

Ancestry and the 1851 Unfilmed Census

"A mountain was in labour, sending forth dreadful groans, and there was in the region the highest expectation. After all, it brought forth a mouse" (Horace 65BC – 8BC).

The Transcription Projects

In 2008 ancestry.com announced that they were to scan and transcribe the water-damaged census returns for Manchester. This was of particular interest to MLFHS since our volunteers had worked at the Public Record Office (subsequently The National Archives) from 1991 to 2005, under the leadership of Ray Hulley, to transcribe this same material from the original enumeration books. The results of this work were published, initially on microfiche, later on CDROM and latterly, online at www.findmypast.co.uk

Ancestry were very enthusiastic about the use of advanced illumination techniques to enhance the contrast between ink and paper and demonstrated some impressive 'before and after' images which showed apparently illegible pages restored to perfect legibility. They have now completed scanning and have produced transcripts from the scanned images as the basis for an index. Ancestry recently launched this new material with their customary flourish and boldly claimed on their web site:

"...members of the Manchester & Lancashire Family History Society did a tremendous job of transcribing all the information they could make out. Now, thanks to sophisticated technology developed specially for these records, we've made it possible to search the entire census for the area."

Now, I doubt anyone with knowledge of Ray Hulley's work would dissent from the first sentence, but the second sentence warrants closer consideration. It seems to imply that Ancestry have managed to recover information over and above that which had been recovered previously. To put this claim into perspective, it is instructive to compare the Ancestry and MLFHS transcriptions of a page taken from the returns for Chorlton-on-Medlock.

Comparing the Transcripts

Figures 1a and 1b compare the page as transcribed by MLFHS with the indexing data as provided by Ancestry for the same page. The Ancestry layout has been adjusted slightly to aid comparison and some additional information (e.g. 'England' against birthplaces and '(Male)' to explain the abbreviation 'M') which does not appear in the returns, was removed. It should be noted that Ancestry do not appear to have transcribed either street names or occupations so these are ignored in the comparison.

The first, and most obvious, difference is that Ancestry do not offer a transcription of the last six entries on the page, almost a third of the people enumerated. This is, however, only part of the problem.

The final name transcribed by Ancestry is John HELME, which MLFHS read as John McKEARNEY. Although the surname is not really legible from the image, it is clearly neither HELME nor is it 'Do' (ditto) which would suggest continuation of the previous surname. He is further indexed as 'brother' when it is clear from the image that 'Visitor' is the correct reading.

The name 'HELME' transcribed for the six preceding entries also differs from the MLFHS interpretation which has the first three as WALIE and the remainder as ...DGE. While the first surname cannot be clearly deciphered from the image, it is readily apparent that the same surname does not apply to all six people. The fourth surname clearly reads '...DGE', the first letters being lost to a lacuna. The marriage of Alexander WYLIE to widow Mary JUDGE on 6 October 1844 at the Collegiate Church would seem to substantially back up the MLFHS interpretation, at least within a letter.

There are further differences in interpretation. Thomas DUTTON, readable with some difficulty on line 6, appears as Thomas DUDLOW in the Ancestry version. The three [JU]DGE stepchildren are named by MLFHS as Jane, Charles and Patrick but by Ancestry as John, Isabela and Richard. John is described as a 'stepdaughter' and Isabela as a 'stepson'. Both of these interpretations would seem at least questionable!

Ancestry's Mary HELME (more correctly Mary WYLIE, formerly JUDGE) is shown as aged 42, whereas MLFHS transcribe her age as 49. Mary can be found in the 1841 census with an age of 40 so 49 would seem a more realistic interpretation. Since the 1851 census took place earlier than that for 1841 it is possible that her birthday fell in the intervening three months and so the two ages are wholly consistent.

The final difference is the birthplace of Thomas DUTTON (or DUDLOW). Both correctly transcribe Lan(cashire) but Ancestry has the place as 'Hawks' while MLFHS has 'Plank Lane'. The image is unclear, but the word 'Lane' is a possible reading and the first letter is certainly more like P than W. There is a Plank Lane at Leigh, so this does not seem to be an unrealistic interpretation. Unfortunately, this is not an untypical page. Analysis of several other pages has produced similar results.

It would seem that Ancestry's transcribers were unfamiliar with local place names and this has produced mis-readings such as Cheshire, Durham for Cheshire, Dunham, and Cheshire, Penmory for Lancashire, Runcorn. Perhaps the most amusing error found to date is Canaryshire, a valiant attempt to transcribe a somewhat unclear Lancashire. They also seem to have had problems with some very clearly written personal names such as Leonard Jas. Reuss in Chorlton-on-Medlock who appears as Leonard Jas. Kenas. Further examples include Huateo Nelson (for Horatio Nelson), John Puroegorass (John Pindigrass) and Instler Lervid (Juster Laird). Some clearly readable names simply are not transcribed. The family of Reverend William Gaskell, appear in Chorlton-on-Medlock. The names of William and Elizabeth are both clearly readable using the Ancestry on-screen 'magnifier' yet neither name appears in the Ancestry index.

If the image of a page is sufficiently legible for Ancestry to have recovered all of the entries, the MLFHS transcript also tends to be complete. However, as the pages become more badly damaged, Ancestry increasingly fall short of MLFHS in the level of detail recovered.

It would appear that Ancestry only included details in their index where they were able to read at least the forename and/or surname (or where the latter can be inferred from earlier entries). If the name cannot be read then the whole entry is ignored. In contrast, MLFHS transcribed everything they found legible. This means that there is a fighting chance of recognising your family from a partially transcribed name and other unique details (for an extreme example of this see the identification of the GASKELL family on the 1851-unfilmed web site (www.1851-unfilmed.org.uk/cases.htm)).

Extent of Recovery

Several of the districts affected contained a mixture of both filmed and unfiled pages and it is consequently difficult to identify the portion of the Ancestry index which relates only to the unfiled portions. It is also difficult to make a detailed comparison since while we have detailed information from the MLFHS project, extracting a similar level of detail from Ancestry's online indexes for the whole of the data involved is not generally practicable. Nevertheless, a simple and meaningful comparison can be made based on the recovery of surnames and forenames and a detailed comparison has been undertaken for a sample of the data.

The margin by which Ancestry's transcriptions fall short of the earlier MLFHS transcriptions can be estimated from the analysis shown at Figure 2. The table compares the number of entries transcribed by each project for four districts which were wholly unfiled. They show, for each, the number of entries in which a surname, and possibly a forename, was recovered, as well as the number of entries for which only a forename was recovered. In each case this may be accompanied by either limited or full information relating to the individual but this is not analysed..

The analysis shows that while Ancestry recovered at least a surname for 68.6% of the population, MLFHS achieved this for 79.5%. Ancestry's recovery rate rises to 76% if entries for which only a forename was recovered are included while MLFHS achieved 81.5% using this less demanding measure.

Although it was not practicable to make a close comparison of the recovery of relationships, marital status, gender and birthplace for all of the districts, an analysis for the two smaller districts, Blackley and Pendlebury is shown at Figure 3. This analysis shows that MLFHS consistently recovered at least some information for more individuals than was achieved by Ancestry. In terms of entries for which 100% of the enumerated details were recovered, the margin is substantial, in Blackley by 91.3% against Ancestry's 77.8% and in Pendlebury by 63% to 50.2%.

Possible Reasons for the Differences

Despite the extensive room for criticism, it is to Ancestry's credit that they have spent time and money on producing what may be the best images possible of this damaged material and for making these images available to the public for the first time on their site. However, in respect of the transcriptions, it is a disappointing outcome.

The use of advanced scanning techniques, it seems, can only take you so far. It undoubtedly converts material for which traditional microfilming or scanning would fail

to render much legible content into images which have considerably higher contrast and legibility. This does not, however, mean that everything can be read. Aside from the portions which have been completely lost owing to disintegration of the paper, there are many areas which even the advanced scanning process fails to render legible.

The MLFHS volunteers had the considerable advantage of being allowed to work 'hands-on' with the original material for as long as was necessary. Pages which had been laminated to support the fragile paper were de-laminated to provide the best view of the text. Working both with natural light and hand-held ultraviolet illumination allowed the type, level and angle of illumination to be adjusted to its optimum for each page or, if necessary, for each word. Clearly this has proved more effective in recovering information from the most damaged areas. The scanner seems to have had particular problems with the pages which had been laminated, the texture of the laminate tending to obscure the text beneath.

Our other substantial advantage was the people. Not only did we have volunteers who were knowledgeable of local personal and place names, but they were not under any time pressure and could spend time working on a difficult entry. They could also enlist other volunteers to provide a second opinion. Ancestry, it can probably be safely said, did not have access to either local knowledge or unlimited time.

Where does this leave Researchers?

So, as a family historian, what do you do? Without question, your first port-of-call should be the Society's free online index at www.1851-unfilmed.org.uk which allows you to identify whether the names you are looking for appear in the MLFHS transcript. If they are not there, then it is highly unlikely you will find them in the Ancestry index. The site also allows you to search on a partial name or on a street name and if you find a match, you can then see all of the names on that page as they are set out in the original. This should give you some confidence that you have found the person you want.

Once you have located a person in the free index, you can then access the full transcript either by purchasing the relevant CD from the MLFHS online bookshop or by accessing it at www.findmypast.co.uk who manage the online version of this data on the society's behalf.

It would be unwise, nevertheless, to ignore the Ancestry version since it does provide an image of the original page. If the person you are looking for is in the Ancestry index, then you can see the original document and confirm that you agree with the information as transcribed.

Acknowledgement

I am indebted to Ray Hulley for producing much of the information which appears in Figures 2 and 3.

John Marsden

MLFHS Transcription of Chorlton-on-Medlock Enumeration District 1e Page 16

61	15 Makin Street	Phoebe WRIGHT	Dau	U	2	At Home	Burton-upon-Trent
62	1 Wilson Street	James ANKERS	Head	M	34	Coal Porter	Chester
62	1 Wilson Street	Mary Jane ANKERS	Wife	M	24	House Keeper	Lancashire Liverpool
62	1 Wilson Street	Elizabeth ANKERS	Dau	U	8	At Home	Lancashire Manchester
62	1 Wilson Street	James ANKERS	Son	U	1	At Home	Lancashire Manchester
62	1 Wilson Street	Thomas DUTTON	Visitor	U	26	Coal Porter	Lancashire Plank Lane
63	3 Wilson Street	Alexander WALIE	Head	M	46	Spinner	Scotland
63	3 Wilson Street	Mary WALIE	Wife	M	42	House Keeper	Ireland
63	3 Wilson Street	Joseph WALIE	Son	U	4	At Home	Lancashire
63	3 Wilson Street	Jane ...DGE	Stepdau	U	22	Weaver	Lancashire
63	3 Wilson Street	Charles ...DGE	Stepson	U	28	Winder	Ireland
63	3 Wilson Street	Patrick ...DGE	Stepson	U	18	Winder	Ireland
63	3 Wilson Street	John MCKEARNEY	Visitor	U		At Home	Lancashire
64	5 Wilson Street	Bridget MCGUIRE	Head	W	46	House Keeper	Ireland
64	5 Wilson Street	Bridget MCGUIRE	Dau	M	23	Frame Tenter	Ireland
64	5 Wilson Street	Charles ATFIELD	Son/law	M	24	Chair Maker	Lancashire Manchester
64	5 Wilson Street	Ann MALONE	Lodger	U	23	Spinner	Ireland
65	6 Wilson Street	Patrick CALLAGAN	Head	M	42	Labourer	Ireland
65	6 Wilson Street	Mary CALLAGAN	Wife	M	48	House Keeper	Ireland

Figure 1a

Ancestry transcription of Chorlton-on-Medlock Enumeration District 1e Page 16

61	Phoebe WRIGHT	Daughter	F	2		Burton Upon Trent, Staffordshire
62	James ANKERS	Head	M	34		Chester, Cheshire
62	Mary Jane ANKERS	Wife	F	24		Liverpool, Lancashire
62	Elizabeth ANKERS	Daughter	F	8		Manchester, Lancashire
62	James ANKERS	Son	M	1		Manchester, Lancashire
62	Thomas DUDLOW	Visitor	M	26		Lan Hawks
63	Alexander HELME	Head	M	46		
63	Mary HELME	Wife	F	49		
63	Joseph HELME	Son	M	4		Manchester, Lancashire
63	John HELME	Stepdaughter			22	Manchester, Lancashire
63	Isabela HELME	Stepson	M	28		Ireland
63	Richard HELME	Stepson	M	18		Ireland
63	John HELME	Brother	M			Manchester, Lancashire

Figure 1b

Recovery Rates in Terms of Names Recovered

Unfilmed District	Population (HO)	Ancestry		M&LFHS	
		Indexed surname	Indexed Forename only	Indexed surname	Indexed Forename only
Pendleton	14,136	9,002	1,381	9,638	198
Pendlebury	2,750	1,840	290	3,002	51
Prestwich	5,146	3,444	105	4,288	8
Blackley	3,503	3,229	107	3,361	5
Totals	25,535	17,515	1,883	20,289	262
% of Population		68.6%	7.4%	79.5%	1%
Total (Full + partial)		76%		81.5%	

The table summarises the numbers of records recovered by Ancestry and by M&LFHS for which a surname (with or without a forename) was recovered and the numbers for which only a forename was recovered (ignoring any other information recovered for the individual). The totals are shown as percentages of the known population (as provided by the Home Office statistical analysis)

Figure 2

Recovery Rates in Terms of Complete Records Recovered

District	Index	Population (HO)	Total Indexed	100% Recovered	Incomplete Entries
Blackley	Ancestry	3,503	3,336 (95.2%)	2,275 (77.8%)	611 (17.4%)
	MLFHS	3,503	3,480 (99.3%)	3,197 (91.3%)	283 (8.0%)
Pendlebury	Ancestry	2,750	2,130 (77.5%)	1,381 (50.2%)	749 (27.2%)
	MLFHS	2,750	2,750 (100%)	1,754 (63%)	996 (36.2%)

The table summarises the percentages of the population (as provided by the Home Office statistical analysis) for which an index entry was recovered and within each of these totals, the percentages of the population for which 100% of the details were recovered and for which less than 100% of the details were recovered.

Figure 3