

Death Records

The Demise of Your Ancestor

Failing to trace our ancestor's lives right through until their deaths may lead to serious omissions in our Family Histories.

Failure to find their deaths and records may result in overlooking a treasure trove of information.

Knowing exactly when an ancestor died is very important.

It enables us to rule out any references to people with the same name in sources after this date.

Death records cover a wide range of sources from – death certificates and burial records to wills, obituaries, gravestones, inquest records and also other less well known sources.

Death Certificates

The General Register Office was established to register all Births, Marriages and Deaths in England and Wales from 1 July 1837 onwards.

Each Death should have been recorded in the registration district where it occurred and there should be a death certificate for everyone.

To get a copy of a death certificate you can search the GRO indexes from the main family history sites or from BMD (freebmd.org.uk)

Once you have found the entry that you believe refers to your ancestor, make a note of the details and order a certificate from –

Gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates for £9.25.

You can also order copies of death certificates from the local register office.

You can learn a lot more about a person using the key pieces of information on a certificate.

Place of death, age, occupation, cause of death and also whoever registered the death.

These can lead to further information about your family.

Ages on death certificates can be inaccurate and depend on the knowledge of the person registering the death.

Despite this, the age recorded can be extremely helpful for pinpointing the Baptism of anyone who died before 1851 census.

The 1851 census was the first to give a fairly accurate statement of a persons age.

Even after 1851 the age of death should be used in tandem with census returns to confirm a persons supposed date of birth.

The occupation column may show your ancestor changed jobs or had a additional job to that recorded on other sources.

Charles Jeffery was a tailor but his death certificate shows he was also an actor.

Women's occupations are rarely recorded before the 20th century.

Instead you will find details of their husband or their father.

If a woman is recorded as a widow then this will help you narrow down the time period for the husband's death.

This can sometimes be tricky of tracing a popular surname before 1866 when ages were not included in the death certificate.

Inquests

Death certificates may turn up some sad surprises for instance Edward was found drowned in the local river and as will always be the case the sudden or unexpected death generated a inquest.

These were normally held before the local coroner and a jury.

From 1875 details of when and where the inquest took place are included on the certificates.

Even before this date you will know if there was an inquest because the coroner will be From 1850 detailed inquest reports often appeared in the local newspapers, many of which can now be found at –

Britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

As well as at local libraries and local archives.

Parish Registers

Before 1837 burial entries in parish registers are the nearest equivalent of the death certificate.

The amount of detail varies greatly depending on the parish and the date but if it gives an age, which they all should from 1813, it can help you track down a baptism or help identify the correct death certificate in the GRO index

Some pre 1813 registers also give a cause of death although the terminology used may leave you wondering exactly what your ancestor died of.

One such terminology found is “*TEETH*”.

This is found on several occasions in the 17th century registers for St Giles, Cripplegate, London.

If you find that you have more than one possible baptism for your ancestor then use burial entries to see if any of the children baptised have died as infants.

There is no centralised database of burials but the National Burial Index (NBI) is a growing project.

Part of the NBI can now also be found on Findmypast.

Wills

Although it is generally true that only our wealthier ancestors left wills you may be surprised at just how many labourers and other people of supposedly lowly status did in fact do so, it is a source that should never be overlooked.

Wills may help you progress your research when information in parish registers is too sparse for you to be certain you have found the right family.

In counties such as Kent, many early wills still survive, and these may extend your family tree before the time of the first parish registers in 1538.

Wills are also a wonderful source for building and verifying a pedigree as well as enlightening you to your ancestors wealth, occupation and any connections with other parts of the country.

Many wills record relatives residing far from home as well as sometimes overseas, and they provide a vital clue as to the whereabouts of other family members.

To locate wills proved after 1858 use the Principle Probate Registry Index which can be found at – gov.uk/search-will-probate or up to 1966 on Ancestry.

Before 1858 wills were proved by a hierarchy of ecclesiastical courts and there will usually be more than one set of probate records for you to search in order to see if your ancestor has left a will.

Manorial Records

Court rolls are the most useful type of manorial records and detail the proceedings of the local "Court Baron" who dealt with a wide range of manorial administration including the transfer of copyholdland traditionally passed to the next of kin after the death of whoever held it.

The court roll recorded the name of the person who had died, the land they held, the name of their heir, their relationship to the deceased and sometimes in the case of a child their age.

If a succession of court rolls survived for your ancestor's manor, you may be able to trace your family back in time through successive land transfers.

Up to the 1700s manorial records may be hard to read as most are in Latin but after this date the majority are in English and are indexed by surname.

To learn more about manorial records go to –

lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/manorialrecords/index.htm

Monumental Inscriptions

There is a growing number of databases offering inscriptions from gravestones, or actual images of gravestones themselves ie photographs on line.

Such as

worldburialindex.com

gravestonephotos.com

billiongraves.com

Cemetery Records

From the 1850s the majority of our urban ancestors were interred in municipal cemeteries and until recently it could be difficult to identify the cemetery in question.

Deceasedonline.com is rapidly making these searches far easier by placing municipal burial, cremation and grave records online.

War Memorials

The recent commemoration of the outbreak of the First World War has resulted in the growth in the number of groups and companies collating information on the fallen soldiers of the war.

Several online databases relate to War Memorials that are maintained and run by the Imperial War Museum (iwm.org.uk/memorials/search) or try the War Memorials on line at (warmemorialsonline.org.uk) run by the Genealogist.

Death Duties 1796 – 1903

These provide a short cut to locating a will and can record what an ancestors estate was worth.

You will usually find details of legatees and occupation and from 1857 there should be an entry for any estate valued over £20.

Duty was not levied where the state passed between spouses and up to 1805 between children, parents or grandparents of the deceased.

The index can be searched on Findmypast or at the National Archives in Kew and records up to 1811 can be downloaded from its website. nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/death-duty-registers.htm

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission commemorates those killed during both World Wars and other conflicts.

You can search its database at www.cwgc.org to find those killed in the World Wars. Each entry gives their name or initial, place and date of death, place of burial and or commemoration, rank, regiment, unit and often details of next of kin as well as their address.

This site is free to use and should be your first search point if you know your ancestor died in either World War.

Last year the CWGC also uploaded casualty archive documents for the First World War which often give details of the soldier.

These documents are now being uploaded for the Second World War too.

8 Tips for Finding Missing Deaths

1. There are inaccuracies in the GRO index which could mean that you fail to find what you are looking for. Use www.uk.bmd.org.uk to see if the relevant registration district has put a copy of its own more accurate index on line, if not contact the register office to ask if they will conduct a search for you. Certificates ordered from register offices cost £10.
2. For missing deaths and burials from 1858 search the Principle Probate Registry Index. If your ancestor features in these indexes will give their date of death and help you locate the correct entry in the GRO index.
3. Your ancestors may not have been members of the Church of England so check non-conformist burial registers available from – thegeneologist.co.uk, findmypast.co.uk or bmdregisters.co.uk
4. The age at death may be wrong or your ancestor may be recorded under their middle name, while they may have died far from home or even abroad. Check passenger lists and online census returns for America and Canada which are available on Ancestry and Findmypast.
5. The spelling of surnames did not become standard until the late 19th and early 20th century so keep an open mind as to how the name may have been spelt and copied.
6. Mis-transcriptions are common in indexes because transcribers misread the handwriting. If the initial letter of the surname has been mis-transcribed search without the surname but add in other details like county of death and a rough date.
7. Occasionally people became known by christian names unrelated to those given to them at birth and subsequently may have been registered under that name at death. Bert may have been recorded as Albert instead of Herbert, Hubert or Bertram.

8. Your assumptions about where and when your ancestor died may be wrong. Your ancestor may appear to be dead because they do not appear on a census return, but check the following census in case they were simply not recorded in the previous one. Similarly, they may not have died in the area that you expect.