

Get more from Death records

Celia Heritage looks at the wide array of genealogical resources that can help you to fill in the details about the demise of your ancestors

Failing to trace our ancestors' lives right through until their deaths may lead to serious omissions in our family histories! If we fail to find their deaths, and the records that resulted from them, we are potentially overlooking a treasure trove of information about our family as a whole. Knowing exactly when an ancestor died is also important, so that you can rule out any references to people with the same name in other sources after this date.

Death records cover a wide range of sources, including death certificates and burial entries, wills, obituaries, gravestones, inquest records and also other less-well-known sources.

Death certificates

Following the creation of the General Register Office (GRO) – which was established to register all births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales from 1 July 1837 onwards – each death should have been recorded in the registration district where it occurred and there should be

a death certificate for everyone. To get a copy of a death certificate, you can search the GRO indexes from the main family history subscription sites or from freebmd.org.uk.

Once you have found the entry that you believe refers to your ancestor, make a note of the necessary details and order the certificate from gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates for £9.25. You can also order copies of death certificates from the relevant local register office (see 'Eight tips for finding missing deaths' on page 26).

You can learn a lot more about a person using the key pieces of information on the certificate: place and date of death, age, occupation, cause of death and the details of whoever registered the death. These can also lead to further information about your family as a whole.

The certificate for my great great grandmother Margaret Bowness, who died in 1874 in Cartmel Fell, Lancashire, showed her exact place of death to be "Tower Wood". Using maps I discovered that this was the name of a

house on the shore of Lake Windermere, which turned out to be the home of her son George. This led me on to discover George's will, from which I learned a lot more about him and other family members, too.

In Margaret's case, the details of the person who registered her death helped me find out more about another branch of the family. Her death was registered by 'John Bowness Watson' who clearly had to be a relative and, had she died a year later, the relationship would have been recorded on the certificate. Using census records I discovered that he was the son of her daughter Margaret and I was quickly able to extend Margaret's branch of the tree.

Ages on death certificates can be inaccurate, depending on the knowledge of the person registering the death. Despite this, the age recorded can be extremely helpful for pinpointing the baptism of anyone who died before the 1851 census, which was the first to give a fairly accurate statement of a person's age. Even after 1851 the age at death should be used in tandem ↻

with census returns to confirm a person's supposed year of birth.

The occupation column may show your ancestor changed jobs or had an additional job to that recorded in other sources. My husband's ancestor, Charles Curling, was a tailor but his death certificate is one of only two records that show he was also an actor.

Women's occupations are rarely recorded before the 20th century. Instead you will find details of their husband or their father. If a woman is recorded as a widow this will help you narrow down a time period for the husband's death and locate that in the index too. This can sometimes be tricky if tracing a popular surname before 1866 when ages were not included in the death index.

Inquests

Death certificates may turn up some sad surprises, such as that for my relative Edward Dickinson, who died in 1906 in Staveley near Kendal, Westmorland. Edward was found drowned in the local river and (as will always be the case if a death was sudden or unexpected) there was an inquest. Inquests were normally held before the local coroner and a jury.

From 1875, details of when and where the inquest took place are included on certificates. Even before this date you will know if there was an inquest because the coroner will be recorded as the informant on the certificate. From the 1850s, detailed inquest reports often appeared in local newspapers, many of which can now be found at britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

or on Findmypast, as well as at local libraries and archives. Otherwise, you may find actual inquest records at the local county record office. Survival rates are patchy, but a good finding aid is *Coroners' Records in England and Wales* by Jeremy Gibson and Colin Rogers (published by The Family History Partnership).

Otherwise check the online catalogue of the record office in the area where your ancestor died.

I found two newspaper reports of Edward's death, one in *The Lancashire Evening Post* but a much more detailed one in *The Westmorland Gazette*, which reported Edward's inquest at length. This account gave me a far better understanding of his life. The beauty of these records is that they frequently reveal things about our ancestors that were never recorded elsewhere. I learned that Edward had the habit



Victorian fishermen recovering the victim of a shipwreck, 1897

of regularly walking along the river to look for eggs and it is little things like this that really bring our ancestors to life. I also discovered that Edward, who was a coal merchant, had financial worries and had been depressed. He suffered from dizzy spells too, which, with hindsight, may well have been caused by stress.

While it is easy to assume that he committed suicide as a result of these problems, he left no note and did not indicate in any way that he wished to end his life. He may simply have suffered a dizzy spell and passed out while he was by the river, falling face down and drowning as a result. The jury passed a verdict of 'Found drowned'.

Parish registers

Before 1837 burial entries in parish registers are the nearest equivalent of the death certificate.

Death overseas and in Scotland and Ireland

The General Register Office (GRO) also has lists of British Nationals who died overseas. Although these are far from comprehensive, they are worth checking and are available using sites such as findmypast.co.uk and thegenealogist.co.uk. They include listings of those who died overseas while serving in the forces, those who died at sea, and civilians whose deaths were registered at a British Consulate or High Commission.

There are various websites listing details of British citizens and also other nationalities buried overseas. Findmypast has digitised deaths and burials in British India (you can also search the records at the British Library in London), while the British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia (bacs.org.uk) records graves in a number of British cemeteries and elsewhere in South Asia. The library of the Society of Genealogists in London contains many books recording burials and memorial inscriptions overseas, as well as a wonderful collection of will indexes.

Records of deaths and burials and wills in Scotland can be found at scotlandspeople.gov.uk. Deaths were registered by the state from 1855 and a Scottish death entry from this date onwards contains far more information than that given on its English counterpart. Notably you



British soldiers at a funeral during the First World War

will find details of the deceased's place and date of birth, and parents, although the accuracy of these facts depended on the knowledge of whoever registered the death.

Civil registration of deaths in Ireland began in 1864. Since the partition of Ireland in 1922, there have been two General Register Offices, one for the Republic of Ireland (GROIRE) and one for Northern Ireland (GRONI). For a death occurring in Northern Ireland up to 1922, you can apply for a copy of the death certificate from either GROIRE or GRONI. After 1922 you must apply to GRONI. GRONI has put its Deaths index (together with its births and marriages indexes) online. Using this you can pay to view images of all certificates, provided they are over 50 years old. For further details, go to geni.nidirect.gov.uk.

For deaths that took place over 100 years ago in the Republic of Ireland, you can use the official GRO index at irishgenealogy.ie and order your certificates from timeline.ie/irish-genealogy-clerk/family-bmd-records. Transcriptions of the index are also available at familysearch.org, findmypast.co.uk and ancestry.co.uk. If you use these to search for deaths in Northern Ireland, be aware that the transcriptions may not be complete.

EDWARD DICKINSON'S DEATH CERTIFICATE

A death certificate from 1906 showing what information you can glean...

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF DEATH

GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number **B012510**

REGISTRATION DISTRICT **Kendal**

1906 DEATH in the Sub-district of **Ambleside** in the County of **Westmorland**

Columns:	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 required	Signature of registrar
153	Dead body found in river 1906	Edward Dickinson	Male	33 years	Coal dealer	Drowning	Certificate issued by J. L. Gordon, Coroner for Westmorland, Kendal held 2nd October 1906	Third October 1906	Thomas Hoar 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 **24th** day of **October** 19**06**.

DXZ 019278

CAUTION: It is an offence to falsify a certificate or to make or knowingly use a false certificate or a copy of a false certificate intending it to be accepted as genuine to the prejudice of any person or to possess a certificate knowing it to be false without lawful authority.

THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE OF ENGLAND

PLACE OF DEATH

The place of death may lead you to new information about your ancestor's life immediately before their death. They may have died away from home with a relative, in a hospital or workhouse or, as in this case, met an untimely end. Edward's entry reads "Dead body found First October 1906 in the Gowan Beck Hugill RD". 'RD' stands for Rural District.

AGE AT DEATH

Depending on the accuracy of the information given by the informant, the deceased's age at death may be inaccurate, sometimes by several years. Compare it to his age in the census returns.

OCCUPATION

While the occupation will help confirm you have found the correct death certificate, in some cases your ancestor may have downgraded his occupation to something less taxing in later life or even have had a second occupation you knew nothing about.

INFORMANT

The person who registered the death was often a relative and you may pick up useful details about another family member here, such as the name of a married daughter. In this case, the informant is the coroner because of the nature of Edward's death. If your ancestor's death was the subject of an inquest the informant will be the coroner. From 1875, details of where and when the inquest took place will be recorded.

The amount of detail given varies greatly depending on the parish and date but, if it gives an age, which they all should from 1813, it can help you track down a baptism or help identify the correct death certificate in the GRO index.

Some pre-1813 registers also give a cause of death, although the terminology used may leave you wondering exactly what your ancestor died of – such as the term 'Teeth', found on several occasions in 17th-century registers for St Giles Cripplegate, London. If you find that you have more than one possible baptism for your ancestor, use burial entries to see if any

of the children baptised died as infants. There is no centralised database of burials but the National Burial Index (NBI) is a growing project that covers 18.4 million entries and can be bought from The Federation of Family History Societies on CD (ffhs.org.uk). Part of the NBI can also now be found on Findmypast.

Wills

Although it is generally true that only our wealthier ancestors left wills, you may be surprised at just how many labourers and other people of supposedly lowly status did in fact do

so, and it is a source that should never be overlooked. Wills may help you progress your research when information in parish registers is too sparse for you to be certain you have found the right family. In counties such as Kent, where many early wills survive, they may extend your family tree before the time of the first parish registers in 1538.

Wills are not only wonderful sources for building and verifying a pedigree, they can also enlighten you regarding your ancestor's wealth, occupation and any connections with other parts of the country. Many wills record

relatives residing far from home and sometimes overseas, providing a vital clue as to the whereabouts of other family members.

To locate wills proved after 1858, use the Principal Probate Registry index. This is centralised index and can be found at gov.uk/search-will-probate or (up to 1966) on Ancestry. Before this date, wills were proved by a hierarchy of ecclesiastical courts and there will usually be more than one set of probate court records for you to search in order to see if your ancestor left a will.

Tracking down a will

One of the determining criteria as to where a will was proved was the location of your ancestor's estate. It is logical to assume that the majority of their land and property would have been located where they lived, so use this as a starting point and then check to see which probate courts covered this area. Despite currently only being available in libraries or secondhand, the best guide remains Jeremy Gibson and Else Churchill's, *Probate Jurisdictions: Where to Look for Wills* (published by the Federation of Family History Societies).

Although there is also a set of maps available on Findmypast showing probate jurisdictions (bit.ly/1GI5Ga9) these do not show archdeaconry courts, so your best option is to contact the county record office covering the area your ancestor lived to determine which



Schoolgirls at the funeral of a Folkestone air-raid victim, 1917

court you should check and the location of these records.

A sizeable portion of will indexes are now online, as are a growing number of will images. An index of Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC) wills is freely available on The National Archives website, with downloads of images available for a small fee. The index and images are also available on TheGenealogist and Ancestry. The PCC was the highest probate court in England and Wales and any will could

have been proved there, so the index is well worth searching. Don't just rely on commercial websites when looking for wills. Some county record offices have placed will indexes online and some also have a document copying service for those who cannot travel to the record office.

Wills proved before 1858 in Wales have been digitised by the National Library of Wales and can be searched at llgc.org.uk.

Essex County Record Office's digitised wills are available via (seax.essexcc.gov.uk/essexancestors.aspx). You will also find indexes compiled by societies and individuals.

Use The National Archive's guide to wills at nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person/willbefore1858.htm to learn more about wills.

Manorial records

Few researchers investigate manorial records but, subject to survival rates, these can be a wonderful resource. Court rolls are the most useful type of manorial record. These detail the proceedings of the local 'court baron', which dealt with a wide range of manorial administration, including details of the transfer of copyhold land.

Copyhold land traditionally passed to the next of kin after the death of whoever held it. The court roll recorded the name of the person who had died, the land they held, the name of the heir, their relationship to the deceased and sometimes (in the case of a child) their age.

If a succession of court rolls survives for your ancestor's manor, you may be able to trace your family back in time through successive land transfers. In some cases, details of the deceased's will can also be found among the court rolls.

Up to the 1700s, manorial records can be hard to read – most are in Latin – but after this date the majority are in English and many

Alternative death records and where to find them online and in the archives

MONUMENTAL INSCRIPTIONS AND GRAVESTONES

There is a growing number of databases offering inscriptions from gravestones or actual images of the gravestones themselves online, such as worldburialindex.com, gravestonephotos.com and billiongraves.com, while



TheGenealogist also has its own growing collection of gravestone images. These can provide vital information about dates of birth and death, as well as extra information about the deceased, such as an occupation, place of residence and details of other family members. Sometimes you may also find the cause of death.

WAR MEMORIALS

The recent commemoration of the outbreak of the First World War has resulted in a growth in the number of groups and companies collating information on the fallen soldiers of the war. There are several online databases relating to war memorials, including that run by the Imperial War Museum (twm.org.uk/memorials/search/), War Memorials Online (war-memorials.org.uk) and the War Memorial Database run by TheGenealogist. There are also many local projects run by enthusiastic individuals.



CEMETERY RECORDS



From the 1850s the majority of our urban ancestors were interred in municipal cemeteries and until recently it could be difficult to identify the cemetery in question, especially in London. Deceasedonline.com is rapidly making these searches far easier by placing municipal burial, cremation and grave records online.

GETTY IMAGES



DEATH DUTY REGISTERS 1796-1903

These provide a shortcut to locating a will and can record what an ancestor's estate was worth. You will usually find details of legatees and occupation. From 1857 there should be an entry for any estate valued at over £20. Duty was not levied where an estate passed between spouses and up to 1805 between children, parents or grandparents of the deceased. The index can be searched on Findmypast or at The National Archives in Kew and records up to 1811 can be downloaded from its website at nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/death-duty-registers.htm.

THE COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES COMMISSION

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) commemorates those killed during both world wars and other conflicts. Search its database at www.cwgc.org to find those killed in the world wars. Each entry gives their name or initials, place and date of death, place of burial and/or commemoration, rank, regiment, unit and often details of next of kin and their address. This site is free to use and should be your first searching point if you know that your ancestor died in either world war. Last year the CWGC also uploaded Casualty Archive Documents for the First World War, which often give further details of the soldier. These documents are now being uploaded for the Second World War too.



are indexed by surname, so they are not so hard to use and well worth investigating once you have got to grips with the easier sources in this article. To learn more about manorial records go to lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/manorialrecords/index.htm.

Although closing a chapter on an ancestor's life may involve a bit of legwork (and the possible cost of ordering some incorrect death certificates), it's certainly worth doing. Not only will it give you another date for your family tree and a fresh perspective on your ancestor's life,

but it may open up new doors in your research that lead to further discoveries. ■

Celia Heritage is a professional genealogist. Her first downloadable video on using wills has just been released at heritagefamilyhistory.co.uk

Eight tips for finding missing deaths

1 There are inaccuracies in the GRO index which could mean you fail to find what you are looking for. Use www.ukbmd.org.uk to see if the relevant registration district has put a copy of its own, more accurate, index online. If not, contact the register office to ask if they will conduct a search for you. Certificates ordered from register offices cost £10.

2 For missing deaths and burials from 1858, search the Principal Probate Registry index. If your ancestor features, these indexes will give their date of death and help you locate the correct entry in the GRO index.

3 Your ancestors may not have been members of the Church of England, so check nonconformist burial registers available on thegenealogist.co.uk, findmypast.co.uk or bmdregisters.co.uk.

4 The age at death may be wrong or your ancestor may be recorded under their middle name, while they may have died far from home or even abroad. Check passenger lists and online census returns for America and Canada available on Ancestry and Findmypast.

5 The spelling of surnames did not become standardised until the late 19th/early 20th century. Keep an open mind as to how the name could have been spelled or mis-copied.

6 Mis-transcriptions are common in indexes simply because transcribers mis-read the handwriting. If the initial letter of the surname has been mis-transcribed, search without the surname but adding in other details, such as likely county of death and a rough date.

7 Occasionally people became known by Christian names unrelated to those given to them at birth and they may have been registered under that name at death. Similarly, someone known all his life as 'Bert' may have inadvertently been recorded as Albert instead of Herbert, Hubert or Bertram at death.

8 Your assumptions about where and when your ancestor died may be wrong. Your ancestor may appear to be dead because they do not appear on a census return, but check the following census in case they were simply not recorded in the previous one. Similarly, they may not have died in the area that you expect.