Get that old photo collection in order

Many people have old photo collections – perhaps you're one of them. If you're lucky the photos are all organised, labelled and dated; but if they're a bit of a jumble and you want to get them in order here's what you can do.

O=Organise: First, assemble all the photos together so that you can see what you've got to work on. Next, do an initial sort to match up photos from the same set of negatives or that were taken at the same time or place. Clues you can look out for include black and white or colour, print size, border width, paper-type markings on the back, and any words or numbers printed on the back. This is an excellent little game for the family to play!

As you identify sets of photos, try to give them a rough date; if you want to write the dates on the back, don't press too hard or the writing will show through on the front - write lightly and on the edge. Now you'll need some old envelopes. Assign an appropriate date range to each envelope (eg 1940-1950) and put the photo sets into them. Try to date any individual photos that haven't been matched to any other and put those into the envelopes as well. The remainder can go into an 'unidentified' envelope of their own.

R= Record: Once you've got your photos organised, you may decide that you've done enough. In which case, clearly mark the envelopes with their date ranges and then store them in a safe place. However, sorting through your photos may have stimulated your curiosity, and you might want to find out more about them. If so, you should first decide whether to create an index of your collection in a notebook or on a computer to make it easy to access. You can choose to just record information about each envelope or about each individual photo. In both cases, each envelope or photo will need a unique identifier so that you can relate the information in the record to the particular physical item it refers to. If you've chosen to record information just about the envelopes, the identifier can be the date ranges they contain. If you're choosing to record information about each photo, the identifier you should use is a serial number which you should apply to each set of photos (eg 1, 2, 3 etc). Each photo within a set should be given a unique sub-number (eg 3-1, 3-2, 3-3 etc). If this all sounds a bit too daunting, no problem; you can go ahead and investigate the contents of your photos without creating a separate record.

D= Discovery: Discovering what people, places, activities and dates are associated with each photo can be difficult especially if it's an old collection. The obvious thing to do is to talk to older relatives who are of that era or who may have been told about the people in the photos by their forebears. It may be worth making a recording of some of these conversations for family posterity (several simple sound recording apps for modern smart phones are available for download).

Although the easiest place to make a note of what you find out about each photo is on the back, it might damage the photo. So, as advised before, if you are going to write on the back, write lightly and on the edge. If you've decided to number each individual photo, this is the time to start doing it and to set up the Index. Starting from '1' assign consecutive numbers to each separate set of photos, and make a note about what this set is all about in the Index. For each photo within the set, assign a sub-number (eg 8-1, 8-2, 8-3 etc) and write that sub-number on the back of the relevant photo. An Excel template for creating an Index is available in the 'Organising Family Photos' section on my website www.pwofc.com.

E=Electronic version: When your investigations are over you may want to consider making electronic versions of your photos. The best way to do this is by scanning them on to your computer. The digital files that are created can be named in the same manner as your envelopes or individual photos, with the addition of a brief description and date, eg 8-4 - Aunt Sally and George at Blackpool, August 1937. If you aren't numbering each photo you can put the date in the file name (using the YYYY-MM-DD format) with a brief description eg 1971-9-29 - York races. You'll need to name some folders to store the files in. If you're numbering the photos individually, I suggest using the set numbers with a very short description eg 8 – Sid's wedding. If you're just putting the date in the file names then the folder names can be date ranges eg 1940-1950.

If you want to get really sophisticated, you can obtain specialist software such as Photoshop which will help you look after your digital photo files. Such software may also have the very useful ability to pick out all the instances of a particular face within your collection.

One last important point about your digital collection - don't forget to back up your files.

R=Reveal: Now that your collection is in good shape, it's worth considering whether you really want to keep it hidden away or whether you'd like to reveal it to your family and friends so that they can enjoy the results of your hard work. The obvious thing to do with the physical photos is to store them in a photo album. My preference is to use albums with slip-in tabs that you can write on. If you decide to create electronic versions of the photos as described above, it's easy to print out your own slip-in tabs - see the 'Organising family photos' section on my website www.pwofc.com. Albums with slots for two 6x4 prints on each page fit easily on most bookshelves. They can be adapted for the odd larger photo by cutting an opening in one of the lower plastic slots.

Another simple thing to do is to use a multi-photo frame, changing the photos every month or so.

If you have created digital photos you can use an accessory application to randomly display all your photos in a window on your computer screen (such an accessory came bundled with MS Windows 7 but I'm not sure if it's still in Windows 10). A tablet computer, such as an iPad, is also an excellent way to view photos – but be sure to buy one which has enough storage to take the whole of your digital photo collection. Another approach is to buy a digital photo frame which will display the photos you load onto an SD card. However, if you want to get really sophisticated you can load copies of your digital photos on to a so-called Media Server – essentially a storage computer – linked to your TV – you will then be able to look at your photos from the comfort of your sofa.

Finally, an option which makes the most of both the digital and the physical is to create a hardcopy book of your photos using one of the many online photo services. It's very easy to download your digital photos, arrange them on the pages and add some explanatory text. There are a variety of sizes you can choose from; an A4 sized 40-page book needn't cost you more than £30 if you keep a look out for special offers.

Paul Wilson, www.pwofc.com