

DELVING INTO THE PAST WHILE HOUSE SITTING

by Andrew Redfern



There are many reasons why a house sit may appeal to you. It might be the location, the pets or proximity to family. It could even be a combination of several factors. But have you ever considered securing a house sit to help trace your family history?

WHO KNOWS WHAT YOU'LL DISCOVER WHEN YOU TRAVEL TO THE PAST



As the pandemic hit, a DNA match contacted me through the Ancestry website asking to collaborate on our family tree. That message reignited my passion for family history and so began a serious project and subsequent post-lockdown hobby.

A number of discoveries were made and there are now a number of cities and towns throughout the world that I am keen to visit to further track down my ancestors. I plan to actively seek house sits in these areas as the world of travel opens up again.

One of the benefits of researching while house sitting is that house sits generally offer you an extended period of time to interrogate archives. Some may also require several visits to sort through relevant material.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Many ancestry records are now digitised and can be searched online either for free or via subscription sites.

Working from what I already knew, going back in time to the unknown, I have been able to obtain copies of birth and death certificates, wills, and prison registers of many of my ancestors. Digitised newspapers are a great resource as well and these often tell the everyday stories of relatives while also giving more insight into the local area where they lived.



These online resources are a great place to start, but some records simply aren't available online and you will need to visit the particular archive or repository to view the materials.

GRAVEYARDS & CEMETARIES

In between house sits in the UK in 2018, we were very fortunate to be able to visit the grave of Dr William Redfern in Edinburgh.

There's nothing quite like standing at an ancestor's final resting place contemplating their life. While there are many photos available online of gravesites, being there in person is incomparable and sometimes can be very moving or even spine-tingling.

Kensal Green Cemetery in London is high on my list of places to visit, where a family memorial stands of several long lost cousins. Closer to home in Australia I also hope to house sit in rural New South Wales to visit several cemeteries in the area. Buried in Gulgong, my 3rd great grandmother has a particularly grand tomb, despite suspicions she was poisoned by her husband. A photo of the grave will certainly add to the story.

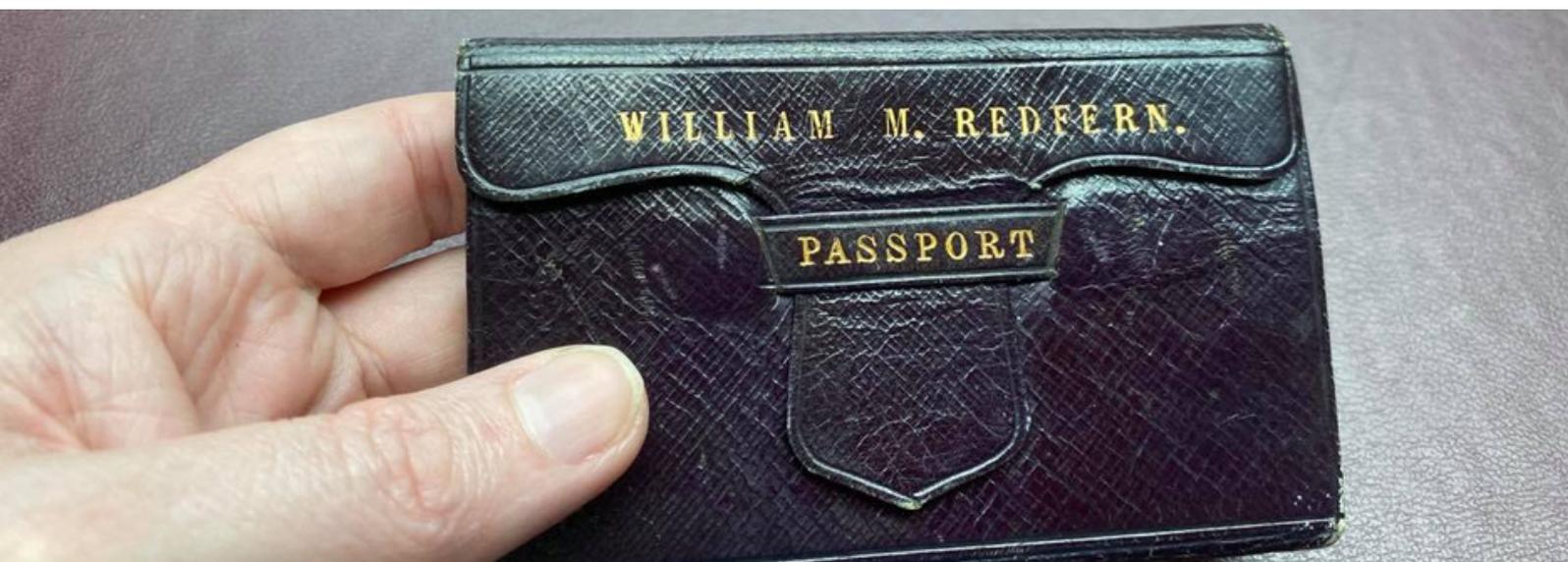
DUBLIN & BELFAST

My 3rd great grandfather, a member of the United Irishmen in the last 1790s, was arrested and interned in Kilmainham Gaol for "treasonable practices". The prison letters are fascinating and show his gradual decline while behind bars, worried for his wife and family who were not able to support themselves.

There is an extensive visitor centre at the gaol and house sitting in Dublin will provide a great opportunity to visit, and to search the National Archives of Ireland. The same 3rd great grandfather was a saddler in Belfast prior to his arrest and I am keen to walk in his footsteps and stand on the site where he had his shop. The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland will be another place to visit to find additional records on the notorious Robert Redfern.

MEXICAN CONNECTIONS

We've house sat in Mexico several times and are keen to return. Santa Cruz is on the list thanks to another 3rd great grandfather, imprisoned as a result of his involvement in the Mexican War of Independence.





William Bestwick was shipped to New York where he jumped ship and subsequently made his way to Australia.

This area of Mexico is one we are yet to explore and what better excuse do I need than to investigate the prison and interrogate local repositories and archives.

TIME TRAVELING IN THE UK

The Knowles family (a paternal line) were owners of the Swan Inn in Wedmore, Somerset and the hotel still exists.

You can even stay in the accommodation which is something I am keen to do, even for a night or two between sits.

One brother of the family remained in Wedmore while two brothers emigrated to Australia. House sitting in the area and staying a while will allow me to immerse myself in the local history and perhaps even track down some elusive cousins.

TASMANIA CALLS

Closer to home, Tasmania and particularly the area around Kempton also has significance for my family.

My 2nd great grandfather escaped from gaol in Bathurst, NSW and made his way to Hobart before being re-arrested. The pattern of criminals and gaols in my family is somewhat concerning!!

He served out his sentence, working in chain gangs near Green Ponds (now Kempton). There's a convict museum being planned for Hobart where my ancestor will be included. Spending time in Tasmania will allow me to further explore my connections as well as hopefully meeting key historians who can assist with my research.

Investigating my family history has certainly unearthed some very surprising discoveries and led to investigating many unknown parts of the world. As the stories of my ancestors are re-created it is fascinating to see where they will turn up next. As I stand in these places where my ancestors lived and worked I wonder if a sense of connection will wash over me?

There's only one way to find out - start applying for house sits in the areas of my ancestral roots. If nothing else, it may allow an application to stand out in a crowd of many.

Andrew Redfern

Andrew is one half of the Global Wanderers. With his partner Christopher he has travelled extensively and completed over 50 international house sits. You can read more about Andrew's family history discoveries at www.andrewredfern.com or [Facebook](#) or [twitter](#)