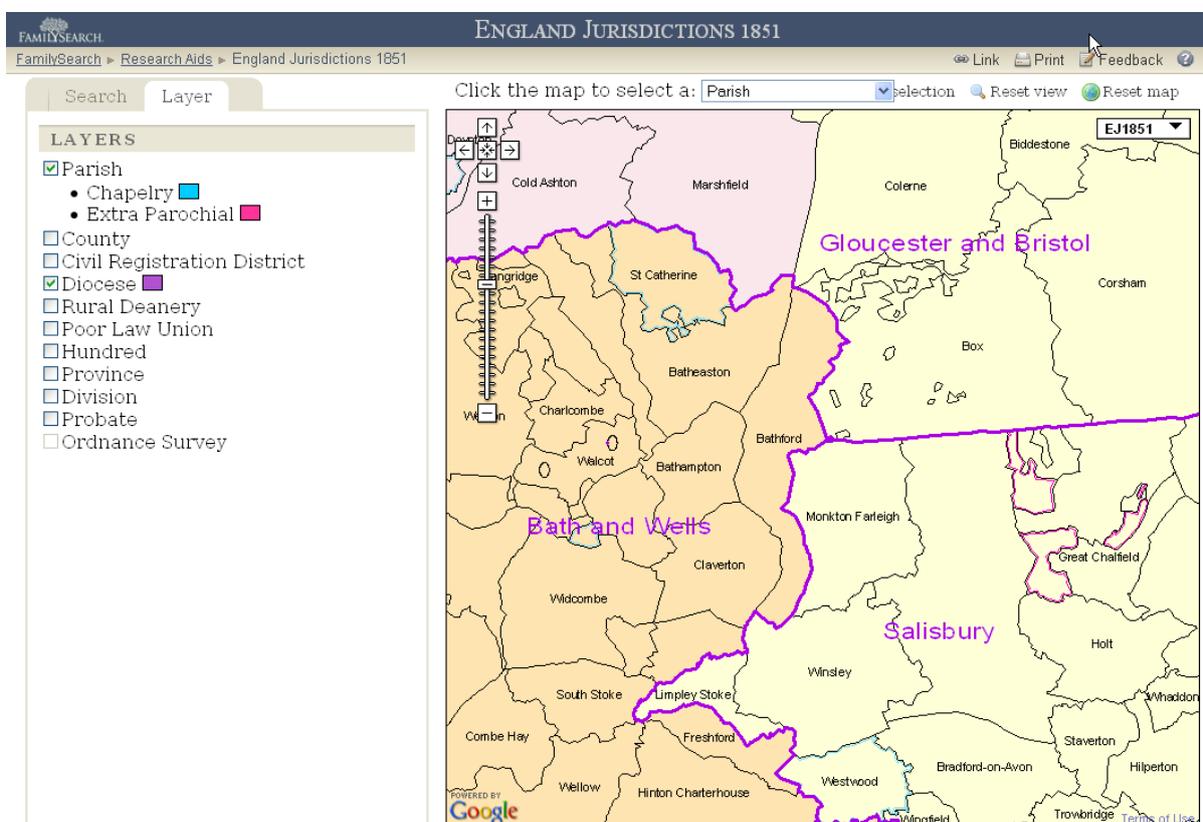


## Interactive Mapping for Family Historians

Peter Christian

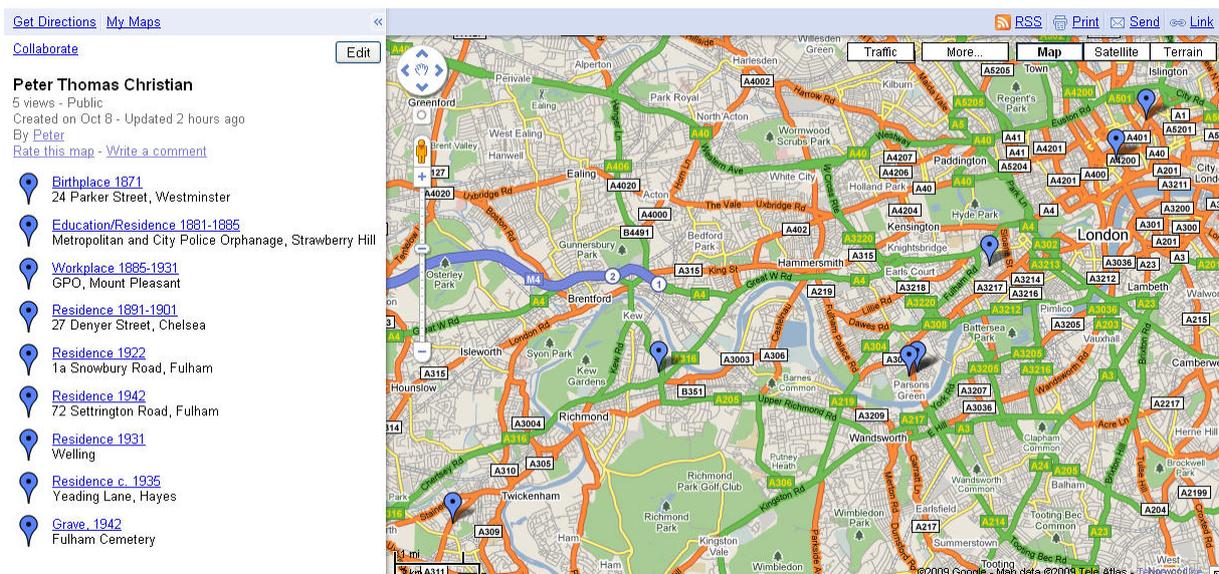
The web offers a large repertoire of maps, both present-day and historical. Mostly these are scans of printed maps, and their availability online has been a huge boon to family and local historians. But the web has also opened up entirely new mapping possibilities, with maps which are not just passive resources but allow you to interact with them in various ways, and even create your own.

At its simplest, an interactive online map can offer you the choice of exactly what information is displayed. A good genealogical example is the map of English Jurisdictions in 1851 hosted on the FamilySearch maps site at [maps.familysearch.org](https://maps.familysearch.org). Over a base map showing the counties of England, you can select one or more “layers”, each of which shows the boundaries for a particular type of administrative unit — Parish, County, Civil Registration District, Diocese, Rural Deanery, Poor Law Union, Hundred, Province, Division, and Probate. The ability to select more than one layer can be very useful: you can see which diocese a parish belongs to (see the screenshot) or which parishes are covered by a particular registration district. (Of course, this map simplifies some of the complexities of these boundaries.)



The basis of this and many other online maps are the facilities provided by Google Maps, which has a UK site at [maps.google.co.uk](http://maps.google.co.uk). Google not only provides streetmaps, aerial and street-level photographs on its own site, but its My Maps facility gives you the opportunity to create your own maps by adding information to Google's base map.

To demonstrate the facilities, I have created a very simply map showing some of the places that are significant in the life of my great grandfather Peter Thomas Christian. I have just added a few markers for individual locations, but you can also draw lines and shapes on the map, to map out movements and areas.



Although Google's main street map allows for relatively coarse locations, the satellite view allows you to identify individual houses and to place the marker very precisely. For places where Google Street View images are available, this means you will be able to see the individual house. In my map, clicking on the street view icon will show the house where my great grandfather lived before his death in 1942. But you can also attach photographs as long as they are hosted online, perhaps at an online photo service such as Flickr or Google's Picasaweb – my map includes a photograph of my great grandfather's grave in Fulham New Cemetery. Indeed, they don't even need to be your own photos – this map includes a photo of the orphanage where my great grandfather spent five years of his youth, linked from another web site, that of the The Twickenham Museum ([www.twickenham-museum.org.uk](http://www.twickenham-museum.org.uk)). In this case, the building no longer exists, so street-view is no use and a historical photograph is the only option. (Even though you aren't strictly copying the photograph, you are *using* it, so you need to be careful about copyright: avoid linking to newer photographs which aren't specifically marked for free use. Wikipedia is a good source of public domain photos of public buildings and places.)

To create your own maps, you first need a Google account. If you are already using Google Mail, you will already have one, but otherwise you will need to sign up by following the

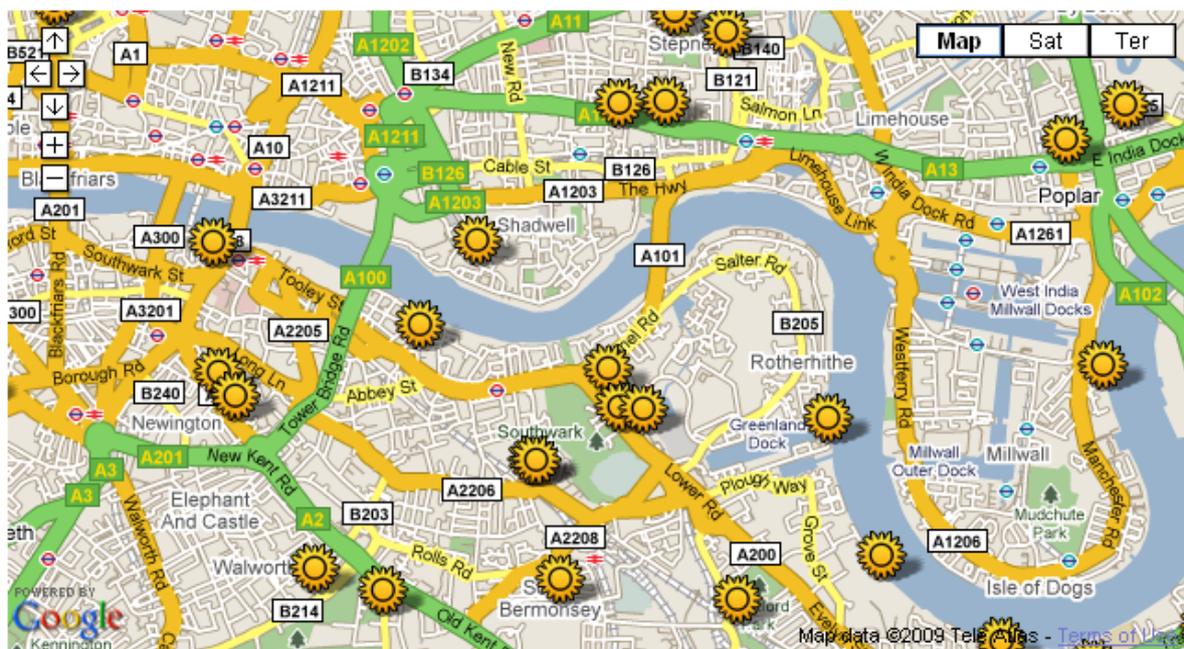
“Sign in” link at the top right of the any Google screen. Then, when you return to Google Maps, click on the **Get started** button, or perhaps first look at the help pages or the tutorial video.

I have made this map public, so that anyone searching on the name can find it — if you go to Google Maps UK and search for “Peter Thomas Christian” this will list all the markers on the map. But it is also possible to have a private map which can only be seen by people you give the full web address of the map to. Unfortunately these are over 100 characters long, but you will find the full web address for my map in my public bookmarks at [delicious.com/petex/ancestors90/maps](http://delicious.com/petex/ancestors90/maps). You can also give other family members, or indeed the world at large, editing rights to contribute to the map, using the “collaborate” option.

Although I have only looked at Google Maps here, you can also use Microsoft’s Bing Maps at [www.bing.com/maps](http://www.bing.com/maps). If you have not already got a Windows Live ID or a Hotmail e-mail address, you will need to register (free).

Google maps can also be incorporated in other web sites on their own web sites, which is in fact what FamilySearch has done with the Jurisdictions map mentioned at the start of this article. A nice example of how this can be used for historical information Londonist’s map showing the sites of V2 rocket strikes on London at [londonist.com/2009/01/london\\_v2\\_rocket\\_sitesmapped.php](http://londonist.com/2009/01/london_v2_rocket_sitesmapped.php).

## London V2 Rocket Sites...Mapped



Of course, setting up a map like this takes more technical knowledge than creating a map on Google’s site, and is well beyond the scope of this article, but if you’ve got your own website, have a look at [code.google.com/apis/maps/](http://code.google.com/apis/maps/) to see what is involved. In fact, the

English Jurisdictions map mentioned at the start of this article is just another example of the same thing, though compiling and coding the various sets of boundaries and obviously a vastly more complex task.

But you don't always need to create the data yourself. The County Borders website at [www.county-borders.co.uk](http://www.county-borders.co.uk) has a downloadable file containing all the boundary data, which you can import into your own Google Map. Google uses two file formats for map data, KML and KMZ — wherever you find a file with one of these filename extensions, you can use it in a Google map.

An interesting example of a collaborative site is Nations' Memorybank at [www.nationsmemorybank.com](http://www.nationsmemorybank.com). If you register (free) you can collaborate in the project by add stories or images to individual map locations. Stories can be classified (family, fashion, food, house, local, military and family, fashion, food, general, house, local, military), enabling visitors to find material on a particular topic.

Of course, you are not going to find that someone has already compiled the geographical data for your own family tree, and creating a Google Map for your entire pedigree by placing individual markers would be an immense and time-consuming task. What you really need is the ability to generate a map automatically from your pedigree by uploading a GEDCOM file from your family tree software. In fact genealogists and historians are not the only ones with a need to match up large amounts of data with a map, and you will find plenty of sites that offer data in mapped form, for example:

- The Havia AlertMap at [hisz.rsos.hu/alertmap](http://hisz.rsos.hu/alertmap) which maps emergency and disaster worldwide
- The many crime mapping sites such as that of the Metropolitan Police at [maps.met.police.uk](http://maps.met.police.uk)
- The *New York Times's* "Immigration Explorer", which shows the patterns of immigration in to the USA for over 20 immigrant groups from 1880 to 2000, derived from the US censuses (go to the home page at [www.nytime.com](http://www.nytime.com) and search for "Immigration Explorer, in quotation marks — when your initial search draws a blank, click on "Past 12 Months"; alternatively follow the link from my public bookmarks at [delicious.com/petex/ancestors90](http://delicious.com/petex/ancestors90)).

These projects are all one-offs and require some programming expertise to get the data into the map. But genealogists are in a very fortunate position: the GEDCOM file format for storing pedigree information is the sole file type universally supported by genealogy software, so any mapping facility that supports GEDCOM import does not require any specialist knowledge on the part of the person uploading the data. The result is that there are already several services which can create maps for the places attached to events in a GEDCOM file.

One program that does this is Map My Ancestors, a commercial program for Windows, which will create a set of co-ordinates for the places in a GEDCOM file, which you then upload to a Google Maps. It attempts to match all the places in your pedigree with matching co-ordinates, which you can check and, if necessary, correct (when I tried it with a sample file, it seemed very accurate and in fact helped me spot a misspelt place name). You save a file with the details, and use the import option on the Google My Maps page. You can download the program from [www.familytreeassistant.com](http://www.familytreeassistant.com) – it costs £10, but there is a free 30-day free trial version, with a maximum of 20 individuals. If you just want to view the map on your own computer, the program will display the places in Google Earth (which you can download free from [earth.google.com](http://earth.google.com)).

A similar service is provided by Ancestral Atlas at [www.ancestralatlas.com](http://www.ancestralatlas.com) — this site was reviewed in depth by Chris Pomery in *Ancestors* 83. Unlike Map My Ancestors, this site hosts the maps itself.

WorldHistory at [www.worldhistory.com](http://www.worldhistory.com) is a new free site aimed at all those with an interest in mapping historical events, so mapping ancestors is just one of the options. The site is still in development at the time of writing, but should be live by the time you read this.

A number of the main genealogy software packages have provision for mapping, though they only draw on online maps for display and, so far as I know, do not have facilities for making them available online. For example, the deluxe version of Legacy ([www.legacyfamilytree.com](http://www.legacyfamilytree.com)) uses Google Maps and RootsMagic (see [blog.rootsmagic.com/?p=69](http://blog.rootsmagic.com/?p=69)) uses Microsoft's Bing Maps. Progeny has a product called Map My Family Tree (downloadable for \$39.95 from [www.progenygenealogy.com/map-my-family-tree.html](http://www.progenygenealogy.com/map-my-family-tree.html)), which is reviewed by Dick Eastman at [blog.eogn.com/eastmans\\_online\\_genealogy/2006/09/map\\_my\\_family\\_t.html](http://blog.eogn.com/eastmans_online_genealogy/2006/09/map_my_family_t.html).

However, TNG, a program for maintaining an online family tree on your own website (details at [lythgoes.net/genealogy/software.php](http://lythgoes.net/genealogy/software.php)). Unfortunately, it has no automatic facility for locating places and this needs to be done manually — for each place in the master list of places, you need to locate it yourself on Google Maps and the co-ordinates are automatically added to the places list. The page for each ancestors then shows a Google Map for all the places identified with him or her. The screenshot, taken from my own website at [www.petex.org.uk/getperson.php?personID=I170&tree=chr](http://www.petex.org.uk/getperson.php?personID=I170&tree=chr), shows the places associated with my ancestor Thomas Christian. Usefully, the events are numbered in chronological order.



This is one of the cases where the internet does not so much provide another way of accessing offline resources, but enables a completely new set of possibilities for family historians. The range of possibilities is enormous and the examples discussed in this article are undoubtedly just the beginning — in the long term interactive online mapping is bound to become an increasingly important and useful tool for displaying the geography of your family tree.

### Taking it further

The technical term for matching placenames to latitude and longitude is “geocoding”, and if you want to incorporate maps on your own web site, it will be worth looking at Wikipedia’s article on this at [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org). There’s a specifically genealogical guide in Alan E. Mann’s “GeoGenealogy: Geography for Genealogists” at [www.alanmann.com/articles/geogen.htm](http://www.alanmann.com/articles/geogen.htm).

Kimberley Powell has a useful article on genealogical use of Google Maps, “Map Adventures with Google” at [genealogy.about.com/od/geography/a/google.htm](http://genealogy.about.com/od/geography/a/google.htm). This has details of some further useful sites which offer facilities for exploiting Google Maps.

Dick Eastman’s Online genealogy Newsletter at [blog.eogn.com](http://blog.eogn.com) has had a number of articles in recent years on mapping for genealogists, along with reviews of some of the software and services mentioned here — use the search box near the bottom of the right hand column to look for articles on “mapping”.