

Family History Research

Importance of Civil Registration documents

For an overview of Civil Registration of births, marriages & deaths ('bmd' to family historians) we recommend a bit of Google searching. Look in particular for:

Genuki : <https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/civreg>

UK Government: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-order-and-pay-for-certificates>

FreeBMD: <https://www.freebmd.org.uk/>

Civil Registration of births, marriages and deaths began on 1st July, 1837 in England and Wales, 1st January, 1855 in Scotland and 1864* in Northern Ireland.

The various Acts that set up and developed these systems **forbid public access to the records**. However, **indexes** to the filing system used to store these records are publicly available in major Archives or Public Libraries throughout the UK. Most usefully, however, a team of volunteers have been transcribing these indexes on line. **Their platform is the FreeBMD website shown above which is, as its name suggests, free to use.**

It cannot be emphasised enough, that when tracing a family tree it is essential that every step is checked against these primary records before moving on to the next stage. Back to around 1837 this means getting access to the above civil registration certificates.

*Note: Irish records started somewhat earlier for some marriages.

Now, although the various Acts mentioned above forbid public access to certificates, it is possible to purchase **copies of these certificates!** At this point it's worth pausing to ask how these copies arose.

The 1837 Act set up **Registration Districts** with **Registrars** in charge of collecting the required data and producing the certificates and con-current copies that went into the Registrar's files. Registrars were also required to send copies of these certificates to the **General Register Office (GRO)** at the end of each quarter of the year. These yearly quarters have become labelled by the last month of the quarter such that each year has March, June, September and December collections of certificates. To keep record of where certificates are within these quarterly archives an Index was created for each archive. Until recently these indexes were available for inspection at the National Archives and also in major Archives and Central Libraries around the county. It is these that FreeBMD have transcribed.

We will shortly take a look at the sorts of information provided by these certificates but first it is important to repeat that the copies that GRO can supply are **copies** of the originals. For much of the time that certificates were created this copying was a hand-and-eye job; photocopies were not available! The upshot is that these copies sometimes contain either typographical errors or omissions. However, copies of the original certificates can be ordered from the local Register Office if that is known – at the same cost as those from GRO. Currently (2020) the cost of all certificates from either source is £11.00 including postage. However, GRO also offers a pdf service for just £7.00 per copy. It should be noted, however, that these copies are not acceptable for 'official' purposes such as passport applications, etc.

So, back to certificates – what do we need to know to order a certificate?

This is where FreeBMD website comes in very handy. For the next step we will assume you have launched **www.freebmd.org.uk** and will explore some of the data as it applies to you. The first step is to click on the red **Search** button at far left of the home page.

Looking for your birth registration.

At the top-left of the Search window you will see four little 'check boxes' – click in the **Birth** box to give a tick symbol.

Enter your **surname** and **first name** in the next set of boxes – capital letters are not required.

In the **Date range** boxes enter the year of your birth – enter it in box the **Mar** and **Dec** boxes. Now to the right-hand boxes...

Districts gives access to all of the Registration Districts across the whole of England and Wales or, if you select a particular County from the lower Counties box, those Registration Districts within that particular county. A caution here – if you were delivered away from your parents' normal home, such as in hospital, or they went to a neighbouring Registration Office for convenience, the District may not be the one you would expect. In this case you will need to do a wider search.

However, as a first search, click on your chosen County in the **Counties** list first and then either leave **All Districts in County** at the top of the **Districts** list or search through the list to select the one that you are confident of.

Finally, click on **Find** at bottom left, just below **Options** and above two blue links.

Hopefully you are then presented with your birth certification details. When doing research the above approach may need to:

- a. search different name spellings or, particularly, alternative forenames. This latter can be 'interesting' in that some individuals were known by different forenames than those on their certificate. This might be that they had two forenames and were known by the second of these, or some had baptismal names which differed from those on their certificate!
- b. search a wider range of dates.
- c. search a wider range of locations (Counties and Districts)

The search result will show:

Surname	Forename	Quarter	Year	<i>Mother's maiden name</i>	Registration District	Volume	Page
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The entry of *Mother's maiden name* is a FreeBMD addition and not one on the original Indexes. FreeBMD started this extra – and very useful – feature from around 1912 data. To order a certificate from GRO all of the above data except *Mother's maiden name* needs to be provided.

Marriage certificates

Searching for marriage certificates is similar to that for births – just click on the appropriate **Type** box and then add the required information. In this case entering the **Spouse**, if known, can sharpen up the search considerably. **Very usefully**, if you click on the **Page** reference of the resulting search you get a display of the four entries on the particular page – this will include the forename details of the other partner in that particular marriage.

The actual search result for a marriage has a very similar layout to that for a birth except that in place of *Mother's maiden name* we find the **Spouse's Surname**. e.g.

Surname	Forename	Quarter	Year	Spouse's Surname	Registration District	Volume	Page
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Death Certificates

As a first point of family history research, Death certificates are generally of least interest – they often contain nothing linking to other family members.

How do birth and marriage certificates help family history research?

Birth certificates record the subject's father and mother, including her maiden name.

Using this information then allows a search for the marriage of these parents.

A marriage certificate contains the names of fathers of both parties which leads to a search for the birth of each party which should identify the maiden name of the mother.

Repeating this cycle of Birth > Marriage > Birth > Marriage ... creates a family tree. If only it was that straightforward!