

Ancestry more than just spit and hope

The online ancestor-finding company Ancestry.com has taken flak for years over its DNA option, a way to supposedly find out through your spit if you're related to royalty, in its traditional form or the guise of simply someone famous.

In the latest attack, the editor of one of our major newspapers had a go at the company over a claim by Māori Television's Native Affairs show that a DNA ethnicity test taken by more than nine million people worldwide had discovered a full-blooded Māori.

The show uncritically embraced Ancestry.com, whose press releases, he said (including "Richie McCaw is Jamaican") were ignored by most journalists. "It's a website that touts for business from the lonely by promising to find a DNA strand that connects them to greatness." Reputable medical media support his view, saying that after a few generations our connections become so merged that eventually everyone is related to everyone else.

Despite that, I'd like to put in a good word for Ancestry.com. Its basic service can deliver much. The proviso is you need to learn to use it properly, and that can take years of experimentation, if our experience is anything to go by. When I say "our," I mean the person in the household Arthur Daley would have cautiously referred to as 'er indoors.

Lin has become so adept at Ancestry dot comming that I now know where the modern version of my surname originated. She found the original family name in 1685 was Tooker, which soon after morphed into my iteration.

That's not unusual. Early records were written by the literate few, who "interviewed" people for the recording of marriages, births, deaths, property transactions and the census. That early spelling would have been an honest attempt to record the way the name was spoken in Buckinghamshire, England. They may well still say it like that there, if their speech patterns have survived political correctness and the education system.

Compared to some families, the Tucker/Tookers got off lightly - except for unprintable variations I copped at high school. When researching a book about one prominent Taranaki family, I discovered their name had 20 different spellings, including versions traced to German miners who migrated to Cornwall in the 1500s.

Anyway, good 'ol Ancestry.com enabled us to find written evidence that my father's claim of 52 bakers in the family was probably accurate. Edward Tooker was a baker in Buckingham, as were his sons, grandson and son, on down to my father, Henry William John (Jack) Tucker, whose former bakery building still stands in Mangorei Rd, New Plymouth.

Lin produced a 30-page PowerPoint document showing how the generations migrated south through English villages with wonderful names like Little Missenden and Holmer Green, eventually getting to the London suburb of Woolwich, just south of the River Thames and within the sound of Bow Bells. If you're born within earshot of those you're a Cockney.

A member of the seventh recorded generation of bakers, my grandfather ran away to sea at 17 and washed up in Auckland, where he married Gladys Mayne (early

iterations of whose name followed the usual pattern and were spelled Main and Maine). He won a thousand pounds in the Australian lottery in 1918 and used it to build a bakery in Otahuhu. All four sons – including Jack – were bakers.

The baking tradition died with that generation, though. My 19 cousins and I pursued other ways of making a living, no doubt influenced by the fact our fathers had to get up at 2am to go to work and were invariably sleeping when we came home from school in mid-afternoon. So the baker total has stalled at 52.

My brother Rob worked in London in 1972 and tracked down the old bakery building in Woolwich, a wedge-shaped structure on the corner of two intersecting streets. When he knocked on the door, great-aunt Ena Tucker opened it and said: “You must be young Rob, then, from New Zealand.” How she knew, he never quite worked out.

It turned out Ena and her sister, Gladys Tucker, were by then living alone in the old place, whose downstairs shop counter was the scene of their father Edward’s death at the age of 98. They were about to move out, and after they did the building was demolished.

Rob took photos of them, of course, and soon those will be added to Lin’s document. Future generations will get to see it all online - as they and Ancestry.com will no doubt prefer.