

Tree Preservation by George Ruscoe

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We take great care these days to preserve trees of great age or rarity – do we take as much care with our family tree? In a previous article I wrote about preserving your archives, with a promise to say something more about protecting the data held on your computer (September 2004, page 102). Since then I came across details of a case of credit card fraud probably resulting from a family tree on a web site. This draws attention to the care we must take in publishing our family tree on the internet.

Preserving privacy

It is common practice to remove details of living persons from any tree that is published on the web. This is not only a matter of courtesy, but the Data Protection Act places limits on the holding and publishing of personal data. While it is permissible for you to hold data on living persons for your own purposes, for example in your address book or birthday book, you are not permitted to publish it without their permission. Some family history programs have an option to Publish to the Web, and there are other programs to convert the GEDCOM output from your program to a web page. These may include a facility to suppress the details of anyone who appears to be living (say, born in the past 110 years and no death date recorded).

Some of these programs will replace the forename of the individual with the word “Living” but leave the surname. The case mentioned above is that of an elderly widow who was the victim of credit card fraud. She put this down to the publication of birth and death dates for her husband, brother and sister-in-law in an online genealogy. With this information someone had accessed the US Social Security Death Index online and obtained the zip code to which the “lump sum” for all three would have been sent. A search of online business telephone books for the surname (shared by these three deceased persons, but otherwise quite rare) showed one business in that area – run by the lady’s son and his wife. A single telephone call was all that was needed to confirm the son and wife as directors of the business. This also gave an address for the family. Although the lady herself was unlisted, the criminal guessed, from her husband’s age at death, that she was elderly and might well be living with her family.

The elderly widow’s name and address was also listed on a local garden-lovers hobby web site. It was not difficult to piece together her identity (with the surname being relatively uncommon). The next move was to call local credit card companies, requesting a change to her billing address. The one piece of information commonly used to identify the caller – *mother’s maiden name* – was available from the online tree.

This suggests that it is not sufficient just to remove some details of living persons from published trees. It is better to remove them and their (dead) siblings completely from the published version, leaving perhaps a note: “three offspring”. It might also be a good idea, when asked for your mother’s maiden

name, to give a fictitious one – provided only that you remember what you said! The thing that makes Internet publishing more dangerous than books or magazines is the fact that searching is so much easier. Try typing your own full name into Google or some other search engine. I found a namesake in Australia participating in a swimming competition and several others scattered around the world, despite having a fairly uncommon surname.

While on this subject, it is only polite to ask before passing on any personal details, including an email address, to others. If you are sending a general email to a number of persons who are otherwise unconnected, the best procedure is to make use of the Bcc: field in the email header. You will be familiar with the From:, To:, and copies (Cc:) entries. There is also a Blind Copies (Bcc:) which means that the address is hidden from the recipients. If this entry is not normally shown at the head of a new email, there are still ways to use it. Outlook Express, for example, has an option under the View menu (when composing a message) of “All Headers”; or if you click on the To: icon the dialog box shown includes all three boxes for addresses. If you put nothing in the To: box, then the message may arrive showing something like “Undisclosed recipient”.

If you prefer not to see this, you can of course send the message to yourself with blind copies to others; or being ingenious, why not include an entry in your address book with your own email address, but a “Display Name” of “Family Circle” or something appropriate. Use this to sent To:, with blind copies (Bcc:) to the individuals.

Preserving data

Having protected your family and friends, the other subject was protecting the data on your PC. There is much to be said about the virus threat, “spam” email and so on. However, for the moment let us discuss only organising your files and backing them up onto a safe second medium. These notes are aimed mainly at the vast majority of PC users, who have a version of the Windows operating system (95 or later). To avoid repeating too much detail I have gathered some hints on these operations into an appendix. Where you see * consult the appendix for more information.

When one is called upon to look at the computer of a friend with a problem, it is often surprising to find that nearly all the “documents” (or files) are stored under a single heading of My Documents. When Microsoft developed Windows 95 they decided it would be a good idea to set up such a “folder” (or directory as they used to be known) in which the user could keep their documents. Since then there has been a development of others, like My Pictures, My Websites and so on.

There are of course many folders on your hard disk (the C: drive in most machines), but many of them contain Windows System files and programs, and these are often hidden from normal view, which is perhaps just as well. The whole structure is meant to imitate the office filing system, where there are various filing cabinets (disk drives) containing folders, and each folder can

contain many documents. However, on the computer, each folder may also contain other sub-folders as well. This is like a filing cabinet with four drawers. The drawer is a “top-level” folder, and this contains other sub-folders.

It is a great help if you organise your documents into folders, so that My Documents might contain Letters, Family History, Money, Xmas Lists and so on. You can have a whole hierarchy of folders (just like a family tree!) but may not often find another level necessary. How do we look at this tree and see what files and folders we have? And how do we create a new folder, and move our files into it? You will see the tree in part when you use the Open or Save As commands in a program. Usually Microsoft programs will be set up to start off in the My Documents folder. What you see is the list of files it contains. These may be shown as Icons, a list of names, or a list with details. The latter is the one that I prefer, but it is a matter of taste. The Views icon at the top of the window gives you a pull down list of choices of display. The two yellow icons represent folders: one (with a “spark”) to create a new folder, the other (with an arrow) to move up a level. If you move the mouse pointer over these icons it will tell you what they do.

Another way to view the tree of folders is with Windows Explorer. This is probably set to start in My Documents, and is usually found from Start; Programs; Accessories. If you want a Shortcut to this on the Desktop, get the Start menu up and, instead of a left click on Windows Explorer, use a right click to get a menu, select Send to and Desktop (see Appendix below *). The “modern” view in Explorer shows a blue panel at the left with actions to take and a panel at the right showing the contents of the current folder. However, if you click on the Folders button on the toolbar, the left panel is replaced by a display of the tree of folders, starting from the Desktop. Clicking the – or + sign to the left of a folder name will contract or expand the display of sub-folders; clicking on the folder icon will expand it and display its contents in the right hand panel.

A new folder may be created in several ways; through the main menu: File; New; Folder is one (or right click and choose New; Folder) *. You can type its name straight away, say Letters. If you are doing this to tidy up your files, you will now want to move your letter documents into the new folder. This you can do by dragging the icon beside the file name over the icon for the folder. You can also select several files at once and move them. To do this hold down the CTRL key and click on each in turn, then release the key. Once you have mastered this, you can organise your documents more efficiently. A sub-folder that I find particularly useful is called OLD. This exists in many of my folders.

When I decide to make changes to a document, I copy the current version into the OLD folder; first left click to select the file, and then Copy the file and Paste into the other folder (see Appendix *). Then double click to open the file in the main folder and make any changes. This means that the date of modification shown for the file in the OLD folder is unchanged. You may find that you already have a copy in OLD, and then have to decide whether to replace it. Generally, if you have been making a backup copy of your files, you

will have the earlier one on another disk, if required. The OLD folder just gives you a quick way of going back one step if you get it all wrong

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