

20 Tips to Finding Your Missing Ancestors

If you are having trouble finding family on the Census or in Birth, Marriage and Death Indexes you are not alone. It happens to every Genealogist at some point for a variety of reasons. Perhaps your ancestor is there, you just haven't found them yet, it's a matter of tweaking your search techniques.

People didn't vanish into the ether or the mystical cloud, and there are many good reasons why they might not be listed on the Census or in Civil Registration Indexes.

A missing Ancestor may be a clue that family life wasn't quite as you expected to find it.

The standard formula for building a Family Tree using Birth and Marriage Certificates in combination with Census Returns works on the preconception that most people in the past married, then had children and then settled down to a quiet life.

It's important to keep an open mind.

Sometimes a twist of fate dramatically changed the course of events.

Children could be fostered out and adopted. A legal adoption process didn't exist until 1927. Informal arrangements can be tricky to uncover and can lead to changes of name that throw you off the trail. Thankfully the reasons why many people did not appear in the Census are well documented and we need not always suspect the worst.

Not all records are on-line so you may need to venture into an archive to find the solution. Reading up on social history of the area where your relatives lived can reveal simple explanations for why their circumstances may have changed. ie a shift in the economic climate may have forced them to move away and may even have split a families up temporarily.

There are many possible scenarios so before giving up hope make sure that you have tried these 20 tips

1. Ancestors May Have Used Middle Names

It was surprising common for people to be called by their middle names ie a girl christened Adeline V Stephen in 1882 went on to become known as Virginia Woolf.

First and middle names could be used interchangeably, even on official documents like Censuses. It was not unheard of and perfectly legal for someone called Frederick George Wilson to go by the names of George Frederick Wilson, George Wilson or Frederick Wilson.

The clue to deciding whether you have found the right person is to make sure that all other details match what you are expecting to find.

2. Check the Mother's Maiden Name

Don't assume that all your ancestors children were born in wedlock. It's important to keep an open mind. If you can't locate a child's birth in the Civil Registration Indexes it often transpires that they were born prior to the parents marriage and the birth would be registered under the Mother's maiden name.

Most commonly encountered are with the first born who may appear on early Censuses under their Mother's maiden name but adopted her married surname on later returns. Whether or not the Mother's husband was the child's biological father often remains a mystery.

3. Try Help Forums

Posting requests on genealogy forums asking for help with a tricky line can often reap rewards.

4. Perhaps They Have Moved

You have found your Ancestors in 1891 and again in 1911 in Cumbria but you are unable to trace in 1901. Could they have skipped over the border to Scotland, or even gone as far as the Isle of Man or Ireland.

It's always worth double checking records in neighbouring territories when someone goes missing. Very few people were home owners in the Victorian period and rental agreements tended to be short term so our Ancestors were more itinerant than you might imagine.

5. Use Wild Card Searches

A frequent reason for people being missing from records is because they have been incorrectly transcribed.

An illiterate Ancestor may have enlisted the help of a neighbour to complete the schedule which was later transcribed into an enumerator's book. The books were more recently transcribed into a database to make them more electronically searchable, so there were at least three stages in the process where a mistake could have been made.

Typical example was Elizabeth Hughes father is shown as Isam which could have been Isambard or Isaac and was in fact Leonard.

6. Try Some Different Databases

We all have our favourite genealogy websites that we rely on for Census returns as well as BMD Indexes with our research. Each of the main commercial providers have custom made index systems which offer different interpretations of the same record.

A random search may bring up something that you weren't expecting, like a school record or an old paper or microfiche names index.

7. Check Overseas Indexes

Many people travelled to exotic corners of the British Empire during the 19th Century with thousands lured to India where the British Government assumed power in 1857. Births, Marriage and Deaths of British people who lived in India are recorded in the India Office Records held at the British Library and these are now on Findmypast.

Websites also provide passenger lists for ships carrying people to destinations outside of Europe between 1890 and 1960. Registers of overseas births, marriages and deaths lodged with the British Consul and UK High Commission in other countries from 1818 are also available on [Familysearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org)

8. Check Local Register Offices

In the same way that Census transcriptions contain errors and omissions, the GRO Civil Birth Marriage and Death Indexes are not perfect. The national collection of BMD was compiled from quarterly returns submitted by local register offices, so the central index is actually a secondary source. The primary indexes are still maintained by district register offices.

9. Focus on Occupations

Databases usually encourage us to search for names, if this proves unsuccessful you may need to think creatively about how else you may find people. Skilled tradesmen such as butchers, bakers and blacksmiths can actually be easier to locate using their search terms.

Thegenealogist.co.uk displays professions on the Census results page so entering just a first name, date of birth and job description in the keyword search box can be an effective way of identifying someone whose surname has been mistranscribed.

Employment records, like law lists and trade directories also provide street addresses that could be looked up in the Census.

10. Searching the Poor Law Records

Could your Ancestor have been in the workhouse on the night a Census was taken? Many institutions listed hundreds of paupers only by their initials so making them easy to miss. Poor law records including workhouse registers do show admissions and discharges and these provide detailed biographical information.

11. Try Parish Registers

Try Parish Registers this is good advice for even after the advent of civil registration in England and Wales in 1837 it still wasn't compulsory to register a child's birth until 1874 and this could explain their absence from the indexes.

It was also possible for deaths to slip through the net as the onus was on registrars rather than the next of kin to ensure deaths were registered prior to 1874.

Parish registers of baptisms and burials are not quite as detailed as civil birth and death certificates, however marriage registers after 1837 offer identical information to GRO certificates and were signed in Ancestors handwriting.

12. Nonconformist Registers

You might not find your people in the local parish registers even though they were Protestant. This could be because they followed one of the many nonconformist denominations that took root after the Toleration Act of 1689. In such cases you will probably have to look to the registers of more than one denomination.

Just because someone baptised all their children in a nonconformist chapel does not mean that their burial will be found there. You may need to search Anglican parishes and cemeteries because few chapels had burial grounds.

You can explore an array of nonconformist registers at bmdregisters.co.uk and read an in-depth guide at nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/nonconformists.htm

13. Serving With the Forces

Did your Ancestors line of duty take them overseas. Men from all walks of life joined the army, navy, marines and later the RFC and RAF and though a brief stint with the forces it may not be apparent from later records.

Those stationed abroad will not be found in UK Censuses prior to 1911 with the exception of men at sea on naval ships which were enumerated in 1861 to 1881 and 1901. Some recruits were allowed to take their families away with them and this could explain why the whole clan could be missing.

Locating service records and lists of personnel can be found at:-
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person

14. Old Maps

Recently digitalised collections of tithe maps will help many people pin point where their Ancestors were living around 1840 to 1850s. Though the apportionments only name the head of the household or principal leaseholder.

Thegenealogist.co.uk has so far digitalised 11 million records from Buckinghamshire, Middlesex, Leicestershire and Surrey but a national collection of 11,000 maps will appear on line soon.

15. Shift Search to a Sibling

If an Ancestor in your direct line is proving problematic to find shift the search to a sibling and preferably one with a distinctive name. Barnabas Smith will give you a greater chance of locating a relative named Thomas Smith.

The youngest child's age and place of birth are more likely to be accurate, however your difficulty in tracing someone may be a clue to something more sinister.

16. Wills

The National Probate Calendar which was compiled from 1858 onwards will provide the deceased's occupation and address as well of the names of next of kin who acted as executors. This is particularly helpful when identifying the correct death of someone with a common name.

Even if your Ancestors didn't write a Will they may still appear in the Calendar of Letters of Administration were issued to wind up their estate.

The Calendar can be searched for free from 1858 up to the present day at:- gov.uk/search-will-probate but Ancestry has a more flexible search engine covering 1858 to 1966 and this can be found at:- tinyurl.com/36goopo.

17. Officially Changed Names

It was legal for anyone to change their name without making an official declaration to the authorities so long as their motivations weren't fraudulent. A minority of people choose the official route and changed their name by Deed Poll.

Registers of a small percentage can be found at the national archives in Kew and can be searched for free at:- www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/change-of-name.htm

The government run London Gazette also published announcements from 1914 and can be searched for free at:-www.thegazette.co.uk.

18. National Archives

A surprisingly large number of records that are held at the National Archives in Kew have been catalogued in greater detail in recent years and can be found at:- discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk

The catalogue acts as a name index to many collections even where the paper records have not been digitalised. These are of use for finding ancestors who came under the radar of government departments responsible for justice, defence and immigration.

19. Newspaper Announcements

Local and national newspapers are second to none for divulging long forgotten facts and may shed light on why they are missing from record collections you have already searched.

Digital newspaper collections are the quickest way to find out if your Ancestor has been up to no good and was in prison or the workhouse at the time of the Census.

Birth, marriage and death announcements and obituaries might also provide additional information to help you decide whether you have found the right Civil Registration Certificate when you are unsure.

Thousands of papers held at the British Library are being digitalised at:-

britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk and findmypast.co.uk, so you can search quickly by name, but local libraries and archives will also hold copies of regional titles on microfilm.

20. Convicts

It is well worth checking out criminal records to discover if your missing forebear was incarcerated. Not all convictions made it in to the pages of local and national newspapers.

If the crime was petty the jails were another type of institution that were prone to listing inmates by initials on Census nights.

Ancestors who committed theft or more serious crimes could be transported to Australia and may explain their absence on the Census return. The average term in Australia was 7 years and convicts could return home once their sentence was served. Many choose to remain in the colony.

Links to online criminal registers and transportation records can be found by following the guides to criminals, bankrupts and litigants and can be found at:-

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person