

Some General Notes on Records

One aim of genealogical research is to ascertain and link as many direct ancestors as possible whilst at the same time giving some detail of their lives, places they lived and occupations.

The main tools for the construction of a basic tree for ancestors who were born or died or married after 1837 in England or Wales (1855 in Scotland) and the provision of initial interesting detail are the records of the General Register Office in England and Wales and the Statutory Registers of Scotland which, in theory recorded most births and in theory all legal marriages and all deaths.

Other records which assist in giving details of location, relationships, occupations and dates and places of birth, or the fact of a death or marriage within the ten years from the previous census are census records. Set out below is some information about these useful records.

The indexes of the General Register Office

As indicated on my website a tree can sometimes be constructed without certificates. This is because the indexes, compiled by the General Register Office from the copy certificates provided to it give certain information which has varied since 1837. For example it was only from 1912 that the birth index (as distinct from the actual birth certificate) has included the mother's maiden name.

Similarly it was only from 1866 that ages at death were recorded in the indexes and only since 1912 that the surname of the other party to a marriage has been recorded in the indexes against the name of the potential candidate for an event. Till then when relying on the index it is necessary to look at the potential candidates on the same page of the register and consider the forename of the person's spouse, usually revealed in the census following the marriage.

The historic indexes were not merely a finding aid certificate but could be, particularly useful when dealing with unusual names, a research tool in their own right and it is sometimes possible, to avoid the expense of certificates, to conclude that a particular event in the GRO indexes does relate to the subject of research. Where a certificate has not been obtained and the index relied on it will be clear from the source reference in the relevant footnote. If it has been felt that the certificate is required either to further the research or obtain necessary and pertinent information you, the client will have been advised accordingly and given the option to purchase the certificate.

From November 2016

The GRO updated its information so that it is now possible to conduct a search on the GRO's own site which will give, in the case of births from September 1837, the mother's maiden name and, in the case of deaths from that time, the age at death.

In November 2016 the GRO also ran a beta trial for a short period which enabled the register entry to be obtained in the form of a PDF without having to apply for the actual certificate. The cost of the PDF was £6, a significant reduction against the cost of a full certificate of £9.25.

It is understood that the trial was considered a success and an announcement is awaited regarding an extension which may include a three hour service to obtain PDFs.

If advice is given to obtain a certificate and the advice is rejected I cannot of course be responsible for inaccuracies and errors in the resulting report and pedigree. The obtaining of certificates

makes the likelihood of the tree being accurate greater and when dealing with common names they are often essential. The actual certificates may add information. For example a person who registers a death may be a close relative of the deceased, not found during research, particularly after 1911 when there are no Census records available. It is often interesting to see who was a witness at a wedding.

The indexes are not infallible. They are prone to mistakes and sometimes contain details which are second hand in that they are a copy of a copy. There are omissions which may in a few cases, make tracing an event impossible.

Neither are the certificates infallible. Those obtained from the GRO are sometimes third hand copies; that is of certificates a registrar made from copies supplied to him by a clergyman which the clergyman had copied from his own register. Added to this on occasions not all our ancestors were truthful. They may have lied about the date of birth of a child to avoid a penalty for late registration, a woman registering the birth of an illegitimate child might have pretended she was married, a bigamist would certainly not have said on the occasion of a second marriage that he was married, rather that he was a bachelor or widower.

When you instruct me you must be prepared to incur additional charges of certificates, and any other charges incurred in obtaining records.

Census Records

The valuable censuses for family research in England, Wales and Scotland are those taken in the years 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911. There were censuses taken before that date but the information, apart from a few documents retained by individual parishes, relating to them is statistical only. The census taken in 1921 will not be released until 2021. The 1931 census was destroyed by enemy action in World War 2.

The census records I use in the compilation of this report are viewed online. They are indexed and online access therefore on the whole provides a convenient and time effective way of examining them. They are not transcripts (save as described below) but copies of original census returns. The copyright lies with the National Archives and the copies used have been placed online by Ancestry.co.uk. In the case of the census returns 1841-1901 inclusive the available documents (save in the case of the records of institutions, e.g. workhouses and hospitals) the documents viewed are digitized copies of the enumerator's returns. They are subject to error in that the enumerator was often tired and underpaid and so made mistakes. He was dealing with returns which were often badly written by the householder who may have been only semi literate or not literate at all (in which case the enumerator might have had to fill in the form), who did not know how to spell his name, when or where he was born, came from a different part of the country with an unfamiliar name and had an accent unfamiliar to the enumerator. Spelling was not standardised and a person's name was what he said, not what was written down which makes for discrepancies in the spelling of names over a person's lifetime and from generation to generation.

I have said that the census returns are not transcripts. The returns are in fact, up until 1911, transcripts of the householders returns made by the census enumerator. When his job was done the original household returns were destroyed leaving the enumerator's returns as the best available evidence.

The 1911 census returns are the actual schedules filled in by our ancestors in their own handwriting and can yield some very interesting and sometimes unexpected information.

If your report includes reports on the Scottish censuses then, because the only available images of the returns and enumeration books are provided on a pay per view basis by Scotland's People website we may rely on transcripts provided by Ancestry.co.uk If this is the case it will be clear from the source reference Any source reference will make it clear whenever any transcript of any record has been relied on rather than an original or digitized copy of an original.

The information required by the various censuses was increased year by year. In 1841 the enumerator returns do not even show how people in a household were related to each other, nor in most cases precise ages.

In England and Wales, Scotland Channel Islands and Isle of Man censuses now available to us were taken on the following dates:-

1841 6 June 1841 resulting in many seasonal workers away from home being omitted

1851 The night of 30/31 March 1851

1861 The night of 7/8 April 1861

1871 The night of 2/3 April 1871

1881 The night of 3/4 April 1881

1891 The night of 5/6 April 1891

1901 The night of 31 March/1 April 1901

1911 The night of 2/3 April 1911

Other records

Where other records have been used in the compilation from the report it will have been made clear in source references and whether these are originals or transcripts. Wherever possible original documents, or digitised copies of originals are used in my research.

If an ancestor included in this report died between 1858 and 1966, leaving a will or a grant of representation was required to administer their estate it will have become apparent during the course of our research and will be noted in the report. The relevant documents can be obtained and may add interest to the report. Wills can be a particularly fruitful source of information for genealogical research.

Apart from the basic tools of census returns and the records of the General Register Office there are a whole range of records which can be used both to trace ancestors and give the details of their lives. For example most people do not know that until the mid nineteenth century our ancestors could not move freely from place to place as we do because of the poor law system which was administered by the authorities of the civil parish. If a person was in a parish and fell on hard times he or she might have to undergo a settlement examination to show their place of legal settlement was the parish they were claiming from. If it wasn't they were removed. Fairly unpleasant for them but it means that where records survive they give a huge amount of details and people's lives, families and where they lived and worked and any apprenticeship they had served. The law of settlement, introduced in Elizabethan times became increasingly complex and settlement could be acquired in more than one way, hence the records and their value. The concept of settlement, though the full rigors of its consequences became reduced, did not end until the advent of the welfare state.

There are many other records which were brought into existence at various times too numerous to be mentioned here.

Other interesting and useful records include those relating to voting rights before 1832 which might depend on the ownership of land rather than the place of abode or the membership of a craft or Freemans' guild.

Ancestors may have been unlucky enough to have entered a workhouse, prison or lunatic asylum, or even be hung or transported.

I would be delighted to advise what records might be available either to add colour to a basic report or to enable your own research to be furthered.

Note on age estimates

In a report it sometimes happens either that a person has not been identified, or they can be identified by name but their dates of birth and death cannot be ascertained.

Where this applies a wide ranging estimate may have given. It is only an indication of a time period and is based upon the fact that a man would not normally father a child after the age of 70 or a woman, give birth beyond 50. Within this time period the latest date when people became parents was somewhat younger.

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