

The Foundation for Medieval Genealogy

by Steven Edwards

The Foundation for Medieval Genealogy (FMG) was founded in 2001 by a small group of colleagues with a shared interest in medieval genealogy and prosopography. We were all aware of the important contribution to this field by the late Charles Evans (the author's father-in-law) and were eager to continue his work by exploiting the possibilities of modern technology. Further details of how the organisation came to be formed can be found on the website (<http://fmg.ac>). Early on we agreed that the highest standards of scholarship should be a guiding principle in our work and that we should seek to establish a network, UK-based but global in extent, of people with a serious interest in pre-1500 genealogy. This cut-off date was chosen deliberately in order to keep the focus on the medieval period. We are not rigid, in that events in the earlier part of the 16th century need to be linked to earlier dates; however there are many other organisations that deal with the greater volume of archive material and published information from the 16th century onwards.

As a small start-up group, with no funding base, we realised we should have to find a means of financing our activities. So far this has largely been through the generosity of a very few individual donors. If the FMG is to become established and to survive it will need to develop a regular funding stream. Accordingly we registered, in England, as an educational charity and have established a two tier subscription level for those interested in joining. The basic "user" level has a very modest annual charge that provides access to our web-based resource centre, notably the *Medieval Genealogical Registry* (see below) and an online version of the FMG newsletter *Foundations*. Those with a greater level of commitment are invited to apply for full membership, which gives all the above benefits plus full participatory and voting rights in the organisation, a printed copy of *Foundations*, and other benefits as the organisational activities develop.

Like SIGG, our user and member community is too widely dispersed to make regular meetings practicable, and our focus is on web-based and other electronic means of data communication.

Projects

The FMG's objectives are the advancement of public education in the study of medieval genealogy and prosopography, the promotion of research into medieval genealogy and the publication of the useful results of that research. In line with this we are devoting considerable effort to the acquisition of research materials, and the preparation of publications where we aim to maintain a balance between electronic publication both via our website and on CD-ROM, and conventional printed materials. There is considerable scope for indexing of medieval sources, and although some excellent indexes exist (notably the International Medieval Bibliography, IMB, run by the University of Leeds, <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/imi/imb/imb.htm>) we shall be looking for new projects to open up further access to the wealth of information stored in archives around the world.

The first issue of *Foundations* was published in January 2003, as an online (PDF) edition and in hardcopy. The contents and abstracts are viewable on the open section of our website. The initial reaction to this has been favourable and we intend

to produce further issues every six months. Needless to say an index will be generated in due course!

We are also currently engaged on a compilation of the entire genealogical works of our patron, the late Charles FH Evans FSA FSG, who published around 100 articles, letters, notes & queries, and reviews over a period of 57 years. This entails a great deal of scanning, formatting and basic indexing, although a comprehensive index is beyond our resources at present.

The Plantagenet Ancestry by W. H. Turton is one of the best-known 20th century works on medieval genealogy. It displays in chart format over 7000 known ancestors of Elizabeth of York, mother of King Henry VIII of England. Published in 1928, and still in print, it has been a major source for those interested in exploring the genealogies of royal and noble European families. For its time it was an impressive work of scholarship but, with the wealth of new material made available in the past 70 years, it is well overdue for a complete revision.

In the revised edition our aim is not only to correct errors and fill in the gaps, but also to expand the amount of information about each individual. For instance, where Turton gives only the year of birth, death, and marriage, we will be giving the full date and location of each, where known. In addition limited footnotes will cover other life events, such as 'non-ancestral' marriages and details such as 'died in childbirth', 'born posthumously', and 'killed in battle'.

The most important departure from the original work is a greatly expanded bibliography, which will link each life event to a specific source. Those who share our interests will then be able to check and, where necessary, challenge the account we have given. Our aim is to interact with others working in this field and incorporate additions and corrections into later editions of this work, with all due acknowledgement - of course.

Modern technology will allow us to achieve far more than could have been imagined in Turton's day. Using computer databases we can now bring together, sift, organise, and index huge amounts of data very quickly. Additions and corrections can be made efficiently and quickly, and passed onto the users.

The ***Medieval Genealogical Registry*** (MGR) is an interactive web based library of medieval genealogical, heraldic, and prosopographical data. It will be of interest to SIGG members who work with relational databases. Built upon the collections of the FMG, the Registry provides a progressively expanding catalogue of medieval source materials, along with abstracts, reviews, and detailed indexes. It also shows linkages between groups of sources and individual persons referenced by the text, enabling genealogical trees to be created.

The author of the MGR has described its underlying structure in an article in *Foundations*, where he defines it as a 'public medieval genealogical database'. That is to say, a database that can be read and contributed to by people from across the world, but which, unlike databases such as RootsWeb, is genuinely a single database rather than an interlinked collection of many smaller databases. Such 'collection' databases allow users to submit their own personal database, which is then incorporated into the master index for searching purposes. The major drawback with this approach is that the same person could occur dozens, or maybe thousands of times in different guises.

The MGR aims to provide a single database where data is contributed on a per person basis, rather than as a pre-interlinked set of persons. This is very hard to

achieve in post-medieval genealogy, as there is very often considerable doubt whether a person in one database is the same as a person with similar details in another database. Medieval genealogy however does not, in the vast majority of cases, suffer this problem. The researcher almost always knows 'who' they are talking about, ie a distinct person in history. The questions are more based around what is known of that person and their relationships.

A proposed Journal of Medieval Genealogy

There are many journals devoted to genealogy and family history, some aimed at the enthusiastic amateur while others address a more learned, academic readership. We have found many articles in such journals which cover medieval topics. The articles are scattered across journals, and across the years. We are progressively indexing these sources in the *Medieval Genealogical Registry*, referred to above.

Meanwhile the FMG is considering establishing a published journal devoted to medieval genealogy. In line with our established values the journal would aim to present scholarly studies of the highest quality. The editorial team would retain the right to subject submitted articles to peer review, and to reject any articles which were considered not to reach an adequate standard of research. This is not intended to deter the enthusiastic researcher, but rather to stimulate and encourage those carrying out medieval genealogical studies to aspire to the highest standards of accuracy and traceability so that their work shall be unimpeachable.

Concluding remarks

While genealogy is one of the most popular hobbies of our times, and indeed many genealogists offer their services on a professional basis, the medieval period is more specialised, being of more restricted interest. There are many reasons for this. Many people, researching only their own ancestry, are happy to trace lines back to the 19th or 18th centuries and the records to achieve this are nowadays readily accessible as primary or secondary sources. A few more persistent researchers can penetrate 17th or occasionally 16th century records. But before this, unless one can link to royal or noble lineages, one requires access to more obscure sources, often in difficult scripts and in Latin or other medieval languages.

That is why the Foundation for Medieval Genealogy (FMG) was established – to stimulate research and provide a forum for those with an interest in genealogy and prosopography in the medieval period.

For further information please email info@fmq.ac or write to the author at 38 Windsor Road, Chobham, Woking, Surrey GU24 8LA. 