The IGI - and British Vital Records Index.

This presentation will be in two parts - the first to explain about the records, and the second to explore the use of the data - primarily the BVRI data, because I expect that most of you here have already made use of the IGI. The PowerPoint slides will list just bullet-points that I shall expand upon.

The IGI is actually a file of International data - covering 150 or so countries, whilst the ‘British Vital Records Index’ is specifically BRITISH - well at least using the pre-1937 criteria. However, there are separate files on CD of Vital Record Index information for Australia, Scandinavia, Western Europe, North America, and Mexico; these are generally similar to the British information - but will not be addressed in this presentation. (The Scandinavian data is in fact online as well). For both the IGI and the Vital Record data, I shall be addressing specifically the data relating to the State of England, in order to save time and make the talk more relevant to the present audience, but the records for other Countries are broadly similar.

For Britain at least, these records appear to relate mostly to PROTESTANT information, apart from the early records of the Established Church that meandered between the two camps. Elsewhere in Europe - as far as my personal researches have taken me - I formed the impression that the records were wholly Protestant, and suspected that access to Catholic data had been denied.

All of our early records that form the basis our our researches, are church records, and the ones in which we get most involved are Parish records that record details of Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials. Such records are those of the “Established Church” that is a euphemism and abbreviation for implying whatever cult was flavour of the month at the time.

If any of you can recall your history lessons at school, you will know that King Henry VIII created the Church of England, both to enable him to get rid of an unwanted wife, but also to grab the monies stolen from the population by the Roman Catholic Church, and that following that action subsequent monarchs tried to reinstate the Roman Church, and then supplant this again by the Church of England, and so on until “stability” was reached. I’m reminded of the old ballad of the Vicar of Bray, that changed his allegiances every time that the Crown changed - so that he would “always be the Vicar of Bray”.

So, the early Parish Registers are a mixture of both Roman Catholic and Church of England data. Now all this instability stirred up considerable unrest, and from the early 1600s, protestant movements began, with the result that a trend began for people to fail to get Baptised within the Established Church, and even not to marry there or be buried there if it was avoidable. By the nineteenth Century, less than 25% of the population were fully active members of the Established Church, although many more continued to baptise children there, and until 1837 most were obliged to marry there.

Legislation made only marriages within the Established Church legal, except for Quakers, and later Jews, and subsequently break-away sects established their own burial grounds, so the record system was quickly breaking down, which of course is why the Civil Registration system of July 1837 was introduced.
As you all know, the beauty of the 1837 Civil Registration system is - at least in theory - that all the records for England and Wales are indexed together in one file, so finding an individual’s details in it are relatively easy - well at least easier than finding a Parish Record entry.

What are the IGI and British Vital Records?

I’m sure that most of you have some idea about the former - this, however, may not be quite right - but I doubt whether many know just exactly what the ‘British Vital Record Index’ is.

**The simple explanation is that both are lists of the Baptisms & Marriages of deceased members of the Mormon Church.**

You may find this definition a bit simplistic - so I shall elaborate.

Perhaps you have found close family members listed in one or other or both of the indices - I know that I have both sets of grandparents included, and I can assure you that I, my parents, and grandparents etc. were never WILLINGLY associated with the Mormon sect.

So what is going on then?

**The three components**

Well, these indices are made up of three components:-

1. Genuine members of the Mormon sect from 1842.
2. Parents, their siblings, grandparents etc. plus any other relatives that have been researched by Members of the Mormon sect, and those details submitted for inclusion.
3. Persons listed on transcriptions of the Baptism and Marriage records of other Christian sects - particularly the Established Church.

The one thing that the records supposedly have in common, is that the persons listed were all deceased before the date of their inclusion, but this criterion is applied by attempting to ensure that no transcribed records are included for persons less than 100 years old at the cut-off dates - i.e. 1888, except for the Internet version of the IGI that contains later member submissions where entries right up to present times are accepted provided that the persons are believed to be deceased (some inclusions fail this criterion!).

Normally, only records of Baptism and Marriage are included, but where Birth details are present in records - those MAY have been recorded, and some transcriptions have been re-worked to add the Birth details to the Internet version. There are few entries relating to burials, save for those records submitted by Members pertaining to their own relations.

The inclusion of the first category of data - the actual members of the Mormon Church - requires no further explanation, but you may by now be wondering just what is going on in respect of the Member additions and particularly the data transcribed from the registers - so I shall explain.

The Mormon faith includes an understanding of family members being reunited after death, so
Church Members are charged with the task of discovering just who were their family members, and then performing Temple Ordinances to admit them into the Mormon faith by Baptism by proxy, and subsequently use the marriage details to ‘seal’ the children to the parents.

Members are required to go back three or four generations at least, and to assist them with their researches, the Genealogical Society of Utah was created to assemble a collection of Genealogical material that is stored in the Mormon Temple at Salt Lake City.

LDS Temple Records

Wherever possible, original editions of printed works were obtained, but for most records they have had to undertake the microfilming (nowadays scanning) of the original record, and these original films are housed in the Library within the Temple at Salt Lake City. Many of the original records filmed were Parish Registers - including burials - and all sorts of other Parish Data.

The Library and it’s records have been made available free of charge to all members -plus the general public - and copies of the films, including films of such original records held, are made available on demand to every Mormon Temple throughout the World.

There are two Mormon Temples within or near the EoL FHS area. One at Hornchurch (incorrectly described at ‘Romford’) holds a copy of the IGI on fiche, plus a selection of films relating to the ‘London’ area; the one at Exhibition Road, Kensington (opposite the Science Museum, and incorrectly described as ‘Hyde Park’), holds over 100,000 films relating to Britain; the latter is NOT the complete collection for Great Britain, but consists of the records most likely to be used by patrons.

Material not already held at a particular Temple may the ordered in, at a charge of £4.50 per film (if the film will be returned to source after four weeks) or £3.50 if the Library decides that it should be retained indefinitely (Hornchurch have decided NOT to retain any further films, and has limited opening hours with advance booking required).

Many of the filmed Parish Register records have been transcribed into digital form by the Members, and it is those transcriptions that make up the third category of material contained in the IGI and VRI files. The Mormons decided that they would process the digitised information by putting the data through Temple ordinances in the same manner as their Member’s own submissions, to become Members of the Mormon Church. This is in accordance with the Church’s doctrine, on the understanding that those people had not been aware of the Mormon teachings, and should therefore be offered the opportunity to become members posthumously. So far, none of the people concerned have registered an objection to this!

The Mormons have been denied access to film many records, because of the way that they use the information, but other records have been filmed but not transcribed because they gave an undertaking not to bulk-process the data through the Temple Ordinances, so these latter records are unlikely to be transcribed in the foreseeable future - but the films are still available for patrons to consult. Many records have been neither filmed or transcribed yet, simply due to the enormity of the task.
The IGI History

The IGI was begun in the 1960s using a mainframe computer, and in 1988 the first general publication of that index occurred on microfiche, followed by a second edition in 1992; the latter is the latest and final fiche edition, but the data has been updated very little since then, and there is relatively little difference between the content of the two fiche versions. Essentially, the transcribed records have not been supplemented since 1992 so the file has been effectively FROZEN since then, but there have been weekly updates of Member submissions ever since then; such Member submissions are relatively few compared to the overall size of the file, and are generally of very little interest to non-members.

No amendment to the transcribed information is permitted - even where the information is easily demonstrated to be wrong - because the data has been processed through the Temple Ordinances in that condition. However, in a few instances where a transcription originally excluded birth details from a register of Baptismal information, those birth details may have now been included subsequent to 1992 in the on-line version of the IGI.

A slightly updated version of the 1992 file with Member additions was produced on CD in around 1997, with a separate addendum produced about one year later, and the Internet version was created in about 2000. Neither the CDs nor Internet versions contain further register transcriptions beyond the 1992 cut-off date. The CDs were only ever made available to Mormon Temple Libraries, and are still available for use there; they are still useful for research, because the data is presented in a different manner to both the Fiche and Internet versions, and the entire or selected results from a search may be copied by a researcher to a file. All that is omitted from the old fiche and CD versions, are the added birth details and LDS Member submissions, and the latter are of doubtful use because there is no source information included, and some of the entries - particularly the more recent additions - are generally considered to be unreliable. At Exhibition Road, the CD data is available as one consolidated file.

As previously stated, the IGI is an International Index for over 150 countries, being confined to those countries where the Christian faith is practised to the extent of there being at least one Church there that kept records of Baptism; other countries are not represented at all, and not all countries that actually have records may have been included as yet, because the records have not yet been transcribed. The IGI has been limited to Christian records, because only deceased persons already baptised into the Christian faith are deemed suitable for admission as Mormons, but of course it would not have been possible to even film records relating to other faiths because - with minor exceptions - only the Christian faith produced records suitable for use in Genealogical studies. The Jews and Hindus produce records of sorts, but are not a complete record of events, are not readily available to Genealogists, and are of course largely available only in non-Latin scripts. Purely Civil records have not been transcribed, simply because these would be unsuitable for the performance of Temple Ordinances, but some may have been filmed. The transcription of various Censuses performed by the Mormons, was done purely to assist their Members in their Genealogical research - albeit with a view to some of the entries being included as Member submissions to the IGI etc., but no bulk inclusions in the IGI were ever attempted as this data is unsuitable (in it’s own right) for that purpose. Burials were excluded as they were deemed to be not particularly helpful in general.
**Searching the IGI**

The IGI on microfiche and CD is sequenced by date, within name, within County, within “Country”. Unfortunately, it was produced by Americans that (typically) know very little of the World outside of North America, and appear to be unaware of their own inadequacies, so the classification of Countries and Counties is somewhat wrong; the major grouping is for the “British Isles” that includes the States of England, Wales, Scotland, Eire, and Northern Ireland; Man; but the Channel Isles have been included, although the Channel Islands are not part of the British Isles or Great Britain; Man is part of the British Isles - part not part of Great Britain; the Faeroes have been left out, even though geographically part of the British Isles, but of course were administered by Danmark. The Internet version of the IGI is probably sequenced in the same manner as the fiche versions, because the search arguments are organised similarly, but the on-line version extracts just the data matching a specified forename + surname combination for a specified period - whereas the microfiche and CD versions do not confine the user to examining the entries in such a specific way, but permit easy perusal of all entries for the entire surname within one County; of course, the user does have to concentrate on one specific County at a time, and would need to know which Counties to search. Both Internet and CD/fiche methods have their advantages, so the microfiche and CD versions are still useful, as the only differences in the content are minor.

It may be worth reminding Eol FHS members, that the Society still possesses a 1992 set of fiche for the IGI, that has largely fallen out of use, but is still available for consultation HERE during our monthly sessions, and is also available on loan together with a reader and various other files on fiche. The loan arrangement unfortunately involves taking the entire set of fiche in 30 or more boxes, that will fill a moderate sized car!

**British Vital Records Index**

As stated earlier, the IGI has effectively been frozen since 1992. However, the transcription operation continued and apparently still continues - apparently with revised cut-off dates. In 1998, some of the transcriptions that occurred after the publication of the 1992 version of the IGI, were published on CD as the ‘Vital Record Index’, and a second edition of the British content containing more data, was subsequently produced and of course superceded the first edition; the other countries involved have not so far had further updates.

This ‘Vital Record Index’ data supplements the IGI, and is essentially no different from the Register Transcription portion of it, but for eight years or so no subsequent updated versions have been issued. No explanation appears to have been offered as to why the IGI was effectively frozen as at 1992, or why the ‘Vital Records Index’ was produced as a separate entity, or why no updates have been produced since. The BVRI data does include data that stretches to 1906. The Scandinavian version of the ‘Vital Records Index’ is available on-line from the Family Search web-site, but the others are not. ALL the VRI data is still currently available on CD whilst existing stocks last.

Logically, there is no difference whatsoever between the IGI content of register transcriptions and the BVRI - other than the fact that the BVRI material was transcribed later, and includes some material for slightly later dates.
However, worthy of note for the BVRI is the fact that it contains the The National Archives categories RG4 - RG8 Non-conformist registers, including Dr. Williams’s Library, that were handed over to the General Register Office before and after the introduction of the 1837 Civil Registration system. (The Dr. Williams’s Library material is more easily identified in the first edition). Unlike the generally accurate IGI transcriptions, there are inexcusable transcription errors in the ‘British Vital Records Index’. To improve transcription accuracy, each part of the IGI and 1881 Census of England & Wales were transcribed separately by two individuals, and differences resolved by a third person; much of the 1881 Census of England & Wales work was performed at the Hornchurch Temple.

Continuing Transcription

Transcription of registers and the performance of Temple Ordinances on the names therein still continues, but no revised cut-off date has been published - so the presumption is that the cut-off remains unchanged at around 1906. It has been suggested that the original cut-off dates in the 1880s were linked to the start-up of the 1837 Civil Registration system, where the birth registration process did not become compulsory until 1875 so that some overlap was intentionally included in the transcription; however, this is quite untrue because the Civil Registration records are unsuitable for use in the Mormon Temple Ordinances. However, from a Genealogist’s point of view, it is necessary to search both the Civil records and IGI for the overlapping period because the records are not duplicates of one another. The IGI cut-off dates were set merely to try to exclude living persons.

Interaction with Civil Registration Data

The 1837 Civil Registration process was introduced purely because of the breakdown in the stranglehold that the Established Church had previously had on the population. From about 1538 onwards, religion in Britain was disrupted by the split between England and Rome, and similarly elsewhere in Europe, and this resulted in several breakaway offshoots of the Christian cult. In England from about 1620, the Baptist movement became a separate group and this no longer performed infant baptisms; however, some Baptists still had their infants baptised within the Established Church, in order to create an “identity” record or merely to avoid persecution, but many people opted out of religion to varying extents - with the result that many of the population no longer left any records pertaining to a “birth” event, but Marriage within the Established Church was still required (to be legal - except for Jews & Quakers that were permitted to conduct their own arrangements) - but registration of Burials was almost unavoidable. From 1622, the Baptists introduced their own “Civil Registration” process and records for recording births, but their adult Baptisms were recorded merely in their meeting books. By the 1800s, less than 25% of the population were genuine practising members of the Established Church, with the result that an ever increasing number of births escaped any form of registration whatsoever. Although Burials have generated the most complete set of records, relatively little of the data has been transcribed, and often such records as exist do not include ages, or the names of other family members, to enable these to be linked adequately in a family tree.

Of course, even after 1875, there were, and still are, some people that were never baptised and never had their birth registered. For the GRO Civil Registration of Births, fines for late
registration were imposed, a final cut off date is applied a few weeks after birth, and anyone that misses the cut-off date is unable EVER to obtain registration; persons affected in that way that require to be able to produce “evidence of birth”, have to make do by creating a “statutory declaration” document witnessed by a Commissioner for Oaths, declaring their birth details, but there is no process for recording that information on any formal register. For some children, the birth dates were falsified to enable them to be registered - or to avoid a ‘late fine’, so you may find differences between the birth date recognised by the individual concerned, and the formal record of birth in the Civil records.

Although Genealogists generally treat a Baptism within the Established Church as a BIRTH event, baptism may take place at ANY time after birth, so the date of baptism may not be meaningful as a guide to approximate date of birth - but sometimes the Baptismal registers additionally record the birth date. However, IGI transcriptions originally ignored birth dates, but the On-line version of the IGI now includes many birth details that were actually in the registers. Researchers must check their findings from the IGI and BVRI to the film of the original register - both to verify the baptismal information and to see what else may have been recorded there. I found what appeared to be the baptism of a great grandmother in East London on the IGI in 1841; this was a purely “best fit” find initially - but the date was ten years out, and the event apparently in the “wrong” place - so in fact not a very good fit at all!; of course, I should have checked the actual registers - but didn’t! Subsequently, the LDS transcribed and added the birth dates for that Parish Register to the IGI; why I checked the entry again - I cannot explain, but the added birth entry of 1831 now confirmed that I had actually found the correct person. The reason for the delay between birth and Baptism, was some long time later shewn to be due to the fact that the family went to Washington to work on the rebuilding of the White House (the father produced leaded-light windows) and stayed away nearly ten years - two other children being produced in Washington, and the eldest child wasn’t baptised until the fourth child was born in Stepney and was baptised upon return to Britain. This just emphasises the need to key-in the findings from the IGI and BVRI with other known facts, and to verify the detail against the actual register data, rather than blindly proceed with the “best fit” data. Unfortunately, most IGI users blissfully ignore this advice.

No-one has yet been able to explain to me why new transcriptions were not added to the existing IGI, nor why new versions of the VRI haven’t been produced subsequently. Although the ‘Family Search’ web site tries to cover the VRI, the British data has not been included.

Pilot Web Site

However, there is now a pilot web site available that appears to be trying to address the issue to some extent. The pilot site is International, but for Britain incorporates just the ‘British Vital Records Index’ data, plus a few other minor files. It is assumed to be the complete BVRI file rather than just a sample because , but I can’t confirm that because nothing has been published about it. It is also not known by me whether the final version of the site will incorporate the IGI data as well - or whether the two separate sites will be retained.

The pilot website is to be found at WWW.FamilySearch.Org, using the second option from the ‘Record Search’ drop-down menu.
Unfortunately, the news about the new site is not as good as it first appears. A couple of years ago, the search engine for the IGI was degraded to aggregate vast numbers of records into a fictitious and quite meaningless “Greater London” category (likewise ‘Merseyside’, and so on for the other Metropolitan areas), and the pilot site has currently degraded the results of the search even further by producing hundreds of pages of irrelevant “results” - similar to the methods adopted on ‘Ancestry.com’. There is a further problem, in that it would appear that the BVRI data may have been re-keyed instead of copied (or at least manipulated in some way that has corrupted it), as some of the address locations seem to have been changed, and all sorts of inconsistencies are now occurring! I would recommend that you all try the site and register your objections using the feedback facility.

I did manage to find on the pilot site, a handful of people that I knew to be on the ‘British Vital Records Index’ disks, but it was a hard struggle to find them because the search engine had buried the details amongst literally hundreds of pages of total rubbish. One of the problems seems to relate to the fact that the Americans don’t know the difference between London and Middlesex, etc, and they even have places in Middlesex such as Mile End indexed as Essex, London, and Middlesex. Since almost all the data relates to pre-1890, it is a total nonsense to inflict the 1890 and 1972 changes of administrative areas upon this historical information. Even the 1890 changes of County name are totally unhelpful to apply, because users won’t know when such changes occurred in relation to their subject’s Baptism, nor in fact care about such petty administrative changes. I suspect that the LDS are pandering to the total ignorance of the North Americans - instead of trying to educate them.

There are some apparent anomalies in the transcription of Parish registers, in that particular registers from a series in one Parish appear to have escaped the transcription process for no obvious reason; several East London Churches have suffered in this way, and publications such as Phillimore’s Atlas that purport to be authoritative lists of IGI transcriptions etc. shew the Parishes concerned as having being transcribed in their entirety from their start to the IGI cut-off date. Phillimore makes no attempt whatsoever to document the BVRI coverage.

The usefulness of the IGI & BVRI data.

Both IGI and VRI indices are currently two separate and independent indices that each cover a series of selected Parish Registers (and similar). As I’m sure that you are all aware, the original documents exist purely Parish by Parish, and most had no form of index whatsoever, and of course there is no overall index of the content of the Parish Registers collectively, produced by the Established Church or any other party other than the LDS. However, whilst the Mormon transcription process has been quite extensive for England, there is far from 100% coverage for the period before the cut-off, and it would seem nothing whatsoever after those dates. If the IGI and BVRI did not exist, the Parish Registers would otherwise have to be searched one by one - with the hope of coming across a record relating to the selected ancestor, and it would therefore be necessary to first try to deduce the Parishes most likely to relate to the individuals concerned. This of course becomes an almost impossible task without further information, as families rarely stay in the same place for more than three generations. Following the movements of a family is particularly difficult for those Genealogists involved with “London”, since the migration process generally follows a path from a remote village to a town, then to the County
town, then to “London” - so a Londoner could have come from anywhere in the country by following one of the trunk routes. Without some help, it is very difficult to trace a Londoner back to origins, but since not all Parishes are yet included, a purely local move to a nearby village not yet appearing in either index will not be spotted using the indices.

These IGI and BVRI indices provide a much needed tool to benefit research. Not only is the search of specific Parish Registers very hit and miss - trying to determine in which Parish the ancestor may have been registered - but of course the researcher won’t necessarily see other possibly more suitable records in other Parishes that have not yet been (and might never be) searched.

A further problem relates to the fact that LDS Member submissions have been included. Whilst some of those entries are the result of accurate work, many of the entries there are distinctly unhelpful, perhaps even entirely fictitious! Many ‘Member’ entries are “duplicated”, despite the fact that the IGI is published primarily for Members to use for their research and that the “Temple Ready” programme is supposed to be used to prevent duplicate entries getting through. However, the doubtful content may be spotted by reference to the “batch numbers” of the submissions; entries from Parish Baptisms are prefixed “C”, whilst marriages are prefixed “M”, and Member submissions, have entirely numeric batch numbers.

The drawbacks of using the indices

A really major problem is that whilst the IGI is quite extensive in coverage, and is therefore inordinately useful, it is just a PARTIAL index, and that of course means that there are MANY OMISSIONS. Naïve users seem to forget this, and assume that every person that they seek is included, and will consequently select persons on a “best fit” basis when all else fails - even when names don’t tally and dates are years out! One must also remember to examine and actively reject all other “possible” results, rather than just seize upon the first likely item seen.

Never forget that the IGI and BVRI are just indices, and so the “original” record still has to be checked, not merely to verify the transcription but also to see if any further information is present there.

To be meaningful, ALL Genealogical data has to key-in with other data in the tree from all other sources; without this keying-in process, it is unsafe to proceed with the abstraction of data, yet I have many times come across “genealogists” that have constructed chunks of their tree merely by lifting sets of information straight off of the IGI on a “best fit” basis and with no keying-in with other data, and so creating total nonsense. I have had weeks of my time wasted by “Genes Reunited” users that have done just that.

Nevertheless, the IGI is a very useful tool to use for material within the British Isles. Coverage elsewhere - such as in Germany - appears to be very sparse, and it’s a big problem trying to gauge what fraction of the population is included.
Searching the IGI

The IGI and some of the VRI are available on-line at WWW.FamilySearch.org. It is possible to perform a search that operates on all the LDS databases at once, or to search just the IGI. The first search may sound the most useful, but it limits the results to just the first 25 results from each database, so it actually not very helpful at all; I have yet to find any useful data in the other databases (ignoring the 1881 census that may be searched better elsewhere), and the Pilot database also has yet to produce a useful result for me. The search engines are fatally flawed by attempting to search for more than one type of record (such as both Birth events plus Marriages) in one search, as of course if properly set, the date and place criteria are most unlikely to fit more than one event at a time.

Unfortunately, the search engines have been very badly designed. Every time that you begin a session, it is necessary to set-up all the search arguments from scratch; it’s not possible to search more than one County at the same time; you can’t search for one particular town or church - indeed the churches generally aren’t named at all! Originally, it was possible to perform a simple search for all children of one set of parents - but now no longer possible, nor to use ‘wild cards’, or include other search arguments when searching without a forename.

A recent change made nonsense of searches involving the post-1972 Metropolitan areas, as the LDS don’t appear to understand that “Greater London” is an artifact of modern conception (like Merseyside, and so on) and has absolutely no relevance when searching historical records, and that it is a great hindrance to return results for the whole a “Greater London” when you require only “Middlesex” or London City and not whatever happens to be encompassed by the M25. Most Mormons are American, and these just don’t understand that London and Middlesex are not synonymous, and that having buckets full of “results” returned is the sign of a poor search engine - not a good one!

It is still possible to use a few “tricks” in the search to give better results. Searching by “batch” number instead of name is possible. Whilst you can pour through another web site to try to find the batch number for a specific register, there is an easier way that will work in some instances. Once you have found one IGI entry of Baptism or Marriage for one child of a series, the rest of the siblings (within the same register) can often be resolved without knowing their names or labouriously checking the parents. From the screen displaying the selected person, click the ‘batch search’ option, and this will bring up a fresh search screen shewing just the batch number. Performing a search with the search arguments just “as is”, will return as results the ENTIRE REGISTER for examination, but first entering the family name will restrict the output to the one surname, and entering the parents forenames will restrict the output further to hopefully just the children of the one set of parents. Use the last option with caution, as forenames of parents aren’t necessarily recorded correctly.

If you refer to the web site freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~hughwallis/IGIBatchNumbers.htm, you will find a lot of potentially useful information regarding batch numbers, and the IGI in general, plus a special index of persons using a surname as a forename, that can be extremely useful where ‘throwback’ naming has been used. There appears to be nothing similar for the BVRI.