A Systematic Approach to Managing your ONS

The Trials and Tribulations of a One-Name Study

by David Skyrme (6232)

In recent journals there have been several helpful articles for newcomers to One-Name Studies. As well as Melody Burton's articles (Vol 14 Nos 3-5), those by Graham Matthews (Vol 14, No 4), Martin Hindry and Yvonne Masters (Vol 14, No 5) give some useful insights into the methods they use. As someone who has now been doing One-Name Studies for 10 years, I would like to share some of my approaches and experiences.

I outlined my approach and methods in my article 'Skyrme: From a Family History to a One-Name Study' (JOONS, Vol 12 No. 3). The main changes I have seen and the challenges since then are:

- Information overload – new material is coming online faster than I can process it.

- Time management – there's so much to do and not enough time to do it.

- Joining the dots – connecting isolated persons in my database to existing families and trees.

- Focussing on outputs – it always seems more interesting to pursue research rather than writing up.

- Collaborative working – how two (or more) minds are better than one.

- Staying organized – your filing system, backups, hard copy, scribbles etc.

The next sections say a bit more about how I address these matters.

Information Overload

The rate at which potentially useful records are coming online is faster than my ability to review and process them. Parish records, electoral registers, passenger records and newspaper articles are examples. Thus, even though Skyrme is by the Guild's definition a 'rare' name (between 11 and 50 births on average in the two year periods 1850-1 and 1950-1), the number of newspaper articles that feature a Skyrme leapt from 11,000 to over 18,000 in just over three years, i.e. about 40 a week.

It is important, therefore to focus on the most useful sources, such as BMD records, censuses and wills but be selective elsewhere. For parish records, you do need to collect most of them, so I have a spreadsheet where each line is an entry with name, date, event etc. as well as listing the source. This allows me to check whether a newly uploaded source is really new or a duplicate of what I already have. One column is the ID of that person in my database. It this is not given, it means that I have not yet processed the original record or cannot identify the person. For newspaper articles, I find reports of funerals very helpful as many give a list of mourners and their relationship to the deceased, such as niece, son-in-law.

Time Management

It is essential to balance your time against the different tasks that are needed to conduct an ONS. There are seven days in a week and an ONS has 'seven pillars' of activity. So each day you could work on a different pillar – right? No! For me some pillars need only occasional attention. Thus I only synthesise and publicise occasionally. I am meticulous in responding to queries, of which I get 10-20 a year, so not one every week. I keep a spreadsheet of respondents with a description of the enquiry and my response with dates. With the respondent's permission I will add their name to a group emailing list (blind copied) to which I occasionally publicise significant news about the study. For preservation every 6 months or so I send a memory stick of my studies (around 11,500 files totalling 13Gb) to the Guild's library archive.

It's so easy to concentrate your time on the aspects that you like doing best. For me I like the analysis and constructing family trees. Since I work on my Skyrme ONS 3-4 evenings a week, my time roughly splits as follows. Every Friday I check for new records that have been uploaded. This includes Ancestry, FamilySearch and FindMyPast's Friday blogs. Many are for updated datasets, and FMP is best in this respect in that you can see if you've already downloaded a record that it finds. I use the advanced search feature on the British Newspaper Archive since you can select the date range when articles were added.

Other evenings I work on updating my master database (Family Historian), connecting trees, writing up and preparing articles for publication, giving each roughly the same time, say 2-3 hours a week. So all together I try and progress each of the full range of ONS tasks.

Joining the Dots (People)

Some of the biggest frustrations are when you have a record for a person but you don't know to which family that person belongs. It's even more difficult when a newspaper article simply refers to a Mr Skyrme. Here you need detective work. Try to identify potential candidates by searching for individuals who have something in common, such as age range or location. When I go through parish records, I literally go page by page looking for all people not just with the surname of my ONS but also the surnames of known spouses. I have quite often found new people for my ONS from images which have not been correctly transcribed by the major commercial sites.

Initially it does mean that you have records of many 'orphaned' individuals. But by searching around you collect records that may be related, e.g. wills, leases. This is one area where I still use paper or index cards, since you can write down hypotheses and shuffle and group potential members of the same family.

It is also very satisfying when you think you have solved the puzzle.

Focussing on Outputs
Ultimately, your ONS will outlive you and become your legacy, only if you create some outputs that others can use. Using my management experience, I start with a vision of where I want to get to, then work out the steps. For me the types of output I want to leave are:

- An updated profile on the one-name.net website.

- A website (currently www.skyrme.info) which is replicated at skyrme.one-name.net.

- Articles in family history journals (and JOONS, of course!).

- Trees and narratives generated from my database that I send out on request.

- A GEDCOM database for my successor.

- A complete set of computer files with lists, indexes and images (censuses, BMD records, local histories, photographs, scans of original documents etc.).

Just as I inherited a CD when I took over the Skyrm(e) ONS in 2014, I have a structured set of computer files on my PC. Any files or documents that are on paper have been photographed or scanned. My PC has 5,000 records that I have downloaded but not processed. These would be useful to whoever takes over my ONS later.

Whilst the GEDCOM database and supporting computer files are updated almost daily, I set myself targets for the first two outputs, such as at least two articles a year, and 6 or more website updates. But please don't check, since I've not always met my target!

Collaborative Working
One of the benefits of having visible outputs is that it often generates correspondence. As a result of someone reading an article or viewing your website, they get in touch and we find that we have been working the same branch of a family and that we can fill in gaps for each other. Connections are also made on websites like Ancestry where other people are working on the same family. For myself, I have declined to upload my work to Ancestry – there are some enormous howlers there, e.g. someone having a child when they were only 8 or even 108 years old! I once did upload trees to my website, but my approach now is to selectively email sections of trees to those with a genuine interest. However, using a service like TNG (The Next Generation) which is supported by GOONS is an option that many One-Namers use.

There are, of course, many family history societies and other websites that have forums where users can collaborate. Collaborating with others is a useful check on the accuracy of what you are doing.

Staying Organized
With an ONS you collect a lot of information at various stages of processing. It may be raw data, images of original documents, transcripts. With a bit more processing, you may have indexes and lists, entries in a database (either in a family history program or a program such as Custodian 4). And finally there may be published material (pedigrees, books, articles etc.).

The challenge is to develop a work-flow system that works for you. It must also be such that others can replicate your findings. Here is mine:

- Download a record (image, transcript etc.) into a relevant 'To Process' folder. My folders are organised by category, e.g. Places with subcategories BMD, Censuses, MIs etc.

- Give each record an identifiable filename – mine are of the format: date, surname, forename, description, source (e.g. 1783.10.28 Skyrme, William – creditors notice, Hereford Journal)

- Process a record – enter details into a list or index (I have indexes for BMD, passenger lists etc) and also the master database

- Refile the record moving it from 'To process' to the relevant ONS folder/subfolders. I have about 20 subfolders. Those which are not related to place include criminal, medical records, military, occupations, wills and probate etc.

- Add a link to the media in the master database.

- Doing regular backups, including off-site backups such as in the cloud or through the ONS preservation service.

Above all, you must clearly identify your sources and their quality. Simply writing 'Ancestry' or 'FMP' is not sufficient. What is the citation for the original document? If it's a parish record is it from the original register, a bishop's transcript, or someone else's transcript (e.g. done by a family history Society). If it's a census, put in the full reference e.g. RG13/5123/176 p33. How reliable is it if it is a secondary source, such as a transcript? I often find discrepancies in dates where two transcripts disagree – enter them both, and possibly later you may see the original image (which if the date is blurred may still leave you with an ambiguity). Helen Osborn's book Genealogy: Essential Research Methods is worthy of study.

Conclusion
I have described my methods of addressing the challenges of running a One-Name Study. Everyone will have an approach and use the software and tools that work best for them. The important thing to bear in mind is: "could someone else make sense of what I have done and pick up from where I left off"?

I hope that you have found some useful tips from reading this article and I look forward to seeing future JOONS articles from which I can extract ideas to improve my own approach.

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