

Using Death Records for Family History

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Death Records - Why we need them!

These are usually the records that are left to last, if not totally overlooked, by most researchers. Yet it's very important that you don't overlook them because they:

- Shed greater light on an ancestor's life than many records created in his lifetime
- May help break down brick walls
- Clarify when your ancestor stops appearing in records
- Act as springboards for locating other records and yet further information

An unlocated death means you have not got the full story!

Death Certificates

Make sure you extract all information from each column! Follow up on unfamiliar places of death e.g., workhouse or institution. Use directories, census returns, maps & Google to do this. If you are in the UK large-scale Ordnance Survey maps will be found in local libraries & record offices. Online look at <http://maps.nls.uk/os/> while various reproductions maps are available at <http://www.alangodfrey.com/maps.co.uk/> and <http://oldtowns.co.uk/>

Make sure you take note of who registered the death – it may be a relative (relationships *should* be stated from 1875) but it may be the coroner. If it is the latter there will have been an inquest or at very least a post mortem. If so there may be further surviving records! (see below). To help understand causes of death on certificates look at:

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/England_Diseases_and_Causes_of_Death -
International Institute](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/England_Diseases_and_Causes_of_Death_-_International_Institute)

Inquests records and obituaries

Whenever a death was sudden or unexpected there would have been an inquest into the cause of death. With the introduction of civil registration on 1 July 1837, a death certificate should not have been issued until after the inquest. From the mid-19th century look to see if the inquest was reported in local newspapers. Search the British Newspaper Archive website (below) or newspapers in record offices & libraries. Otherwise look for surviving coroner's records. Many inquest records do not survive as there was no requirement to preserve them until 1921. From then on records dated before 1875 had to be preserved, but many had already been destroyed. Later documents are not similarly protected and once they are fifteen years old may legally be destroyed by the coroner. Some have been deposited in local record offices. Inquest files under 75 years old are closed to the public. Between 1752 & 1860s coroners' records are filed with the Quarter Sessions records at county record offices. Before this many are at the National Archives, Kew. Records become more detailed with time, reaching their peak in the late 19th /early 20th century. Use the two Gibson Guides on

Coroners' Records & Local Newspapers to help locate records (see below). A few inquest records are digitised: e.g., those covering the City of London, Middlesex and Westminster. See www.LondonLives.org. Some early inquest records have been transcribed and are in print. Pre-1733 records will be in Latin

Read:

- National Archives Research Guide 'Coroners' Inquests' <https://tinyurl.com/hoq2y5g>
- J. Gibson and C Rogers, *Coroners' Records in England and Wales* (The Family History Partnership, 2009). Gives survival rates.
- British Library explore catalogue - explore.bl.uk Select –Advanced search and then Material Type – 'Newspapers' from drop down search menu

Memorial Cards (Funeral Cards)

Printed cards sent to family members and friends after a funeral. They were very popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and most contain the person's name, date of death, age and details of where he was buried. They often also include a verse which, although highly sentimental, may give an indication of the person's character or the cause of death. These verses were probably chosen by the family from a list supplied by the undertaker or printer. They are very useful for tracing dates of death and also burial places, especially in municipal cemeteries in which case the plot and grave number will usually also be given. They will also give the name of the undertaker and you might track down undertakers' records this way – see my book [*Cemeteries & Graveyards*](#) (Pen and Sword 2022).

Although memorial cards are usually found among family papers, some have found their way into the hands of collectors who allow searches to be carried out in their databases such as www.roscommonhistory.ie/Misc/Memorials/Misc.htm. Others find their way onto the second hand market, often for sale via online auction sites and the Society of Genealogists has a [searchable database](#) of cards in its possession donated by Philip Jones which you can access if you are a member.

Obituaries

Before the 1850s obituaries in provincial newspapers were often short and added at the whim of the local printer who ran the newspaper. Full obituaries in newspapers become usual from 1850s and can be found for both better-off and poorer ancestors - providing they were newsworthy. This is an excellent source not only for finding out more about your relative but for locating other useful records. Use the Gibson Guide to Local Newspaper (see below) to see the newspapers available and utilise latest digital technology such as the [British Newspaper Archive](#) <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk> (£) (also on Findmypast) and National Library of Wales Newspaper Collection <http://newspapers.library.wales> (Free)

- National Archives Research Guide: Newspapers. <https://tinyurl.com/y9vaf4j7>
- *Local Newspapers 1750-1920* (3rd Edition) by Jeremy Gibson & Brett Langton (Family History Partnership 2011). Will help locate the many local newspapers
- British Library Explore catalogue mentioned above.

Death Duty Records (DDRs)

Dates: 1796 to 1903

- provide a short cut to help locate probate court for pre- 1858 wills
- they help determine relationship of legatees to testator
- provide the value of estate at time of death as opposed to when will written
- By 1857 death duty affected all estates over the value of £20
- There was no duty liable on estates passed between:
 - Spouses, children, parents or grandparents of the deceased up to 1805.
 - Spouse and parents only from 1805.
 - Spouses only from 1815
- Freehold land became liable only in 1853

Where to Find Them

- The National Archives, Kew, London. Class number: IR26
- IR 27 index to the records at Findmypast.co.uk
- DDRs available online via TNA website include:
 - Non-PCC wills up to 1811
- After 1811 and for PCC wills - hire a researcher to visit TNA in person or order copy via TNA

National Archives Research Guide: Country Court Death Duty Records

<https://tinyurl.com/gtwcf3c>

Inventories were required with wills up to 1782. Originals are at record offices & a few are online. After 1782 inventories are usually found only with letters of administration. They may be catalogued and filed separately from, or together with, the will. Not all survive. If the items in the inventory are listed room by room, you will also get to 'virtual tour' of your ancestor's house.

Importance of using death records in tandem

You should use death records in tandem where possible. Don't just find a death certificate, look for the burial entry and the gravestone or memorial inscription too and look for a will! Each may give you information that is not on the other. One may help locate another. For example, if you are having trouble locating the death certificate, then check the Principal Probate Registry index which is online at Ancestry up to 1995, <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1904&enc=1> and at <https://probatesearch.service.gov.uk/#wills> to see if your ancestor left a will. The index entry will give a date of death and help locate the certificate.

Memorial Inscriptions, gravestones and burials records online

Finding a gravestone or Memorial Inscription (MI) will give you an approximate date of birth and the date of death. There is a rapidly increasing amount of online data providing details of burials, gravestones and MIs and some are totally free, while some are free to search but you pay to view an image. You may be surprised at the amount of information on some

gravestones in addition to the name, age and date of death. This may include other family members, occupations and causes of death - the latter is particularly useful before 1837.

See Chapters 6 & 7 of [Cemeteries & Graveyards](#) for extensive listings of databases and best ways to search.

Military Records

www.thegenealogist.co.uk has WW1 casualty lists, war deaths, and a war memorial database which also links to the free Commonwealth War Graves website below.

Imperial War Museum War Memorial website <http://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/search>

Commonwealth War Graves Commission: <http://www.cwgc.org>

Childless Relatives: Think about those who died childless or as children- they formed part of your family. Although you may have found numerous siblings for your ancestor in the baptism registers, death records may reveal that many died in infancy, giving you a completely different perspective on your ancestor's childhood. Always think about your ancestor's death, how old they were and how it would have affected those left behind.

Locate Qualified/Vetted UK Researchers: Association of Genealogists & Researchers in Archives <http://www.agra.org.uk>

Further Reading

Celia Heritage [Tracing Your Ancestors Through Death Records](#) (Pen & Sword, 2nd ed. 2015)

Celia Heritage [Cemeteries & Graveyards. A Guide for Local and Family Historians](#) (Pen & Sword 2022)

Simon Wills, *How our Ancestors Died* (Pen & Sword 2013)

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Go to <https://www.mindpebble.co.uk/reframing-roots/>