

QUALIFICATIONS IN GENEALOGY

Personal Experiences

IHGS Higher Certificate and Diploma

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In this review I describe my very personal experience of studying with IHGS and completing the Higher Certificate and Diploma in Genealogy qualifications, both of which are recognised by AGRA and pave the way for membership, with a reduced set of application criteria. Those with the IHGS Diploma in Genealogy (having the post-nominal 'DipGen') are recognised as having already attained a high standard and are exempt from completing a research assignment.

I became an IHGS student purely by chance, although I'd already developed a keen interest in family history as a result of a task set for me by my late father to discover more about his birth parents.

Having caught the genealogy 'bug', I became increasingly vocal about my growing passion for the subject, to the extent that close acquaintances began to ask me to conduct research for them.

At that time, I was not charging for my research, most of it conducted using the subscription sites of Ancestry and Findmypast, but with a little FreeReg and FamilySearch thrown in for good measure. It wasn't too long before I came to realise that I didn't really know what I was doing and, as a lifelong learner, decided that I needed some proper education in the subject.

A Google search for 'family history courses' returned a number of options, but I recall that the 'Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies' stood out from the crowd, as even the name smacked of academic prowess.

I signed up for the Higher Certificate in 2012, choosing the option to pay for the course by instalments over two years. During my primary career and, in the days before the internet, I'd had some experience of distance learning with the Rapid Results College and, as a graduate of Nottingham and Leeds Universities, I was comfortable with the prospect of submitting assignments for assessment. However, registering with IHGS at the age of 59, I had no intention of sitting any more examinations for the rest of my life.

I received an information pack about the course, setting out in detail what was expected for each assignment. The programme of study seemed perfectly designed to take me through the complete range of genealogical record sets, with assignments likewise constructed to provide me with practical research opportunities in local and national archives. There was also an online student forum, giving the chance to share experiences with other students and an opportunity to attend weekend study workshops, tailored to complement the Higher Certificate syllabus.

I still had no preconception about becoming a professional genealogist, I just wanted to learn how to do things properly.

Initially I found writing assignments challenging but I received a response and mark sheet from my tutor after only a couple of days. The feedback was positive and constructive. I didn't fare so well with the second assignment, but again took the equally constructive feedback on board.

The true beauty of the IHGS model only revealed itself over time. I had retired from my primary career at the time of the London Olympics and, within a year, had relocated to the coast of Suffolk. This change of scenery set my studies back a few months, as I adjusted to the new environment and dealt with more pressing priorities. In the spring of 2014 I then had a car accident, which likewise set me back a couple of months. But there was no pressure, only support from IHGS. I wrote to my tutor explaining the reason for the pause in my studies and received an understanding reply.

It took me four years to complete the Higher Certificate course. I sat the exam in June 2016 and thought I'd messed up the paper, only to find out subsequently that I'd passed with distinction. At the ensuing IHGS Awards Day, I met up with fellow students for the first time and was also introduced to the tutorial team, one of whom outlined the Diploma in Genealogy. This, he told me, was the key to acceptance by AGRA.

At first I wasn't sure about the need for the Diploma. I'd invested a lot of time and effort in the Higher Certificate, but was now facing the prospect of a yet more intense period of study and research, requiring the submission of 'next level' portfolio pieces, and an assigned task for an imaginary client.

Looking back, I'm so glad I soldiered on with my studies, as the Diploma set me up with a nationally recognised qualification and a platform upon which to build my own family history research and education business.

During my personal journey, the world of genealogy has seen significant change. The exponential growth in online datasets has motivated many newcomers to family history to embark on their personal journey of discovery, with further impetus provided by advances in genetic genealogy. The Register of Qualified Genealogists (RQG), founded in 2017, has also established itself as another organisation that recognises the IHGS Diploma as accreditation for full membership. However, as an AGRA Associate, I find that most of the enquiries I receive from prospective clients arrive via my profile on the AGRA website.

IHGS has also evolved in recent years to take account of changing customer needs, offering a relatively new suite of three courses. The first two of these, 'Awaken Your Ancestors', and 'Broadening Your Family Tree,' were designed to provide students with a thorough knowledge of core genealogical record sets, without the need to submit work for assessment and with an option to sit elementary and intermediate examination papers. The third course, 'Completing Your Ancestral Journey', does require the submission of assignments and success in the associated examination provides students with exemption from the first eight lectures of the Higher Certificate.

Like the rest of the world, IHGS has had to adapt to the challenging period through which we have all lived as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. A typically creative response by the IHGS team has resulted in the design and delivery of a rolling programme of Zoom based tutorials, available to students and the wider public alike. These sessions, intended to complement the course material, have proved immensely popular and are now considered an integral component of the IHGS proposition. So, whether you are a keen family historian

looking to brush up on your knowledge about a particular area of genealogical interest, want to complete a course of study at your own pace, but without the pressure of written assignments and examinations, or are thinking seriously about becoming a professional genealogist and joining AGRA, IHGS 'The School of Family History', has something for you.