
Practical Wisdom

CASE STUDY

Case Study: Finding Maisie's Marriage Record

Reopening a Stalled Genealogy Search With AI Assistance

From the Practical Wisdom AI Archive

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INTRO

The Challenge

Eddie had been looking for a marriage record for years. His great-aunt, Maisie, an Irish Roman Catholic Montessori teacher from County Tipperary, had gone to Ceylon in the 1920s and married an Englishman, Jim, a telephone engineer from Lancashire. Family oral history confirmed the couple had met overseas. They had travelled extensively, returned, built a life together. The marriage itself, though, was nowhere on paper.

Eddie had searched the obvious places. Irish Catholic parish registers in Tipperary returned nothing. Standard Ancestry searches turned up nothing. The trail went cold the moment Maisie left Ireland.

The challenge was not a lack of effort. Eddie knew the family story, knew approximately when the marriage would have taken place, and had searched in good faith for years. The challenge was that he had been searching the wrong archives, and he had no way of knowing it without an outside view of the problem.

PHASE 1

Reframing the Search

The opening session was not about searching anything. It was about laying out everything Eddie already knew and looking at it with fresh eyes.

What was confirmed

- Maisie's full name and maiden name; her birthplace in County Tipperary; her religion (Roman Catholic).
- Jim's full name with two given names. He might appear in records as Albert, Edward, A.E., or Albert Edward.
- Jim's 1921 England and Wales census entry: engineer with the Automatic Telephone Company, Liverpool.
- Family oral history: the couple met overseas, most likely in Ceylon.

What was missing

- Any direct evidence of where the marriage took place.
- Any confirmation of Jim's posting abroad, when, or with which company.
- Any record of a marriage in Catholic parish registers anywhere in Ireland.

The reframing was simple but consequential. If the couple had met overseas and Maisie was a Catholic Irish woman in Ceylon, the marriage was almost certainly registered in a Catholic church there, not in Ireland and not in any English civil register. Years of searching Irish Catholic registers had been searching the wrong archive.

PHASE 2

The Hidden Lead

The 1921 census entry for Jim turned out to be the key that unlocked the geography. Eddie had the entry but had not connected its implications.

Working through what the Automatic Telephone Company actually did in 1921, the picture emerged. Liverpool-based, with installation contracts spanning the British Empire including Ceylon, India, and the Far East. A telephone engineer in Liverpool in 1921 was, by 1923 or 1924,

plausibly anywhere. The hypothesis became sharper: Jim was very likely posted to Ceylon by his employer or a similar company, and that is where he met Maisie.

The hypothesis did not prove anything. But it explained the marriage's absence from Irish records and pointed firmly toward where the marriage record was likely to be: Catholic diocesan archives in Ceylon, most likely Colombo.

PHASE 3

New Search Territory

Once the geography was established, the search opened in five directions Eddie had not previously explored.

Kabristan Archives

A free-to-search index of approximately sixteen thousand colonial births, marriages and deaths from Ceylon. Free to search, small fee for full record details. Includes Catholic and Anglican records. The first place to look for any colonial-era Ceylon marriage.

Catholic Diocese of Colombo, direct contact

The diocese maintains physical marriage registers that often survive even where no digitised version exists. A short, polite email naming the parties and the approximate window frequently produces a result no algorithmic search ever will. Staff are generally helpful with genealogy enquiries.

FindMyPast British In Ceylon Parish Records

A specialist subscription dataset covering British subjects in Ceylon. Worth a short trial subscription if the Diocese of Colombo route does not produce a result.

Ancestry UK Foreign and Overseas Registers 1627-1965

Already accessible through Eddie's existing subscription, this dataset covers British subjects who married abroad. A search Eddie had not run.

Ancestry Passenger Lists

Passenger manifests for ships travelling to and from Ceylon and India in the 1920s. Married couples were often listed together on shipping manifests. This will not produce the marriage record itself but can confirm a marriage date range.

Ferguson's Directory of Ceylon

A free online resource listing Europeans in Ceylon by name, location and occupation through the 1920s. Searching for Jim's surname would confirm his presence in Ceylon and identify which city, narrowing the diocesan search to a specific parish.

Five new leads where there had been none. None of them guaranteed to produce the marriage record. All of them in places Eddie had not previously thought to look.

PHASE 4

Building a Reusable Research Note

The search was always going to be iterative. Catholic diocesan archives in another country do not respond instantly. Subscription trials have time limits. Each lead followed up would generate new information feeding back into the search.

Rather than treat each session as a fresh start, the work produced a structured research context note. The note captured what was known, what had been searched, what remained, and what

to ask in any new conversation. It could be pasted into any future AI session and the work would resume from where it had left off rather than start from the beginning.

The note included:

- A clear statement of the core research goal: find when and where the marriage took place. Everything else secondary.
- Everything known about Maisie and Jim, including spelling variants of both names.
- What had been searched and what had returned nothing, so future sessions did not retread settled ground.
- The current working hypothesis.
- The priority search order, with website addresses, draft emails, and search tips.
- An empty section for results to be filled in as the search progressed.

The reusable note was, in some ways, more valuable than any single lead. The leads might or might not produce the marriage record. The note would compound across sessions and across years.

OUTCOMES

Outcomes and Lessons

Where Eddie Stood at the End

No marriage record had been found. That is the honest outcome. The search was structurally healthier than it had been: five new leads in places Eddie had not previously considered, a sharper hypothesis about where the marriage took place, a reusable note for ongoing work, and direct contact established with the diocesan archive most likely to hold the record.

What the AI Did Not Do

It did not reach into the Colombo diocesan archive and produce a marriage certificate. It did not solve the mystery in a single conversation. It did not replace the years of family research that had already happened.

What the AI Did Do

It noticed something Eddie had overlooked: the implication of Jim's 1921 Liverpool employer for his subsequent geography. It pointed to specialist archives Eddie had not heard of. It drafted the email to the Diocese of Colombo. It built the priority list. And it produced a research note designed to outlive any single conversation.

The Critical Insight

The bottleneck on a long-running research problem is rarely access to the tool. It is usually the question. Eddie had been asking some version of "where is this marriage record" for years and finding nothing because the answer was in archives he had not thought to search. Reframing the question, asking what employer would have sent Jim to Ceylon and which Catholic diocese was the most likely repository, opened five new leads in a single afternoon.

Broader Application

This case demonstrates AI consultation in:

- Long-running research problems where existing approaches have stalled.
- Geographic and archival reframing: recognising when a search has been targeting the wrong place.
- Reusable session continuity: capturing context once so it does not have to be rebuilt every time.
- Outside view on familiar material: bringing fresh eyes to documents the researcher has read many times.

The marriage record may yet be found. It may not. The journey now has a map where there was previously blank space, and that is a different kind of progress.