

Natalie Pithers

00:00-00:21: GL:

Hello and welcome back to The Apple Cart. My guest today is Natalie Pithers. She's the creator of Genealogy stories and the founder of the Curious Descendants Club. Now, Natalie and I met quite a long time, virtually before we met in person, we were match-made, match-made...

Put together pre-digital conference that we both attended and we were matched because we were both interested in history. Natalie was a professional genealogist, so she was a lot more history-ish than me. But we got on really well and we stayed in touch and then we were able to meet in person.

And we've met in person a couple of times and we're hoping to do that again soon. Probably actually closer to you. Now I'm in France than when I was in Newcastle. Anyway, I digress. Natalie, Hello, welcome to The Apple Cart.

00:58-01:16: GL:

Thank you for being here. Very good listen. This is the standard for the podcasts. I just gave a long introduction. So we're talking about creativity and doing things differently and being disruptive.

Tell me, first of all, a little bit about the genealogy side of what you do, the genealogy stories. Which is a word I can say but can't spell. There is a difficult one to spell.

01:31-01:37: NP

Yeah, so I've had a lifelong interest in family history, well, lifelong, since I was about 18. Kind of fed by stories that my great-grandma used to tell my mum, who used to tell me, and then mum and I together kind of researched our family history. And then I became a bit obsessed with it, and it never really waned or dropped off all throughout my life.

It's been there, and when I had my second child, I'd been working in project management and I had my second daughter. And I didn't really want to go back to having to work those kind of long hours that's required and commuting and all those kind of things. And so I thought, Well, I'll just see if I can get some genealogy clients.

And I thought the best way to do that would be to share my own family history stories and start blogging. So I was blogging under Genealogy Stories. And quite quickly built up a fairly decent kind of client portfolio and was really busy and realised that, actually, as much as I do like the researching, I'm probably not the best researcher in the world.

Because I was finding it difficult to get out to the archives and do the things that you really ought to be doing. And I began to realise more and more that. Actually, the bits that I enjoyed about researching were very much about diving into and doing the kind of social history research, and not necessarily always about the genealogy aspect.

And then I also realised I'm not too bad at writing myself, and that actually through trying to grow my own business and interviewing people. I had a podcast called Twice Removed, or a video series called Twice Removed. And I'd actually just naturally been drawn to lots of other storytellers. And that kind of led me to starting the Curious Descendants Club, which is all about helping people to tell their family history stories.

Usually in written format, but probably more through things like blogging and sharing stories, rather than necessarily books that are kind of done and finished forever. Because most of the Curious Descendants club members are, like me, and absolutely obsessed with family history. And you're never actually going to finish doing it. So, yes, that was a really long-winded way of telling you what Genealogy Stories was about.

GL: Yeah, so I've been fortunate enough to be invited to give writing presentations in the Curious Descendants Club a couple of times. And the members are lovely and they are really passionate and enthusiastic. Easy for me to say.

What is it that you think appeals to people about that kind of approach? Rather than just having a physical or a digital family tree? Which is just lots of little lines coming out, what do you think it is that appeals to members and other people?

NP: Yeah, I think, because, really, when we start looking into our family history, for many of us, we might start thinking about, Oh, I wonder where my ancestors were from, or what they did, you know what jobs they did and what places they lived?

Quite quickly, that turns into a kind of fascination generally with their story, you know, why did they do these things, or what was going on there? Or, actually, I can only find out a few scant pieces about my ancestor, and it doesn't really tell me about who they were.

I know their name and I know when they were born and died, but that doesn't give me a lot. So you become really fascinated in actually the context of their lives. You know, that's where the storytelling comes in. I think we understand each other as human beings through storytelling, and it's no different than we look back on the past.

GL: I haven't got a great deal of interest in doing my own family tree. Because my Nana would come back to haunt me if I was digging into her family. But what I liked about this is true about the way that the club members approach it.

And your approach in general is that it's not just about your family, it's about everything else. And I think what's nice is that looking at it like that is, you know, you're putting them in a place and you're giving them a sense of your readers. In the family you traced, an idea of what life would have been like.

And that is, I think, that's key, isn't it? That's human nature that we're curious about, about people and how they lived. And I like the fact that actually you can bring lots of other elements of history in it into it. So you can find an angle to bring in another interest in whatever it is you want. And there's so much scope there isn't there.

NP: So I think a lot of the time, our family history is just acting as a conduit, as a kind of springboard into just generally examining lives in the past. And I think one of the things that I absolutely love about the Curious Descendants club is actually, a lot of my club members are really interested in capturing the stories of marginalised people, or people whose voices wouldn't have been heard so much, especially women's history.

So a lot of the time, it's not necessarily about their actual female ancestor, it's much more about women in the past generally. Or that person that didn't get heard within their own lifetime. It's quite a kind of social, historical....

Yeah, it's those untold stories, right? Giving that voice to somebody who maybe didn't get justice within their own lifetime, or didn't get heard at all. Who didn't have much of a say in what happened to them within their life. And being able to explore that.

GL: And women's history is really fascinating because they didn't get to keep. You know, the only records you have from women in general tend to be, you know, from wealthy women in terms of letters and stuff.

And one of my favourite things about the Roman Fort of Vindolanda is they have these tablets. That were letters written by the wives of the commanders who were writing to their friends in the nearby Milecastle. You know, the next one along, but you don't hear much from the ordinary woman, do you?

You know, people like us who were just doing their own thing, so it's nice to be able to bring that into your family. So even if you can't find your ancestor's actual voice, you can at least imagine what things would have been like for her. And that's nice, I think, to be able to do that.

NP: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there certainly are women's voices there, you've just got to dig a bit deeper for them, I think. But yeah, it's about exploring what their lives are like, and it tells you so much about why things are the way they are today.

And it gives me a lot of hope as well, especially in times like this, where the world seems like a big, scary, difficult place. It can feel quite, a menacing world that we're living in at the moment, especially with women's rights being squeezed in some countries. But it actually gives me a lot of hope, when I look back on the past, that actually things were worse.

We did have less rights. Yeah, things could already be worse, and things have moved in the right direction generally. But also, even when they haven't, there are people that will fight and they're there. And yeah, it just makes everything... It just helps me to understand and navigate the world that we live in today, I suppose, with all its complexities.

09:06-09:39: GL:

Yeah, one of the things that I've been talking about with the podcast guests is for. Not everybody is a creative business like mine, so we've been talking about ways to find creative

hobbies and pastimes. And I think what's nice about being creative is that you don't have to just go and get a sketchbook.

And, you know, try and be an artist, that there's lots of ways you can be creative if it takes you out of what you do. So I've had guests to knit as a hobby. You know, I like cooking and having (dinner) guests and being over the top and elaborate with my table decorations and stuff. So digging into your family history then could also be a nice creative outlet, would you say?

NP: Oh yeah, definitely, definitely. You can get really creative with that, you can go off in all different tangents. And I mean, one of the ways that I really like to explore it is just by picking a random theme. And then say watches or something or bits, and then kind of going off into a kind of random object history and weaving in your own family or your own local history in at the same time.

So no, I think you can be really creative with family history. Yeah, definitely, because essentially, history is storytelling. Yeah, it is, and it's fun to do.

GL: Do you think that? I mean, you've obviously worked in project management, which sounds like a very sort of data-driven, you know, logical, putting things in order. Do you think that in those kind of industries, people put restrictions on themselves in sort of thinking creatively and differently, and do they need an outlet?

NP:

Oh, there's scope for creativity in project management as well. I'd say project management is about problem solving generally, and in order to solve problems, you've got to be quite creative. So I don't really think it is. I mean, I'm quite a data-driven person in lots of different ways, I can get quite excited about a really good spreadsheet.

GL: Everyone's got problems!

NP: Process flow diagram is like, Oh yeah, I love one of those. But I mean, there's something a bit, I think there's something a bit creative about that. There's a time of trying to map something out and trying to illustrate something with data, or trying to look at a whole load of data.

That is at the moment meaningless and cut it in different ways in order to make sense of it. I actually think it's got quite a creative element to it because it is essentially problem solving. I think we underestimate actually just how creative being a good problem solver is.

I always think my brother was a chef and then had his own business manufacturing biscuits, and I always think he's a really creative person. But that's part, but largely because of the way he goes about problem solving and manufacturing, and making things leaner and leaner and leaner.

In terms of more and more and more efficient, there's something really creative about that. Actually, if I put that there, what will happen? Yeah, it's kind of a kind of engineering-y

creativity. I suppose. He's really good at escape rooms and things because his mind works differently, and I think that's a real particular type of creativity. It's undervalued, actually, I think.

12:34-12:54: GL:

Yeah, and I think, so, that's just, yeah, I think maybe I did project management a disservice as somebody who's never done it. There are lots of ways to be creative. And I think certainly all that lean manufacturing and Six Sigma and the Japanese factories isn't there that has a lean equivalent to I can't remember which Japanese factory.

NP: I'm probably way out of date, but yeah, there's loads of different. Yeah, there's one of the project management as well. I mean, there's loads of different methodologies and things out there, but I mean, I'm not saying every project manager. But sometimes, when we say somebody's intelligent and we kind of look at it as a perhaps only in one way.

Like, oh, they're intelligent because they pass exams, you know? And actually, there are loads of different types of intelligence out there, there's people who are emotionally far more intelligent than me, for example.

You know, I'm very disorganised, you know, actually in my personal life. And I think one of the reasons I like project management is because then I change very much. But yeah, so, yeah, I think I think creativity is similar in a bit, like intelligence, it takes lots of different forms.

GL: Yeah, so maybe actually accepting that. You know, whatever industry you're in, there are ways to be creative. And if you're doing anything that's different to what's been done before in that industry, in your particular organisation, that is that is creative.

I mean, I had that working in local authorities, you know, people wouldn't like change. And you have to try, and then you have to try and find creative ways to encourage people to embrace a more efficient way of working. Yeah, I think anything, anything that helps problem solve or helps other people look at a problem differently, perhaps, or that in itself is a kind of unique kind of creativity.

14:38-14:43: NP:

I think teaching's quite creative. Yeah, generally, but yeah.

14:44-15:49: GL:

So I think, as so, most of the audience for this podcast, I think, are small business owners. And I think one of the things that one struggles with when you become self-employed is that you are really good at what you do.

But the whole business of being in business is the tricky bit. But maybe it should be reassuring to people that actually, as a business owner, you are creative, problem solving all the time, and the fact that you managed to keep your business going is creative.

And is proof that actually, you can do more than more than you think you're capable of, which I think is it's got to be a heartening message when there's political upheaval everywhere at the minute, like we said.

There's probably another recession coming, if we ever got out of the last one. You know that that actually, if you are running a business and you're still in business, then you have some control and then you can take a creative approach to managing it and to growing it.

And I think that's nice.

NP: I think entrepreneurs generally actually are quite creative. I mean, they've been creative enough to come up with an idea and market it. And that takes quite a lot of creativity. And also, I can't remember whose talk it was. It was when we were at Atomicon that we watched a talk.

It was about creativity, and it was about how having problems and having constraints breeds creativity. And I've never really looked at it in that way, but I really, wholeheartedly agree with it. If you've got a wide, big, open page and somebody says to you write something a lot of people just freeze and they don't know what to do.

But if you say, right, you've got 30 seconds and you've got to write all the different ways you can say the colour blue, it suddenly becomes much more tangible and doable. We think about how creative a lot of businesses got during Covid, about having to pivot and sell things online or do things differently.

You know, actually, the constraints within our business and the times where it's the most challenging can actually be the times that we've become the most creative and come up with most fantastic ideas.

Because we've been given those constraints and put in a box way out of there. So, yeah, they can be double-edged swords

GL: I was talking to Laura Pearman, and she's a creative brand strategist, and she's also a her background's photography, so she's very creative. And we were talking about maybe the everything that's going on in the world now.

There will be some constraints. Maybe that will breed some really interesting new things in art and in other fields as well. It's not going to be very pleasant for a lot of people, but it's quite an exciting time creatively.

17:48-18:17: NP:

Yeah, quite, yeah, yeah, I mean, you look at times that have been difficult. And we do get some bursts of creativity. You know, around the kind of revolution times and things like that. You get a lot of art and ways of expressing complex themes.

I mean, I think that's a big part of creativity, isn't it? Trying to distil the complex into something that other people can understand and relate to within, like one image or within one novel. So that's where creativity becomes real genius. I think yes.

GL: So to change the subject slightly quite a bit. You and I. We met virtually as a sort of networking pre-event, which ended up being online, and then we've met. We've attended a couple of conferences together. What do you think the benefits are for business owners of going to conferences and events as somebody who does it themselves?

NP: I think it's really energising. I think. We as business owners, we can sit there in our own lounge or our own study on our own. Ploughing through, day after day after day and actually just getting out and getting kind of a day that's different from the normal is quite powerful.

But also, it's the meeting of people, it's hearing those other conversations that are going on, even if you don't get chatting to somebody. Just keeping your ear out and listening to what other people are talking about can spark your own creativity or your own thoughts.

But yeah, no, for me, they've definitely been about the people I've met, I think, much, much more so than the talks that I've attended, I think.

19:29-19:44: GL:

Yeah, I think that's sort of the general consensus, but that's not to say that you don't learn things from the talks. But very definitely go with the idea of meeting people and talking to people.

And I suppose for some people, that's quite daunting. For me as an extroverted extrovert, meeting people and talking to people is never a problem. But not everybody feels like that. But then everybody else, there are other people in the same boat.

I know that at Atomicon they've worked really hard to have chill out zones for people to go in and decompress. So I think there's something for everyone, isn't there?

NP: Yeah, definitely, and also I would say to try not to pack too much in. I mean, I'm an introvert, I'm not shy at all. So I'm like an extroverted introvert, I guess, then, by your definition. So, I'm not shy and I do enjoy socialising, but I just find it really tiring and I need a lot of space and time on my own.

I remember one of the big conferences that I went to, it was just one day, but it started early and finished late. I'd had a late night the night before, kind of networking and socialising, same one I went to with you.

I missed a couple of the talks in the middle of the day because I went back to the hotel and had to lie down. Because I got a really bad headache and it was because I'd crammed too much in. I'd been there for a couple of days before the event. I'd spent loads of time socialising and meeting all these people that I'd met online that I hadn't met in person.

And although I loved it and really enjoyed it, if I did it again, I would say, right, maybe go for an extra day and not have to cram so much in. Or actually just cut my losses and not meet up with quite so many people so I could maintain that balance a little bit better.

21:15-21:51: GL:

Bear in mind your own energy levels. I guess I think you definitely need buffer time, even if you are an extrovert. I think for me, it's mostly sleepy time because I have a tendency to stay out late and be the last person to leave.

We used to go to a two-day event in London, which obviously meant we were there the night before and then would stay the night of the conference. Because travelling back to Newcastle was such a long way to go.

And there were a couple of times where I'd get halfway through the day and I'd go back for a lie down. But that was because of my excesses the night before. It wasn't so much overwhelm from talking to people.

But yeah, the Geordies were known for being the hard partiers and the stay-uppers, and people were told to avoid us.

NP: Yes, I've made that mistake a few times myself. You get out of the night before a conference, remember that you've got to go to the actual conference. Yes, you do. That's the hard bit. Yeah, it's always funny to watch other people suffering when they've done that. Always party the most on the last night, that's my advice.

Yes, I mean, that's not why you should go to business events, but you know, it's part of it. Other people get, you know when you're working in an office and stuff. You do get the occasional quiz night that everybody's going to, or the Christmas party do, or somebody's leaving, do all those kind of things. I think we kind of forget that.

Actually. When you're in an office environment, you actually do get those kind of chances to socialise in a way you don't get when you're self-employed. And so actually, it's probably no wonder that we go to big conferences and get all of them.

GL: That's probably a good way of putting it. Actually. Yeah, we're all cramming in a year's worth of socialising into two days. I think it can be really lonely being self-employed, I mean, generally, I think it can be quite challenging that way.

Especially if you've got a business that's a bit unusual that you find that, you know, people don't. I used to find that with genealogy stories a little bit. It wasn't something a lot of other people were doing, and therefore I found it a bit. There was an aspect of it being lonely that way.

Because when I had a problem, it quite often wasn't necessarily what other business owners could relate to, or they didn't quite understand the business. So I think it's actually really

important to find those kind of people that do get it. Or that are in the same field or in similar circumstances, or whether that's doing the same thing, or whether that's similar living circumstances. In terms of kids or no kids, or whatever set up, it is that you have, yeah.

GL: So what about industry-specific events? There are obviously genealogy, conferences and things. Are they a thing that you would do that you would recommend? Are they wild?

NP: I don't think they're as wild as marketing events. There's a really, really huge one called RootsTech, which before Covid did come to London. It's normally in America, kind of Utah, you know. It's run by FamilySearch, which is a Mormon organisation, genealogy being very, very important to the Mormon faith.

And that's massive. It's a really, really big event. And they did bring it to London pre-Covid and hasn't come back yet to London. I'm hoping one day it does. It was on the Excel Centre and it was big.

But then generally there were a lot more kind of smaller conferences and one-day events, but they're very much more most of them anyway. The majority of them are much more about attending interesting talks on history and genealogy, rather than like how to run a genealogy business. There are a few of those, but that's not for me.

And actually, I'd probably say I've learned more from the non-genealogy ones in that respect, I think in terms of business stuff. But yeah, yeah, so I think you've got to try.

GL: You've got to find a balance, haven't you? If you're doing something quite niche, like what you do, you do, you're going to need. Both sides of those are the other Mormons hard partiers.

25:43-26:03: NP

No, I wouldn't say they were hard partiers, they were really interesting and really warm. And I mean, the London Group had the London Conference that I went to, had a really lovely feel about it. And actually, we were on at the same time as Comic-con, and so we had the Excel centre and then Comic-Con came in halfway through and had the other half.

And there was this really interesting night where half of Comic-con and half of the genealogy groups were in the same pub. And we were doing like genealogy on like, you know, Star Wars.

And it was really, really good fun. And it was like these two people, that these two groups that you know on the surface of things, you'd think were quite opposite. So you're like, stereotypical genealogist is probably over 60,.

Kind of a stereotype of perhaps a different type of geeky type of person to maybe perhaps you're a younger kind of comic-con, really creative, different kind of geeky Dungeons and Dragons type person. And you wouldn't think these two communities had much to kind of meet in the middle. But actually, it was a really, really good night. So it just goes to show...

GL: Yeah, it sounds like it sounds like fun.

NP: You know, we're just people at the end of the day.

26:55-27:06 GL:

Well, yeah, I could, just. I can imagine, like people like wandering across the Excel and ending up in each other's events. That would be quite fun.

NP: Yeah, it was, it was quite fun. Yeah, there was a lot of that. Yeah, it was good, yeah.

GL: What would your advice be to anybody who wanted to start looking into their family history? Would you encourage them to think about the story aspect from the beginning?

27:25-27:45: NP:

I would, actually. I think it's really easy, especially when you first start to get quite hung up on how far back you can go. And hit brick walls and hit kind of waiting periods. We have to wait for certain information to become available. Or it's just beyond your price point, and you have to wait till you can go to an archive and view it at a lower price point.

And there's also quite a lot to learn as well. It can be quite overwhelming. So I think actually, if you focus more on the story aspect of it, some of those kind of brick wall frustrations are alleviated.

And actually, you're really getting to know each ancestor as you meet them. Rather than ending up with a really big list of them and then becoming quite overwhelmed, which can happen surprisingly quickly. You know, every generation we go back double.

28:12-28:49: GL:

Yeah, when you've got, when you've got big families, which obviously you don't have to go back very far for big families. And you would quite quickly become overwhelmed.

NP: Yeah, but also, you know, you've got, you've got two sets of grandparents, four sets of great grandparents, 16 great, great grandparents. And then double it and double it, and double it. So it doesn't take many generations back to be quite overwhelmed.

And then when you think if you get quite interested in their lives as a whole, then you tend to look at. Not just your direct ancestors, but you know the other children that, say, great grandparents had, or you know, not just your direct ancestors that they had. And you know, some of these Victorian people I've got, I've got one ancestor that had 19 children. It can really quickly get huge.

GL: Yeah, yeah. And of course, it was also that tradition wasn't there of naming the new child after a dead child.

NP: Yeah, that's not unusual.

GL: Yeah, that can cause some problems, I would imagine also, given the fact that everybody had the same name.

NP: Yeah, yeah. Edward, named by his father, Edward, who was named from his father, Edward. Smith, yeah. Or Davies in my family. Yeah, yeah, that can be. That can be quite... But yeah, I mean, it can be real potluck.

You can have a really unusual surname and get stuck, and you can have a really common surname and find that. They did an unusual occupation, or lived in a really small village, or have some kind of other way of distinguishing themselves. So there's not always kind of obvious rhyme and reason to it.

GL: What advice would you give to somebody who just, you know, they're feeling a bit overwhelmed? And they need to look at things differently and do things creatively. What works for you as a business owner to do things differently?

NP: Finding other small business owners, definitely. So joining some sort of community. There are lots of them online and paid, and paid and non-paid, where you can try and access other people that have been through similar or are going through similar.

Yeah, and that might be simplest looking at your local Facebook groups and trying to find local businesses. If there isn't one, start one. That's, that's a good one, a coffee morning. Because they'll definitely be out there.

And even if their businesses are quite different to your, even if their businesses with premises or whatever, they'll still have similar challenges in it. Yeah, I think talking, talking over your overwhelm and why you're overwhelmed with somebody else's is really, really invaluable.

Yeah, getting outside your own head. And the other thing I'd say as well is, I think there's a lot of pressure on small business owners to make all of their money from their small business. And I know that when I went back to working, which was an opportunity I got given that was within genealogy, it was for a genealogy charity.

I still felt this kind of, even though it was a job that I was really excited about. I still felt this sense of like, Does that mean I failed as a small business owner? Because I'm not just doing my small business now? Yeah, I've got some reliable income, yeah.

Which now I look back and that's just bizarre. Why would I think like that? But I think that's a really common, you know, people think, oh, well. My business is going for a really difficult financial time. So I've had to go pick up some paid hours as a as a contractor, or as gone back into part time employment or whatever.

And that means that my dream is somehow not worked out. And I think we put a lot of pressure on ourselves like that, in a way that nobody within a paid nine to five job would do. I

think if you were working in an office job and you got given an exciting opportunity to earn some extra money on the side, you wouldn't feel like you'd fail in your day job, would you? So just being a bit kind to yourself that way

GL: I think that's really good advice, actually, because if you haven't had to go back and get work, then you're lucky. But you can't control what happens to you with your clients and the economy and other factors outside of your control. So if you can go and get work and it's in...

Sorry, the dog's just farted! I don't think I'll get Mark to edit that out, we can leave it in. She doesn't do it very often, she's quite embarrassed.!

There's no shame in that. You can learn a lot from that and you can apply those experiences to your business. When you come back to it, or when you're able to pick it up and grow it again.

NP: And what's realistic for you? What income do you need to have in, and how many hours can you realistically put into your business? And if you're juggling other things and other life commitments, looking after elderly parents or looking after children, whatever.

Then you might have a financial element that you just can't kind of work around and you can't put in, you know, 60 hour weeks into your business, or you can, but you'll burn yourself out. So, yeah, I think you have to. You have to kind of make some tough choices sometimes.

You don't have to like it, it's OK to not like it. I mean, I was pleased when I got (my job) it was a great opportunity. But I know other people who've stepped back temporarily into work with small businesses and have not really wanted to and have felt a bit down about it. Which is understandable.

But, you know, that's no different from us having to do jobs in the office that we don't like to do. Sometimes. Sometimes you just got to grin it and bear it, and your dream is still there, and you're still growing it on the side. It's not over.

GL: Yeah, I love that, I really do love that. That's an honest and fair and positive way of looking at it. So Natalie, I have taken up a lot of your time. thank you for being here. If people wanted to find out more about you and the Curious Descendants club, where can they go?

NP: They can have a look at my website www.genealogystories.co.uk. I always have to think, then is it .co.uk? but it is .co.uk? And also increasing them hanging out on Blue Sky, that's Genealogy Stories UK.

I'm really enjoying it. I've travelled back in time to when previous millionaire owned apps weren't owned by billionaires. I'm loving that, so if you like words, go over there, maybe, and find me. Yeah, I have signed up for an account, but I haven't done anything yet.

And then my husband signed up like a week after and he's already mastered it and he's telling me all the amazing things that you can do with Blue Sky. So I'm going to have to put some time aside to have a look, but I will share all of the links in the show notes.

And yeah, I would. If anybody wants to connect with me on Blue Sky and show me what I should be doing, that would be nice as well. But I think we are you and I connected, aren't we? Yeah, brilliant. Thank you very much for your time and I'll speak to you soon. Oh, thank you for having me.