

BBC WON / 'THE FAMILY TREE IS THE SKELETON; I GET TO PUT THE FLESH ON'

# UK's Jewish 'heir hunter' tracks down missing relatives who now stand to inherit

History-loving Wirralian Saul Marks appears on long-running BBC One reality show about forensic genealogists

By [RENEE GHERT-ZAND](#) | 25 November 2017, 9:39 am



Forensic genealogist Saul Marks. (Courtesy of Brother's Wish Genealogy Service)

You can be certain Saul Marks isn't scamming you when he calls to say you have a windfall coming your way. The money he'll tell you about is a legitimate inheritance you didn't even know you were entitled to.

BBC One watchers will recognize Marks from "[Heir Hunters](#)," a reality show about probate researchers (also known as forensic genealogists), who track down missing relatives of deceased individuals so their estate can be claimed. Often, these are people who died intestate (without a will) and without any known next of kin, whose estates end up on the Crown's [Bona Vacantia](#) list. ("Bona Vacantia" is Latin for vacant goods, or ownerless property—which goes to the state if no legal spouse or bloodline relative is located to inherit.)

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Marks, 37, has appeared in 30 "Heir Hunters" episodes in the last eight and a half years, and he is currently involved in the filming of the show's twelfth season.

A lanky, balding fast-talker, Marks comes across on screen as equally serious and enthusiastic about his work in combing through historical documents and building family trees. Somehow, he makes it look incredibly exciting to sit at a computer for hours pouring over birth and death certificates, or to visit a local archive.



Saul Marks during filming of an 'Heir Hunters' episode for BBC One (Courtesy of Brother's Wish Genealogy Service)

“I have no problem with confidence, and I enjoy being on TV,” Marks recently told *The Times of Israel* in a phone conversation from his Wallasey office at [Celtic Research](#), one of the UK’s leading heir hunting firms.

As seen on “Heir Hunters,” the country’s more than 30 probate research firms compete against one another to be the first and most accurate in locating any or all living potential heirs in a case. The firms make their money by taking a cut from the inheritance payment of each heir they sign up to make a successful claim to the government’s Bona Vacantia’s Division.

Marks joined Celtic Research in 2008, five years after starting his own genealogy consulting firm, [Brother’s Wish Genealogy Service](#), which he still runs. At any given time, he’s juggling some 50 open files at Celtic and 35 open cases for his own business. Whereas his work at Celtic focuses on heir hunting, his private clients come to him also out of an interest in their ancestry and family history. In addition, adoptees ask his help in tracking down their biological parents.

One time, Marks’ crack investigative skills allowed a girl to fulfill her athletic ambition. The researcher’s friend from the local cricket club, a professional basketball coach, was keen to prove that his daughter was eligible to play for Wales. Building on initial information, Marks was able to prove that the young lady had ancestors some 200 years ago who were born on the Welsh island of Anglesey.

“On the basis of this, the basketball authorities granted her eligibility. I believe she has gone on to represent Wales at youth level,” Marks said.

It’s no surprise that Marks, who is active at Liverpool’s historic and landmarked [Princes Road Synagogue](#) and pioneered the restoration of Liverpool’s oldest Jewish burial ground, [Deane Road Cemetery](#), specializes in British Jewish genealogy.



Deane Road Cemetery, the oldest Jewish burial ground in Liverpool, England (Courtesy of Saul Marks)

At Celtic, where Marks is case manager for North West England, 20 percent of his cases relate to Jews. More than half of his work at Brother's Wish has to do with Jewish individuals and families.

Marks is quick to set the record straight on misconceptions about Jewish genealogy.

“A lot of Jewish families are under the impression that relevant records were destroyed by the Nazis and Communists. This is incorrect. Many of these records do still exist and information can be found, such as what I discovered about [my own family](#) back to the 1740s in Poland,” Marks said.

Marks also dispels the assumption that Jewish families and communities are close-knit, and that a Jew could not possibly die without his or her relatives aware.

“Jewish families do lose touch, or they can be *broigez*,” he said, using a Yiddish term for being distant due to anger or annoyance.

“I’m working on just such a case right now. No one knew this elderly Jewish man had died. He was a loner,” he said.

Marks, who studied genealogy at the University of Sunderland and completed a diploma in archives and records management at the University of Liverpool, traces his longstanding interest in genealogy to a Friday night Shabbat service many years ago in Chester, a town in northwest England on the Wirral Peninsula.

His parents moved to the area from London, settling in the village of Little Sutton to raise Marks and his younger sister. The only Jewish family in the village, the children went to Hebrew school in nearby Chester and Liverpool. With Chester's synagogue closed since 1952, religious services and celebrations were held at homes of members of the local Jewish community.

"I remember one time noticing a framed family tree that one family had on their wall. This must have triggered something in me, because it prompted me to ask my parents about our own family tree," Marks said.

His Jewish life shifted to Liverpool shortly before his bar mitzvah, when he started regularly attending Princes Road Synagogue and studying with a tutor. He has remained involved with the congregation, serving on its board and attending with his London-born wife and young son and daughter.



Saul Marks does archives research during filming of an 'Heir Hunters' episode for BBC One (Courtesy of Brother's Wish Genealogy Service)

Marks does not have to travel too often or far for work. Today, most genealogically-related research, such as birth, marriage and death indexes, censuses, and electoral rolls have been digitized and uploaded to the internet.

"I would say that around 90% of my research is done online. Even many parish baptism, marriage and burial records that go back further in time and are necessary for my private client research have been digitized," Marks said.

According to Marks, a person requires a certain mindset to engage so intensely with genealogical research.

"You can learn it, or it can be innate — but you have to have it," he said.

Marks loves manipulating discrete data that he can drop into boxes and color code. Problem solving and creating a map charting a family's growth and changing structure over time "tickles" him.

However, his interest goes far beyond mere genealogy, or the creation of a family tree.

"The family tree is just the skeleton. I also love that in some of my work I get to put the flesh on that skeleton — the family history," he said.



Saul Marks examines a family tree during filming of an 'Heir Hunters' episode for BBC One (Courtesy of Brother's Wish Genealogy Service)

Marks got to do this for a private client — his sister's former school teacher, who is a devoted Christian, but whose wife's mother was born Jewish. The client asked Marks to delve into his wife's Jewish ancestry so he could present the findings to her as a birthday present.

Marks traced the wife's Jewish ancestors in England back to the 18th century. One was the head one of the first Jewish families to settle in Leicester since the city's medieval Jewish community, and who had a school named for him after his death. Another was a man who bought the land for the first Jewish cemetery in Nottingham.

“And he promptly became the first person to be buried in it, dying at the young age of 32,” Marks noted ironically.

Marks is thankful to reality TV, a product of the present moment, for bringing attention to his work. But when it comes down to it, he's more attuned to a different era.

“I love the past. I live in the past. The ideal gift for me would be a machine in which I could travel back in time,” he said.

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