



# England and Wales Civil Registration

Dan Poffenberger, AG®

British Research Consultant ~ Family History Library  
poffenbergerds@familysearch.org

Civil registration records, known as vital records in the U.S., are the government's registration of births, marriages, and deaths. In England and Wales, this began 1 July 1837. In theory, every vital event that occurred was to be reported to the local registrars. From 1837-1875, many births, perhaps as high as 15%, were not reported. After 1875 registration is nearly complete, although there is some debate that in large cities some events went unregistered.

These records have **not been digitized**. Each copied obtained is technically a registered copy and therefore protected by UK law. As of 2015, legislation was introduced in the House of Commons to give the Registrar General more control to potentially issue "genealogical copies" of records deemed old enough to still protect people's privacy however no such option currently exists.

## Background

To facilitate this record keeping enterprise in 1837, the country was divided into 619 registration districts. Registration districts were typically smaller than counties but larger than parishes. A registration district in a rural area might include 30 parishes, whereas a district in an urban area might only cover part of a parish. These were reorganized into 623 districts in 1851. Each district was also further divided into sub-districts to help with record keeping however records are found at the registration district level.

Births and deaths were recorded by a local Superintendent Registrar in each registration district. Quarterly, the local registrar would send a copy of his register to the national Registrar General. For marriages, if the marriage took place at a Church of England church, the minister was required to send a copy of his marriage register quarterly directly to the Registrar General. He would also send a copy to the local Superintendent Registrar however this might sometimes be done well after the fact when the church's marriage register was full.

This effectively should have created two copies of each birth and death record (local and national) and potentially three copies of most marriages (church, local and national). The creation of the civil registration system created the possibility that a couple would not marry in a church but rather by the Superintendent Registrar at the office or another location. This was especially true for non-conformists (Non-Church of England adherents).

## Before searching

Before starting your search, it is most important that you determine which registration district the event was most likely registered in. To find which registration district your parish or town belongs to, you can look online at <http://maps.familysearch.org>. Type the name of your parish in the search box. Search results will appear in the column on the left. Select your parish

(names of some villages, hamlets or alternate place names may also show). A map will appear showing the boundaries of your parish and there will be a box with information about it. Click on the "Jurisdictions" tab and check the third row labeled "Civil Registration District". This information is as of 1851.

Some districts changed over time. A good place to understand possible changes to registration districts or to find all of the parishes in a registration district, go to [www.ukbmd.org.uk/genuki/reg/](http://www.ukbmd.org.uk/genuki/reg/). Select the county your place is in then find the registration district indicated by FamilySearch Maps described above. Time period and notes on its existence are found in columns on the right.

## Searching the Indexes

Indexes to civil registration include all of England and Wales. The indexes are organized quarterly: the March quarter, June quarter, September quarter, and December quarter. These are also described as the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> quarters. Online indexes allow you to search a range of years however, be aware that your search results will reflect what quarter the event was registered in. Births and deaths could be registered in the following quarter if the event happened near the end of the quarter however marriages were always supposed to be registered in the quarter in which they occurred.

Civil registration indexes initially contained the following information, all of which is required for obtaining copies of certificates: full name, district name, volume and page number. It is also important to note the year and quarter of registration. Over the years, the indexes evolved to contain more information: age added to death indexes in 1866, mother's maiden name added to birth indexes in 1911, spouse's surname added to marriage indexes in 1912, birth date added to death indexes in 1969.

## Information Found in England Civil Registration Records

### Birth Certificates

- Registration district
- Name and sex of child
- When and where born
- Name, surname, and occupation of father
- Name and maiden surname of mother (indicated by "formerly")
- When and by whom registered
- Signature, description, and residence of informant
- Father, mother, neighbor, or other person present at the birth was supposed to register the birth within 42 days

### Marriage Certificates

- Registration District and place of marriage
- Names and surnames of bride and groom
- When and where married
- Ages or full age
- Occupations and marital status
- Residences at time of marriage
- Fathers' names and occupations
- Signatures of bride and groom and witnesses

- All marriages were to be recorded in a civil register immediately after the ceremony by the officiating minister

### **Death Certificates**

- Registration District
- Name and surname of deceased
- When and where died
- Age
- Sex
- Cause of death
- Signature, description, and residence of informant
- When and by whom registered

### **Civil Registration Indexes**

Several national indexes exist which are complete well into the 1900's. A good place to start is at:

1. FreeBMD. FreeBMD is a computerized fully searchable index made from the national civil registration indexes. You can search all of England and Wales for entries from July 1837-1975 (although currently it is not complete after 1962). Click on "Information" then "Coverage Charts" to see current coverage. To use FreeBMD, go to:

- 1) [www.freebmd.org.uk](http://www.freebmd.org.uk)
- 2) Click on "Search"
- 3) Select Births, Deaths, or Marriages.
- 4) Type in Name and Date information. (Use the 'spouse' fields on marriage searches only. The mother's maiden name applies only to births after 1910.)
- 5) Optional filters allow you to select County and or District. (I recommend leaving this blank, at least for your initial search.)
- 6) You can also change settings for "Exact match on first names" and "Phonetic search surnames". These can be helpful when you're struggling to find the correct entry.
- 7) Click on "Find" to start your search.

When your results appear and an appropriate entry found, make note of all the information, including quarter and year. Information that may help you know if you're searching the correct registration district can be found by clicking on the name of the district and then on "more information about it can be found here" you can see the county the district was in and the parishes within that district. For marriage results, click on the page number to see the names of others registered on that page. There should be an equal number of brides and grooms indicating that each bride married one of the grooms and vice versa.

2. UKBMD. While FREEBMD is an index of the national registers, UKBMD indicates when there is an index of the local civil registration registers. Most of the time they are the same, but not always. Go to [www.ukbmd.org.uk](http://www.ukbmd.org.uk), click on the "Local BMD" link in the column on the left. Scroll down to see if an appropriate local BMD website exists for the place you want to search then search.

Also, these indexes typically show results by year only rather than year and quarter. They may also contain additional information such as the exact church where a couple married, the mother's surname prior to 1911 and age at death prior to 1866.

3. FamilySearch.org. FamilySearch.org has separate England civil registration databases for birth marriages and deaths from 1837 to 1920 using the following links:

Births: <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/2285338>

Marriages: <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/2285732>

Deaths: <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/2285341>

Ancestry.com and FindMyPast.co.uk also have indexes to England and Wales civil registration with different search capabilities. Go to their respective catalogs and type "England Civil Registration" to locate those indexes.

If you're unable to find the birth, marriage or death index reference you're seeking, the images of the actual Registrar General's book indexes pages can be searched on microfiche and microfilm at the Family History Library. You might try this in case the index entry was transcribed incorrectly. Where a local BMD website is not available, you can also "Google" search the name of the registration district where you believe the event occurred and add the words "superintendent registrar" and often find county or local websites with information on contacting the local registrars to find out what they may require for a search of their records.

## Ordering England Birth, Marriage and Death Records

The best way to order birth, marriage and death certificates from England is from the government website of the Registrar General. From the index you should have noted the:

- event type
- year
- quarter (list the quarter by the last month in that quarter, e.g. March, June, September, or December)
- district name
- volume
- page number

Go to the Web site [www.gro.gov.uk](http://www.gro.gov.uk) and click on "Order certificates online". Review the instructions for ordering a certificate then click on "Order a certificate online now." You will be asked to register if you haven't already. To do this click on "Register as an Individual" and fill in the required information. Login and then select what type of certificate you would like to order on the "Certificate choice" page. Pay particular attention the question "Is the GRO Index reference known?" The default answer is no, but you want to change it to "yes," because you should have already found your person in the indexes. Click "Submit".

Use the information from the index to fill in the boxes with asterisks by their descriptions. Avoid adding information that is not exactly as found in the index. This may cause the application to be rejected and you won't know what information was the problem. Then click "Submit".

Next, you can review your name, address and email information from your registration. If correct, click "Submit". Now you can review your order as well as add additional certificates if there are more that you want to order. To do this, click "Add to order". Otherwise, click "Checkout". You have one more opportunity to confirm the certificate information then click on "Proceed with payment". Your next screen will ask you to enter in credit card information. Before doing this, check the address bar on your internet browser to make sure the address begins with a lock symbol and the letters "https:" in green. This indicates your connection is secure and should help protect your credit card information. The cost is £9.25 per certificate including delivery. Time for a standard delivery is about two weeks.

Other than ordering online through the GRO.gov.uk website, another option as noted above is to contact the local Superintendent Registrar directly. Some of these also have links through the

UKBMD website. Note that the local registrar can be more expensive. You can usually request a certificate through their local website or by contacting them by e-mail

## **Why Can't I Find My Ancestors in the Index?**

The indexes are good but not perfect. Remember that birth registration was not strictly enforced until 1875. Ministers weren't always as diligent as needed on marriage registrations. A death certificate was required so death registrations should be the most complete.

If you can't find your ancestor in the index, try the following:

Look for different ways to spell the first name or last name (e.g. Jno versus John)

Look for ways a name could be pronounced (e.g. Kenety instead of Kennedy)

Look for "male" or "female" as a given name (e.g. "Male" Johnson or "Female" Johnson)

Search more quarters or years (At least two years on either side of the event year)

If a name is there but the place is not expected, are there other clues that the event could be registered somewhere other than where you expected?

It may not be in the index because there was an error in indexing or transcribing, double-checking with the local Superintendent Registrar for the expected registration district and time period would be the best possible solution.

Lastly, it's still possible the event was not recorded.