Online Parish Clerks

Roy Stockdill salutes the UK’s hardworking Online Parish Clerks, unsung heroes of the family history world.

It began, as the best and simplest ideas often do, over a pint in a pub. Out of a chat between mates over beer and chips came a concept that would help fuel the explosion in internet genealogy – the Online Parish Clerk.

While the big commercial data providers are the giants of this brave new world, there are hundreds of individuals and in volunteer groups slaving away, unpaid, over computers in their own homes to bring us an ever-growing collection of family history records.

How did it all start? Let’s zoom back in time over a decade to the millennium year of 2000...

Three men, all keen family historians, were deep in conversation in a picturesque local called the Queen’s Head in the Cornish village of St Stephen in Brannel, four miles west of St Austell. We should call them visionaries because they saw very early on what a remarkable boon the worldwide web was going to be for amateur genealogists.

Out of this pub talk came the Cornwall Online Parish Clerk project, the first of its kind which was to be followed by other counties in England. As the ‘About Us’ page of the website (www.cornwall-opc.org/Structure/about_us.php) tells it... ‘The Cornwall Online Parish Clerk project was envisioned by three gentlemen residing in Cornwall, Michael McCormick, David Stick and Paul Brewer, while enjoying an extended repast at the Queen’s Head, St Stephen in Brannel, sometime in the year 2000. During further meetings, they sorted out the questions and decided the group’s structure – a rather unique concept. There is no “formal” structure, other than a person who coordinates the assignments of parishes to individuals. ’In January, 2001, they announced the group to the Cornish Lists at RootsWeb... and asked for volunteers. List members from around the world responded. Through diligent recruiting efforts, and enthusiastic volunteers, the group has grown, as has the concept.’

Don’t you love that phrase ‘extended repast’? One of the founders, David Stick, puts it more prosaically. He says: ‘The idea came to us over a few pints of beer and a plate of chips during our monthly get-together. It was apparent in those early days that the worldwide web was going to be a valuable tool for amateur genealogists. However, many people located out of the county of Cornwall or abroad were finding that obtaining the data was difficult without access to the county record office.

‘The LDS [the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which runs FamilySearch.org] offered much data in microfilm/fiche format but frequently this was difficult to read and, without local knowledge, it was often difficult to find among the myriad pages. We also could see that there was going to be an opportunity for the more unscrupulous to make money out of researchers!’
‘We agreed that we should try to offer data free of charge to those attempting to find their ancestors. Obviously, we were unlikely to be able to transcribe all of the data for a whole county without much help. It was natural then that we should decide that we should recruit volunteers for each parish who would be responsible for transcription of both census and register data and any additional information about their parish and make it available to all.’

Blessed with an enthusiastic response from volunteers around the world with Cornish roots, the project took off in a big way and today Myra Cordrey, who has acted as coordinator of the website since 2005, can report that only a handful of the 250-plus Cornwall parishes aren’t in the care of an OPC.

‘These volunteers are scattered across the globe, many being descendants of emigrants,’ says Myra. ‘We are also fortunate to have a large band of non-OPC transcribers who contribute when they have the time.

Where it all began: the Queen’s Head in St Stephen in Brannel and (left) the resulting Cornwall OPC website.

“We have an agreement with the LDS by which we receive CDs of its films. Other sources include fiche and visits to the Cornwall Record Office, the latter being very helpful to us. We return the favour by donating copies of our transcripts.

‘Lately, we have started to include other Cornish records in our searchable database. These include apprenticeship indentures, bastardy bonds, emigration records, hearth tax, land records, memorial inscriptions, muster rolls, parish settlement papers, Protestant returns and voters lists.’

In 2010, about 20 of the Cornwall volunteer OPCs and two of the founders, David Stick and Michael McCormick, met up at the Queen’s Head where it all began for a 10th anniversary celebration.

What defines an OPC?

So what exactly is an online parish clerk (OPC)? One thing it’s important to stress is that the OPCs have no connection with the local officials appointed by parish councils to manage their affairs.

An OPC is a volunteer who ‘adopts’ a particular parish and becomes responsible for transcribing and collating information about that parish. The backbone of this data is, inevitably, census returns and parish registers, but most of the county OPC websites offer many other records as well, including photographs from the parish.

Because of the flexible nature of the OPC concept, there is considerable variety in how the records are offered to family historians. Some OPCs coordinate a team of volunteers, transcribing and putting online veritable treasure troves of data from original records, while others work alone, doing look-ups in their records and answering queries by email.

One thing, however, on which all are agreed – the information must be free. This is the principal aspect of the OPC scheme that sets it apart from the commercial data providers and makes the volunteers all the more praiseworthy.

Cornwall’s early lead was followed by other counties, the movement being especially prominent in England’s West Country. Today there are 11 counties operating OPC schemes. Alphabetically, they are: Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Essex, Hampshire, Kent, Lancashire, Somerset, Sussex, Warwickshire and Wiltshire (although the Kent OPC does request donations, which is contrary to the founders’ original concept).

Meet the volunteers

Deborah O’Brien, who coordinates the Devon Online Parish Clerks scheme (genuki.es.ncl.ac.uk/DEV/OPCproject.html) as well as looking after four individual parishes, says: ‘Devon was the second county to start an OPC project. We began in late 2001. Due to restrictions made by the Diocese of Exeter, the LDS had never been able to film any of the parish registers. Finally, the Devon Record Office was able to negotiate with the diocese and make fiche of parish registers available for purchase.’

Discover how Online Parish Clerks websites can revolutionise your research.

Look online

Visit the UK Online Parish Clerks (Genealogy) website at www.onlineparishclerks.org.uk for an overview of all the counties covered by OPCs.
So, this meant that all Devon OPC volunteers have to buy their own fiche – £1.50 per fiche plus the register fee – and then make their transcriptions.

'This is not too expensive for a small parish such as Mcevy, one of mine which cost me about £15, but for larger parishes such as Plymouth St Andrew or Stoke Damereil you can be looking at over £100 for a few years.'

'There are more than 500 ancient Devon parishes and to date we have OPC coverage for 194 of them, with about 85 volunteers. Devon is one of the more comprehensively represented counties on GENUKI and links to all our OPCs are shown on the dedicated webpage. Any transcriptions are included on individual parish pages, but due to diocese and diocese record office restrictions, it is necessary for us to obtain written permission for publication from incumbent ministers.

'Where it is not possible to obtain permission our OPCs are able to provide individual look-ups. As to database programs, I personally use Excel and I believe most of our OPCs do the same. We have one OPC who is extremely knowledgeable who keeps everything in boxes under his bed!' Many OPCs are based outside Britain, as highlighted by Myra Cordrey. Another Devon OPC is Wayne Shepherd, a Calgary-born Canadian whose ancestors came from Cornwall in southwest Devon. He became the OPC for that parish in 2003 and also looks after the records for three other Devon parishes and was responsible for the OPC map of the county shown here.

Wayne, who is giving a presentation on the OPC scheme to a genealogical conference in Alberta in April, has traced his ancestors back to Cornwall in the 17th century.

He says: 'In the photo of myself, I am standing beside one of the bells in St Michael and All Angels Church. They were installed in 1770 when my 5x great-grandfather was the church warden. His name is cast into the bells, spelled exactly as we spell the surname today.'

Another West Country county with a sizeable team of volunteers, many of them based abroad, is Wiltshire (www.wiltshire-opc.org.uk) for which Teresa Lewis is the administrator and also OPC for the parish of Worton and Marston, near Devizes. Says Teresa:

'We have a team of 47 at present covering a small percentage of the available parishes in Wiltshire. They are not all Wiltshire-based, many live in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and many other counties in England. I am based in Scotland. The volunteers all have one common link, their roots cross into the Wiltshire parishes at some time in history.

'Our site does not own records to transcribe, we rely heavily on donations from our users. Some are lucky enough to be able to get to the record office and transcribe. We are sometimes very cunning and the saying “Where there is a will there is a way” springs to mind! Personally I got involved as I could find nothing online about the parish I was born in, Worton.'

A Wiltshire overseas OPC is Cathy Sedgwick, an Australian who lives in Sydney and has adopted the parish of Dinton, near Wilton. Says Cathy: ‘I was doing some research into my mother-in-law’s side of the family and came across the Wiltshire OPC project page. My mother-in-law’s maternal grandfather lived in Dinton from about the 1920s until his death in the mid-1960s.

‘Being in Australia does have its limitations, but since “adopting” the Dinton page I have been able to transcribe various directories, researched the men listed on the war memorial and found extracts in Australian newspapers relating to Dinton.

Hampshire OPC (www.knightroots.co.uk) was officially launched in 2005 when Linda and Tony Knight decided to put transcriptions they had completed over several years

Baptismal record from Frome, Somerset, for Roy’s distant relation, Lydia Mead.
online and free to view for Hampshire researchers everywhere. The transcription database has grown from a collection of look-ups for mailing list members to the hundreds of thousands of online entries available today. Hampshire OPC works differently to a traditional OPC organisation and does not allocate an individual ‘clerk’ to a specific parish. As Hampshire is a huge county, Linda and Tony decided to concentrate their efforts on transcribing parish registers. In addition, more than 500 photographs of Hampshire towns and villages were also added – again, totally free to view. The majority of the transcriptions are completed in Word although some are in pdf, spreadsheet and database format. Microsoft Frontpage is the html editor used.

My experience
In researching this article, I was naturally interested to see if I could find anything on the various OPC pages relevant to my own family researches. The Wiltshire OPC website has a fine collection of photographs and I was pleased to find a picture of Penknapp Providence Chapel at Dilton Marsh, where my wife had ancestors, and a 2x great-grandmother whose name appears in the chapel’s Sunday School register in the 1840s.

I myself had ancestors from the adjacent county of Somerset, which also has an Online Parish Clerks Project (wsom-opc.org.uk) covering 158 of the county’s 620 parishes. There I found a baptismal record at St John the Baptist Church, Frome, for Lydia Mead, who was the daughter of Charles Mead, a brother of my 2x great-grandfather Philip Mead.

The only northern county with an official OPC scheme is Lancashire, which has an excellent website (www.lan-opc.org.uk) – much as it pains me to say it as a Yorkshireman! – run by an ex-pat Brit, Paul Dixon, from his home in Texas – yet another OPC co-ordinator doing a sterling job from outside the UK. It was here that I found no fewer than 674 records from across the county for the surname Stockdale, with variants, for my one-name study.

Finally, returning to the south-west of England, I couldn’t resist looking at the Dorset OPC website (www.opcdorset.org) and, in particular, the parish of Corfe Castle, Dorset is a county I know well and Corfe Castle, on the Isle of Purbeck between Swanage and Wareham, is one of my favourite places in all Britain.

King Edward the Martyr was notoriously murdered at Corfe in 978 and the ancient castle ruins are a stunning sight amid the Purbeck Hills. The OPC for the parish is Louise Heywood, who is lucky enough to live there, and she has placed online a positive cornucopia of records, including some fairly uncommon ones in the form of Tudor subsidy rolls for 1524, 1544 and 1594, protestation returns from 1641 and hearth tax returns 1662-1664.

Other OPC sites
Though, regrettably, I have little space in which to cover them, here are the other county OPC sites that you may find useful:

- Essex: essex-opc.org.uk
- Kent: www.kentopc.org
- Sussex: www.sussex-opc.org

If you have interests in any of these counties, then do visit the websites! There you will find an astonishing amount of information and records to help you in your researches. Better still, volunteer to be an OPC yourself to help other family historians.

Unsung OPC heroes
Online Parish Clerks are all volunteers. Here we put faces to some of the names:

- Two of the Cornwall OPC project founders, Paul Brewer (left) and Michael McCormick.
- Myra Cordrey, coordinate of Cornwall OPC website.
- Deborah O’Brien, coordinate of Devon OPC.
- Wayne Shephard, a Canadian-based OPC for Devon.
- Texas-based Paul Dixon, coordinate of Lancashire OPC.
- Cathy Sedgwick of Sydney, Australia, OPC for Dinton, Wiltshire.
- Tony and Linda Knight of Hampshire OPC.
- Louise Haywood, OPC for Corfe Castle, Dorset.