Getting started with family history

*Bring your past to life*

Were your ancestors hardworking farmers or wealthy aristocrats? Where did they live? What did they do? Did they fight for their country or die on the battlefield? Did they travel to foreign lands to seek their fortunes, or did they live very close to where you are right now?

With Findmypast, it’s easy to discover your own family’s story. You can easily search our archive of over 2 billion historical records from around the world - including the fascinating British Newspaper Archive - to follow your ancestors’ journeys and build your own family tree.

We’ve put together this handy getting started guide, to introduce you to birth, marriage and death records, census records, parish records and more. We’ve also covered advice for searching Irish records, building your family tree online, expert hints and tips, how to order certificates and lots more.

You can find lots more practical advice, as well as many fascinating historical stories and discoveries on our blog (blog.findmypast.co.uk).
Contents

Starting out

1. Introduction
2. Getting started
3. Searching on Findmypast
4. Building your family tree

Types of records

5. Birth, marriage and death records (BMDs)
6. What certificates can tell you
7. Census records
8. Parish records
9. Newspapers
10. Military records
11. Crime, prison and punishment records
12. Travel records
13. Occupations and institutions
14. Irish records

Take your journey further

15. Breaking down brick walls
16. What to do next
17. Get in touch
18. Glossary
Introduction

Family history is so much more than dates and names. It’s an opportunity to discover a story that belongs completely to you.

That story starts with simply jotting down a few names and birthdates, but it quickly grows into a fascinating journey. Who were your great-great-great-grandparents? Where did they live? Were they rich or poor? Did they fight in wars, or travel to foreign shores? Do you descend from criminals or aristocracy?

This guide will help familiarise you with some of the different kinds of historical records you can explore on Findmypast. We recommend reading it before you start your research, and then keeping it to refer back to as and when you need it.

First Steps

It all starts with you. It may sound simple, but the essential first step to building your family tree is to write down as much as you can from what you know already.

Make some notes sketching out a basic tree, and fill in key details such as names, birthdays, and birthplaces. Include your siblings, parents, grandparents, and cousins, going as far back as you can. Don’t worry about filling in every detail straight away.

Head to findmypast.co.uk to register and start building your family tree online with our easy family tree builder. Keep a note of anything you’re unsure of so that you remember to come back to it later. Once you’ve done the research below, read the “Building your family tree” section of this booklet for more on getting the most out of your tree.

Once you’ve exhausted your own knowledge, it’s time to ask your family for theirs. Contact as many family members as you can. Explain what
you’re up to, and ask whether they’re able to put you in touch with other relatives whose contact details you don’t have.

Digging Deeper

Now, you need to start digging. Face-to-face interviews tend to be the most productive, but phone calls are also better than email or mail. You may well find you spend hours reminiscing, but be prepared with a list of what you need to cover so you can make sure the discussion stays on track. Recording the interview can be useful, not only to pick up threads you might forget later, but also as a keepsake to include alongside your family tree.

Ideally, you want each relative to sketch out their equivalent of the ‘skeleton’ family tree you made for yourself earlier, going back as far as possible. You may find some of the things they tell you are easily added immediately to your family tree on findmypast.co.uk. With other points you may need to use findmypast’s records to research further, then add them in later.

Be sure to take note of:

- Names
- Dates
- Life details (occupation, migrations, any major events)
- Stories
- Romances (you never know when this may prove relevant – but do be sensitive! Don’t put your relatives off talking to you again!)
- Physical descriptions
- Anecdotes

Repeat the same enquiries with each person, and keep track of concurrences and inconsistencies in their answers. Let them talk freely, and avoid ‘feeding’ your interviewees with leading questions.

It’s also important to ask if you can see photos, certificates, or documents relating to your ancestors. And bring anything you have already – it might trigger more memories! Check whether anyone else in the family has done any genealogical research, as it may save you
If you can, scan or take photographs of any documents and images you find. You can then upload these to your personal family tree on findmypast at a later stage.

Once you’ve gathered all you can from your relatives, take stock and decide on the best line of investigation. You might choose to trace your family surname (remember this might be tricky if it’s a popular one!), solve a family mystery, or simply follow one branch back as far as you can. In any case, having a goal in mind will really focus your efforts.
Searching on Findmypast

Once you’ve gathered all of the information you can from your relatives, you’re ready to go further back using findmypast’s search facility to find your ancestors in our millions of online records.

Once you’ve registered and logged in at findmypast.co.uk, you’ll see some simple search fields. Type in the name and details of someone you know (it’s easiest to start with yourself) and you’ll find a selection of records. Look at the dates and details to work out which ones you’re looking for. Take some time to explore the different record collections and find out what sort of information you can find.

Here are some handy tips for searching the records on Findmypast:

• Start with yourself and work backwards. This is usually the easiest way to build up your family tree.

• Start broad and narrow down. Start with a more general search, and then use filters to eliminate results. Findmypast allows you to search across all record sets, so using this technique will make it less likely you’ll miss someone.

• Use an asterisk * (this is called a wildcard) to search for a part of a name that may have changed over time. For example, where you know a “Mc” surname may also have been recorded as a “Mac”, you can use this to find both variants. “M*cDonald” will find both McDonald and Macdonald.

• Historical records for births, marriages and deaths are located in ‘registration districts’, often named after the largest town in the area. Be prepared to widen your search and start with no location to see what results are returned, as district boundaries have changed over time.

• You can change location on findmypast with the “where” box. If you can’t find your ancestors in Britain, they may have moved abroad – see if you can find them around the world.

• Start without the “variants” box ticked. If you get no results, tick it and search again to see if you can find your ancestor with a slightly
differently spelled name (which happened more often than you might imagine due to varying literacy rates).

• Our ancestors often lied about their age on occasion, for various reasons. They may have needed to be older to enlist in the military, or they may have married someone much younger or older than themselves and wanted to reduce the margin. Ages of death were given by using information supplied on behalf of the deceased. Give yourself some leeway either side of the birth year you think is correct to be sure that you find your record.

• Re-examine your records when looking for more information about a particular person. One small error in your research can have a knock-on effect, and you may find that an incorrect name or date is the cause!
Building your family tree

Findmypast has its own free family tree builder. It’s the perfect place to keep all your discoveries safe. Head to https://www.findmypast.com/family-tree to get started.

Can’t see the wood for the family trees? Here are a few tips to help you keep your research in order:

• There are different views to help you visualise relationships when looking at your tree. The pedigree view shows only direct ancestors, while the family view shows all brothers, sisters and spouses of each generation. Use both of these to identify gaps in your research and pinpoint what to look for next.

• Every relative you add to the tree has their own profile. You can add media to these (pictures, images of records, maps of where your ancestor lived and even audio recordings of them or people talking about them). The facts section allows you to add custom and pre-prepared facts that can tell the whole story about your relatives. Add media relating to every fact and cite your sources to be sure of accuracy. Link other members of your family (witnesses, informants etc.) to these facts and you’ll be able to discover new links that may not have been so obvious before!

• Relatives have a notes page too - write down everything you can. Every half-story or possible lead should be kept until you are sure.

• The People list can be sorted by name, dates and places, and includes hints on records you might like to look at to further your research. Use the list to spot gaps (perhaps you’ve missed a birth location or death date). When you find the records to fill in this information, you might be able to go back even further!

• It’s entirely up to you whether you make your tree public or private, either when you start or at any point in your research journey. However, if you keep it private, you might miss out on finding new distant relatives who might be able to collaborate with you. Every single fact you add can be public or private, so even when your tree is public, it’s still up to you how much you share or keep to yourself. But remember,
somebody spotting those names might just be the person with the picture in the attic you desperately need to see, or the certificate that solves that family mystery!
Types of Records

Birth, marriage and death records (BMDs)

Birth, marriage and death records (BMDs) are a great place to start when tracing your family tree. Search for your own birth to begin with. Then, if your parents married, perhaps you can look for their marriage, along with your mother’s birth, and then your father’s.

The records at Findmypast list all of the births, marriages and deaths that occurred in England and Wales between 1837 and 2005. You’ll also find information about British citizens living abroad or at sea.

The records will tell you the person’s name and the geographic district in which the birth, marriage or death was registered, as well as the year and quarter.

Birth records

In this example, we can see that Ada Maria Howard’s birth was registered in Royston in the July, August and September quarter of 1903. For births recorded after 1911, you’ll also find the mother’s maiden name listed.
Marriage records

Marriage records from 1912 onwards will also tell you the last name of the person your ancestor married. In this example, we can see that Arthur W Johnson married a woman with the last name Targett. Their marriage was registered in the January, February and March quarter of 1912.

Death records

Along with location and date, death records will also tell you how old your ancestor was. Here we can see that Florence B M Silk died at the age of 73. Her death was registered in Alton in the January, February and March quarter of 1945. For deaths recorded after 1969, the person’s exact date of birth was listed.

You will also find volume and page numbers on the right-hand side of the birth, marriage and death records. These numbers are important, as you can use them to order a copy of a birth, marriage or death certificate from the General Register Office (GRO).
What certificates can tell you

You can use the information you’ve found in Findmypast’s records to order a copy of your ancestor’s birth, marriage or death certificate from the General Register Office.

Certificates will reveal lots of extra information about your ancestors, such as parents’ names, addresses and occupations. You can add all of these new details to your family tree.

Birth certificates

This is an example of a birth certificate. Here we see that Ada Maria Howard was born on 11 June 1903 in Layston. The certificate tells us that her father’s name was Ernest Howard, while her mother’s name was Mercy Howard. We also discover that her father was a “chimney sweeper master”.

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CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF BIRTH
GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

REGISTRATION DISTRICT
1903 Buntingford
in the County of Hertford

No. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
192 Name: Ada Maria Howard
Sex: Female
Father’s name: Ernest Howard
Mother’s name: Mercy Howard, formerly Howard
Occasion of birth: Birth
Registrant’s sign: Mercy Howard
Mother’s sign: Ernest Howard
Registrar’s sign: Hugh Old
Date of birth: 11 June 1903

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Births in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 25th day of January 2010

BXCE 334659

CAUTION THERE ARE OFFENCES RELATING TO FALSELY ALTERING A CERTIFICATE AND USING OR POSSESSING A FALSE CERTIFICATE - CROWN COPYRIGHT
WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.
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Marriage certificates can provide a lot of new information for your family tree. In the example here, the certificate tells us that Arthur William Johnson married Mary Magdalen Targett on 3 February 1912 at the Register Office in Wandsworth. It tells us the couple’s ages, their marital status and also that Arthur was employed as a lighterman (operating a barge).

We also learn the addresses where Arthur and Mary lived, along with their fathers’ names and occupations. We can see that the lighterman trade ran in Arthur’s family and that Mary’s father was a “ladies’ tailor”.
This death certificate reveals that Florence Beatrice Maud Silk died on 4 February 1945 at her home in Alton. It tells us that Florence was 73 and was the wife of Charles Silk, a retired sorter for the Post Office. We also learn the cause of death, and that Florence’s husband was present at the death.

How to order certificate copies

You can order a certificate by visiting www.gro.gov.uk for England and Wales, or www.gro-scotland.gov.uk for Scotland, or www.welfare.ie (and searching for “General Register Office) for Ireland.

Search for, or follow the links to, “order certificates online”. You will be asked to provide information from the birth, marriage or death record you’ve found at findmypast. Certificates cost £9.25 in England and Wales, £15 in Scotland, and €20 in Ireland.*

*Prices correct at time of going to press.
Census records

The census is a count of all the people in the United Kingdom on one particular day, taken every ten years. Censuses have been used throughout history to provide governments with information relating to population size and land ownership. They can be traced as far back as the ancient Egyptians, who used them to distribute land following the annual flooding of the Nile.

William the Conqueror’s Domesday Book is perhaps the most famous census of all, and was an early attempt to collect information about land ownership in England following the Norman invasion.

The first official government census in Britain was taken in 1801. There has been a census every ten years since, except for 1941 as Britain was at war. Between 1801 and 1831 the census contained only general information about numbers of people. The 1841 census was the first to list the names of every individual in a household.

What can a census tell us?

Censuses can contain great amounts of detail, such as:

• Your ancestors’ ages
• Their marital statuses
• Their relationship to the head of the household
• Their occupations
• Their places of birth
• Details of their residence.

These are all staples of genealogical research that feed your family tree.

How to search a census

When first searching census records, it’s best to keep things simple. Begin by searching your ancestor’s name, before gradually widening your search to include variations in name, age and place of birth if you need to.
The information found on census returns is not always completely accurate. Not only were names, ages and spellings less rigidly important than they are today, forms were not thoroughly checked for accuracy. If a third party completed the form, they would record what they had been told, and would have to guess the spellings of unfamiliar names and places. If the census enumerator could not read the handwriting, they too would have made a guess.

The census can be a really valuable source for helping us to find out about the past. After 1851 the records became increasingly detailed and as everybody in the country was asked the same questions, they allow us to compare different areas at the same time or over a period of time.

Searching censuses requires a flexible approach. They are perhaps the most useful records for expanding your family tree. With time and patience, you should be able to trace your ancestors across every available census, retracing their movements and changing fortunes while discovering unknown relatives along the way.
Parish records

Parish records are records kept by the church after a law passed in 1538 in England and Wales that required all baptisms, marriages and burials to be recorded in the parish register. With religion being such an integral part of daily life during this period, they can offer a fascinating window into British life from the Tudor period onwards.

What you can find in parish records

As our forebears moved around much less than we do today, quite often you can find a family living in the same village for hundreds of years. This means you can use these registers to chart the growth of your family through time.

Often they also contain details, including:
• Occupation
• Address
• Full names
• Cause of death
• Marriage witnesses and the signature of those married (if your ancestors signed with an X, it probably meant they could not read or write)

All of these extra details are vital in building your family tree and telling the whole story.

Most registers no longer reside at the church and are kept at local record offices. Many of them have been scanned onto microfiche or digitised and indexed, and can be viewed online. Findmypast has the largest online collection of parish records from England and Wales.

As official central government registration of births, marriages and deaths didn’t begin until 1837, these records are the best place to find evidence of your ancestors and go further back in your family tree.

Remember that burials traditionally occurred a few days after death, and baptisms could take place up to eight days after birth, but it was not unusual for older children or even adults to be baptised, so remember to allow some flexibility in the dates when you’re searching.
Newspapers

Newspapers are a fantastic resource for family history research. They can reveal incredible details about your ancestors and help you understand the world in which they lived.

You’ll find millions of pages from local British and Irish newspapers at findmypast, dating from the 1700s to the 1950s. All of the words in the newspapers are searchable, so try looking for a person’s name, a place or historical event to get started.

Western Daily Press, 1 April 1944. Image © Local World Limited, created courtesy of THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.

Newspapers reported on both national and local news, including births, marriages, deaths and criminal trials. You may find your ancestor mentioned by name, and could even uncover a photograph.
If you have heard a rumour in your family, newspapers are a great place to look for the truth. Accidents, scandals, suicides, murders and bigamy cases were all widely reported.

One family historian using findmypast found the article above. It confirmed a story she’d heard about her family history: that her mother had been rescued from a house fire when she was a child.
The Hatter's Gazette reprints from an old journal, dated January 16th, 1797, the following amusing account of the wearing of the first silk hat in London:—“John Hetherington, haberdasher, of the Strand, was arraigned before the Lord Mayor yesterday on a charge of breach of the peace, and inciting to riot, and was required to give bonds in the sum of £500. It was in evidence that Mr. Hetherington, who is well connected, appeared on the public highway wearing upon his head what he called a silk hat (which was offered in evidence), a tall structure having a shiny lustre, and calculated to frighten timid people. As a matter of fact, the officers of the Crown stated several women fainted at the unusual sight, while children screamed, dogs yelped, and a younger son of Cordwainer Thomas, who was returning from a Chandler’s shop, was thrown down by the crowd which had collected, and had his right arm broken. For these reasons the defendant was seized by the guards, and taken before the Lord Mayor. In extenuation of his crime the defendant claimed that he had not violated any law of the kingdom, but was merely exercising a right to appear in a head-dress of his own design—a right not denied to any Englishman.”

Huddersfield Chronicle, 24 January 1899. Image © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

You’ll also find thousands of stories that vividly bring events of the past to life - or at least, how the press reported them.

The article above details the commotion that was reportedly caused by
a top hat in 1797. It seems “several women fainted at the unusual sight, while children screamed [and] dogs yelped”. 
Military records

Many of us have members of our family tree who served in the armed forces. You may be aware of their military service through family stories from the two World Wars, or memorabilia and photographs. Perhaps you want to reveal more about their regiment, rank or role, or where they were active, or maybe you’re looking for other ancestors with a military past.

Types of military record

Findmypast has many records which can provide all kinds of detail on your military ancestors:

• MEDAL INDEX CARDS can tell you which medals they received, their regiment, their rank, and where they served.

• ROLLS OF HONOUR normally list people who died in military service.

• ATTESTATION PAPERS contain information about when and where they enlisted, along with their age (or the age they claimed to be) and where they came from.

• SERVICE RECORDS can often contain any or all of the above, and even physical details such as how tall they were. Service records can vary greatly according to how much paperwork they contain - some may even have letters and notes about your ancestor’s progress in their role, health, and any injuries they received.

• PENSION RECORDS list the discharge of armed forces personnel.

There are also more specific records such as those for Army Deserters, Conscientious Objectors, Prisoners of War, and records of nursing staff.
War through history

Findmypast holds, among others, army records for:

- Boer Wars (1899-1902)
- World War One (1914-1918)
- World War Two (1939-1945)
- Other wars including Napoleonic (1775-1817), Peninsular (1793-1814) and more.

There are not many surviving records for navy personnel before 1853, but after this date they are often very comprehensive, and include everyone who served regardless of their rank.
Crime, prison and punishment records

Crime, prison and punishment records not only provide you with a unique opportunity to discover any “black sheep” in your family, they also show the evolution of the criminal justice system in the nineteenth century as the country dealt with the impact of industrialisation, urbanisation and population growth.

Records of law and order record the intimate details of hundreds of thousands of people’s lives. These include:

• Judges’ recommendations for or against pardons.

• Petitions through which criminals and their families could offer mitigating circumstances and grounds for mercy.

• Calendars detailing the nature of a prisoner’s crime, their victims, witnesses and sentencing.

Later records contain licences detailing everything from previous convictions to the state of a prisoner’s health.

As well as the Georgian highway robber, the Victorian murderer and the Edwardian thief, the courts often dealt with the rural poacher, the unemployed petty food thief or the early trade unionist or Chartist. The records are a fascinating source for family, local and social historians.

Many registers contain mugshots of habitual ‘drunks’, which feature incredible descriptions of criminals’ appearances, demeanour and identifying marks. These give you the chance to learn specific details, and even see the faces of your ancestors.

The information in the records comes from a variety of Government departments, including the Home Office, Prison Commission, Metropolitan Police, Central Criminal Court (also known as the Old Bailey) and the Admiralty.
Travel records

Sometimes, relatives can seem to disappear from your family history search, apparently without reason. If your family are curiously absent from a census you expected them to appear on, they may have been travelling when the census was taken.

Even if you don’t think your family travelled or migrated, it’s always worth checking passenger lists to see whether your ancestor ventured to foreign shores - you may make a surprising discovery.

What are passenger lists?

Passenger lists record who sailed out of Britain for destinations outside of Europe and the Mediterranean, and on which ships. Findmypast has records from 1890-1960.

Some passenger lists are beautiful historic documents. They are also invaluable in tracing ‘missing’ ancestors. You can search long-haul voyages to destinations on all continents, including Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA.

Exploring a passenger list

This is a handwritten passenger record. Edwin Gell, a 40-year-old builder, travelled from Liverpool to Cape Town aboard the Suevic on 20 February 1902. We can work out the approximate year of his birth by subtracting his age from the year of the voyage - in this case around 1862.

Edwin may not have lived in Liverpool before his voyage. Someone living in Liverpool is more likely to have sailed from there, but their
destination overseas wasn’t always served by a shipping line operating out of that port. If voyages were not departing on the date they were travelling, they would also need to journey to the right port.

Passenger lists are not always precise as to their exact routes on their way to their final destination. Wherever a voyage has one or more ports of call, there may be a difference between where the ship is going and where a passenger is going. A ship may be sailing to Sydney but passengers may leave the boat at Bombay.
To make things as easy as possible for your research, we try to make sure that destination ports given on findmypast are those of the passenger, not of the ship.

Other travel records on findmypast

Findmypast has many other records related to migration to help you solve any gaps in your family tree:

• COLONIAL SERVICE RECORDS: did your ancestors live and work in India between 1793 and 1933, perhaps in the army or civil service? Find out when they arrived and what they did there.

• TRANSPORTATION RECORDS: almost 100,000 convicts were sent to New South Wales in Australia between 1788 and 1842. Perhaps these records can show you a hidden Australian link in your family tree – who they were, when they were transported, and the name of the ship they were on.

• PASSPORT APPLICATIONS: In 1846 standard regulations were finally passed relating to passport applications. As well as names and dates of issue, some passport records contain extra observations about the person that were noted during the application.
Occasions and institutions

Occupational records bridge the gap between births and deaths. A relative’s place in society, their income, whether they were sacked or promoted - this is the kind of colour these records might add to your family tree.

If you found someone in, say, the Merchant Navy Seamen records, you’d learn where they travelled, what they were paid, and see a physical description of them – including details such as hair and eye colour and distinguishing characteristics like tattoos. You might even find a photograph of them in the more recent records.

Alternatively, if your ancestor was a teacher, you could verify where they taught using the Teacher’s Registration Council Registers. Forebears who worked in a Royal household might be found in our Royal Household Staff 1526-1924 collection, which would enlighten you as to the nature of their service and the dates of their employment.

If any of your ancestors fell on particularly hard times, you might also find their name among those listed entering (or, more optimistically, leaving) the workhouse.

Some families prided themselves on their trades, handed down through the generations. Discovering that your ancestor worked in the same field that you do today can be a delightful revelation.

Irish records

Irish family history researchers face specific challenges when building their family trees. In June 1922, during the Irish Civil War, the Public Records Office in Dublin was damaged. Most of the records held there - which dated back to the thirteenth century - were lost. Almost all of the nineteenth century census records in Ireland were destroyed, with only the 1901 and 1911 censuses surviving in full.

Thankfully, the destruction was not total. While the loss makes things a little less straightforward, there are ways to trace your family in Ireland. A great deal survived, and millions of records are now available online.
Alternatives to the census

Often referred to as ‘census substitutes’, land and estate surveys can provide details about the lives of ancestors who lived during the nineteenth century. Griffith’s Valuation and the Landed Estate Court Rentals can provide a wealth of information about your family and help to fill in missing gaps.

Civil registrations of all Catholic births, marriages and deaths (BMDs) started in 1864 in Ireland. Using the volume, page number and other information from the index, you can order copies of the full register entries from the General Register Office (GRO) in Dublin (visit welfare.ie and search for General Register Office). These cost €20 or €4 for photocopies.

Before 1864, individual parish churches recorded baptisms, marriages and burials in register books. Most of these records are still held in the local churches. As with all Irish research, knowing the area or parish that your family came from is important.

Other ways to build your Irish family tree

In addition to the sources above, there are a variety of other sources you can investigate to build your Irish family tree:

• MILITARY RECORDS: Irish soldiers made up over 30% of the British Army during the nineteenth century.

• COURT RECORDS: Petty Sessions and Prison registers on findmypast offer a fascinating window on nineteenth century Ireland.

• TRAVEL RECORDS: The Irish diaspora is estimated to include over 80 million people. Passenger lists can help you discover the journeys your family undertook.

• NEWSPAPERS: Discover what life was like for your forebears. Family notices and news reports are a treasure trove for family historians.

You can discover more about what other records survived on findmypast. To learn about the main sources for Irish family history
research, both on findmypast and elsewhere, visit findmypast.co.uk and download your free Irish family history guide.
Take your journey further

Breaking down brick walls

Every family historian hits a brick wall in their research from time to time. Don’t give up - we’ve all been there! Here are some hints that might help you.

Why isn’t my ancestor in the census?

• Check the date your ancestor died, if you know it. See if you can find their spouse listed as “widow” or “widower”.

• Were they travelling abroad? See if you can find them in any travel records.

• Were they in a workhouse, asylum, or the army? Check these records too.

• Try searching for variant name spellings, maiden names or new names due to remarriage. Did the enumerator misspell their name, or did your ancestor adopt another one?

Of course, some people didn’t want to be found, and may have tried to avoid being on the census at all!

Why can’t I find a birth/marriage/death record?

• Was the birth pre-1875? Before this date, birth records were not compulsory. Try parish baptism registers instead.

• People weren’t always known by the names they were given at birth. A Jack may have been registered as John. If children were named after parents, they may have been called by middle names.

• These life events are registered where they happen. Perhaps the birth didn’t take place in your family hometown - if you’ve got a birthplace from a census, a town gazetteer could help you work out where it is.
I’ve found two people with the same name. Which is my ancestor?

• You may need to research both names until you know who is the right one.

• Look for clues on marriage certificates such as the jobs they did. Do they match the census?

What about adoption, or illegitimacy?

• The Adopted Children’s Register was introduced in 1927. Before this, England and Wales did not have a standardised formal adoption system, and children might be taken in informally and raised by family members or friends without any certification process. Access to records on adoption can be limited, so you may want to have a look at www.adoptionsearchreunion.org.uk.

• After 1875, fathers of illegitimate children had to be present when the birth was registered if their names were to be included on the certificate. Some children were given their father’s surname as a middle name. Baptism registers may also name the father. Officials known as Overseers of the Poor, up until 1834, had tracing fathers as part of their duties. This means parish records may contain “bastardy examinations and orders” which may shed light on your research.

How are Scottish and Irish records different from English and Welsh ones?

• Statutory Records combine birth, marriage and death records and were introduced in Scotland in 1855. Birth records are often the most detailed.

• Old Parochial Registers of the Church of Scotland cover the period from around 1553 to 1855. They vary in completeness, and do contain gaps as registering events was not enforced and was often unpopular.

• After 1790 sanctions on Catholicism became less stringent, and Catholic parish records became more common in Scotland. These were
independently held and some are very detailed, covering conversion to the faith and first confessions.

• Before 1921 Ireland was a single country. This means that some records will be specific to Northern Ireland and the Republic, and others will cover both areas as one nation.
What to do next

You’ve begun a journey that never ends, but one that rewards you with every discovery. With new records added weekly at findmypast, you can continue to fill in the gaps in your family history story, but you can also visit local archives and see records for yourself.

Archive offices hold many documents which could give you more information. Your local family history society will have regular meetings of like-minded beginners and experts alike. Many family history societies offer research services to help you if you get stuck.

If you enjoy Findmypast and want to learn more about us and genealogy, why not join us online:

• On Facebook: facebook.com/findmypast.
• On Twitter: @findmypast.

Here you can talk to other family historians and the Findmypast team.

On findmypast.co.uk, check your findmypast account settings section – we recommend opting in to receive our monthly newsletter. If you do this, you’ll be the first to hear about new records and opportunities to meet the team in person at events around the country!

Good luck on your family history adventure.

Get in touch!

If you need some help navigating the site, or you want to discuss your findmypast account, get in touch with our Support Team at support@findmypast.co.uk. They’re always happy to help.
Glossary

BMDs: official records of births, marriages and deaths.

CENSUS: An official count of the population in a particular area. A census generally collects information on people living in each address in the area, including names, occupations and ages.

CIVIL REGISTRATION: Civil registration records are those kept by government offices. Examples of records kept by a civil registry include births, marriages, deaths, annulments and divorces, and adoptions.

STATUTORY REGISTERS: Official records of births, marriages and deaths in Scotland. At the start of 1855, civil registration replaced parish registration, and in the same year registration became compulsory, regardless of religion, with a standardised record format.

PARISH REGISTERS: Records, usually handwritten, kept by church parishes. These record details of baptisms, marriages and burials.

GRO: The General Register Office. The GRO holds records of every birth, marriage and death registered in England and Wales from 1837 onwards. Ireland and Scotland have their own GROs. If you need to trace records back further than 1837, parish records are a good place to start. The GRO can provide copies of certificates of birth, marriage and death for a charge.
Success story

Estelle Calfe started her journey when she was searching findmypast’s British In India collection and discovered that her grandmother’s cousin, Gerald Priestley had served in the Indian Civil Service.

“My first foray into the archives told me that Gerald had been knighted for his service. I was determined to learn more!

I discovered his marriage certificate to Isobel MacLeod Millar. This gave me her father’s name, which I’d not known before - Alfred Pulley Millar. I was intrigued by his unusual name, and discovered a copy of Alfred’s will, which gave me some really useful information. I worked out his wife’s maiden name, and discovered that he married Alice Mundell Flude in India in 1883, something the family had never known before.

I’m always astonished at the sort of information I can get from records. Now I have details of both Alfred and Alice’s fathers to take my tree even further back. A final quick search told me that Alfred Millar was actually born about 4 miles from where I live now in North London – the story comes full circle!”

Success story

“Access to the newspapers has provided me with an amazing amount of detail; much more than I ever dreamed I’d find.

Such as the family in York from which three members were transported to Australia for completely separate offences, or my ancestor, described as “the notorious poacher”, who stole seven fowl and received 9 months imprisonment then later shot a man in the face and received another 9 months.

I even have photographs of one ancestor from a race in 1912 in which he became the first man to ever paddle across the river Humber in a tub. Priceless information.”

- Pete Maddra, June 2013