

Guide to Death certificates

The official records of an ancestor's demise may provide clues as to how, where, and with whom they spent their final days.

Track down a forebear's death

Death certificates are often overlooked in the family historian's research, however they can unlock secrets of an ancestor's life. They will provide details of how, where and when your forebear died, while the name of the informant could shed light on previously unknown relationships. These details will help you to find any wills or probate records that may exist and can take your research further.

The General Register Office (GRO) in Southport holds records of deaths recorded in England and Wales from 1837, as well as records for some British Nationals who died overseas.

How to find an index reference

The GRO provides a public index that lists basic details of every death recorded in England and Wales since 1837. The index is divided into four quarters for each year and can be viewed online for free at libraries and record offices, or visit www.freebmd.org.uk.

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. Once you have found the right death 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 death was registered
- registration district
- volume and page number of the entry



	Standard Service	Despatch target	Priority Service	Despatch target
Certificate with GRO index reference number supplied	£9.25	Four working days	£23.40	Next working day if ordered before 4pm
Certificate without GRO index reference number supplied	£9.25	Fifteen working days	£23.40	Next working day if ordered before 4pm

Guide to death certificates

1 Where and when died

This column should provide date of death and a location or full address. People didn't always die at home. It may have happened in hospital or in the workhouse, which could fall into a different registration district than the one you're expecting.

2 Name and surname

This is the name given to the registrar by the informant. Please note that this will be the name they were using at the time of death, not the name they were given at birth.

4 Age

The informant gives the deceased's age at death to the best of their knowledge. This is not always correct.

5 Occupation

This will be the last known occupation of the deceased. Females were usually recorded by their relationship to husband or father – eg 'widow of'.

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH

GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number: SPECIMEN

REGISTRATION DISTRICT		SAINT GEORGE HANOVER SQUARE						
1910		DEATH in the Sub-district of Mayfair and Knightsbridge			in the County of London			

Column:-	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
No.	When and where died	Name and surname	Sex	Age	Occupation	Cause of death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
	1	2		4	5	6	7	8	
	55 Sixteenth August 1910 South Street Mayfair	Florence Nightingale	Female	90 years	Spinster and Daughter of William Edward Nightingale deceased of 67 Andover Street	Old age Heart Failure Certified by Dr. Santlett Anderson M.D.	B. Bate Nightingale Cousin of Sea Trust Holloway Mallock	Sixteenth August 1910	Mrs. Hamilton Registrar


CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Deaths in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 16th day of March 2015

See note overleaf

CAUTION: THERE ARE OFFENCES RELATING TO FALSIFYING OR ALTERING A CERTIFICATE AND USING OR POSSESSING A FALSE CERTIFICATE ©CROWN COPYRIGHT
WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY.

SBM



6 Cause of death

If the word 'certified' appears, it means the cause of death was given by the doctor in medical attendance of the deceased. If there was an inquest, that will also be noted.

7 Signature, description and residence of informant

Often a spouse or other close relative. If the address is the same as the place of death, then it's likely the deceased died at home. After 1875, the relationship to the deceased was recorded.

8 When registered

The date the death was registered. This was usually very shortly after the death as a certificate was needed before a burial could take place.

It's quick and easy...

Online

It's quick and easy to order a death certificate online, just follow these three steps:

STEP ONE: Visit www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates and click on 'Start now'. Select 'Order a certificate online now' and register if you have not registered before (you will need an email address).

STEP TWO: Select 'Death Certificate' and if you know the GRO index reference number, click yes, if not click no. You will need to add the year of the event (if you do not have the index reference number a search will be carried out for you that covers a three-year period around the year you provide).

STEP THREE: Once your address has been confirmed you will be asked to provide the information you have got from the index. You can order a certificate without an index reference number but you will need to give some identifying information such as the name of the deceased, year and district of death. You will not be charged more for this service but it will take longer for your certificate to be dispatched. You will need to pay by credit or debit card.

By Phone

If you don't wish to order online you can apply by telephone with a credit/debit card on 0300 123 1837. Lines are open Monday to Friday 8am – 8pm, Saturday 9am – 4pm.

By Post

Application can also be made by post and forms can be obtained from GRO or downloaded via www.gov.uk/bmdcertificates

Find that death

Try these tips if you can't find the demise of an ancestor listed in the indexes

TIP 1: After 1866, the age of the deceased is recorded in the indexes so it will help to have pinpointed their date of birth before searching for a death.

TIP 2: Not sure of the year of death? Try narrowing down your search using other records such as the census.

TIP 3: A death might not have taken place in the town – or even country – where they lived, so hunt further afield. Don't forget to search the overseas death indexes.

TIP 4: If an inquest was held, the death might have been registered some time later, so widen your search.

TIP 5: The name you know your ancestor by might not be the one that appears on their death certificate. Try searching using their middle names, for example.