

# Hunting through Matches – Handout

This handout provides information from the ‘*Hunting through Matches*’ talk presented at the Family History Show held on 16 March 2024.

## DNA Analysis

To get the most out of a DNA test, whether you are verifying your known tree or solving a mystery, you need to be able to identify who your matches are and build their tree back to find common ancestors. This talk covered methods for sorting through your matches and finding out who they are and building out their trees.

### **Strategy for working through matches**

- Look at highest (most cM) matches first
- Review ones with trees
- Look for names you recognise
- Look for places you recognise
- Identify person using all available clues
- Build their tree
- Group matches
- Keep notes

### **Known Match**

- Confirm shared DNA (cM) supports expected relationship
- Add notes/label match
- At AncestryDNA, each match is assigned as Parent 1 or Parent 2 (or Both Sides/Unassigned). Note Parent 1 can be either paternal or maternal; Parent 2 will be the opposite of Parent 1. Use your known matches to assign the correct side. More information at <https://support.ancestry.co.uk/s/article/DNA-Matches-Split-Up-By-Parent>.


### **Identifying your Unknown Matches**

A key step in using your DNA for your family history is working out who your matches’ ancestors are so that you can try to identify your common ancestors. This can be done in two ways: identify who the match is and trace their family tree or use the family tree provided by the match.

### **Match Information**

At AncestryDNA, more information about the match may be found on their Profile page. Access this by clicking on their name at the top of their Match page. See below for information on Ancestry Family Trees.

At MyHeritage, information about the match (e.g. age band, location) is available in the match list and on their match page. There is a link to their family tree (if they have attached themselves to one) on the match list or from the top of the match page. In addition, if the tree has enough information it will be included on the match page as you scroll down. Note some trees are private and you will need to contact the owner to see if they are happy to share information.

At FamilyTreeDNA, match information may be included on the information pop-up when you click on the match name in the match list. If a family tree has been built, the  symbol will be filled in (rather than three empty boxes). Just click on the symbol to access their tree.

At 23andMe, information about the match is only available on their Match Page. At the top there is information on the match possibly including their year of birth and location (normally where they live now not necessarily where they were born). Scroll down to the ‘Family Background’ section which will hopefully have any family surnames and locations that the match has provided and a link to an online tree if they have linked one. Note the FamilyTree feature at 23andMe is a predictive tree for how your DNA matches may be related to you and each other.

All the information on family trees is dependent on how much information your match has added (and how accurate it is). Remember that many people taking a DNA test are not genealogists and hence do not know their family tree. Also, if they were adopted, they may not know who their biological parents are.

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### Ancestry Family Trees

Ancestry have a number of possible combinations of Family Trees associated with DNA matches.

- **Linked trees** – it is possible to link your DNA to yourself within a tree. Once your match has linked themselves, their tree will show as linked. See below for how to link yourself to your tree.
- **Unlinked trees** – these are any public trees that your match has at Ancestry. These may have the match as the home person but that is not necessary. Also note if they have built trees for other people the unlinked trees may have nothing to do with their family so need to be treated with caution.
- **Public trees** – these are viewable trees. You will be able to see the whole tree if you have an Ancestry subscription or a limited version (4-5 generations) if you do not have a subscription.
- **Private trees** – these are not viewable and you will need to contact the owner for further information. However, also check their Ancestry profile page in case they have other trees that are public. These should be considered to be Unlinked trees. Note that any direct line surnames and places in these trees will be found when you search your DNA matches.
- **Unsearchable trees** – there is a further category of trees which are Private and Unsearchable. If your DNA match has linked their tree to a private and unsearchable tree, there will be no indication that they have a tree connected to their DNA and you will not see the tree listed on their profile page.

Below any public linked family tree on the Match page, there is a box with a list of direct line surnames in both your own tree and your match's tree as well as all direct line surnames (going back 10 generations) in your match's tree (use separate tab for all your match's surnames). At the bottom of the page is a map that includes your match's ancestors. This is useful to find if there is a common location for your ancestors in trying to identify the common ancestor. Use the drop down filter and choose your match's tree to view all their direct ancestors' birth locations (where provided).

### Common Ancestors and ThruLines at Ancestry

For Common Ancestors and ThruLines to work you need to link your DNA to yourself in your tree. To do this, go to the DNA home page and click on 'Link to tree' in the middle under your name. Using 'Link Tree' box, select the family tree you want to use to connect your DNA (if you have more than one tree) or build a tree if you do not have one at Ancestry. Start to type in your name (if the DNA kit is yours) and then select yourself from the dropdown.

Once you have linked your DNA, Ancestry will start to generate 'Common Ancestors' (provided your tree is searchable – it can be public or private). These are suggestions for your potential common ancestors with the match and should be treated as hints not fact. If a common ancestor(s) is identified, these are listed in a box on the left-hand side of the page. In addition, if a common ancestor has been identified, this will show as a green leaf in the corner of the person's box on their family tree. Any surnames that appear in your tree as well are coloured green. An example extract:



If you click on one of the common ancestor suggestions, the possible connection is listed. These also link into a system called ThruLines which finds all paths to that common ancestor within all your DNA matches. Note these paths are only suggestions created from your tree and other trees on Ancestry and are only as good as those trees. In addition, there is a chance that the actual DNA relationship is inherited from a different path. Be careful of suggestions with less than 15cM of shared DNA in case they are 'false'. Although these do not prove that you inherited the shared DNA from the identified common ancestor, they do provide useful genealogical paper connections. On ThruLines, confirm that most matches are shared matches with each other to give additional confidence that they all share a common ancestor (although note the path may still be wrong for all of them). Beware if you have speculated in your tree – the Common Ancestors/ThruLines feature will give you confirmation bias (e.g. appear to confirm the speculation but it is only doing that because you put in the speculation).

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### **MyHeritage Theory of Family Relativity**

MyHeritage provide a similar feature to Common Ancestors called Theory of Family Relativity. If a connection between your tree and your match's tree (or via any other tree, FamilySearch tree, or historical documents) is identified, the path between you and your match will be shown. Where different sources of information have been used, each different possible path is shown (with a predicted reliability of their accuracy).

### **Linking DNA Match to Ancestry Tree**

AncestryDNA provide a tool to link any matches you identify into your tree. This allows you to quickly see where they fit in your tree which can be useful when you are then examining their shared matches. To connect the match to your tree, click on the 'Connect to tree' button and select them within your tree. It will be the tree that has your DNA connected to it and you need to have already entered them into that tree.

### **Identifying DNA Matches without Developed Family Trees**

There are a number of ways of identifying your matches if they have not provided a good family tree. These include:

- Even a very small tree can be used to find a basis of a tree to develop yourself. Look for all clues (especially the name of the tree which may give a further clue).
- Look at the match's profile page (click on their name at the top of the Match Page at AncestryDNA or their name on the Match List at FamilyTreeDNA or it is included at the top of the Match Page for MyHeritageDNA, 23andMe and LivingDNA). Use the information (if provided) to identify possible people it could be. If it is a more unusual name, you may be able to trace them.
- If they have a photo, search for their name on Facebook or LinkedIn and see if anyone looks the same (or uses the same profile photo if you're lucky). Also try Google Lens to search for the photo.
- Look for nicknames on other sites such as X, Instagram, TikTok or search through Google.
- Use any given places in conjunction with these approaches to help to identify your match.
- Search for names in obituaries (especially useful in the USA) through Google (or your preferred search engine), newspaper websites or specific obituary sites (e.g. <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/search> and <https://rip.ie/>).
- For people with Unlinked trees (especially if owned by someone other than the DNA tester), consider if the DNA tester is the spouse, parent or sibling of the tree home person. Use the sex (colour of match circle in Match List) and initials of tester to help identify who it may be.
- Search for any people shown in a limited tree to see if someone else has built a better tree (e.g. at Ancestry, FamilySearch, WikiTree).
- For trees with mainly 'Private' people showing, search the 'List of All People' available via the Tree Search button (person symbol with magnifying glass at Ancestry) or the List view at MyHeritage to check if there is anyone who is not private who can give a clue to the match.
- Look at the shared matches for any clues for which line they are related to.
- At MyHeritageDNA or 23andMe, look at the shared match list to see if they have a close relative (who may be more distant from you and hence lower on your match list) who has a more developed tree. At MyHeritageDNA, you can sort the match list by 'Shared DNA with x' where x is your match to find these close relatives quickly.

It is worth noting that there will be matches for which, despite using all these techniques, you still cannot identify them and/or build out their tree. Keep all the records of what you have found on these matches as more information may appear in time that helps you finally solve them.

### **Quick and Dirty Trees**

- Used to quickly find a common ancestor with a match
- Do not need to follow normal good practice:
  - Use other people's trees (with caution)
  - Only one piece of evidence for a relationship
  - Use transcriptions rather than original documents
- Once a connection is found, confirm the 'quick and dirty' tree with more detailed research
- Check all lines for possible connection to ensure found correct path
- Remember a DNA match alone cannot prove a relationship
- Build 'Quick and Dirty' trees on paper, computer files or on an electronic tree.

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- Make ‘Quick and Dirty’ trees at Ancestry private and unsearchable (go to ‘Tree Settings’, ‘Privacy Settings’, then tick ‘Private Tree’ and the tick box to ‘prevent your tree from being found in the search index’)
- Identify your DNA matches in your tree – add \*\*\* before first name; add test company and shared DNA in Suffix (e.g. A-35cM) (note these both help if you export your GEDCOM to WATO) – or alternatively use Ancestry Tags.
- Using caution, add someone from another tree via ‘Tools’ dropdown on right-hand side and choosing ‘Save to Tree’. If adding as a new person, repeat the action as the second time it will connect all data and all family members.

### Contacting matches

All the companies provide the ability to contact matches. This is usually via a messaging system within the company’s website. The exception is FamilyTreeDNA which provides the match’s email address.

You can contact the match to find out more about them or request access to their family tree (or information from it). It is recommended that you do not ask for personal information about living people but something less intrusive like the surnames of their grandparents. If you suspect the family line they are related on, ask if they recognise any of the key surnames on that line. By providing some information about yourself (although not a full family history as this can be off-putting), it can put them at ease that your enquiry is genuine. Also accept that many people take a test for reasons other than researching their family tree and may not check their messages, do not know who their ancestors are (especially if adopted), or may not be willing to share information. Be understanding of this and do not expect an answer.

### Further Reading

- Books
  - *The Family Tree Guide to DNA Testing and Genetic Genealogy*; Blaine T Bettinger; Family Tree Books, USA; 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, August 2019.
  - *Tracing Your Ancestors Using DNA: A Guide for Family Historians*; Edited by Graham S Holton, contributed by John Cleary, Michelle Leonard, Iain McDonald & Alasdair F MacDonald; Pen & Sword Family History, UK; 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, June 2019.
  - *Your DNA Guide - The Book*; Diahn Southard; Your DNA Guide, USA; 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, February 2020.
- ISOGG wiki - [https://isogg.org/wiki/Wiki\\_Welcome\\_Page](https://isogg.org/wiki/Wiki_Welcome_Page)
- Websites/‘How to’ pages
  - <https://www.familysearch.org/blog/en/genealogy-dna-test/>
  - <https://www.whodoyouthinkyouaremagazine.com/tutorials/dna/>
  - <https://www.family-tree.co.uk/dna-testing>
- Blogs
  - Memories in Time – Fiona Brooker - <https://memoriesintime.co.nz/blogs/news>
  - The DNA Geek – Leah Larkin - <http://thednageek.com/blog/>
  - Your DNA Guide – Diahn Southard - <https://www.yourdnaguide.com/ydgblog>
  - Crewys News – Debbie Kennett - <https://cruwys.blogspot.co.uk/>
  - The Genetic Genealogist – Blaine T Bettinger - <https://thegeneticgenealogist.com/>
- Facebook groups
  - DNA Help for Genealogy (UK) - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/AncestryUKDNA>
  - Genetic Genealogy Tips and Techniques - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/geneticgenealogytipsandtechniques>
  - The DNA Roundtable - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1587685288089570>

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