

QUALIFICATIONS IN GENEALOGY

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

The IHGS Qualifications: the Higher Certificate & Diploma

Karen Cummings, AGRA

AGRA fairly recently updated its membership criteria to reflect the changing world of genealogy. There is now a greater emphasis on qualifications in genealogy, in particular AGRA recognises:

- the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies (IHGS) Higher Certificate in Genealogy and Diploma.
- the University of Strathclyde's Postgraduate Certificate in Genealogical, Palaeographical and Heraldic Studies and higher qualifications.

I am sure that other courses will be recognised in a similar way as time moves on. Those with the above qualifications may apply to become Members of AGRA with a reduced set of application criteria. Those with the IHGS Diploma in Genealogy (having the post-nominal "DipGen") are recognised as already having attained a high standard and are further exempt from completing a research assignment.

This article is intended to be the first in a series describing the various genealogy courses available, the experiences of those who have taken them and offer an insight into the level of work required.

When I decided to move to a career in genealogy I knew that I wanted to gain formal qualifications, partly to ensure I had a good grounding in the majority of sources I was likely to encounter, and partly to be able to offer potential clients a reassurance of my level of knowledge. To that end I began with the Correspondence Course in genealogy at the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies (IHGS) in Canterbury. This course consists of twenty-four modules, each of which requires significant background reading around the lecture notes before completing the 3-4 assignments for the module:

- Introduction to Genealogy and Family History
- Family Records
- Records of General Registration
- Census Returns
- Parish Registers
- The Parish and its Records
- Wills and Probate Records
- Palæography
- Armed Services Records
- Education and Occupations
- Nonconformity

- Names
- Migration
- Census Substitutes
- Miscellany
- Quarter Sessions
- Manorial Records
- Title Deeds
- Maps and Associated Records
- Heraldry
- Scotland and Wales
- Irish and other British Records
- Legal Records at The National Archives
- Ecclesiastical Court Records

There is, in essence, no time limit (so long as modules are completed within a "reasonable" time frame), and you can complete the work in your own time as your lifestyle permits. This ticked all the boxes for me at the time, enabling me to fit studying around my other commitments. The downside of course is that a huge amount of self-discipline is required. It is too easy to let one module drag on and lose that momentum.

Each student has a tutor to hand and the online forum, where ideas are shared, is invaluable. On completion of the course students take the "Higher Certificate in Genealogy" exam.

At this point it is important to note that you do not have to have completed the Correspondence Course to sit the IHGS Higher Certificate exam. External candidates are welcomed. There are, however, two exam papers and Correspondence Course students may choose to submit their coursework marks (if of a sufficient standard) in lieu of paper 2.

With a huge amount of effort, lots of support from my family and a few "good talkings to myself" in the mirror I am pleased to report that I completed the course in the minimum recommended three years and am proud to say passed the IHGS Higher Certificate exam with Distinction!

I then decided to move it up to the next level and enrol for the IHGS Diploma in Genealogy. There are three components:

- A set piece of research to conduct in local archives, the starting point provided by the IHGS.
- A portfolio of professional work demonstrating a high quality of research and report writing skills and a breadth of knowledge of a number of source types.
- An exam lasting almost a day, consisting of real time library research, exam condition questions, the production of a pedigree, and a viva voce.

On paper this does not, perhaps, sound too onerous a task. However, this time there are deadlines. The expectation is that the exam will be taken the June after

enrolment. There are also just six months in which to complete the assignment. Secondly, all of a sudden I was not working to a budget and the possibilities for additional research became endless.

I chose to submit six pieces for my portfolio, covering a wide range of sources and time periods and research in a whole host of archives all over the country. In addition to research in local archives in Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Essex, the research took me on my first visit to The National Archives (TNA) in London and resulted in my spending a lot of time staying with friends and family whilst I visited archives in Worcester and Birmingham. Typically, the closer my deadline became the more challenges I found with my research. For example, my visit to TNA to look at the Field Books from the 1910 Valuation Survey revealed that my area of interest in Birmingham was the only part of Birmingham for which TNA do not hold the maps on which the reference numbers may be found. Off I went back up to Birmingham to look at their maps (which have yet to be catalogued and I am indebted to the staff for pulling out the maps likely to be of interest), to note down my reference and return to TNA.

Although immensely hard work, overall the work itself was immensely satisfying. How often are we given the opportunity to take research to the levels we would like to without budgetary constraint? The opportunity to look at all those sources we know may only have a chance of holding further information and being able to look anyway without measuring the chance of success up for a client and letting them decide whether to proceed?

Having submitted my portfolio and set piece the final part of the Diploma was the exam. As the exam is based upon IHGS library resources there is an opportunity to arrive the day before and have a library tour to find out which subjects are in which areas – the main library at the IHGS is split into five different rooms on the first floor. There is also an opportunity to work through some past papers and get a feeling for the process involved. I would highly recommend all future IHGS students take up this opportunity!

After all the hard work I was immensely proud to be told I had passed the Diploma in Genealogy. It marked the end of an immense personal journey and the achievement of a goal I had been steadily working towards for four years.