

Digitisation: Open Access to Public History

Darren Wright

Executive Director - FreeBMD

Digitization, Public Domain & Informational Monopolies

Bournemouth University

Thursday 10th April 2014



What is FreeBMD?

Organisation created in 1998 in order to:-

- Create databases of historical records (primarily family history)
- Using volunteers to transcribe historical documents (11,000 volunteers)
- Using volunteers to create open source software to support transcribing
- Providing datasets under open data licenses*
- Campaigning for open access to historical records

Registered as a charity in 2003.



How Did It Start?

- International Internet Genealogical Society (IIGS)
 - Formed by Dr Brian Leverich, founder/owner of Rootsweb
- What could be achieved if the online genealogists worked together
 - Thousands of potential volunteers
- Needed to identify something with:-
 - Global relevance
 - Availability of source material
 - That would be useful
- General Records Office - Birth, Marriage and Death Registers



Organisation Structure

Structured through three sites:-

www.freebmd.org.uk – General Records Office register of Births Marriages and Deaths (1837 – 1983)

www.freereg.org.uk – Parish records of Births, Marriages and Deaths. Pre 1837

www.freecen.org.uk – 19th Century Census Records



What is FreeBMD?

Scale of projects:-

FreeBMD - 300 million records transcribed so far (up to 1971)

- 1 million records added each month
- 60 million records double entered
- 170,000 searches per day
- 20,000 site visitors per day

FreeREG - 27 million records transcribed so far

- 27,000 searches per day
- 4,000 site visitors per day

FreeCEN - 25 million records transcribed so far

- 16,000 searches per day
- 3,000 site visitors per day



Process

- Obtain source material
- Scan source and add to our image server
- Allocate to syndicate
- Syndicate manager allocates to an individual
- Records are transcribed



Challenges

- Access to source material
- Lack of legal clarity on rights (source material and transcribed material)
- Funding to support infrastructure
- Volunteer capacity to support technical development
- Capacity to manage large volunteer base
- Diversifying our range of projects



Issues With Obtaining Source Material

- Lack of clarity on ownership of source material
- Lack of clarity on what rights exist eg, copyright, right through contract or database rights
- Confused understanding of legal situation
- An already profitable market
- Exclusivity agreements



Solutions

- Challenging right to access source material through Freedom of Information
- Raising public awareness
- Raising political awareness
- Making partnerships with similar projects (avoid duplication of effort)
- Open Data
- Undermining the market

FreeBMD

Benefits

- Satisfying the basic right to be able to access history free of charge
- Providing social benefit to our volunteers
- Using local knowledge in the interpretation of historical records (TWYS)
- Moving from the individual search
- Datasets provide massive potential to investigate social history

FreeBMD