

# The Family Treehouse Podcast by Storied

## Episode #16

**Guest: Fiona Brooker**

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**Heather (Host):** Hi everyone, and welcome to *The Family Treehouse*, a podcast series brought to you by Storied, where I chat with people who have a passion for genealogy, storytelling, or both.

I'm your host, Heather Haunert, and today I am very excited to chat with our guest, **Fiona Brooker**, all the way from New Zealand. I really appreciate her jumping on, with such a big difference in time zones, to chat with us.

Fiona is a professional genealogist, and I absolutely adore her website, *Memories in Time*. She's got so many amazing things on her site. She runs a project called *Memories in Time*—we were just chatting about it before we got on the podcast today—finding missing items in different places and sharing them with the world.

She also has her **Modern Family Tree Workshop**, and they're actually pictured behind her in the video. I love how she takes a photo, adds a family tree, and uses color blocking with it. It looks amazing. I could go on and on all day.

Welcome, Fiona. I am so glad you're with us today.

**Fiona (Guest):** Thank you! I'm so excited to chat.

**Heather:** So why don't you start by telling us a little bit about your background and how you got started in family history and storytelling. I'd also love to hear about any coursework or education you've done—especially since you're part of APG.

**Fiona:** Sure. I started family history really young. I remember as a child, we had to do a school project, and I still have the original family tree my mother drew for me. I also have the original letter my grandmother wrote to me, telling me how my granddad immigrated to New Zealand in the 1920s.

It was written in child-friendly language, which made it easier for me to understand. I remember sitting on the veranda of my grandparents' home on the West Coast—just

outside of Hokitika—where we had copies of letters from England that our ancestors in New Zealand had written back to their family.

My mom and I would sit together, looking at these letters, figuring out how everyone fit in the family.

**Fiona:** When I got to high school, there was an evening class in family history. I remember having to get special permission from the principal to attend, because technically I should've been doing homework at that time.

That class really started me, and I've basically been doing this all my life.

It was a lifesaver when I was home on maternity leave. My background was actually in accountancy, but over time it changed. Now I work full-time as a genealogist—doing research for people, helping them with DNA results, and most importantly, sharing those stories and getting them out into the world.

From a training perspective, we have what's called an **OE**—I don't know if you know that term in the U.S. In New Zealand (and probably Australia), it stands for *Overseas Experience*. When you're in your 20s, you go somewhere abroad.

My husband and I went to England for 18 months. While there, I did a whole lot of courses through the Society of Genealogists, and I also did a 40-week night course through the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies, based out of Kent, though my course was in London. That allowed me to earn certificates with them.

That was my first serious qualification. New Zealand had a qualification at one point, but it folded. I actually taught on it rather than taking it, funnily enough. Since then, I've done work with ProGen.

It's always interesting doing courses from New Zealand that are based in the States, because our experiences—especially with records—are so different. I learn a lot, but I also get to share how things work here in New Zealand. Over time, other courses have come along, and you learn as much as possible.

But honestly, you learn the most by actually doing the research. You discover little things and think, *Oh, I didn't know that—that's really interesting*.

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**Heather:** I love that you got that experience in England. That's amazing—and for such a long time, too.

**Fiona:** Oh, it was a fantastic course. It was great to actually get involved and then be on-site to look at so many resources.

**Heather:** Yes—being on-site anywhere is such a treat. Have you been to the States to do research?

**Fiona:** I've had a few days in Salt Lake City to do research at what's now the FamilySearch Library, but that was on our way home from England. Since then, I haven't been back—but it's on the to-do list.

**Heather:** If you're going anywhere for research, Salt Lake is the place!

**Fiona:** Absolutely. My husband got dragged into doing research as well, though he'd probably have been happier at the basketball stadium.

**Heather:** [laughs] My husband would agree with that!

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**Heather:** Fiona, why do you think storytelling is such an important part of family history?

**Fiona:** Storytelling is the link. We're really good at researching—finding all the links, the documents, tracing things back as far as possible—but then what?

I've been doing this 35–40 years. A lot of the information is in my head, on my computer, or in folders. My family doesn't necessarily know it. That's why storytelling is so important—we need to share what we've learned.

If we don't, when we pass away, it's all still locked up, and no one knows how important it is or what's hidden there. That scares me.

My mission for the last few years has been to get the information *out of the computer* and into people's hands. Storytelling gives people connections. It lets them see that maybe what's happening to us now isn't so different from what our ancestors experienced—or maybe it's very different, but we can see how they reacted and what they went through.

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**Heather:** Yes! And sometimes those stories connect with people who aren't into records or dates.

**Fiona:** Absolutely. When my kids were little, I'd turn ancestor stories into bedtime stories. For example: *So, Edmund married Anna Maria, and they hopped on a big ship to New Zealand and started a farm...*

In New Zealand, kids have a family history project at a certain age. My kids had a series of UK books called *Horrible Histories*—with titles like *The Rotten Romans* or *The Villainous Victorians*. They loved the gory or unusual parts.

One ancestor in Australia was killed by a tree he was cutting down. To me, that's sad—but to the kids, it was “cool.” My son even made a PowerPoint with a stick figure and a tree falling on him. To this day, if I mention ancestors, they'll ask, “Is that the guy the tree fell on?”

Stories stick.

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**Heather:** How do you go about writing a story? Do you have a structure or checklist?

**Fiona:** Yes—this came from an idea I had on a camping trip. I created *Plan to Publish*, a 12-step guide to getting a story written and published in a year.

It starts with a plan and structure—maybe downloading a report from your genealogy program. The writing is just one step. And for me, writing isn't my favorite part; I'm more numbers and accounting-minded. So I understand it's hard for some people.

I suggest starting with bullet points from your research—dates, events—then turning each into a sentence. Soon, you've got paragraphs. If you're doing a photo book, you can have lots of pictures with short text, and suddenly you have a book.

The length doesn't matter. Five words, a hundred words, a thousand—what matters is sharing something.

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**Heather:** I love that. Is your 12-step program on your site?

**Fiona:** Yes—there's a webinar I gave, plus all 12 guides, free to download.

**Heather:** Perfect—I'll link it when we share this episode. Do you use historical records in your storytelling?

**Fiona:** Absolutely—they're the backbone. We have very few family photos, and some ancestors have none at all, so I rely on records. In New Zealand, we have *Papers Past*, a free digitized newspaper archive. Australia has *Trove*.

These add incredible social history. For example, I found in a newspaper that my great-great-grandmother was a bigamist!

Historical records give you snapshots in time. But you have to understand their context—just because someone is listed at a house on census night doesn't mean they always lived there. They give you something to write about, something to illustrate with.

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**Heather:** What about difficult family stories?

**Fiona:** Distance and time help. Writing about my great-great-grandmother's bigamy is easier because I didn't know her. If it were my mother, that would be harder.

Sometimes, emotionally close stories are better left for future generations to tell. And we have to remember that social norms change—what's shocking now may have been normal then.

I grew up with my grandmother, who had a stroke, living in our home. She couldn't speak well, but she was wonderful. I still have her leg caliper. Helping her put on her shoes was part of my daily routine. My kids will never understand that, so I write about it.

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**Heather:** Great example. Do you have other resources you recommend?

**Fiona:** Start a family group—share photos, ask questions, spark conversations. Use memory prompts and question lists to get people talking. Think about your audience—sometimes children's versions of stories work well.

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**Heather:** What if you have a story but no photo or record to go with it?

**Fiona:** Use maps, location photos, museum items. I've even used AI images—as long as I clearly label them as AI-generated—to illustrate a scene.

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**Heather:** Good point. And graves?

**Fiona:** In New Zealand, the NZ Society of Genealogists transcribed almost every cemetery in the country. Many councils have burial databases. Sometimes markers are gone—wooden crosses don't last 150 years—but the record remains.

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**Heather:** My favorite question—can you share a favorite family story?

**Fiona:** Yes. I'm working on a book about my immigrant ancestors. One is Jane Hanham, née Birky, who came to New Zealand in 1872 to join her son (my ancestor), who had arrived in the 1850s via Australia.

She traveled on the ship *Utopia*. One day at the archives, another researcher overheard me mention it. She said, "The *Utopia* still exists—it's now the *Star of India*, docked in San Diego."

Later, I got to stand on that ship. Jane was the matron of the single women aboard, so she got free passage. Standing in those tiny cabins, realizing they lived there for three months—it was humbling.

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**Heather:** That's incredible. As we wrap up, any last advice?

**Fiona:** Just start. Get it out of the computer and into people's hands. I worry about future genealogists—no letters, no diaries, all digital. Print your stories and photos; they'll last longer.

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**Heather:** Fiona, thank you so much for sharing your expertise and passion today.

**Fiona:** You're welcome—it's been lovely.

**Heather:** Until next time, friends—embrace the power of your family's untold tales. Start writing your family stories today, and let their voices echo for generations to come at [Storied.com](https://www.storied.com).

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