

The internet has unearthed an amazing wealth of sources to family and local historians but it has also presented some interesting challenges. For instance, free text searching sometimes delivers wonderful gifts in the form of unexpected results that represent a real break-through in our research. On the other hand, we have to learn to handle the sheer amount of irrelevant hits that databases may return when we search for common family or place names. Using the Catalogue search screen, users can avoid the retrieval of spelling variations and retrieve only exact matches of a term by enclosing it with double quotes (e.g. “Stephens” will not find Stephen). It is also possible to use dates or to restrict searches to parts of the catalogue in order to narrow down your searches further.

Internet searching may become a time-consuming affair, as initially we tend not to trust search engines fully and may end up running similar searches with the purpose of comparing the number of results in order to verify the reliability of the source database (e.g. test searches for the same keywords with and without quotes, with and without dates, etc.). When we search for the term Banbury in The National Archives Catalogue, the system delivers 1,311 catalogue references but when we search for its exact spelling using double quotes 1,303 references are returned.¹ This is in fact quite encouraging as the small discrepancy is due to the fact that the initial search for Banbury also retrieves the form Banburye.

It should also be mentioned that the Topic Index screen (accessible under ‘show advanced search options’), provides a different means of searching for place names. A large selection of personal names, corporate names, subjects and places have been verified and linked to the most relevant areas of the catalogue, as part of the cataloguing process. They provide special access points into the catalogue. This type of search does not find every occurrence of a term (as the free text search does) but it is most useful to limit the number of search results to a few references for the richest parts of the catalogue about a term. For example, a Topic Index search for Banbury only retrieves the four whole record series relevant to this place (rather than broader instances where the term may appear as a person’s surname or as a place in other contexts).

¹ Some readers may notice that, when this article was first published in the April 2004 issue of the *Oxfordshire Family Historian*, there were 1,293 hits for this search.