

## 4. Family History

### BMD Certificates – how to get them

Civil registration of Births, Marriages and Deaths (BMD) are the bedrock upon which most people's family history researches are built. Civil Registration began in England on 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1837 (later in Scotland and Ireland) and certificates are held in two places – or, to be more precise, the *original* certificates are held where they were originally issued and a *copy* is available from the General Register Office (G.R.O.). For the advantages of ordering certificates from the local Register Office, see *Ordering BMD certificates locally* on page 2.

Most people tend to access the national records via the **General Register Office** <[www.gro.gov.uk](http://www.gro.gov.uk)> which is part of **Her Majesty's Passport Office** but contact can also be made by phone or letter:

Certificate Services Section  
General Register Office  
PO Box 2  
SOUTHPORT  
PR8 2JD

Tel: +44 (0) 845 603 7788 (08:00-20:00 Monday to Friday. Saturday 09:00 to 16:00). Calls are charged at the cost of a local call. Please note your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

This telephone number is 'Typetalk' enabled. This means that people with hearing difficulties can communicate with the General Register Office (GRO) via the National Telephone Relay Service who set up a link with the GRO and act as an intermediary on their behalf.

Individuals cannot search the original documents; **indexes** to these records are made available in a number of places. To order a copy of a certificate held at the GRO it is necessary to consult these indexes to obtain the full index to the chosen certificate. This index reference is always of the form:

**Surname Forename(s), Year, Quarter, Registration District, Volume, page.**

e.g. Jackson, Elisha 1851 Sep, Hinckley, 15, 84.

Ordering certificates online or by post once a full GRO reference is known is easy – and costs £9.25 at the time of writing – you **must** have this full reference before attempting to order.

Since certificates held by GRO are copies of the originals, there is always a possibility of transcription errors – mistakes made during the process of copying. Mistakes are rare – but they do happen.

**Indexes** to the GRO records are available in a number of places :

- The National Archives, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU.
- Indexes are also held by many large Public Libraries.

Online copies of these indexes can also be searched in a number of ways. Two examples are the service provided by <[www.FreeBMD.org.uk](http://www.FreeBMD.org.uk)> which offer a free service up to the early 1960s, and services such as that provided by <[www.Findmypast.co.uk](http://www.Findmypast.co.uk)> which is a pay-per-view sites providing facsimiles of the printed indexes that you would find at the National Archives. These pay-per-view sites – and there are a lot of them – have the advantage of being more complete than those provided FREE.

1. An alternative approach, which has the advantage of avoiding the issue of transcription errors, is to approach the original Registration Office directly. A good way to identify this office is to use the **Directgov** ([www.directgov.gov.uk](http://www.directgov.gov.uk)) public service website.
2. In the **Search this site box** (top right) enter **Local Registrar** or something similar. You will probably have to 'home in' on births or marriages to find the local office details – this site is constantly changing, so be diligent!

## Viewing the General Register Office indexes

You can view GRO indexes online through several specialist organisations and websites, or you can view the indexes at a library or office in your area.

### Viewing full copies of the indexes

Copies of the indexes can no longer be purchased but a complete set, including 'Births, Deaths and Marriages from 1837 – 2007', 'Overseas from 1761 – 2007', 'Civil Partnerships from 2005 – 2007', 'Adoptions from 1927 – 2007', and the provisional indexes for 'Births and Deaths for 2008', is available at:

- National Archives at Kew
- Greater Manchester County Record Office
- Birmingham Central Library
- Bridgend Reference and Information Library
- Plymouth Central Library
- City of Westminster Archives Centre

These locations get updates for you to view in person. This is expected to continue until free, online access can be provided.

Local offices may also be able to direct you to other resources of interest to your researches:

## Ordering BMD certificates locally

The original civil certification process was – and is – locally based, people registered their births or marriages, and had their deaths registered, at a local register office. The system in place from 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1837 (in England and Wales) required local Registrars to maintain these Registers. He or she was also required, at the end of each quarter, to send **copies** of the registrations made in his/her office in that quarter; it is these copies that you will be accessing when you contact the GRO as described in the previous section.

Clearly, this is an area where transcription errors can become an issue – GRO-derived copies are just that – copies. In the days before photocopying these copies were made by clerks who are known to have introduced errors, particularly at times of great demand such as marriages just prior to the outbreak of war. They do, however, have one major difference from those provided by local registrars in that they are photocopies of the original GRO entries. This can be a mixed blessing, however, since handwriting can be quite an issue, as also can the poor quality of ink or photocopy.

Of course, it is vital that we know which registration office to approach since registration districts have sometimes changed since 1837. A good place to start is

[www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/civreg/places/](http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/civreg/places/) which provides search facilities for 1837-1930.

Ordering locally is usually only possible by post but in the author's experience, locally ordered certificates (certainly at the time of writing) are processed more quickly than GRO copies which can take some 10 days to arrive; locally ordered ones usually take around 4 days from date of posting orders. The cost of locally ordered certificates remains £9.25 including postage.

The major advantages of ordering locally include:

- Reduced chances of transcription errors (see above)
- Original registrar's 'hand' interpreted by an experienced eye.
- Ability to discuss the reference before ordering (see below)

A disadvantage is that the **GRO reference obtained by on-line searching is almost invariably not one that local offices use**. However, having said that, they are usually willing to look through their records to confirm that they hold the certificate that is the one you are seeking. This particular facility can be invaluable; for example, the author was trying to disentangle a family relationship that looked like it involved an adoption. A marriage reference had been found which appeared likely to be between George Cooper (2x great grandfather) and one Mary Ann A.Cresswell. All of the available data strongly pointed to this being the 'right' George Cooper, and we already knew from Census data that his wife was Mary Ann. Converging evidence pointed to Mary Ann's maiden name being Ando (quite unusual in South Wales) but we couldn't find her in censuses just prior to her likely marriage. However, a Mary Ann Cresswell was found 'just around the corner' from the Cooper household in the 1871 Census.

So our 'long shot' question was – did the 'A' in Mary Ann Cresswell stand for Ando?

A quick 'phone call to the appropriate Register Office yielded the answer, 'Yes'! An order for that certificate was put in the post forthwith!

This example does emphasise that local register offices can be helpful in identification of the right certificate, helping to avoid wasted purchases.

For historical information about registration districts, and parishes within them, try looking at [www.ukbmd.org.uk/genuki/reg/](http://www.ukbmd.org.uk/genuki/reg/)

© G.A.Herdman  
Revised 12 July 2014