Guide to Birth certificates

Find the documentation for your ancestor’s birth and you will have the information you need to leapfrog back another generation.

Track down a forebear’s birth

Birth certificates are the foundation of any family historian’s research into an individual. They will help take you back to the next generation, providing the father’s name and occupation as well as, importantly, the mother’s maiden name. These details will allow you to locate a marriage for the parents with a greater degree of certainty.

The General Register Office (GRO) in Southport holds comprehensive records of all births recorded in England and Wales from 1837 onwards as well as records for some British Nationals born overseas.

The GRO provides a public index that lists basic details of every birth recorded in England and Wales since 1837. The index is divided into four quarters for each year.

How to find an index reference

The historical birth indexes for England and Wales (those over 100 years old) are available to search free of charge via the GRO certificate online ordering service on GOV.UK. The index is searchable, for which you will need to key in certain information. Additional functionality includes phonetic/soundex searching. Also, the Mother’s Maiden Name is shown in the online index where available.

Birth indexes are also available to search on FreeBMD. This free-to-use website has an almost complete transcription of the indexes for England and Wales from 1837 to 1983. You can also search the indexes for a fee using commercial websites.

The indexes are also available to view in microfiche format at certain libraries (see our leaflet ‘Discover your Family History’).

Once you have found the right birth record in the indexes you will need to make a note of the following:

- full name of the person on the certificate
- year and quarter in which the birth was registered
- registration district
- volume and page number of the entry

For information on our current prices please refer to the booklet on GOV.UK 'How to order and Pay for Civil Registration Records’ or visit www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates click 'start now' and select 'Most Customers Want to Know'
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1. **Date and place of birth**
   The later the date of birth, the more likely a full address will appear. A time of birth may indicate the child is a twin, triplet etc.

2. **Name**
   The forename(s) given to the child at birth. A line through this column means no name was given at the time of registration.

3. **Father’s name**
   The absence of a name here may indicate that the parents were not married to each other at the time of the birth.

4. **Name and maiden name of mother**
   This extra information will help you track down the mother’s parents as well as a marriage between her and the father. From the September quarter of 1911 the mother’s maiden name is included in the index.

5. **Occupation of father**
   This information can be useful for confirming that you are looking at a certificate for the right family – although it is not definitive proof.

6. **Signature, description and residence of informant**
   Usually one of the parents, however, it could be a grandparent, another relative, or someone present at the birth.

7. **Date registered**
   Registration was supposed to take place within 42 days of the birth. The date determines which quarter the birth appears in the indexes, in this case the Dec quarter.

8. **Names entered after registration**
   Used to record any names given to the child – for example, at baptism – up to 12 months after initial registration.
Find that birth
Try these tips if you can’t find an ancestor’s arrival into the world recorded in the indexes.

TIP 1: Prior to 1875, the registration of an event was not compulsory and therefore some births were never officially registered.

TIP 2: Registration of a birth may have happened in the quarter after it took place, so search later indexes.

TIP 3: A birth might have taken place outside England and Wales e.g. in Scotland. Search Scottish records at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk.

TIP 4: Babies were not always named immediately, many appearing as ‘infant’, ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ in the indexes.

TIP 5: The name you know your ancestor by might not be the one that appears on their birth certificate. Many people chose to be called by their middle names.