

## Handout: Just How Accurate is the GRO Index? & How to Locate 'Missing' Entries

A Talk by Celia Heritage

[www.chfh.co.uk](http://www.chfh.co.uk)

*I hope you enjoyed my talk. This handout aims to act as a reminder for some of the points in the talk as well as being a reference aid for various books and websites that will help you in your search for records. For further advice on good research technique there is my family history e-course available from [www.chfh.co.uk/ecourse](http://www.chfh.co.uk/ecourse)*

Here we are considering the General Register Office index of births, marriages and deaths for England and Wales.

Why is it that you may fail to find an entry of birth marriage or death in the index when it is supposed to cover every birth, marriage and death (BMD) that occurred back to 1 July 1837?

### **Mistakes and inaccuracies in the index**

There are two sets of BMD indexes. The first is the one created and kept at local level by the register office where your ancestor's birth marriage or death was registered and the second is the national index we call the General Register Office Index - often referred to as the GRO index. Most of us will be using the GRO index for the very good reason that it is a centralised index of BMDs that happened all across England and Wales so if your ancestor moved around you should still be able to find him.

In order to use the local indexes you need to at least have an idea of where your ancestor was born, married or died and one reason we are looking for the certificate is because we don't know these facts - so overall the GRO index is far more practical to use.

There is a tendency to regard birth, marriage and death certificates and the accompanying index to them as accurate because they are, after all, official documents. The GRO Index is, however, strewn with errors of various types and if after extensive research you still can't find a birth, marriage or death you will have to consider that the reason you can't find it is because of this!

This is mainly due to the way the information was collated. It was very prone to copying errors and omissions. The records held at district register offices are more accurate than those held by the GRO because they have not been repeatedly copied.

Two separate acts of parliament gave us the legislation which formed the GRO set of records.

*The Registration Act* established the General Register Office and provided for the division of the country into districts and laid down the regulations for registering births and deaths while the *Marriage Act* dealt with the complications of registering marriages - which were much more complicated.

*The Marriage Act* dealt specifically with the registration of marriages which was complicated by the fact that many people of course would still get married in church rather than at the new register offices. The *Marriage Act* covered the rules and regulations for marriages in both Register Offices

and in churches. Importantly for us as researchers this act stipulated that in a Church of England (or Wales) marriage the minister should stand in place of the Registrar - so it was his duty to see that the marriage details were recorded correctly and were sent to the local Superintendent Registrar at the correct times. Remember this for later!

The church held two identical marriage registers and the marriage entries were supposed to be numbered chronologically and identically and completed at the time of the marriage - not beforehand or afterwards! When they were full one would be sent to the local Superintendent Registrar for safe keeping while one was kept by the church in question and became part of its parish registers.

The Marriage Act also stipulated that Quakers and Jews could perform their own marriages but that marriages in the chapels or churches of other groups such as Methodist, Baptists or Catholics were only valid if the district registrar (or his deputy) attended. Although the Minister of the Chapel would perform the marriage ceremony the registrar or his deputy had to then countersign the entry. It was only from 1898 that this was relaxed and ministers of non-conformist or Catholic churches were allowed to officiate without the presence of a Registrar. Although banns of marriages (notices read out in Church of England and Wales churches by the vicar three times before a marriage took place) were not replaced, a new *civil notice of marriage* was also introduced to act in a similar manner for all other marriages not taking place in the established church.

### **Implementing the System**

England and Wales were divided into twenty seven numbered geographical regions containing 619 registration districts, many of which were also divided again into sub-districts. The registration districts were added to and altered slightly in 1852, 1946 and 1965. From 1<sup>st</sup> July 1837, all births and deaths were supposed to be registered at the local register office (so either at the district register office or a sub-district register office) as were all register office marriages. In the case of a marriage in the Church of England a copy of all marriages that had taken place in that quarter was passed on to the Superintendent Registrar by the vicar or his clerk. Quarterly copies were then made under the supervision of each Superintendent Registrar who sent these copies to GRO Headquarters. Vicars often failed to send in their copies accurately or in time. The GRO index was formed from the quarterly copies and the main causes of errors are copying errors and entries that have been omitted. Read the following book for a full overview. *A Comedy of Errors' or The Marriage Records of England and Wales 1837 - 1899* by Mike Whitfield Foster, Mike W, (M. Foster 1998) and its sequel *A Comedy of Errors Act 2' or The Marriage Records of England and Wales 1837 - 1899* (M. Foster 2002)

### **Ways to locate 'missing' events in the index**

We now have a new online copy of the Birth and Death index up to 197 and 1957 respectively. This is available at <https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/> and you can order PDFs of certificates. This will give details of the mother maiden name before the usual cut off point of Sep Quarter 1911 which is very useful. Use this in tandem with other version of the index such as [www.freebmd.org](http://www.freebmd.org). No index is free from errors and new errors occur each time it is transcribed to put online.

General Advice if you have 'lost' an event:

Make sure you have checked:

- all surname variants
- searched under both spouses and tried searching just on surnames
- browsed the index rather than search engine

Buy the birth certificate of another sibling – are the details of the parents the same on that certificate? But watch out for second marriages!

*Double check with the local registrar – is the birth entry correct?*

### **Surname Variants**

There was no set spelling of names until the late nineteenth century. A surname can appear spelled differently in the same document and it is not wrong.

Important to think how else the name could be heard and spelled

e.g. ORPIN, ORPINGE, OPPIN, HOPPIN These are the same surname!

Today we have further complications because additional errors have crept in when the index was transcribed to go online - and the quality of the transcriptions vary between the different companies. Some mistakes are less easily spotted e.g. Barnes could be mistranscribed as Bamer. And it will be even harder to spot them if it's the initial the letter that has been misread.

If you can't find what you are looking for start by using another website - they may have got it right and indexes are usually free to search

Still no luck - use wildcard - inserting an asterisk instead of the letter you think may have been mistranscribed and you can also try searching simply on the first name, approximate date of the event and the area you believe it took place - scroll through results .

What you can also do is to go back to the old fashioned method of searching - ditch the search engine and search year by year and quarter by quarter. If it is purely a mistranscription by the website then this should pick up the name you want. You need to be prepared to spend some time searching in this way.

The information on certificates and therefore in the index is only as good as that given by the person who registered the birth or death or by the clergyman or registrar who recorded the details of a marriage.

A person's may be in the index but not appear as we expect:

The name: may appear differently in different records. So although you may know your ancestor as Sarah, her marriage or death may be registered under Sally which started as a diminutive of Sarah and eventually became a name in its own right. Similarly she may have been registered at birth as Sally but when she married the vicar presumed the correct form of her name was Sarah and written that down or perhaps she preferred Sarah and gave this as her name at marriage.

People could also acquire or lose middle names. Some middle names were not entered on the birth certificate but added when the child was baptised. They might however appear on the marriage or death

certificate and the same applies in reverse. First and middle names could be reversed too - sometimes just a copying error

Let's look at some of the problems specifically affecting the different types of event in the GRO index.

Births:

- Even if the registration was not late if it were towards the end of a quarter could take it over in to the next quarter's registration and even into the following year if the birth was in December
- If you are looking for a birth based on the age at marriage that could well be wrong!
- While of course ages on the census can also be inaccurate - search 5 years either side of expected date

Ways around the problem:

- Look for baptism instead - won't give you the mother's maiden name but might help narrow down the search for the birth and occasionally you may find the date of birth has been added too
- Look for births of siblings - from census

Marriages

- Look in the parish register instead - from 1837 it has exactly the same information as on the marriage certificate.
- May have married many miles away from what you consider to be their local area. May have met each other while working away from home. Remember that people travelled to a far greater extent than we give them credit for. By the 1870s long distance rail travel affordable for all
- Likewise a clergyman recording a marriage could easily mishear a first or last name or just simply have a senior moment and write down the wrong name!

Deaths

Frequently can be the hardest of the vital events to locate in the index. No burial without a death cert from Jul 1837!

From 1866 you have an age to give you a clue - before this there is very little information in the index to help you identify the correct entry.

You may have more information from your research about your ancestor than the person who registered your ancestor's death. A granddaughter or son in law may not actually have been too sure how old your ancestor was when he died and would have given his best guess. Similarly even a close person can get it wrong while your ancestors did not have the same fixation on how old they were that we do these day - they may not have been too sure themselves especially if they were illiterate and could not read their birth certificate.

Likewise a grandson registering the death of his grandfather who he had always known as 'Bert' may have presumed his name was Albert and given this name to the registrar. His real name might have been Herbert or Bertram.

Most of us expect to find our ancestor dying in the vicinity of where he lived during his life or certainly during his later years. But this may not be the case.

- Moved away to live with grown up children
- Died away from home in hospital or sanatorium
- Died away from home while travelling - what was his work
- Do you know roughly when he died - could he have died prematurely or died at an extremely old age
- Unknown deaths - people not identified at death - found after 'Z' in the index
- Narrow down date of death - use the census but double check the census after your ancestor disappeared too! Look for the death of the "other half" if there was one, to see if they were a widow/widower when they died. This will narrow down date of the spouse's death.

Look for an alternative death record that will give date of death

- Look for a will/administration bond - the person may have left a will. After 1858 you can search on a nationwide basis and if you find an entry in the probate index it will give date of death of the person. Also use online trade directories/phone books - see when the entries stop - though this is not entirely reliable as the person may have moved away or not paid for an entry.
- If the area where you believe your ancestor probably died has parish registers online or if you have easy access to the relevant local record office it's worth trying to narrow down the date of death by looking for a burial. Burial entries from 1813 will give the age and place of residence which can help you search for the corresponding death cert
- Also use online sources such as monumental inscriptions and gravestones which give dates of death

### Overseas & Emigration

Family may have been in the army and stationed abroad - marrying, giving birth or dying there.

By nineteenth century many people (even poorer people) travelled abroad to find better fortune. Check - passenger lists and overseas census records

- The Overseas GRO indexes - also available on TheGenealogist. Not everyone is included though.
- Don't forget to look for them in Scotland and Ireland, Channel Islands & Isle of Man too!

Very occasionally a person deliberately changed their name to something totally different perhaps because they were hiding something or for other unknown reason and in that event you have little chance of finding them

For all lost events it pays dividends to be aware of the location of registration districts and county boundaries. The set of civil registration maps produced by the IHGS clearly illustrates the location of the

respective regions and registration districts, and lists volume numbers. Studying these will help you decide how likely a death entry is, while a working knowledge of which volume numbers cover the expected area of death is useful, especially if you are not familiar with the names of the districts in the area.

**There are further details of errors in the BMD index and how to trace missing deaths in my book *Tracing Your Ancestors Through Death Records* published by Pen and Sword books .**

### **Websites and Further Reading**

*First Name Variants* by Alan Bardsley (FFHS 2003).

*Registration Districts* by Ray Wiggins (3rd ed SOG 2001)

*A Handbook to the Civil Registration Districts of England and Wales* by Brett Langston (2nd ed Family History Partnership 2003).

*A Comedy of Errors' or The Marriage Records of England and Wales 1837 - 1899* by Mike Whitfield Foster, Mike W, (M. Foster 1998) and its sequel *A Comedy of Errors Act 2' or The Marriage Records of England and Wales 1837 - 1899* (M. Foster 2002)

*Tracing Your Ancestors Through Death Records* Celia Heritage (pub Pen and Sword 2013)

List of Registration Districts in England and Wales: <http://www.ukbmd.org.uk/genuki/reg/>

Civil Registration Maps showing regions and district names available from [www.ihgs.ac.uk](http://www.ihgs.ac.uk)