

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.

Where did they come from?

Narrowing down the place of origin to a very small area in Italy is vital for research because 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 in this country 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 www.ellisland.com.

Civil Records in Italy

The civil registration records - *Stato Civile* - 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 are strongly recommended.

The civil registers of births, marriages and death 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, and 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 to 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.

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 *Ufficio di Anagrafe* of each *comune*. You need to have a full name and at least an

approximate year of birth. The information you will 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 *achivio 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.

How can I find the address to write to?

You can find the address of the *achivio di stato* or the *curia vescovile* for the area you are interested in if you go to our [Links](#) page, select the appropriate link and search for the province, commune or parish.