Italian nobility). The vast majority of immigrants, though, came from very humble origins.

American and British researchers are much more likely than Italians to have researched these families already, so use online surname lists and mailing groups to see if you can link up with a distant cousin.

Civil Records in Italy

The civil registration records are by far the most useful and accessible source for family history research. The records are written in Italian, in somewhat archaic spidery handwriting. These difficulties can be overcome if you familiarise yourself with the format and language of the documents before approaching the records. The books by Cole and Nelson (see further reading) are strongly recommended.

The civil registers of births, marriages and death - *Stato Civile* – are detailed and have been kept in almost every region since unification; in certain regions the records date back to 1809. All people named are identified by their parents; ages, occupations and addresses are routinely given as well. So on a birth record, the father of the child will be identified as ‘Angelo Bassani, peasant, aged 23, son of Luigi, aged 57’. Wherever a woman is named, her maiden name is used. Both parents of the bride and the groom are identified in marriage records, together with addresses.

The records are held by the town official for each *comune*, so you need to be fairly sure you’ve identified the right place. Unless the records are more than 75 years old, they can be searched only by officials working in the Town Hall. Write the *Ufficio di Stato Civile* for the relevant *comune* to request copies of documents, or permission to search. A fee will be payable.

Always ask for an extract (*estratto dell’atto*) rather than a certificate (*il certificato*), if you can’t access the original documents, as the extracts provide more personal information than the certificates.

Italian church records

The ecclesiastical records of baptisms, marriages and burials were kept from the sixteenth century, though survival is patchy and access to records can be difficult. They are kept in the local parish, though over the centuries the relevant parish church for a particular village may have changed, so you may need to consult several sets of records.

If you are planning a research trip, it is worth writing to the *curia vescovile* (diocesan office) for permission to consult the registers, though even then a parish priest has the right to refuse access. Writing for information meets variable responses, even when accompanied by donations to the parish – you are at the mercy of the individual priest. Always send letters and requests in Italian – there are books and websites that will help you translate.

A growing number of microfilmed parish records are held by LDS, with some available through their FamilySearch website. A few can also now be viewed on Ancestry’s subscription site.

Family records

Il Situazione della Famiglia (known in some regions as *Stato di famiglia*) can be an extremely helpful record for family research. This is requested from the *Servizi Demografici* at the *ufficio di stato civile* of each *comune* (for more recent records, you should approach the *anagrafe*). You need to have a full name and at least an approximate year of birth. The information you’ll receive consists of: marital status, date and place of birth, wife/husband and children’s full names, dates and places of birth, occupations and the family’s full address. The year that the person left the *comune* and where they moved to may also be included. You can write (in Italian) asking for confirmation that the person concerned had lived in that *comune* and the charge for the *Situazione della Famiglia* (which is minimal).

Other records

Among the other sources useful for family history research are census records, tax assessments, military and conscription records, notary records. They are mostly found in the state archive (*archivio di stato*) of each province.

All Italian males over 18 have been conscripted since 1865, and call-up records (*registro di leva*) were kept even for Italian citizens who emigrated – they could theoretically be required to return to serve. They are held by the military archive of each military district, and copies of records over 75 years old are sent to the *archivio di stato*. If only the province or region of an ancestor’s origin is known, the conscription record can help to trace the exact place of birth.

Various local censuses, mainly taken for the purposes of tax assessments, were taken from the fourteenth century onwards, but general censuses began in 1861, and were taken at ten-year intervals thereafter. Until 1911 they tend to name only the head of households, and the later censuses are not open to public inspection, so this source is less significant than for UK research. A *Stati di Anime* (church census) is valuable if it is available in the parish records.

FURTHER READING

Mark Herber, *Ancestral Trails* (2004, Stroud: Sutton Publishing Ltd & Society of Genealogists)

An award-winning "complete guide to British Genealogy and Family History"

Stella Colwell, *The Family Records Centre: A User's Guide*. (2002, Richmond: Public Record Office)

Amanda Bevan, *Tracing your Ancestors in The National Archives* (2006, The National Archives)

Roger Kershaw. *Migration Records* (2009, The National Archives)

Trafford R. Cole, *Italian Genealogical Records* (1995, Salt Lake City: Ancestry Inc)

The most comprehensive guide to Italian records and research available. An American book, it is not of use in tracing Italian ancestors in the UK.

Lynn Nelson, *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Italian Ancestors* (1997, Cincinnati: Bettaway Books)

A shorter guide to Italian records, concentrating on the Stato Civile, lots of practical advice.

Peter Barber & Peter Jacomelli, *Continental Taste: Ticinese emigrants 1847-1987* (1997, Camden History Society)

WEBSITES

Anglo-Italian Family History Society

<http://www.anglo-italianfhs.org.uk/>

Good starting point for exploring Italian ancestry; includes fuller biography and links.

GENUKI

<http://www.genuki.org.uk>

A reference site for family history in the UK.

FamilySearch

<http://www.familysearch.org/>

Research guides, record indexes and library catalogue to find out which Italian records have been microfilmed.

The National Archives online catalogue

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Italian Genealogy Online and all things Italian

<http://www.angelfire.com/ok3/pearlsofwisdom/>

Excellent American web page, full of information, links and tips on how to write letters to Italy.

ItalianAncestry.com

<http://www.italianancestry.com/>

Calling itself 'the essential jump site for all things Italian': has a good set of links.

The Worldwide Web Virtual library: Italian History Index

<http://vlib.iue.it/hist-italy/Index.html>

Very good links to Italian history resources, including geography, religion and institutions.

The Genealogist

www.thegenealogist.co.uk

Terri Colpi, *The Italian Factor: the Italian Community in Great Britain* (1991, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing)

The most rounded introduction to Italian immigrants to the UK, including the 20th century migrations.

Lucio Sponza, *Italian Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Realities and Images* (1988, Leicester: Leicester University Press)

Strong on the regional reasons for emigration, and details of the Victorian Italian community in London.

Michael Gandy, *Catholic Missions and Registers, 1700-1880*, 6 volumes (Whetstone, Gandy)

Details of Catholic Churches and location of registers and transcripts

Edwin Banfield, *The Italian Influence on English Barometers from 1780*, (1993, Trowbridge: Baros Books)

Tudor Allen, *Little Italy: The story of London's Italian Quarter* (2008, Camden Local Studies Centre)

NB. Some of these books may be out of print

FreeBMD

<http://www.freebmd.org.uk>

Italy Surname Distribution Map (Gens)

<http://www.gens.labo.net/it/cognomi/>

Search for your surname in the box labelled *Cognome* & see its distribution across a map of the regions of Italy

FindMyPast

<http://www.findmypast.co.uk/>

Ancestry

<http://www.ancestry.co.uk>

RicercaOmonimie.jsp*

Search for your surname in the box labelled *Cognome* and see its distribution across a map of the regions of Italy. You can then click on to get *Comuni* and phone numbers and addresses.

Archivi Sistema Archivistico Nazionale

<http://archivi.beniculturali.it/UCBAWEB/indice.html>

Italian national archive site (in Italian). Provides addresses for most of the State "Provincial" Record Centres in Italy. Includes details of what each "Provincial" Record Centre holds

Parrocchie (Chiesa Cattolica Italiana)

http://www.chiesacattolica.it/chiesa_cattolica_italiana/00007238_Home.html

Searchable directory of parishes in Italy (in Italian).

Italian to English vocabulary to help with family history documents. <http://www.roangelo.net/vocabula.html>

One page of definitions arranged alphabetically