

BathBMD is Complete!

Phew! We did it! BathBMD has completed transcribing and publishing ALL the indexes to registers held in Bath Register Office.

Let's summarise what was involved.

86 volunteers have been involved doing.....

16,000 hours of volunteer work over....

50 months duration and working on.....

3,026 Registers, to produce....

1,165,000 records (names).

In that time we have also produced...

A web site with 233,000 hits so far and that has done....

278,000 data searches so far and

12 Newsletters explaining progress plus

30 printed and bound index books (replacing 2,500 hand written books!) and

A Petition on 10 Downing Street with 4,221 signatures and

Four Bath Post Office Directories scanned and published consisting of 2,976 pages

Not bad eh? From the very start, BathBMD did not reckon to blindly mimic other sites, but to build on their quality base. That's one reason why we chose the Cheshire software as a basis for the BathBMD site.

As well as all the above statistics, all births have a Mother's Maiden Name (where it is included in the register), all deaths have an age at death, and all marriages are name pairs - not single names of people that married. The age at death fact was not as simple as it sounds. Records from 1974 onwards did not quote Age at Death, but Date of Birth instead. 83,000 records had to have two dates subtracted from one another to create the age at death. That in itself was quite a task!

All middle names have been expanded to full names and not left as initials. (A few are only as initials in the register and therefore cannot be expanded.) That in itself was a substantial element of work but creates a distinct advantage for researchers. We have separate graphs of coverage for each of Births, Marriages and Deaths, which shows how many names are transcribed for each year and hence registration trends. We have a headline on the home page of the web site, and we have a specialist search facility available to users free of charge for when they fail to find records for whatever reason. We also have a volunteer's page that lists all of the 86 volunteers by name in acknowledgement of their contribution. It also gives access to the 12 newsletters produced. All records are indexed to a unique entry number (not a page number containing up to five records) and to a single year - not a group of years. But most of all, we have FINISHED! All data has been transcribed in all registers held in Bath Register Office, right up to

2007, the date when On-Line registration started.

The Volunteers did it!

I could not let a final newsletter go by without mentioning a few of the volunteers. Jos Davies started with us after about a year and quickly became the fastest and most prolific worker of all. Her constant drive to do 'another register today' was one of the main reasons BathBMD finished so fast. Raye Johnson started with us almost at the start of the project. Her devotion to volume and accuracy were also fantastic. With my own transcribing, I have already covered 42% of the total work we had to do!!

Ros Portsmouth and Diane Hale, two friends from work days, started right at the beginning and were also still busy with us right to the end. Gill Dennis, Linda and Richard Saunders, Glen Sheppard and Kathy Ryan also all made a major contribution. My thanks, and those of genealogists everywhere, go to all of you.

Some volunteers could only do stage one typing as they had to work by post and we had to drop them when all the stage one typing was done. But two names stand out - Maurice Catt and Andy Phillips. Both were super fast at getting index books typed up and both did an enormous amount of work. I thank all the people above, and all the other volunteers too numerous to mention. Well, there are 86 of them!

It's been a while.

Since we started, a lot has changed. My initial access to the data was facilitated by my (then) wife Andrea. She left the employment of the Register Office at the end of 2004, and we divorced in 2006. Judy Stone, the Superintendent Registrar that allowed us so much scope to fulfil the task retired in 2007. These things did not hamper us. We carried on with the task! We started with next to no-one and took it from there. The volunteer base grew as the project gathered momentum and nothing was going to stop us from completing the task. At the peak, we had about 40 volunteers all working simultaneously. My thanks also go to all the Register Office staff; they have also been fully supportive as we strived down the final hurdles of completion.

How does BathBMD fit in as other projects aim to index the national record set of which BathBMD records are a part?

As far as the national index is concerned, the DOVE Project (Digitalisation of Vital Events) has been delayed, and FreeBMD continues to plough its way through with the typing up of the existing national index with nothing so far labelled as complete. So any hesitations we may have had as to whether efforts on BathBMD would be worthwhile have been proved to be unfounded. It HAS been worthwhile. And while all new registrations (of Births and Deaths, but not of Marriages), are now done via the Internet, records of all three pre March 2007 still need to be found by genealogists - and now can be!!

Was it all plain sailing?

We met a couple of hurdles, or 'risks' as they may be called in Project Management. One was losing the facilitation and access that being married to Andrea, and her working there, initially granted me. But I was aware of her proposed job change before it happened, and managed to secure the projects continuation irrespective of her employment in the Register Office.

The second and probably quite substantial risk we met was that we may be denied the right to take registers off site for indexing. This happened on 26th August 2006 which definitely slowed us up. We were two thirds of the way through at that point. The Register Office promised us photocopies instead, which they did supply, but 1,000 registers needed copying, and that was a major task, and a major cost to them. They had to get extra temporary staff in, but they did it, and we continued. But it probably added eight months to the length of the project. Apart from that, it was just one enormous amount of work, and work that could not be rushed as it was dependent on accuracy and completeness. We just had to plod on to completion, which is exactly what we did!! Today, I believe the only other register office with ALL its records on-line is the Isle of Wight. All credit to them also.

What for the future?

Local indexing is, in my mind, an essential for the genealogist, and other local indexing projects will continue to get my encouragement and support. WiltshireBMD started since we started, but otherwise, BathBMD was the last UKBMD site to start, and the first to finish. OK, it may not be the biggest indexing project around, but it is finished and that's a major achievement. I shall take a well earned rest from local indexing, but I will always support other projects as best I can. I supported FreeBMD before, and I may do so again in the future. It is certainly a worthwhile project. The stage one volunteers we had to drop about a year ago have all presumably filled any spare time with other activities. Some of the stage two volunteers may now find a rather large void in their lives without BathBMD work to do! I wish them well too. They have been fantastic, and the backbone of the project.

Promoting indexing in the wider community.

In an attempt to promote local indexing to new areas in general, my approach has been threefold:-

1. To get BathBMD done, and to do it professionally to show that it CAN be done, and is a fantastic reference for genealogists around the world. It IS possible and I urge other areas, if you don't start, you won't finish. Look at the benefits Bath Register Office now enjoys - no more laborious searching for records! And look at the benefits for Genealogists too! Access to the data from anywhere in the world! Other areas doing indexing also make these benefits available.
2. To have the web software enhanced to the optimum to maximise the benefits and impact that indexing has. Ian Hartas has, during the course of this project, enhanced the software to include searching on Mother's Maiden Names on births, and displaying those names plus Age at Death on death records in search results. He has also produced a multi region search facility that searches many of the local sites simultaneously. Ian has been a fantastic help to BathBMD, and has been pivotal in UKBMD and local indexing in general. I cannot thank him enough for his skills, his time and his devotion to local indexing in general as well as his assistance to BathBMD in particular.
3. To get as many new areas as possible to start local indexing projects. My petition was elementary in this and was intended to act as a guiding hand from above for areas where direct encouragement was not effective. Continue reading for details of the Petition and the response it generated.

That Petition!

Now that 10 Downing Street has responded to my Petition, let's have a look at what it means. First, let's remind ourselves of the Petition:

We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to Mandate the electronic indexing and free public searching thereof of locally held records of Birth, Marriage and Death at Register Offices across England and Wales.

And the fuller detail:-

Local Register Offices (part of Local Government) are the primary contact for people wanting copies of Birth, Marriage or Death certificates. GRO Southport is a secondary contact having photocopies of the primary locally held registers. As such, Local Register Offices hold a mine of information for UK residents and Family Historians alike. These records are found and managed almost universally by old hand written indexes in cloth bound books and ledgers. While the public can legally access the indexes in person at each office, this mode of access is unacceptable in this day and age. Also, that any modern day business can still work like this in the 21st century is appalling. This petition seeks support to force local Register Offices to electronically index their records from 1837 to 2007 when a new on-line electronic registration system was introduced. While some areas have already opted to do this under the auspices of the UKBMD umbrella, and publish data on freely searchable web databases, other areas show no such inclination. This petition seeks to mandate that action.

Now the Response:-

The Government considers it a matter for individual local authorities to determine how they make publicly available index information relating to birth, death and marriage registrations. The Government does not propose to seek a change in the law to force local authorities to make index information available online or by other electronic means.

The General Register Office (GRO) is a Government body supporting the Registrar General for England and Wales. GRO receives and maintains a copy of every registration of birth, death and marriage registered throughout England and Wales, and is in the process of producing a digitised copy of all records dating back to 1837 when registration became a statutory requirement. The GRO will create a digitised index to the registrations and hopes within the next two years to have the made its GRO index available online for free public access.

This is pretty typical I guess. They are going to do nothing, despite the fact that 4,221 people were asking for things to be different. Hopefully, some of those 4,221 people can bring a more local pressure to bear in their own areas, and get a more efficient Council run facility in the process. There is no indication WHY they don't want to encourage a change. It seems to be a case of 'we're alright Jack', and the GRO photocopy will suffice for all we need it for.

But this is the first time I have seen it said that the DOVE index will be made publicly available and for free as well. How will this impinge on UKBMD indexing? It may make the GRO records the main focus for genealogy research (even more than is!), despite their limitations, and take some of the impetus OUT of local indexing. If and when the DOVE index is made available, I guess most register offices (that have not started indexing) will be tempted to bale out of supplying the genealogy community in favour of what they consider their main and current day role, and let GRO do that bit supported by the DOVE index. It will be sad to lose the original data in its original form in favour of a sliced up photocopy with gaps in!

Ian Hartas, founder of UKBMD states:

It's up to us to continue what we started and publicise the fact that the primary source records are always going to be of better quality than the GRO records, and that in the case of marriages we tell them not only the church but also the full name of the partner and also previous former married names where available. The local offices need to be sold the idea that it's in their financial interest to have their BMD indexes on-line. Money always talks! We still have work to do! FreeBMD, FindMyPast and Ancestry have not impinged on us, so why should the GRO itself?

And John Marsden of LancashireBMD states:

It's pretty much what one would expect. DOVE indexes will probably be free and certainly will make FreeBMD pretty much redundant if it is a better index than the old GRO one. As to the UKBMD work, I see two reasons not to get too downhearted. Firstly, UKBMD indexes a better source. Admittedly, we have to convince people to do their research properly. Secondly, if the local registers are eventually deposited as public records, we will have created a comprehensive index to a FREE resource. My current understanding is that DOVE is in deep trouble and running very over timescale so it is not an immediate threat to anybody!

So there we are. DOVE, with all its limitations is still at least two years off, but BathBMD is complete and on-line today. It's a good job - and well done. It has been one of the most satisfying of projects I have attempted, and short of raising a family - probably one of the largest! For me, it brought together Information Technology, Genealogy, and a challenge that I believed was sorely in need of doing. This, to me, is what computers are for. When I first found out that the Register Office were renewing some of the worn out index books - by copying them out longhand!! - (and that was in 2002!!) I knew that something had to be done for genealogists whose research depended on this data. I was told that some people thought that the computers of the day were not up to the task. Maybe the task to computerise was just too large and too daunting. Well, computers are up to it, and so are the volunteers. It's just a case of making it happen, and that's where I came in. I found the volunteers, and I made it happen!

I would never have believed that a million is such a large number. That many thanks to all involved. You have done a great job, and your efforts are now on line for all to use and benefit from for ever more. Now what was I doing just over four years ago? Ah yes - my Family Tree. Now there's a task that NEVER ends! At least it will be a little bit easier now with more data on-line.

John Fairlie.

Thank You for Helping and Supporting BathBMD