

# Tracing your European Ancestry



An Introduction to Finding your Ancestors who were born outside  
the UK - the easy countries

# The "Home Port" Rule: Starting in the UK

- You MUST find a specific town or parish name, not just country
- Key UK Records to Check:
  - Naturalisation Papers (TNA): The "Gold Mine." Often lists exact village and parents.
  - Marriage Certificates (GRO): Look for foreign-born witnesses or specific trades.
  - 1939 Register: Check for "Opened" records of ancestors born pre-1926.
  - Passenger Lists: Use Handwriting Recognition (HTR) tools to find misspelled surnames

# The Powerhouse Portals: Beyond Ancestry & Findmypast - I

## FamilySearch (The Global Vault)

The Tool: Use the "Search by Place" & "Images" tools.

The Benefit: Access to millions of unindexed microfilms for small villages.

2026 Update: AI-powered browsing now "suggests" the right page in a parish register based on your tree data.

## MyHeritage (The Continental Network)

The Tool: "Smart Matches" & International Trees.

The Benefit: Most popular site in Europe; connects you to cousins still living in the "old country."

2026 Update: New "AI Photo Tagger" identifies distant relatives in shared family albums across borders.

# The Powerhouse Portals: Beyond Ancestry & Findmypast - II

## Geneanet (The European Specialist)

The Tool: Focused on France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

The Benefit: Huge community-driven database; many local French trees are extremely deep.

2026 Update: Advanced AI transcription now handles complex 18th-century French and Dutch handwriting.

# Spotlight: Europe's Digital Leaders

## The Netherlands (The Precision Leader)

Primary Site: [WieWasWie.nl](http://WieWasWie.nl)

The Records: Exceptional Civil Registration (Birth, Marriage, Death) starting in 1811.

2026 Highlight: The "Population Registers" (Bevolkingsregister). These aren't just snapshots like a census; they track a family's moves, births, and deaths year-by-year within a town.

Ease of Use: High. Most sites have an English toggle.

## Sweden (The Life-Tracker)

Primary Site: [ArkivDigital / Riksarkivet](http://ArkivDigital/Riksarkivet)

The Records: Household Examination Books (Husförhörslängd). The local priest visited every home annually to test their religious knowledge—recording everyone's birth, move, and even "character" in the process.

2026 Highlight: Total Digitization. You can effectively follow a Swedish ancestor from the cradle to the grave with almost no "gaps" in their timeline.

# Central Europe: Germany, Austria, and Poland

## The Catholic Path (Matricula Online)

Primary Site: [Matricula-Online.eu](https://www.matricula-online.eu)

Coverage: Germany, Austria, Poland, Luxembourg, and more.

Cost: Free.

2026 Highlight: A revolutionary map-based interface. Click on a village church on a map of 1850 and view the high-resolution parish registers instantly.

Strength: Excellent for ancestors in Southern Germany, the Rhineland, and Austria.

## The Protestant Path (Archion)

Primary Site: [Archion.de](https://www.archion.de)

Coverage: Primarily German Lutheran and Evangelical records.

Cost: Subscription-based (Day, Month, or Year passes).

2026 Highlight: Now includes 90% of the former Prussian provinces (many now in modern-day Poland).

Strength: The "HTR" (Handwriting Recognition) search allows you to type a name and find it in 18th-century Gothic script.

# Breaking the Language Barrier - I

## The "Core 30" Words

The Concept: You only need to recognize about 30 key words (Birth, Marriage, Death, Father, Mother, Godparents).

The Resource: FamilySearch Wiki "Genealogy Word Lists."

2026 Highlight: Instant "Floating" Glossaries.  
Hover your mouse over a foreign word in a record, and your browser now provides a contextual genealogical translation.

## Contextual AI Translation

The Tool: Gemini / ChatGPT / DeepL.

The Benefit: Don't just translate word-for-word. Paste a whole paragraph of a French "Acte de Naissance" into an AI, and ask it to "Extract the names, dates, and locations."

2026 Update: AI now understands archaic regional dialects and "Old French" or "Middle Dutch" that standard translators often miss.

# Breaking the Language Barrier - II

## Cracking the Script (HTR)

The Problem: Old Gothic/Sütterlin handwriting (Germany) or flowery 18th-century script.

The Solution: Transkribus and built-in site tools.

2026 Update: Most major European portals now have "View Transcript" buttons. The AI reads the handwriting and presents it as a typed, English-translated summary.

# Researching in France: The Departmental System - I

## The Archives Départementales

The System: France is split into 101 Departments. Each has its own free archive website.

The Goal: You must identify which "Department" (e.g., Pas-de-Calais, Paris, or Nord) your ancestor lived in.

2026 Update: Most departmental sites now have "One-Click Translation" buttons for English users.

## The "Gold" Records (État Civil)

Post-1792: Civil records are incredibly detailed, often listing parents' birthplaces and ages.

The Shortcut: Use the "Tables Décennales" (10-year indexes) to find a name across a decade in seconds.

Pre-1792: Use Registres Paroissiaux (Parish Registers) for earlier Catholic records.

# Researching in France: The Departmental System - II

## The French Powerhouses (Filae & Geneanet)

Filae.com: The "Ancestry of France." Excellent for searchable name indexes of civil records.

Geneanet: The best place to find trees built by local French cousins.

2026 Tip: Look for the "Livret de Famille" (Family Book) in your own home—it was a portable family tree every French couple carried.

# The Map is Not Static: Changing Borders

- The Prussia/Poland Puzzle: An ancestor born in "Stettin, Prussia" in 1860 is now in "Szczecin, Poland."
- The Dual-Name Strategy: You must search using both the Historical German/French name and the Modern Polish/Czech name.
- Resource: [Kartenmeister.com](https://www.kartenmeister.com) – The essential database for finding German-era place names in Eastern Europe.
- 2026 Update: Interactive "Time-Slider" Maps. Major portals now allow you to overlay 1870 borders onto modern 2026 Google Maps to identify exactly which archive holds your records.

# "Time Slider" and "Map Overlay" tools- I

## 1. Mapire (Historical Maps of the Habsburg Empire)

- The Tool: [mapire.eu](http://mapire.eu)
- Coverage: Austria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Italy, and the Balkans.
- The "Time Slider": It features a transparency slider that allows you to "fade" between the detailed Military Surveys of the 18th/19th centuries and modern satellite imagery.
- Why it's great: You can find exact houses in a village in 1860 and see what stands there on Google Maps today.

## 2. Meyers Gazetteer (MeyersGaz)

- The Tool: [meyersgaz.org](http://meyersgaz.org)
- Coverage: The entire German Empire (as it existed 1871–1918), including vast parts of modern-day Poland, Russia, and Lithuania.
- The "Time Slider": Use the "Ecclesiastical" and "Map" tabs. It allows you to toggle between the historical Meyers map and modern maps.
- Why it's great: It shows you the proximity of the nearest Catholic or Protestant parish, which is essential for knowing where the records are kept.

# "Time Slider" and "Map Overlay" tools - II

## 3. Old Maps Online

- The Tool: [oldmapsonline.org](http://oldmapsonline.org)
- Coverage: Global, but exceptionally strong for the border shifts of Prussia, Silesia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.
- The "Time Slider": It has a timeline at the bottom of the screen. As you move the slider from 1700 to 1950, the available maps for that specific region change.
- Why it's great: It acts as a search engine for historical maps held in libraries worldwide (like the British Library or the David Rumsey Collection).

## 4. Arcanum Maps

- The Tool: [maps.arcanum.com](http://maps.arcanum.com)
- Coverage: Central and Eastern Europe.
- The "Time Slider": This is arguably the most powerful tool in 2026 for synchronized "Side-by-Side" viewing. You can lock two maps together—one historical, one modern—and as you move one, the other follows.
- Why it's great: It includes the Cadastral maps, which are so detailed they show individual property boundaries and land use.

# Specialist Migrations: Huguenots & Beyond

- The Huguenots (France): 50,000 silk weavers and artisans fleeing to London (Spitalfields) and Canterbury during 16th, 17th, & 18th centuries.
- Resource: The Huguenot Society of Great Britain. Their "Quarto Series" of publications is the gold standard for tracking French families in the UK.
- The Palatines (Germany): 1709 migration of thousands of Germans through London to the New World (and some staying in the UK).
- The Jewish Diaspora: Essential specialized portals like JewishGen and the Arolsen Archives for 20th-century research.

# 1709 Palatine Migration- Online Sources - I

## 1. The "London Lists" (The Primary Database)

What they are: When the Palatines arrived in London in 1709, they were processed in four large "waves." The Board of Trade kept meticulous lists of names, occupations, ages, and religions.

Where to find them: The most comprehensive database is found on Ancestry (under "U.S. and Canada, Passenger and Immigration Lists Index") or via the The National Archives (TNA) in series T 1/119.

Search Tip: Search for the book title "Lists of Germans from the Palatinate Who Came to England in 1709" by John Tribbeko and Ruperti

## 2. The Irish Palatine Association (The "Stayers" Database)

The Context: Not all Palatines went to America. Thousands were settled in Ireland (specifically County Limerick) to bolster the Protestant population. Many of their descendants eventually moved to England during the Industrial Revolution.

The Database: [irishpalatine.org](http://irishpalatine.org)

Why it's great: It is the "gold standard" for tracking those families who stayed on this side of the Atlantic. They have a massive biographical database of surnames like Switzer, Teskey, Ruttle, and Heck.

# 1709 Palatine Migration- Online Sources - II

## 3. The Hank Z Jones Collection

The Resource: Henry (Hank) Z Jones Jr. spent decades tracking these specific families. His books, such as "The Palatine Families of New York," actually start with the German parish records where they originated.

Why it matters for 2026: While his books are physical, most of his findings are now integrated into the FamilySearch Family Tree and Wiki. Search the Wiki for "Palatine German Immigration."

## 4. The "Poor Palatines" Project (RootsWeb Legacy)

The Archive: This is one of those cases where the "Legacy Sites" we discussed are vital. The RootsWeb Palatine Mailing List archives contain decades of discussion on specific families moving from the Rhineland to London.

# Overcoming "Brick Walls" - I

## Archives Portal Europe (The Professional Search)

The Tool: A single entry point to records from 30+ countries.

The Benefit: It searches thousands of small local archives that big sites like Ancestry don't reach.

2026 Update: Use the "Digital Scan Request" button to ask small municipal archives for a high-res copy of a specific document for a tiny fee.

## Facebook & Community Power

The Tool: Join "Genealogy! [Country Name]" groups.

The Benefit: Local residents often provide free translation help or "boots on the ground" look-ups at local churches.

2026 Update: Community-driven "Transcription Bees" on social media have now indexed many records that used to be "image-only."

# Overcoming "Brick Walls" - II

## AI Search & Predictive Genealogy

The Tool: Gemini / AI Search Assistants.

The Benefit: Use AI to predict Surname Shifts. (e.g., "Smits" in Holland becomes "Smeets" or "Smith").

2026 Update: AI "Pattern Matching" can now suggest the most likely village of origin based on the unique combination of surnames and occupations in your tree.

# RootsChat: The Live Community

## The "Common Room" Advantage

The Platform: A massive, UK-based volunteer discussion forum.

The Benefit: Real people solving problems in real-time.

2026 Status: Extremely active, especially for bridging the gap between UK families and European origins.

## Key Features for Europe

The "Europe" Board: Dedicated sub-forums for almost every European country.

Transcription Help: Post a photo of a messy record; volunteers will often transcribe and translate it for free within hours.

"Speedy Searchers": Famous for members who can track down an obscure burial or baptism in minutes.

# Don't Ignore the Past: The Value of Legacy Forums

- RootsWeb & GenForum: Now largely archived (read-only), but they contain 30 years of "Surname-Specific" research that has never been uploaded to modern trees.
- The "Cousin-Connection" Archive: Many posts from the late 90s contain transcriptions of family bibles or documents that have since been lost or destroyed.
- Mailing List Archives: Still one of the best ways to find deep-dive discussions on specific European villages or obscure migration patterns.
- 2026 Strategy: Use Advanced Google Searching to "mine" these sites, as their internal search engines are often outdated.

# Q&A and Further Exploration

## Your Final Checklist

Step 1: Return to your UK records and find a specific town or parish.

Step 2: Create free accounts on FamilySearch, MyHeritage, and Geneanet.

Step 3: Print your FamilySearch Keyword List for your target country.

Step 4: Don't fear the script! Let the 2026 AI tools do the heavy lifting.

## Looking Ahead

Slides will be posted on the Family History Group page on the Shepway U3A website shortly

Future Sessions: Would you like a deep dive into any specific countries? Let me know!

Live Demo: I am happy to show anyone how to use any of the websites mentioned on my laptop after the talk.

# Live Demonstration: See It In Action

- Demo 1: Matricula Online (Catholic Germany/Austria)
- How to use the Map Search to find a parish.
- Browsing a digital "Kirchenbuch" (Church Book).
- Demo 2: WieWasWie (The Netherlands)
- Using the English Toggle.
- How to read a "Civil Birth Act" (Akte van Geboorte).
- Demo 3: AI Translation in Action
- Watch as we use Gemini to translate a handwritten record in real-time.





