



Hatched, Matched, Dispatched

Understanding Civil Registration

Civil Registration of births, marriages and deaths started in England and Wales in 1837 and provides the information needed to identify family relationships. This information enables us to build the framework of our family tree.

Unless you already know your family's origins back to at least 1911, you cannot avoid the need to use the records of civil registration and, sadly, the cost of purchasing registration certificates, so an understanding of how the system works and how to find the records you are looking for is essential.

There is a detailed description of the history and structure of civil registration in England and Wales below and you are strongly advised to study this, since understanding the system will help you to understand and solve some of the problems you may encounter. However, you will be keen to get started, so, just remember this article when you run into trouble.

How to Find a Birth, Marriage or Death

The official registers themselves are not open to the public and so we have to purchase certificates which contain copies of the details of each event as they were originally recorded. To help us, there are free, publicly available, indexes of the register entries.

All of the online indexes are to some extent deficient when it comes to very recent events. For later dates than those indicated below, you will need to use the microfiched indexes held by a number of UK libraries (see detailed description below). For events registered within the past year, you will have to contact the Register Office where the event was registered (if known).

The indexes to births, marriages and deaths registered in England and Wales since 1 July 1837 are available online in several places:

LancashireBMD – The indexes at www.lancashirebmd.org.uk (and there are several for other counties) differ from the ones which follow in that they relate to the original registers held by the local Register Offices whereas the others relate to copies held by the General Register Office. **The indexes are incomplete but should be searched first.**

Commercial Web Sites – for example www.ancestry.com and www.findmypast.co.uk You will have to pay a subscription to access these indexes, which cover the period 1837 to about 2005. **DO NOT order certificates from any of these sites as they charge a premium price for the service.**

FreeBMD – the indexes at www.freebmd.org.uk are the same as those on the commercial web sites but currently cover only 1837 to about 1992.

GRO Online Indexes – The General Register Office has digitised some of the copy registers and offers a free search facility (currently) covering births 1837-1919 and 1984-2002 and deaths 1837-1957 and 1984-2019 but not marriages. To access this you need to register at www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/

How to Get a Certificate

LancashireBMD – If you find the record you want using LancashireBMD, order using the online ordering link provided on the site. If there is no online order facility then you can print and mail an order form to the Register Office holding the original register. You will receive a copy of the original register entry rather than a copy of a copy, with the possibility of copying errors.

FreeBMD or Commercial Sites – If you find the record you want on a commercial site or on FreeBMD, note the name(s), year, quarter, district and entry number provided by the index. Using these details, you can order a certificate from the General Register Office. You will receive a copy of the copy of the original register entry. You can order online at:

<https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/>

Do not order certificates using links from commercial index sites or any site, other than the General Register Office (above) or a local authority, which is offering a service. Invariably, you will pay considerably more than the official price.

GRO Online Indexes – If you find the birth or death entry using the GRO Online Index, you can order copies of register entries directly from the search result, for delivery as either a standard printed certificate delivered by post or, for a reduced fee, a digital (pdf) copy which will be delivered by email.

What will the Certificate Tell Me?

Birth Certificate – The date (and time in the case of multiple births) and place of birth; the forename(s) and surname of the child; the forename(s) and surname and occupation of the father*; the forename(s), surname, maiden name and any previous married names of the mother; the date the birth was registered and the name, description (e.g. "father") and address of the informant.

* If the child was illegitimate then the father's name will be omitted unless he was present at the time of registration and agreed to his name being entered in the register.

Marriage Certificate – The date and place of the marriage; the name, age*, name, condition (bachelor/spinster/widow(er)), occupation and address of bride and groom; the name and occupation of the fathers** (but not the mothers) of bride and groom; whether the marriage was by licence or after banns; the name of the officiating minister or registrar and the names of the (usually two) witnesses.

* For those aged 21 or over, this may simply say "over 21". An age of 21 may mean either precisely 21 years or may mean "over 21"

** The absence of a father's name usually implies that the bride or groom was illegitimate. If the father was dead, the word "(deceased)" will often be included, but its absence should not be taken as a proof that he was still alive.

Death Certificate – The date and place of death; name, sex and age* of the deceased; the cause of death*; the name, description and residence of the informant and the date the death was registered.

* Ages on death certificates are notoriously suspect since they depend upon the knowledge of the informant.

** If an inquest was held, the date and place of the inquest and the name of the coroner will be recorded.

How Do I Use This Information?

The **birth certificate** names the child's parents. This provides a starting point for a search for their marriage. In the absence of other information, one should assume that the mother would be somewhere between 16 and 50 years old when she married the father and so the search for a marriage should extend from the date the birth was registered back to around 34 years earlier.

The **marriage certificate** provides the name and age of bride and groom and the names of their respective fathers. On the assumption that the bride or groom's age is correct, a record of their birth should be found in the birth registration indexes around the year suggested by the age. Allow a year either side of this estimate, but if unsuccessful, consider the possibility that the age is not correct and extend the period searched.

If successful, this process can be repeated for each generation back to someone born or married before the start of civil registration in 1837.

The **death certificate** is often of little use in building up a family tree, but should not be ignored. The informant may be a previously unknown relative or the circumstances of the death may have resulted in an inquest and possibly an informative newspaper report. The place of death may be an institution such as a workhouse or asylum, for which there may be further records available.

Once the line of descent has been established back to 1911 or earlier, you can look for the individual and his/her family in the census returns. See the paper "En Famille" for more information about how to find and use the census returns.

What's Special about Manchester?

Researching civil registration in the Manchester area is made considerably easier by the free indexes at lancashirebmd.org.uk which are substantially complete for Manchester, Bolton and Oldham from 1837 until well into the 20th century, thanks to the efforts of numerous MLFHS members who have volunteered their time to creating the indexes.

The benefits of LancashireBMD, aside from the indexes relating to the original registers and not the quarterly copies sent to GRO are:

- Mother's maiden name appears for births before 1912
- Age at death appears for deaths before 1866
- Marriages are 'paired' so there is no ambiguity as to who married whom
- The place of marriage is given in the index

The indexes are also largely complete for many other areas around Manchester. For details of coverage, refer to the coverage pages on the web site.

While the above provides an outline of how to find and use birth, marriage and death certificates, the process is (or can be) considerably more complicated. The notes below explain the system in more detail and discuss search techniques and some of the problems which you may encounter.

Looking More Closely at Civil Registration

The History of Civil Registration

Before 1837, there was no statutory registration process for births and deaths. Church of England ministers were required to keep registers of baptisms and burials but this requirement did not extend to the growing number of nonconformist ministers and chapels. The situation with marriage was better regulated. Since 1754 it was only possible (with the specific exceptions of Jews and Quakers) to marry in a Church of England parish church or chapel licensed for the purpose. Ministers were required to keep registers in a specified format.

On 1 July 1837 a new system of civil registration was introduced. This required all births and deaths to be notified to a civil registrar. The act enabled Church of England ministers (as well as the Secretaries of Synagogues and Quaker Quarterly Meetings) to be appointed as registrars for the purpose of conducting marriages. The system also opened up the possibility of conducting a marriage in a nonconformist chapel provided a civil registrar was present to administer the civil vows and record the marriage in his/her register.

Registration Districts

In 1834, following the Poor Law Amendment Act of that year, the country was divided into a number of Poor Law Unions. These Unions are important because they subsequently provided the basis for both Registration Districts for Civil Registration and Enumeration Districts for the decennial censuses.

England & Wales was divided into a number of Superintendent Registrars' Districts and each District further divided into several Sub-Districts. Sub-districts were the usual interface with the public. The 27 Districts were numbered in Roman numerals I (West London) to XXVII (North Wales) and the Sub-Districts given the name of the town or parish in which the Sub-Registrar was located. The boundaries were revised in 1852 and the number of Districts increased. The new Districts were given Arabic numbers with alphabetical suffixes 1a for West London to 11b for North Wales. Sub-Districts continued to be named as before though some disappeared, some new ones were created and some saw boundary changes. The boundaries and numbering were revised again in 1946. A pair of maps published by the Institute of Heraldic & Genealogical Studies, Canterbury, show the approximate boundaries 1837-1854 and 1856-1946. Further boundary changes took place subsequently, most notably in 1974 as part of the reorganisation of local government. In addition there have been numerous local reorganisations within registration districts.

The Registration Process

Births and deaths must be notified to a Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages within statutory time limits. Births must be notified within 42 days and deaths within 5 days (unless there is an inquest) of the event. It will normally be a Local Registrar who is informed and he or she will make out an appropriate certificate. Every 3 months, the local registrar makes a copy of the entries for the quarter which he sends to the Superintendent Registrar who in turn certifies this and forwards it to the Registrar General. When a register book is full, it is sent to the Superintendent Registrar who retains it.

For marriages, the register is completed as a part of the ceremony. If the wedding takes place in a Registry Office, the Registrar who performs the ceremony will forward copies of register entries quarterly to the Superintendent Registrar. If the marriage is in a church, the officiating minister will

act as local registrar. He/she will complete two registers and send copies of the register entries quarterly to the Superintendent Registrar. When full, one register is sent to the Superintendent Registrar and the other register is retained by the church. The Superintendent Registrar will, as for births and deaths, submit these copies of the register entries to the Registrar General.

The Superintendent Registrar retains the completed registers sent to him by the Local Registrars and church ministers and has the authority to make copies on request and on payment of a statutory fee.

The Registrar General, on receipt of register copies from each Superintendent registrar, produces consolidated indexes to each of these quarterly volumes, one each for birth, marriage and death registrations.

The National Indexes

The indexes compiled by the Registrar General from the register copies sent to him by Superintendent Registrars. are arranged alphabetically by surname and forename(s) in quarterly volumes Jan-Mar, Apr-Jun, Jul-Sep and Oct-Dec according to when the event was registered. The indexes were produced in book form but have in subsequent years been made available in microfilm and microfiche format so that copies may be consulted in a variety of centres including:

Mormon Family History Centres
County Record Offices and many large libraries
Full sets of indexes are held at:
Birmingham Central Library
Bridgend Reference and Information Library
City of Westminster Archives Centre
Manchester Central Library
Newcastle City Library
Plymouth Central Library
The British Library (Identification required for registration purposes)

You will often hear them called the "St. Catherine's Indexes" after their previous home at St. Catherine's House, London. Older researchers may still call them "Somerset House Indexes" after their even earlier home. It must be noted that the index references apply to the central records only. They are meaningless to Superintendent Registrars who may, or may not have compiled indexes to their own registers.

It is more common nowadays to consult these indexes online (see below).

Civil Registration on the Internet

This is now the principal route by which searches for the civil registration of births, marriages and deaths are now made. The national indexes to civil registration for England & Wales are available on the internet from several commercial web sites.

The following commercial sites provide information for charges made against a credit card. The coverage, presentation and charging structures differ considerably. Increasingly, these sites provide machine-searchable indexes. The sites include:

- www.ancestry.co.uk
- www.findmypast.co.uk
- www.bmdindex.co.uk

The above sites currently only cover events registered 1837 to circa 2006. To locate later registrations you will have to use the GRO national indexes as described above.

There is a project to build a machine-searchable copy of the national indexes under the title "FreeBMD" and over 270 million index entries have already been made available covering approximately 1837-1992 with some gaps. Visit www.freebmd.org.uk for more information,

A number of sites provide indexes to local registrar's own indexes. For Lancashire, some 23 million records are already indexed at www.lancashirebmd.org.uk and there are similar sites for Cumbria, Cheshire, Yorkshire, Staffordshire, West Midlands, North Wales, Wiltshire and Bath. These indexes may provide more information than the GRO indexes, for example ages at death before 186 and mother's maiden names for births before 1912. They also provide, in the case of marriages, pairing of brides and grooms and the name of the church at which the marriage took place. Visit www.ukbmd.org.uk for links to these and other sites providing access to local BMD indexes.

Notes on Searching for a Reference

If you are looking for a reference in the microfilmed GRO Indexes, the following notes may be helpful:

- Obey the search room rules, which may include prohibition of eating and drinking and the need to put bags into lockers .
- Many record offices insist you take notes in pencil. Always keep one with your research papers.
- Ask the librarian/archivist how the fiche/film issuing or control system operates and follow it! Use the marker cards or boxes provided.
- Keep a record of quarters searched. There are standard (Allen & Todd) forms for this or you can create your own.
- Search all likely name variants and record which ones you have searched.
- Note any references which look likely even if registered in unexpected places.
- Double check the details of any reference from which you expect to order a certificate.
- Search for marriages under the less common surname first, then cross check the other
- Check the bottom of each page for a late manuscript addition

Problems

Finding a reference in the indexes is not always easy. There are several problems which you may encounter:

- **Entry lost in the system** - The forwarding and copying of registers and the indexing process provide many opportunities for error and omission. These errors and omissions carry forward into the online versions of the GRO indexes. Search LancashireBMD or equivalents for other counties. You may need to check with the Superintendent Registrar where you believe the event would have been registered if an entry cannot be found in the online local or national indexes.
- **Surname indexed under a variant spelling** - This is very common. The name may not have been spelled the way you expect either through change over time or by Registrar's whim/error. Check all known variants. It may also have been mis-transcribed during indexing.
- **Unexpected Forename(s)** - You may know the person by a familiar name such as Jack or Sally when the name they were registered/married under was John or Sarah. Forenames

may be reversed. William John may become John William. Middle names may be dropped or adopted.

- **Birth not registered** - particularly before 1875 when there was no penalty.
- **Parents not married** - even though they represented themselves as married.
- **Child not named** - The child may not have been named at the time of registration and is indexed under "Male" or "Female" only.
- **Unidentified body** - A deceased person might not have been identified and so was registered and indexed under "Unknown"
- **Late amendments** - The entry may have been missed when the book was written/typed. Watch out for manuscript amendments or additions at the bottom of the index page.
- **Change of name** - A child may have been illegitimate and registered under his mother's maiden name but changed this upon her subsequent marriage. A child may have been registered with its father's surname but adopted a stepfather's surname following its widowed mother's re-marriage.
- **Wrong Information** - Your source information is wrong and the entry is recorded at a different time or in an unexpected registration district

Obtaining a Certificate

There are several ways in which you can obtain a certificate once you have found out when and where the birth, marriage or death took place:

On line quoting the index reference, from Office of National Statistics at
<https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/>

By mail, quoting the index reference, from Office of National Statistics, PO Box 2, Southport, PR8 2JD. An additional charge is made for this service. They will search the indexes for an additional fee. Certificates should be supplied within about a week but can be provided next working day for an additional fee. You can download a form from

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/birth-certificate-application-form>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/death-certificate-application-form>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/marriage-certificate-application-form>

Online or by Mail from the Superintendent Registrar, Find the event using the indexes at www.lancashirebmd.org.uk and then use the online ordering services provided (or post an application form, where online ordering is not available) to obtain a copy of the original register entry

By direct approach to the Superintendent Registrar, in the absence of LancashireBMD or equivalent indexes). Give all the details you can including the year and quarter registered if known from the indexes. The index references themselves are meaningless to Registrars but the year and quarter will help them find the entry. Registrars may not be prepared to search for marriages since it can mean searching up to 100 or more registers if you are unable to specify where the marriage took place. Registrars may be prepared to undertake a more flexible search than others. You will need to find out to whom cheques should be made payable as this varies considerably. Turn-around can vary from next day to over a month depending upon the office concerned. Some local Register Offices offer online ordering and payment.

Registrars' addresses can be found on the GENUKI pages at www.genuki.org.uk

There is only one form of marriage or death certificate which you can order but there are options of a "short" and a "full" birth certificate. The short certificate contains very little information and is genealogically more or less useless. You should always order the full certificate for research purposes.

How to Avoid Paying

There are a few ways in which you may be fortunate to avoid the need to purchase a certificate. The following may be worth considering:

Deposited Marriage Registers - If you know the church where a marriage took place, you may find the church copy of the register has been deposited at the local county record office and a photocopy may be obtained. An increasing number of post-1837 marriage registers are now available online as part of the Ancestry and Findmypast databases. This does NOT apply to marriages conducted in a Register Office for which the register is retained by the Register Office concerned.

One Name Studies - You may find index entries and possibly certificate transcripts for specific surnames at web sites relating to one name studies.

Orphan Certificates – Many family history societies have collections of certificates which have been donated by their members (usually because they were ordered in error). They are sometimes listed on society web sites. MLFHS has several thousand of these available to members, indexed within The Great Database and linked to images of the certificates.

Publications

There are many publications which describe the registration system and how to interpret the information which it provides or which support research. Some useful titles specific to the subject include:

General Register Office - Eve McLaughlin

Introduction to Civil Registration - Tom Wood

Birth & Death Certificates - £4 from author: Barbara Dixon, 22 Redwood, Burnham, Slough, SL1 8JN

The Family Tree Detective - Colin Rogers

St. Catherine's House Districts - Ray Wiggins (lists districts and sub-districts)

District Register Offices in England & Wales - E. Yorkshire FHS

A Guide to the Registration Districts of Manchester - MLFHS

Registration District Maps 1837-1852, 1852-1946, 1946 on - IHGS, Northgate, Canterbury, CT1 1BA

Amended 4 June 2020 - John Marsden