The 10 Most Common Research Blocks
Aka. “Brick Walls”

(Apart from Irish Records)
ON THE MOVE

My ancestor has moved away – how can I find them?

Our ancestors were continually seeking to improve their situation in life and, just like us, may have moved to find work or be closer to family.

Mobility was often encouraged by The Poor Law Authorities, some of which even paid for people to emigrate.

From 1837 onwards, it’s reasonably easy to find them with the aid of censuses and civil registration. Before then, clues aren’t as obvious. You can establish short distance moves by working through a neighbouring parish search. Look at documents within the Parish Chest such as settlement certificates, removal orders and emigration registers.

You can find these in the County Records Office

Eligible to vote

Reform Act of 1832 extended the franchise, it wasn’t until 1928 that everyone aged 21 and over could vote, some people chose not to register and so won’t be listed.

If you can’t find an ancestor on the register at the end of WW1, look at the Absent Voter’s List, if they were still in the forces, you’ll find their Army number, and the name of their regiment.
Why can’t I find my ancestor’s burial or memorial site?

There’s no central listing of burials, so finding the last resting place of your ancestor may involve a lengthy search.

The National Burials Index contains over 10 million entries and you can access it via Findmypast.com or on CD-ROM at the County Records Office. Many family history societies have produced burial ground indexes like the BMSGH and local records offices usually have copies.

Check the relevant Diocesan Record Offices, the Monumental Inscription Book is useful as they index surnames and often include a plan of the burial ground and, as church grounds became full in cities in the mid-19th century, municipal authorities established new cemeteries, to find the details of local ‘cems and crems’ go to the council websites for contact details.

For war heroes, you can search The Commonwealth War Graves Commission at the www.cwgc.org database.

Don’t forget the Death Announcement column in the local newspaper in your library archives department.
ENUMERATION ERROR?

My ancestor isn’t on the census - why?

In theory, everyone should’ve been enumerated wherever they were in the UK on census night, but some individuals remain elusive.

Our ancestors moved around more than we think, and whole families may have moved together, or the head may have ventured first. This may account for a woman shown as “wife” on the census with no head of household. Search the actual census covering the area rather than relying on indexes. There’s always a chance the household was recorded but missed off the transcription. All census returns for England and Wales are at The National Archives in Kew or online and you’ll find local ones at County Records Office on microfilm.

All institutions like hospitals, prisons and Army/Navy barracks and/or those on shore leave in the UK were enumerated in the same way as everyone else!

About 10% of the 1861 Census hasn’t survived and records office can advise about incidences in their area.

Finally, in the previous 10 years did they die or remarry so check the GRO Index of Deaths and possible entry on the GRO Marriage Index and check the ancestorsonboard.com database via Findmypast.com for outward-bound passengers?
There are two people with the same name in the locality – which ones is my ancestor?

Research every available document likely to contain additional information, which will let you construct your family group.

There was a very strong tradition for names to be used in a certain order – first son named after paternal grandfather, second son after maternal grandfather, third son after the father – although this was not always hard and fast. Naming patterns followed, slightly different formalities in Scotland, Ireland and Cornwall, also many families included mother’s maiden name.

It’s not always apparent how old the person was when they were baptised, a child may have been one year old when baptised, and subsequently died. The same family could then have another child of the same sex, and baptised them a few weeks later, giving the same name so, check the burial registers as a matter of course.

There is a possibility of “double-dating’ a child may have been baptised and named at home by the vicar, particularly if the midwife thought they may not survive and recorded in the parish register (sometime notated “privately baptised”).
If the child survived, a second entry a few weeks later would be made when ‘accepted into the congregation’ and the mother was ‘churched’ – the result is two entries for the same person that appear close together!

**A COMMON ROOT**

Both children may have been members of families that sprung from a common ancestor, in which the same forenames were much used. The two fathers may have been brothers or cousins. It’s also not unusual for both sets of parents to have the same forenames! Often it’s necessary to research the complete lives of the two potential ancestors and their parents in the hope that evidence will emerge proving which child is which – this is good practice anyway.

You can look at records of the Poor Law, parish chest and schools for example, which may provide a clue.

If you still can’t determine which one is your ancestor and the research shows common ancestry, then you may have to be content with that. This may fall short of perfection but at least you can work from the common ancestor knowing that you still have the correct family …..
ALL CHANGE

My ancestor seems to have changed their name – can this be possible?

People are often throughout their lives by a different name to the one they were registered or baptised with.

Many people also use nicknames or pet names and these could survive in the records or later events such as marriages and even deaths and burials. It was usual for such a change to have been totally informal and as such, go unrecorded.

Some documents may state “alias”, which will give you the clue you’re looking for. However, it’s sometimes difficult to be certain that you’ve identified the correct person.

In the past, many people didn’t want to draw attention to their name change, as there was often some underlying reason, be it a sticky divorce, an illegitimate birth, an ‘adoption’, or even to avoid being found by the authorities after deserting from the military or leaving their family.

You can find records of legitimately changing a name – by deed poll – these were all enrolled in the Close Rolls, which are indexed until 1903 by former name. After this date they are indexed in Court Enrolment Books, both at TNA.

The Phillimore Fry Index to formal change of name from 1760 to 1901 is a useful index from several sources, again found at The National Archives, Kew.
MISSING MARRIAGE

I can’t find my forebears’ marriage record - why?

Despite the institution’s long history, many couples never legally married. During the Victorian era it’s thought as much as 20% of the adult population didn’t marry.

Before 1837, marriages are tricky to locate. You can use banns, registers or marriage license bonds and allegations where they exist to identify a marriage location. You’ll find these in parish records and county records offices.

Hardwick’s Marriage Act 1753 required all marriages except Jews and Quakers to take place in the Anglican Church. Before 1753, marriages were also performed in makeshift chapels, inns and taverns in the area. Each clergyman kept his own notebooks or registers but not all survived. Couples from all over the country used these to avoid formalities and fees. There are some 300 such registers available at TNA – 217 of these were performed on the day before Hardwick’s Act became law!

Remember too that many couples married after the birth of some or all of their children, so always extend your search to cover the years of their children’s birth.

Border marriages were also popular up to about 1878 and GRO Scotland has a useful information sheet.
TRACING COUSINS

How can I find a relative?

Coming forward in time with your research can be a difficult and sensitive task.

When you search for distant cousins, you won’t always know if that person was adopted, died young, married or emigrated.

The first step to establish the last known whereabouts of the person and, if they could now be an adult, search the electoral registers for the known address. These are generally available at libraries but if you think the person you’re seeking is still alive, you can examine electoral registers at www.192.com

For those who have been adopted, The British Association for Adoption and Fostering provides advice about obtaining records at www.adoptionsearchreunion.org.uk

Did they go off to sea?

“Sailors” were in the Royal Navy; “seamen” or “mariners” were in the Merchant Navy. It’s not easy to trace Merchant seamen between 1857 and 1918, as no records of service survive. However, you’ll find surviving muster rolls, crew lists and log books from 1747 and Registers of Seamen from 1835 at The National Archives, Kew.
LONG GONE

*The institution or records no longer exist – what can I do?*

Unfortunately, some records have been lost to time, flood, fire or carelessness. It’s heartening to know however, that even if an organization or institution no long exists, their records will, in many cases, have been deposited in archive.

For parish registers, the survival rate varies, but if the registers themselves are lost, you should be able to find copies in **Bishop’s Transcripts at the Diocesan Records Offices.** These cover 1598 to the early 19th century, except for the Commonwealth period.

Many hospitals owe their foundation to a workhouse or its infirmary and you can search a database at **The National Archives on www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/hospitalrecords**

Companies may have gone bankrupt, simply closed, or been take over by a new parent company; a records database of (among other things), of companies that no longer exist is also available at TNA.

To find the school your ancestor most likely attended, look at old directories in local record offices. You’ll usually find the school records there too, with the Local Education Authority, or even with the school if it still stands. They’re closed for 100 years but you can apply to search them.
My ancestor was in the military but I can’t find his service record - why?

Service records in class WO97 at TNA are often the records to look for when searching for your military forebears. They’re very comprehensive, but they usually relate to those on short service who were discharged to pension. Papers for those dying in service or didn’t receive a discharge certificate haven’t survived, and a fair proportion of British Army personnel fall into this category.

You can search pay lists and muster rolls if you know your ancestor’s regiment. If you don’t know the regiment he served in but can identify a specific date and place, search the Disposition of the British Army in class WO379 at TNA. This details the whereabouts of all regiments on a monthly basis between 1739 and 1967. Once you’ve identified the regiment, you can then go back and search the pay lists and muster rolls.

There were so called part-time forces established after 1757, some were conscripts, some volunteers, they served in the British Isles, replacing the regular Army when it went to war. You can find their surviving Attestation Paper in class WO96 at TNA.

There were also ancillary and civilian employees in the Army, unfortunately very few personnel records survived but their Pensions Records in class WO23 at TNA could help.
BABY BLUES

Why can’t I find my ancestor’s birth registration?

Civil registrations was established on 1 July 1837 in England and Wales, but it wasn’t compulsory to register a birth until 1875, and in the early days, many vicars actively discouraged compliance, telling parishioners that having their infant baptised was sufficient. After 1875, if a child wasn’t registered within 42 days of birth, parents could be fined and in some cases this led to a re-adjustment of the birth date to fit within the 6-week period. Always check the quarters either side of the one you think the event occurred in.

Remember too that the GRO indexes are compiled according to the date of registration, not the date of birth and births are registered where the child is born, which may not be where you first think. The expectant mother may have been on holiday, or returned to her hometown for the birth, or had her baby in a hospital some miles away from home. The birth may have been outside of England or Wales, so check the GRO Miscellaneous Indexes via any of the commercial websites.

NAME OF THE GAME

Your ancestor’s known name might not be the name on their birth certificate. Names such as Millie and Jack are now names in their own right, but until the 20th century these were usually variations of Millicent and John, while ‘Fred’ could’ve been registered as Alfred, Wilfred or Frederick. Not all infants had been named within six weeks of birth and they may have been registered without a forename. In this case, they’ll have ‘male’ or ‘female’ listed after the surname. Sadly, in many cases, these entries refer to infants who lived for only a very short period, and their death may also be recorded in the same quarter, and the spelling of surnames can also be problematic.
Remember that ages shown on censuses and certificates aren’t always accurate, and take this into account. It’s also possible that a birth date may be correct, but the year on the census is wrong, so you should check with the registry office.

ELUSIVE ANCESTORS

If you can’t find someone’s birth certificate, it might be worth ordering their death certificate first to see what it contains, especially if they died relatively recently. A death certificate tells you the age of the person and from 1969 that date and place of birth are shown. If the deceased was a married woman, her maiden name is given too. You could also discover previously unknown forenames which can assist your search.