

My family and I had a wonderful experience a few years ago. We visited one of my ancestral cities—Norwich in Norfolk, England. Among other things, we toured the Norman castle. My son enjoyed driving Boudica's virtual war chariot complete with reins, simulated motion, and video display. In the castle keep, he found the views down to the spooky dungeons fascinating. As I was touring the castle keep, viewing the city's regalia and the scale model of the keep itself, I noticed a line of people waiting at another display area. Using my best tourist mentality, I decided that what they were queuing up for must be something worth seeing, so I wandered over to the display.

Panels versus Pixels

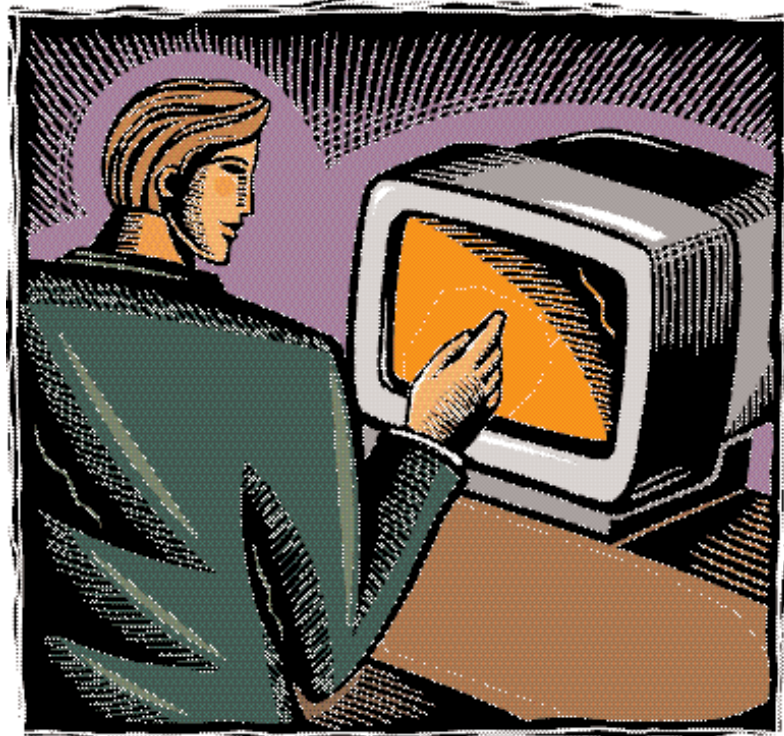
After looking over a few shoulders in line, I saw that we were waiting for access to a low-set table—a console of some sort. Hung on a wall behind the console was a beautifully painted set of wood panels entitled “Norfolk Roll of Honour.” Since there was no line at the wood panels, I went over to see them instead. The panels were hinged so visitors could access each one as if it were a page in a book. On both sides of the panels were the names of the men and women of Norfolk who died in the first World War. In time, the line for the console dissipated and, with my curiosity regarding the wooden panels satisfied, I went back to it to see what all the fuss was about.

In an enclosed display, a touch-screen PC was gleaming out of the console. It stood at waist level for me—perfect height for access by grammar school children. Only the screen was accessible; all the other working components of the system were encased beyond the reach of curious fingers.

Reading the introductory screen, I found I was viewing a modern version

KIOSK

GENEAOLGY



by Mark Howells

of the same “Norfolk Roll of Honour” that was on the wooden panels. This console was a computer kiosk. It allowed museum visitors to view the list of names of Norfolk soldiers who died in the Great War. Perhaps more importantly, it allowed them to search for individuals by surname. A keyboard was displayed on the touch screen and as the visitor entered the sequential letters of a surname, the system displayed results that fit those letters. Once an individual's name had been found, the details of his rank

and date of death were displayed. This is what the line had been for. Visitors were typing in their family surnames to see whether anyone from Norfolk with their surname had died in World War I.

Solemn Smudges

This was not genealogy in the traditional sense, but perhaps it was the germ of genealogy taking hold in some of the museum's visitors. I took my turn at the console and confirmed that my second cousin three times

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removed, Sergeant Ernest George Potter (stonemason, useful tenor, amateur miler, and father of six), had died of fever 7 October 1918 and was buried in the cemetery outside the north gate of Baghdad in what is now Iraq.

I then stepped back and watched as others used the system. Couples approached the display together and looked for a series of names. They would make quiet comments to each other as they came upon names they recognized. Perhaps the name they found was not their relative but only someone with the same last name—some nearly forgotten soul who marched off to war ninety some odd years ago and never came back. “That could be one of ours,” I heard one say to the other. “Didn’t granddad say his dad was gassed in the trenches?”

One woman using the kiosk took a piece of paper out of her handbag, scribbled a quick note, and returned the paper to her bag. “There’s another one hooked,” I thought to myself. Then I turned my attention to the young people using the display.

The children approached the kiosk somewhat differently. They were less solemn. In a strange way, their innocent levity was fitting. The adult visitors were subdued and hushed when confronted with an electronic cenotaph. The juvenile visitors were too young to understand the significance of the information at their fingertips. The older children typed in their last names to see if they got a match. Younger children watched at their sides or asked others, “What does thing this do?” The lucky ones got an explanation from an older sibling or some other caretaker. After leaving the obligatory smudges on the touch screen, the children were soon off to a different part of the keep to see something more interesting.

The Power of Place

Computer kiosks are becoming increasingly common in all aspects of our life. You see them in airports, in shopping malls, and elsewhere. They dispense information at the touch of a finger to visitors at an unfamiliar place. Maps of the location are typical fare on a computer kiosk, along with timetables, special event announcements, and other topics of interest. They perform the same function as the non-electronic kiosks found on city streets and college campuses.

What is becoming more significant in popularizing family history is the computer kiosks appearing at museums. Millions of visitors with a only a mild interest in history visit places of historical interest every year. Historic places draw visitors who at least have the curiosity to see the site. It is a natural extension of their curiosity to have their interest piqued at the possibility that an ancestor of theirs might have been connected to the site.

Some particularly compelling historic places might provide such connections. War memorials, battlefields, immigrant processing centers, and cemeteries are all likely places for the satisfaction of this curiosity. Such places are now using computer kiosks that can access large lists of names associated with that place as a way to enhance the visitor’s experience.

Celluloid Cemetery

Once such place is the Hollywood Forever Cemetery (online at <www.hollywoodforever.com>), formerly known as the Hollywood Memorial Park Cemetery in Hollywood, California. Founded in 1899, many of the silver screen’s famous stars and directors are buried within its grounds, including Cecil B. DeMille, Rudolph Valentino, and Douglas Fairbanks.

Museums and cemeteries are now using computer kiosks that can access large lists of names associated with that place as a way to enhance the visitor's experience.



Using outdoor computer kiosks on the grounds, visitors are treated to fifteen-minute videos celebrating the life stories of the individuals buried there. And now this visual use of kiosks is also available for any new interment if the family of the deceased so chooses; it is not just for the famous. The outdoor computer kiosks provide not only grave location information and name search but video tributes to the deceased.

Cemeteries are obvious candidates for self-serve kiosks that show plot locations by the name of the deceased. Battlefields of historic interest are also providing visitors with computerized lists of not only those who died there, but the combatants who served there as well. Immigration processing centers, most notably Ellis Island, are also ideally suited to provide visitors access to computer kiosks where they can search for possible immigrant ancestors.

Catching the Bug

Combining a historic location with lists of associated individuals has been a traditional practice for a long time. The example above from the war memorial at Norwich castle was first created in wood panels in 1931. It is comforting to note that even though the technology of the "Norfolk Roll of Honour" was updated, the original wooden panels are maintained side-by-side with its new incarnation. Computer kiosks, with their abilities to provide quick searches of large

amounts of data, are an outgrowth of this concept of listing names from the past. These kiosks are a new way of introducing the public to the idea of family history. They often transmit the "genealogy bug" to visitors who have a passing interest but don't know where to begin.

The next time you visit a historic place and see one of these kiosks, step back and watch your fellow visitors. From a respectful distance, observe

how they use the kiosk and their excitement when they find something of interest. When they stop to note something they found on the kiosk, you can say to yourself, "There's another one hooked." ☞

When not traveling with pre-moistened wipes to clean smudged kiosk screens, Mark Howells can be found at markhow@oz.net.

DO YOU HAVE A VALE RELATIVE BORN BETWEEN 1872 & 1900?

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- Full name and address;
- Exact date of birth, age, and race;
- Citizenship status, and, if alien, citizen of what country;
- Employer's name and address (and, nearly always, person's occupation);
- Eye and hair color, height, build, any disabilities (and often whether left);
- Signature (or mark) of applicant, and date of registration;

Many of the cards also include:

- Exact place of birth (including town in old country, if immigrant)
- Number and type of dependents — father / mother / minor brothers or sisters / wife / children;
- Marital status;
- Description of any previous military service, U.S. or foreign;
- Any grounds claimed for exemption — religious, occupational, sole support, etc.;
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Search fees: \$15 (if his residence was rural or small town under 20,000 pop.); \$30 (if larger town/city and you can provide his street address); \$35 (if larger town/city and you cannot provide street address);

Please provide full name, residence in 1917-18 (State, county, and, if applicable, town or city), plus, if known: date of birth, occupation, marital status, and wife's name. Include fee for each person you are seeking; plus long self-addressed, stamped envelope.

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