



The “secret” reason people are gripped by *Who Do You Think You Are?*

And how the same effect can make your Family Project interesting to anybody

Welcome to the second video in the Family Project. I'm John-Paul Flintoff.

I've been helping people tell their family stories for a very long time. But I want to tell you about someone else involved.

(Turns the camera round.)

One sec. I want to look in the boot of the car, because...

...under all the fishing rods, and wellington boots...

Ah yes, Guardian Family!

Edited by my brilliant wife, Harriet Green, co-founder of The Family Project.

In this workshop, I'm going to show you how you can start a simple creative project, to share your family story in a way that people are actually interested to hear - and at the same time enjoy doing a creative exercise with the people you love.

If you missed the first video, I think you should go and watch it now, because I shared in that video how you can make a family heirloom out of what seems like very simple bits of storytelling, and audio, and maybe photos - creating a bit of treasure that future generations will really value.

Go off and watch it now, and I'll stay here and wait for you...

Here's the link: <https://thefamilyproject.info/heirloom/>

Get people's interest

Now, you may be looking to publish a stunning family memoir, and I work with people who do that...

Or you may just be looking for a simple, fairly informal project to do with your family during the holiday...

In either case, you're going to want to know how to do it in such a way that you *actually get people interested*.

Well, in this second video I'm going to show you how you can take advantage of the secret that gives so much power to programmes in the BBC series, *Who Do You Think You Are?*

It's not really a secret, because it's there in plain view...

...but most people don't notice it.

So I think you're going to find this really interesting and very valuable.

Now, on *Who Do You Think You Are*, you may have seen famous people, helped by an army of genealogists, look into their past for stories of people they frankly often didn't even know *existed* before, let alone care about.

Why do people care?

Sometimes, I watch it and I wonder *why they care?* These people they didn't know about before are dead. Long gone.

Why do they care about them?

It's almost like me worrying about people who live a mile away from me. They have no connection with me.

But if somebody *says* they're connected, then I'm interested.

Now, in the UK recently, we've had episodes where people who are famously tough, and hard, like newsreaders...

...like, Jeremy Paxman...

...a very tough TV interviewer, ended up with tears in his eyes when he found out about his ancestors living a hard life in Glasgow.

And JK Rowling, the author of *Harry Potter*, found out something about one of her ancestors in the First World War.

And she was very moved by that.

Amelia Fox, the actress, found out about one of her forebears having a miscarriage.

And she was moved by that.

And I was moved, by them being moved.

And not just me: lots of other viewers were interested and delighted and moved, thinking, "Wow, Jeremy Paxman, he cries! Who'd have thought!"

So I want to just draw your attention to what's important here.

If I could just be cold-blooded and unkind for a moment...

There is no good reason why I should care that someone who died a long time ago,

who lived in Glasgow, had a hard life.

Why should I care?

There is no good reason why I should care that someone in the First World War killed some Germans, which is what happened to JK Rowling's forebears.

Why should I care?

Lots of people killed Germans in the war. It was a thing - very regrettable, but why should I care about this one person that I never heard of before?

And why should I care that a woman, a long time ago, had a miscarriage?

Really trying to be dispassionate about it, there's no reason I should care.

So: *here's why I care.*

I care, because I watch Paxman find out, and he is moved, and I watch him, and therefore I'm moved.

I watch JK Rowling find out about her ancestor having to kill Germans, and she's moved, and I see her, and I'm moved.

I watch Amelia Fox find out about her forebear having a miscarriage, and I think when she made her programme she was pregnant so there's an extra kind of toughness to finding that out.

And the cameras are on her, and it's being recorded – so I'm moved.

So the *content* itself – the fact of the miscarriage, or shooting Germans, or the hard life in Glasgow, is not very interesting to me.

What makes it interesting is someone else being moved by it.

And reflecting on it.

THAT is something I want to watch.

And of course this doesn't only apply to BBC viewers. It applies to anybody you hope to interest in your family story.

Not just the wider world of publishing, and TV rights.

But even your relatives themselves.

No audience should be taken for granted.

Show real feeling

Recently, I was running a residential course for some very accomplished writers working on their memoirs.

I wanted to show how powerful it is to see people being moved. So I asked for a volunteer.

And one brave woman agreed to show me around the room where she slept as a little girl.

We did it right there, in the middle of the room where I was teaching.

I asked her to ignore everybody else, and just walk me round as if we were back in that room, from another country, decades ago.

She pointed out the fireplace (“don't touch!”), and the table (“my father sat there”), and the windows (“you can see the horse and cart”).

At the bookshelf, I asked her to pull down a book, and open it.

She did.

I asked what it said inside. It was Hungarian poetry. Her father used to read it to the family.

He would dress very smartly, although they had been squeezed into a single room, under the Communist regime. He wore a bow tie, she said. Not like most people. He was very respectable.

I can tell you that the people listening were powerfully affected by the way she spoke about her father. Her feelings came through very strongly. And it was those feelings that made it interesting.

Why should anyone care, otherwise, about where a woman we don't know happened to live as a little girl?

Incidentally, this is an exercise John-Paul has done many times. The first time was with Harriet's great aunt Peggy, who was 102 at the time.

She remembered every detail of her childhood room, including where she kept her hairbrush, and what colour the handle was (her sister had a different colour).

She was describing a room she left behind in 1917.

Quite some time ago! But she remembered everything, including a mild sense of injustice that the girls shared a bedroom while their brother had a room to himself.

Can't do it alone

Now, you may be listening to this and thinking: I don't like sharing my feelings. I might feel awkward.

But if you don't, I'm afraid people probably won't much care about your family story. It's just how we're wired.

But to be perfectly clear: feelings don't need to be upsetting, or dark.

You saw that when I showed a still photograph from my own family, then showed it to you again with lots of background laughter.

That's the happy sound of people seeing themselves again in a photo many years later.

The laughter tells us a lot, without any verbal commentary at all.

So it can be very quick and easy.

But it won't happen by itself. And you can't do it alone. You need to embark on some kind of shared Family Project with your relatives.

How to start conversations?

We've covered quite a lot of ground, and I don't want to overwhelm you. So I'll stop the teaching there.

But I want to give you a word of warning.

A lot of people ask me questions about how to have a conversation with family members that might bring up a lot of strong feeling.

In fact, that can be so worrying that many people don't even start at all. And that's terrible, because they really regret it afterwards.

In the next video, I'm going to show you the solution.

How to have those conversations in such a way that everyone is happy afterwards.

And if you are very lucky you might even get some glimpse of Harriet, who I keep mentioning, but you haven't seen yet, have you?

So tell me now, what's one action you'll take, as a result of what you've learned so far...?

Leave a comment, telling me one thing you'll do to get started on your own Family Project. I read all the comments, and I love to hear what you're going to get up to.

Next time, I'll share with you my ideas, and a detailed plan for how you can have those conversations with family members. There will be a downloadable guide, and I'm sure you're going to love it.

I really enjoyed sharing this with you, and I hope if you enjoyed it you will share it with other people too. So go ahead, leave me a comment below.

Till next time, bye!

JP and Harriet

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