



HM Passport  
Office



# Discover your Family History

Getting the most from the **General Register Office**

[www.gov.uk/research-family-history](http://www.gov.uk/research-family-history)

Did you know that when you are researching your family history you can get invaluable information from birth, marriage, civil partnership and death certificates? The General Register Office for England and Wales (GRO) holds records for all births, marriages, civil partnerships, and deaths registered in England and Wales from 1 July 1837, and can help you in your search. (Civil partnerships are available from 5<sup>th</sup> December 2005)

### **This booklet tells you about:**

- The General Register Office for England and Wales, what its role is, and which records it can offer you
- The information you will find on civil registration records
- The information you will need to order civil registration records

It will give you an introduction to how the General Register Office can help.

For more details, please go to [www.gov.uk/research-family-history](http://www.gov.uk/research-family-history)

## Where should I start my search?

When you are starting to research your family history, gather together family memories, photos and documents and you may be able to quickly develop an understanding of the last couple of generations. To find out more detailed information, birth, marriage, civil partnership and death certificates are an invaluable material. They provide links back to the previous generation by giving details of a relative's address, occupation or cause of death. Certificates will also give clues about the individual's parents or husband/wife.

## How can GRO help?

People come to the GRO because it has the records of every birth, marriage civil partnership and death registered in England and Wales available in one place. Some commercial organisations also offer a service to get certificates for you, but these organisations apply to the GRO or the local registration service on your behalf. It is therefore cheaper and quicker to order direct.

GRO also holds overseas records containing details of births, marriages, civil partnerships and deaths of British citizens that have taken place abroad since the late 18th century. These include those registered with British Consuls, High Commissions, HM Forces, the Civil Aviation Authority and the Registrar General of Shipping and Seamen. It is not compulsory to register every birth, marriage, civil partnership or death that occurs overseas and GRO is not automatically notified of every event that has taken place.

For a full list of records available see pages 21 and 22 or for more information visit [www.gov.uk/research-family-history](http://www.gov.uk/research-family-history)

## What services does GRO provide?

The GRO can provide you with birth, marriage, civil partnership and death certificates covering England and Wales from 1 July 1837 onwards (civil partnerships are available from 5<sup>th</sup> December 2005). If you use the standard service, the certificate will be dispatched from GRO on the fourth working day (if the GRO index reference number is provided).

If you use the priority service, the certificate will be dispatched from GRO on or before the next working day (if the order is received before 4pm, excluding weekends and Bank Holidays).

There is also a Portable Document Format (PDF) service covering England and Wales for birth registration records from 1837 to 100 years ago and for deaths from 1837 to 1957. Additionally, we have launched an Online View digital image service for birth registration records from 1837 to 100 years ago and for deaths from 1837 to 1887.

The online service is the **cheapest and simplest** way of placing an order  
[www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates](http://www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates)

### How do I search for records that date from before 1837?

Local parish records contain details of baptisms, marriages and burials. You will usually find parish registers at the local County Record Office or through various websites where registers have been digitised.

It may also be worth checking the GRO regimental records if there was a connection to the British Army.

## What information will I find on a birth, marriage or death certificate?

As well as the full names of the individuals, you will find the following information:

**Birth certificate** – includes date and place of birth, the name and residence of the mother (and sometimes the mother's maiden name). The name and occupation of the father is also shown on the certificate. See Annex A on pages 18 and 19 for an example certificate.

**Marriage certificate** – includes the full names each party to the marriage. It will usually include their occupations, residences and the date and place of the marriage and, in addition, the names and occupations of the fathers of both party, if the marriage took place before 4<sup>th</sup> May 2021. See Annex B on pages 20 and 21 for an example certificate.

**Civil Partnership certificate** – includes the full names each party to the civil partnership. It will usually include their occupations, residences and the date and place of the civil partnership and, in addition, the names and occupations of the mother and father of each party, if the civil partnership was formed before 4<sup>th</sup> May 2021. Where the civil partnership was formed on or after 4<sup>th</sup> May 2021, the name and occupations of the mother, father or parents of both each party will be included.

**Death certificate** – includes the date of death, age, occupation, final residence and cause of death, as well as the name and relationship of the person who acted as the informant. See Annex C on pages 22 and 23 for an example certificate.

### What is the difference between a short and a full birth certificate?

A short certificate is an extract of the full record and only shows the name and surname, date of birth, place of birth and sex of the child.

## The GRO Index Reference

It is cheaper to order certificates online and provide a GRO index reference although you can also apply by telephone or post.

The GRO index reference provides unique reference information that helps find the birth, marriage, civil partnership or death in England and Wales that you are interested in. It includes:

- The year when the birth, marriage, civil partnership or death was registered
- The quarter (e.g. Oct-Dec is the December quarter, Jan-March is the March quarter) when it was registered
- The earliest index is for September quarter 1837. After 1984 the indexes are organised by year only
- The district in which the event was registered
- The volume and page number

The entries within the indexes are arranged in alphabetical order by surname, with first names listed alongside (as recorded on the certificate). The full index data varies depending on the type of event (birth, marriage, civil partnership or death) and the year when the event was registered.

## Where can I find a GRO index reference?

The GRO provides a public index that lists basic details of every birth, marriage, civil partnership and death recorded in England and Wales since 1837. If you provide details of the index reference number, it will be cheaper for you and also help speed up your application.

The historical birth and death index - births over 100 years old and deaths up to 1957 (those records that have been digitised) are available to search free of charge, via the GRO website at [www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates](http://www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates)

You can also visit [www.freebmd.org.uk](http://www.freebmd.org.uk) which contains a transcription of the index from 1837 to 1983.

Further information on researching GRO index reference numbers is available at [www.gov.uk/research-family-history](http://www.gov.uk/research-family-history)

Alternatively, a complete set of GRO Indexes is available in microfiche format to view free of charge at:

- Bridgend Local and Family History Centre
- City of Westminster Archives Centre
- Manchester Central Library
- Newcastle City Library
- Plymouth Central Library
- The British Library and
- The Library of Birmingham

*You are advised to check opening times and availability with the libraries directly before making any travel arrangements.*

Some public libraries and other organisations such as family history societies, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints family history centres or local record offices hold partial sets of the GRO Indexes on microfiche or CD ROM.

A number of organisations make the index available online and you can use these to find the index reference that you need. Most web sites that offer access to these records will make a charge for this service.

## The GRO index reference isn't clear. Can the GRO help?

Yes. If you can't decipher part of an index reference number you can use the GRO's unclear "microfiche service". GRO will provide clarification of the index reference number. You can contact the GRO by:

### Email

[certificate.services@gro.gov.uk](mailto:certificate.services@gro.gov.uk)

### Phone

+44 (0) 300 123 1837

Monday to Friday            8am-6pm

Saturday                      9am-1pm

### Post

General Register  
Office PO Box 2  
Southport Merseyside  
PR8 2JD

The aim is to reply within one working day of receipt of your request and the service is free. This service clarifies the reference number for you but won't confirm that it is the entry you are looking for.



## How can I order a certificate?

### Online

The **cheapest and quickest** way to order a certificate is to go to [www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates](http://www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates) and then follow the link to order certificates online. You can order a certificate and pay for it online.

### Phone

+44 (0) 300 123 1837

Monday to Friday      8am-6pm

Saturday                9am-1pm

To contact GRO using the Text Relay service text 18001 (followed by 0300 123 1837).

### Post

Forms can be downloaded from [www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates](http://www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates)

Completed application forms should be returned to:

General Register  
Office PO Box 2  
Southport Merseyside  
PR8 2JD

### Can I order a certificate from the local register office?

A local register office will have the original register of births, marriages, civil partnerships or deaths and if you know that the event you are interested in occurred in the district that they cover, you can approach the local register office for a certificate.

## How can I order a PDF?

The GRO is continually improving the way it provides civil registration services; including registration records in a format other than by paper certificate.

We offer historical birth and death records for England and Wales in Portable Document Format [PDF]. These include birth registration records over 100 years old and deaths from 1837 to 1957.

An order for a PDF copy of a registration record must be made via our online ordering site. Please note that this service is not available via telephone or postal applications. The PDF product is selectable under the "service option" on the order page for an England & Wales birth event for the years stated above.

You will need to provide the full GRO index reference number for the record that you are interested in, you will be prompted to supply details of the event as you complete the online application form.

You will be sent an email notification to inform you that your PDF image is ready to view and download. You will need to log on to your ordering account and you will find a link to your PDF in your order history. At this point you can view your image by clicking onto the "View PDF" button, download and save.

PDFs will remain available to view for a period of 3 months from the point of ordering, after which it will be removed. You will not receive a reminder prior to deletion.

For more information on the PDF service please visit [www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates](http://www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates) click 'start now' and select 'Most Customers Want to Know'

## How can I order an Online view digital image?

The GRO now offers a quicker, fully automated Online View digital image (in JPEG format) service for historical birth and death records for England and Wales. These include birth and death registration records from 1837 to 100 years ago for births and from 1837 to 1957 for deaths.

An order for an Online View digital image of a registration record must be made via our online ordering site. Please note that this service is not available via telephone or postal applications. The Online view product is selectable under the “service option” on the order page for an England and Wales birth events from 1837 to 100 years ago and death events for the years 1837 – 1957.

You will need to provide the full GRO index reference number for the record that you are interested in, you will be promoted to supply details of the event as you complete the online application form.

After you have completed the payment process of your order you can view the image by clicking onto the “View Online View” button, download and save.

Online View images will remain available to view for a period of 3 months from the point of ordering, after which it will be removed. You will not receive a reminder prior to deletion.

For more Information on the Online View service, please visit [www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates](http://www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates) click ‘start now’ and select ‘Customer Service Guide

## Where can I find out how much copies of registration records cost?

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](http://www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates) click 'start now' and select 'Most Customers Want to Know'.

If you are unable to access this information please contact the GRO by phone, or post (details given on page 8) for a copy of the leaflet 'How to Order and Pay for Civil Registration Records'.

### How do I pay for a certificate?

You can pay online or by telephone using most major credit/debit cards. If you want to apply by post you will be asked to complete a GRO application form. Application forms can be downloaded from

[www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates](http://www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates)

Payment can be made either by cheque, postal order or international bankers draft payable to 'HM Passport Office'.

- Payments made by international bankers draft should be in sterling. The draft must bear the name and address of a clearing bank within the UK
- Please do not send cash
- Where you wish to use the priority service, please clearly mark your envelope 'priority'
- A stamped self-addressed envelope is not required.

**Please note that additional administration fees are payable if you do not apply online (when service is available) or include a GRO index reference.** These cover the extra cost of processing such applications and are generally non-refundable, other than the index fee, if it exceptionally transpires the index information is unavailable.

### How do I pay for a PDF?

You can only order and pay for a PDF online at -

[www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates](http://www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates)

## How do I pay for an Online View digital image?

You can only order and pay for an Online View digital image online at – [www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates](http://www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates)

## I have placed an order for a certificate, what happens next?

When found, the certificate is printed, folded and sent to you in a C5 envelope using standard postal services. Target dates for dispatch are also included on page 3 under the heading ‘What services does GRO provide?’

## Refunds

If we are unable to produce the certificate you require, you will receive a partial refund of the certificate fee, less a deduction to cover work incurred. Any additional administration fees which may have been paid if not applying online or including a GRO index reference are non-refundable. Refunds will take up to five additional days to process. Orders for PDFs are non-refundable.

For full details of fees see the guide: How to Order and Pay for Civil Registration Records.

## What should I do if I cannot find a birth, marriage or death certificate?

Prior to 1875, the registration of an event was not enforced and therefore some were missed. In addition, some events may have taken place outside of England and Wales. An important factor to remember when searching is that there could be some variations in the spelling of names, as many people could not read or write and the registrar would have to interpret spellings.

### Births

- The child may have been registered under a forename/surname other than that by which he/she was known in later life.
- The child could have been registered before the parents had chosen a forename, in which case, the entry in the indexes would be at the end of the listing for the surname under female/male.
- The child could have been born in a period other than that searched
- Widen the search for the place of birth – the child may have been born in a different location as births must be registered in the district they occurred.
- Ages on census records and marriage certificates should be treated with caution. No proof of age was required and often people did not actually know their own age.

### Marriages

- Marriages sometimes took place after the birth of the first child – therefore widening the timescale searched may help.
- One party may have been married more than once, and used a different name – try checking previous surnames, or the name of the other party to the marriage.
- Historically, couples may have continued to live together as man and wife as divorce was rarer. Also, some couples may never have married, or did not remarry after their spouse died.

### Deaths

- Widen the timescale that the death occurred as it could have been registered some time after the event i.e. if an inquest was involved  
Widen the search for the place of death – the person may have died in a different location to where they actually lived (deaths must be

registered in the district they occurred)

- In a very small minority of cases, deaths would be registered without
- a name i.e. if there was nobody to identify a body. These are listed as 'unknown' in the indexes and appear at the end of each quarter

# How can I contact other General Register Offices?

## Scotland

The Registrar General  
The National Records of Scotland  
New Register House  
3 West Register Street  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3YT  
Tel: +44 (0) 131 314 4411  
Website: <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/>

## Northern Ireland

The Registrar General  
Oxford House  
49/55 Chichester Street  
Belfast BT1 4HL  
Tel: 0300 200 7890 from the UK or +44(0)2891 513101 from  
outside the UK

Website: [www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk)

## Republic of Ireland

The Registrar General for events outside Dublin and at non-Catholic  
Churches Government House in Dublin:  
Convent Road  
Roscommon  
Eire  
Tel: +353 (0) 1671 1000

For events in the greater Dublin  
area: Tel: +353 (0) 906 632 900  
Tel: +353 (0) 1671 1929/1968/1974  
Website: [www.groireland.ie](http://www.groireland.ie)



The registration of births and deaths was compulsory from 1878 onwards, and the registration of marriages was obligatory from 1884, although records go back to 1849 for non-Anglican births.

### **Isle of Man – Civil Registry**

Deemsters Walk

Bucks Road

Douglas

Isle of Man

IM1 3AR

Tel: +44 (0) 1624 687 039

### **Jersey – General Registry**

Holds births, marriages and deaths from 1842.

Office of the Superintendent Registrar

25 New Street

St Helier

Jersey

JE2 3RA1

Tel: +44 (0) 1534 441335

### **Guernsey – Register Office**

Holds births and deaths from October 1840, non-Anglican marriages from States Offices January 1841 and Anglican marriages from 1919.

The Greffe

Market Building

PO Box 451, Fountain Street

St Peter Port

Guernsey

GY1 3GX

Tel: +44 (0) 01481 222 800

# Birth certificate help sheet

(\*for births registered before 1 April 1969)

The columns on the birth certificate show, from left to right:

1. **Date and place of birth**

The later the date of birth, the more likely a full address will appear.

2. **Name**

The forename(s) given to the child at birth.

3. **Sex of Child**

4. **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.

5. **Name and maiden name of mother**

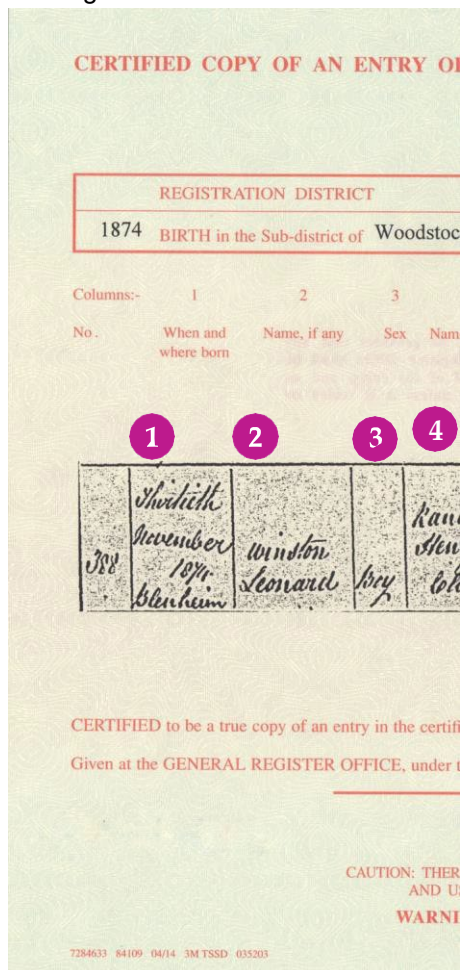
This extra information will help you track down the mother's parents as well as a marriage between her and the father.

6. **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.

7. **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.



8. **Names entered after registration**

Used to record any names given to the child – for example, at baptism – up to 12 months after the initial registration.



# Marriage certificate help sheet

The Columns on the marriage certificate show:

**The header shows the district where the marriage took place. The district name is usually repeated at the bottom of the certificate**

1. **Entry number** in the marriage register
2. **Names of the parties to the Marriage**
3. **Age** The age given by the bride and groom at the time of marriage, this is only as accurate as they believe it to be. 'Full' indicates 21 or over.
4. **Condition** Marital status at time of marriage, e.g. bachelor/spinster, widow/widower or previous marriage dissolved.
5. **Rank or Profession.** From 4<sup>th</sup> May 2023 this changed to record the occupation of the parties.
6. **Residence at the time of marriage** Until 1995, for a marriage to take place in a register office, or religious buildings; one of
7. the couple had to live within that registration district. This rule didn't always apply to couples marrying in a Church of England and Church of Wales Building.
7. **Name and profession of father** With the exception of an adoptive father, the name entered in this column should be that of the birth father.
8. **Depending upon the date of the marriage;** Profession of the birth father or adoptive father. From 17<sup>th</sup> August 2007, the profession of the stepfather could be recorded in the registration: and from 4<sup>th</sup> May 2021, the occupation of each Mother, Father, Parent recorded in space 6 could be recorded.

The names of the Witness are underneath the above columns: This will be marked with an "X" if the person could not write



# Death certificate help sheet

(\*for deaths registered before 1 April 1969)

The columns on the death certificate show:

1. **Entry number** in the death register and when and where the person died
2. **Name and surname** This is the name used at time of death, which is not always the same name given at birth.
3. **Sex of the deceased**
4. **Age** The informant gives the deceased's age at the time of death to the best of their knowledge and belief; therefore it is possible that this may not be accurate.
5. **Occupation** If the deceased is female, the occupation of the deceased's father or male spouse, current or former, living or dead might be given.
6. **Cause of death**
7. **Signature, description and residence of informant:** Marked with an 'X' if the informant was unable to write. After 1875, the relationship of the informant to the deceased was given.
8. **Date of Registration**
9. **Signature of registrar** In the case

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF

REGISTRATION DISTRICT

1910 DEATH in the Sub-district of Mayfair and

Columns:- 1 2 3

No.	When and where died	Name and surname	Sex
55	Fifteenth August 1910 South Street Mayfair	Florence Nightingale	Female

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the


CAUTION: THERE AND US

WARNI

7284633 84108 04/14 3MTSSD 035202

of a death registered more than three months from the date of death the signature of the Superintendent Registrar will also be included.

**DEATH**



GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number SPECIMEN

SAINT GEORGE HANOVER SQUARE  
in the County of London


4	5	6	7	8	9
Age	Occupation	Cause of death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
4	5	6	7	8	9
90 years	Spinster and Daughter of William Edward Nightingale deceased of independent means	Old age Weak Failure Certified by Dr. Garrett Anderson M.D.	S. Shore Nightingale Cousin of Sea House Holloway Mallock	Sixteenth August 1910	M. S. Hamilton Registrar

and copy of a Register of Deaths in the District above mentioned.

Seal of the said Office, the 16th day of March 2015

See note overleaf

ARE OFFENCES RELATING TO FALSIFYING OR ALTERING A CERTIFICATE OR POSSESSING A FALSE CERTIFICATE ©CROWN COPYRIGHT  
A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.

  
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## Annex C

\* On 1 April 1969 the law relating to death registrations was amended resulting in a change to the format of a death certificate. This information relates to deaths registered before 1 April 1969.

## What records does the General Register Office hold?

### Events recorded in England and Wales

Record held	Explanation	From - to
Birth and death records	A record of all births and deaths recorded	July 1837 - 6 months prior to the present date
Marriage records	A record of all marriages recorded	July 1837 - the present date
Civil Partnership records	A record of all civil partnerships recorded	2005 - the present date
Thomas Coram Register	A record of children given into the care of the Founding Hospital	1853 - 1948
Adopted Children Register	A record of all adoptions granted by courts	1927 - present date
Stillbirth register	A record of all stillbirths recorded	1927 - present date
Parental Order Register	A record of all births that have been re-registered on production of a court order where a child has been born via a surrogacy agreement	1994 - present date
Presumption of Death Register	A record of all events recorded in the Presumption of Death Register	2015 - present date

### Events recorded abroad

Record held	Explanation	From - to
Regimental records	Records of births/baptisms, marriages and some deaths relating to British Army Regiments	1761 - 1924
Chaplains returns	Army Chaplains records of baptisms, marriages and deaths	1796 - 1880



## Events recorded abroad (cont.)

Record held	Explanation	From - to
Ionian Islands records	Births, marriages and deaths of the British Garrison on Corfu	1818 - 1864
Marine records	Births and deaths at sea	1837 - present date
Consular records	Births, marriages, civil partnerships and deaths of British Subjects registered at British Consulates	1849 - 12 months prior to the present date (birth, marriage and death). 2005 - present date (civil partnership)
Army records	Births, marriages and deaths of members of the British Army or their families which took place abroad	1881 - 1965
War deaths	Deaths of serving personnel during the Boer War World War 1 World War 2	1899 - 1902 1914 - 1921 1939 - 1948
Aircraft records	Births and deaths on board British registered aircraft	1947 - present date
Foreign Marriage and Civil Partnership certificates	Certificates deposited with the General Register Office	1948 - 2013 (marriages) 2005 - 2013 (civil partnerships)
High Commission records	Births and deaths of British subjects registered at British High Commissions	1949 - present date
Armed Forces records	Births, marriages, civil partnerships and deaths of members of the Armed Forces or their families	1965 - present date (birth, marriage and death). 2005 - present date (civil partnerships)
Installation deaths	Deaths of workers on British Oil and Gas rigs	1971 - present date
Hovercraft records	Births and deaths on British registered hovercrafts	1972 - present date

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For more information visit

[www.gov.uk/research-family-history](http://www.gov.uk/research-family-history)

GRO Jun 25