

## Titanic Text : Demystifying historical study

by Randy Bryan Bigham

### ***Titanic Research***

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#### **Internet research tips for beginners**

From biographies and cultural essays to technical papers and scientific analyses, ET Research at Encyclopedia-Titanica.org is the leading online destination for original, in-depth studies in ocean liner history. ET Research has proudly published the work of leading scholars in maritime and social history but is actively interested in promoting new writers as well.

More than ever before, starting research on almost any subject is easier thanks to the home computer.

Internet destinations for historical and genealogical study are numerous and varied, an inspiring fact for new researchers interested in taking their love of history in general -- and of Titanic in particular -- out of the realm of armchair criticism and into the world of hands-on investigation. Incredible discoveries await the diligent scribe in libraries, museums, galleries, archives and online databases.

#### **Part One: Listen to the Experts**

Providing special insight into the process of documentation are recommendations from writers in the field of Titanica, some of whom have been published by ET Research.

Writer, lecturer and curator **Inger Sheil**, who is writing biographies of Fifth Officer Harold Lowe and Sixth Officer James Moody, recommends that would-be researchers consult "the many good genealogical guides" to be found in almost any large library. "If they're researching people," she says, "that would be the first place I'd send a newbie. "(These sources) can either be broad in scope or quite focused (e.g. how to trace records on a Freemason ancestor, mercantile marine ancestors, ancestors that served in the police force, etc). Some of this can even be found free on-line. The guides to sources and techniques, applicable to passenger and crew research, are particularly useful in the case of those who left few private documents, and whose lives have to be reconstructed from 'official' sources."

"I find that it helps to know as much as possible about historical figures before you approach their descendents for information," she says. "This helps establish your bona fides and demonstrates that you're acting from more than idle curiosity."

She also advises researchers to "have intelligent and focused questions prepared," adding that, "too often, new Titanic researchers, excited by being in contact with someone 'connected' with the disaster, don't know where to begin. Asking them to 'tell me everything about your great-great uncle' is going to overwhelm the interviewee."

Finally Sheil stresses the need for new researchers to "establish friendly, professional relations with

people who work in the field -- academics, archivists, historians etc. Treat them with courtesy and they will often go the extra mile to help you. There are, sadly, some researchers who write demanding, abrupt letters and emails to correspondents -- this is very off-putting. Treat them with the same professionalism as you would hope they would treat your inquiry. Any would-be researcher is going to be writing a great many emails and letters, making a great many phone calls, and will often be visiting archives in person. Communication is a skill -- make sure your own abilities are good, and if not, work on their development."

One of the more promising young researchers at work in the field of liner history today is **Mark Chirnside**, who at age 20 has already published two well-received books on White Star Line ships. He says that his experiences may help other young writers get their projects started.

"Libraries and archives such as as the British Library's Newspaper Library in Colindale have age limits," Chirnside explains, "whereby you might not be able to visit if you are under 18. For myself, I spoke to the manager when I wanted to visit (I was then 17) but because I was doing 'private research' and not an A-level project, and because of my age, I wasn't allowed to visit; I had to do a lot of my earlier work through correspondence." That didn't deter Chirnside who says that, from the age of 15, he was able to research at the Public Record Office, now the National Archives, so long as he was accompanied by an adult. He recommends that researchers visit libraries and archives already well-prepared, having a "game plan" set so as to not waste time looking up files that can be accessed online.

"Similarly, if you can, let the archive know what you want to see (ahead of time)," he suggests. "The National Archives lets you order several documents online with a visitor's card, and since some papers are held offsite and need days of notice, that's a good thing."

**Mark Baber**, a researcher who has contributed much to Encyclopedia-Titanica's database of contemporary news stories, offers the advice to always "keep your eyes open" when working on other projects.

He urges researchers not to "hesitate to ask for help or advice" from experts but warns that they should "be reasonable" in their requests.

"Some folks barge into research fora like ET," Baber observes, "with a seemingly endless series of demands for information, offering nothing in return, as if there's some entitlement to have people disgorge the fruits of years of work. But almost all of the good researchers I've communicated with are willing to share information. It helps, of course, to establish your own credibility and willingness to assist, but even before that's accomplished, a demonstration of willingness to do your own work, and not just feed off the work of others, goes a long way."

Artist, teacher and visual consultant **Bob Godfrey** implores Titanic research novices to make sure they're attempting an article that will "deliver something new in terms of information or interpretation." Godfrey adds that that "generally means referencing unpublished primary source material or at least sources which would not normally be found on the shelves of the average Titaniac."

"Proof-read the draft carefully," Godfrey adds, "and show it to a preview audience of trusted and knowledgeable friends who may spot errors which you missed."

**Daniel  
Klistorner**

"If they're interested in a certain topic and read something interesting in a book," says Klistorner, "the best thing for new researchers to do is to try and locate the original item, the source of the information -- the primary source."

Fellow Aussie **Dave Gittins**, editor of the website "All At Sea" <http://users.senet.com.au/~gittins/> says that genealogists interested in documenting Titanic passengers and crew should "get advice from a local genealogy club, of which there are many." He adds that, while the Internet is useful to a point for beginners, "you have to get to the paperwork, often via microfilm." Gittins also stresses the need for writers, particular those involved on the technical side of the Titanic story, to cross-check accepted facts.

"There's the famous 66,000 tons displacement claim," he says. "It's on a 1912 poster but it's wrong. Everything should be cross-checked where possible."

For technical specs, Gittins recommends researchers read Lloyd's Register of Ships thoroughly. "People get things wrong because they don't understand how Lloyd's measured ships," says Gittins. "The methods are in the book and should be studied."

Author and lecturer **Kyrila  
Scully**

"If you cannot find original sources, contact authors or publishers to ask where they got them," she says. "Verify authenticity against original sources only, not secondary sources."

Scully recommends that researchers consider getting involved in a writers' group: "Many are found at local bookstores, meeting once a month. Don't be afraid of critique. Listen to all advice and follow it. The more brutal the better. This will make you a better writer."

Finally she believes that determination is key to getting any research or writing project started. "Persevere and be patient," Scully says. "Some research can take years. Don't expect instant results."

**Part Two: Log on and Learn**

As the many facets of research can't be covered in a single article, the following overview for beginners has been confined to material accessible via the Internet.

Whether seeking to explore an untapped field of study or to reexamine old turf, history buffs can learn from the list of links provided below that they're just as capable of getting a research project off the ground and running as any established author. More importantly, they will see that their findings and observations can make as much of a difference to the historical record.

"Never assume that someone, or some aspect of a subject, has been so well covered that all avenues of research have been exhausted," advises Inger Sheil.

"Researchers often wear ruts, taking the same approaches and utilizing the same data sources. Familiarize yourself with what records are available, and always go back to primary sources if at all

possible. Even the most careful researchers can make errors in transcription, interpretation etc, so when using sources take your own fresh approach, even if it's 'old' material."

The way to rewarding research will require hard work and dedication. But in the words of Mark Baber, "Don't give up!"

Where does one start online research on a person, place or event? In a word -- <http://www.google.com/>

This search engine caches not only proper names but groupings of words and phrases. By punching a few keys specific texts and contexts can be located within seconds.

For researchers looking for vital statistics documentation, including birth, marriage and death certificates, immigration records, etc., the following sites are indispensable resources, offering searchable online databases and offline search services. Be mindful that dates are not always correct and that it might be necessary to enter a number of spelling variations of a name to find the correct individual.

This list of Web sites should supplement the general reference works and specialized indexes or bibliographies that can be found in all large libraries, such as the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature.

**General Register Office (UK)**

<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>

**The National Archives (UK)**

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

**Family Records Center (UK)**

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/visit/planfrc.htm>

**The 1901 Census of England and Wales**

<http://www.1901census.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

**The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.**

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

**The National Archives (USA)**

<http://www.archives.gov/>

**Genealogy.com**

[http://www.genealogy.com/index\\_n.html](http://www.genealogy.com/index_n.html)

**Looking for photos?**

The most accessible and affordable resource for obtaining copies of historic photos is the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress <http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/>

The LOC picture collection's online catalog <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/pp/mdbquery.html>

**Getty Images**

[http://editorial.gettyimages.com/MS\\_GINS/source/home/home.aspx?pg=1](http://editorial.gettyimages.com/MS_GINS/source/home/home.aspx?pg=1)

**Corbis**

<http://pro.corbis.com/>

**The National Portrait Gallery (London)**

<http://www.npg.org.uk/live/index.asp>

The most accessible, cooperative and by far the friendliest commercial photo agency is The **Illustrated London News Picture Library**. This library is currently digitizing its large collection.

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

Another extensive image archive, though it has limited online searchability, is the **New York Public Library** Picture Collection

<http://www.nypl.org/branch/central/mml/pc/index.html>

For locating moving images, from newsreels to feature film clips, a leading source is **Footage.net**

<http://www.footage.net/index.aspx>

To research newspaper and magazine back issues -- local, regional, national and international ---- there are many commercial and educational Web sites to peruse, although extensive consulting of publications is best undertaken in libraries, where they can be accessed directly via bound volumes, microfiche, or digital format. Among databases to be found online, in library facilities or through other institutions are:

**The Nation Digital Archive**

<http://www.nationarchive.com/index.asp?>

**Time Archive**

<http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,825151,00.html>

**Harper's Weekly**

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

**British Library Newspaper Library**

<http://www.bl.uk/collections/newspapers.html>

**Library of Congress Newspaper and Current Periodical Reading Room**

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/>

**Historical Newspaper Collection at Ancestry.com**

<http://www.ancestry.com/landing/historicnewspapers/newstoyou.htm>

**The Times Digital Archive**

[www.surreycc.gov.uk/...](http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/...)

Lastly, there are **museums**

The most important of these is the **National Maritime Museum**, which recently acquired and has now catalogued large portions of the Lord-MacQuitty Collection.

<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/>

Other museums include:

**Maritime Museum of the Atlantic**

<http://museum.gov.ns.ca/mma/>

**Mystic Seaport -- The Museum of America and the Sea**

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

**The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum**

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

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URL : <http://www.encyclopedia-titanica.org/titanic-research-guide.html>

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