

CIVIL REGISTRATION AND GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE (GRO) INDEX REFERENCES ENGLAND AND WALES

HISTORY

Civil registration was first proposed by Oliver Cromwell in the 1650s. It was eventually introduced on 1st July 1837 in England and Wales. Registration districts were based on Poor Law Union Districts. It was up to local registrars to look out for births; the registrar had to attend marriages if not in an Anglican church; deaths were usually registered, in order to get a burial certificate. Fines for non or late (6 weeks) registration of births were introduced from 1875; up to 15% were not recorded before this, and about 33% in the early years, shown up by the 1841 census. A few marriages were not reported and some records genuinely lost. There were nearly 1 million entries in 1838 and over 1.5 million in 1896. By 1987 there were about 260 million records in total. Original registers are kept at Register Offices with copies at Southport and cannot be seen. Indexes of records are available and are the best way, but not the only way, to order a copy of a register entry.

In Scotland civil registration started in 1855 and is a superior system, with more information than in England and Wales. Both the indexes and certificates have been microfilmed. In Ireland civil registration started in 1845 for Protestant marriages and 1864 for all events; entries are similar to England & Wales.

FORMAT OF INDEXES

Entries are indexed in alphabetical order of surname and grouped by quarters of the year: Jan.-Mar. = Mar. qtr., Apr.-Jun. = Jun. qtr., etc. These are the quarters in which the event was registered, which may be the one after the one in which it took place. From 1983 the indexes are annual. Surnames are in exact order of spelling (check variations), then by forename(s). Actual dates are not given. Entries include name of registrar's district, volume no. and page no.; this is the vital reference information. Some indexes are manuscript, some typed. Take care with references; try to find good examples of characters. Volume nos. were originally Roman I to XXVII and usually unambiguous. Later volumes are 1 to 11 with suffix a, b, c or d; letters not always clear. Record offices usually have maps showing registration districts. Indexes are available on microfilm or microfiche. Originally only available as books at St Catherine's House, London, they are still often referred to as "St Catherine's Indexes" but properly are known as the GRO Indexes.

The birth index only gives the child's name up to Jun. qtr 1911, thereafter the mother's maiden name is given. Registration may have been some time after birth so look in several quarters; also, late registration could have resulted in false (late) date of birth. If the place of birth is not known and several possibilities are listed, try looking at deaths for the next few quarters; many children died in infancy, so this could eliminate some possibilities. If girl not found, try looking for brother. Check end of list for "male" and "female", i.e. not named at time of registration.

The marriage index only gives the person's name up to Mar. quarter 1912, thereafter the surname of the spouse is also given, which enables matching of two entries. Remember that many brides were pregnant in the 1800s, so do not presume marriage dates based on birth dates.

The death index only gives the person's name up to Mar. quarter 1866, thereafter the age at death is given, but may not be accurate. Note that it is possible for the death of a mother in child-birth to be registered in the quarter before the record of her child's birth, if the events occurred very near the end of a quarter, because the death would probably be registered more promptly than the birth.

While looking for a specific person, note any other entry which may later be useful, e.g. same name and same district. Birth and death registers can have up to 8 entries per page and marriage registers can have 2 (4 before 1900). An index reference for a person is not therefore absolutely unique.

If an entry which should be there is not, and the registration area is known, enquiries can be made at the appropriate Register Office. Dependent on the available information as to date and place, it may or may not be possible to find a record in this way. Individual Offices also may or may not be able or prepared to help.

LOCATION OF INDEXES

The indexes can be found at many record offices and local studies libraries. They can be viewed on the internet, for a charge, on a number of websites. An incomplete free index, currently covering most years to about 1918, can be searched at www.freebmd.org.uk. A completely new digitised index is in preparation.

OTHER RECORDS

The GRO also holds indexes to a variety of other records of births, marriages and deaths, such as War Deaths, Army Chaplains Registers, consular records, marine and civil aircraft records, and the adopted children's register (from 1927). A special order form is necessary to obtain copies of any of these records.

CERTIFICATES

These can be ordered online at the National Archives, Kew, or from Southport by post, telephone or online. The cost is less if the GRO ref. is quoted. Certificates held at the GRO are copies of the original registers and liable to errors. In particular, the transcription of names and signatures on marriage certificates can result in apparently different spellings. Certificates can also be ordered from the appropriate Register Office if enough information is known, but note that the GRO ref. is of no use here. However, many Register Office holdings have been, or are being, indexed – see www.ukbmd.org.uk

Birth Certificate Contents

- Registrar's district & sub-district; registrar's name.
- Place of birth: sometimes exact address, but in rural area may be only name of village.
- Date of birth; time of day for multiple births, although occasionally given in early years for single birth.
- Child's name, or sex if name not yet chosen. Name might be added later, but very rarely.
- Father's name and occupation (sometimes exaggerated).
- Mother's forename, married name and maiden name. "Formerly" should denote maiden name and "late" should denote previous married name; treat with caution, however.
- Date of registration. Compare with stated birth date; if not quite 6 weeks, be suspicious.
- Name and address of informant.
- Scottish certificates also give the parents date and place of marriage.

The certificate for an illegitimate child usually omits the father's name and gives the mother's occupation. Up to 1874 the father could be named in his absence, a procedure clearly open to abuse. From 1875 to 1969, the father's name could only be entered if he accompanied the mother to the registrar (or sent an affidavit from overseas); the mother's own surname would still be entered. However, if the parents gave details as though they were married then these might be entered on the certificate. This was more likely in densely populated areas where the Registrar could not be expected to know who was who.

Marriage Certificate Contents

- Registrar's district & sub-district.
- Church, chapel or register office.
- Groom's name; whether bachelor, widower or divorced.
- Groom's age: exact, "full", (21 or over) or "minor", (under 21). May not be truthful.
- Groom's occupation. May be vague, e.g. "engineer".
- Groom's residence; may not be full address.
- Groom's father's name and occupation, even if deceased. Can be useful if died abroad.
- Bride's name; whether spinster, widow or divorced.
- Bride's age, given same way as groom's age. Also may not be truthful.
- Bride's occupation may be given.
- Bride's residence; may not be full address. If same as groom's, does not necessarily mean living together. Same address often quoted to avoid paying for banns in two parishes.
- Bride's father's name and occupation, even if deceased.
- Whether marriage by banns or licence.
- Denomination of church or chapel.
- Couple's signatures or marks. Wife's mark, especially if husband also used mark, does not necessarily mean she was illiterate.
- Witnesses signatures or marks. Can be useful if family members or relatives.
- Name of clergyman or registrar.

Death Certificate Contents

- Registrar's district and sub-district; name of registrar.
- Place of death; may not be full address.
- Deceased's name, sex and age (age not necessarily accurate).
- Deceased's occupation for man or single woman, or name and occupation of husband of married woman (sometimes of a widow) or the father of a child.
- Cause of death.
- Nature and duration of contributing illnesses (can be quite detailed).
- Possibly name of medical attendant.
- Date registered.
- Name and address of informant, who should be a relative or person present or "in attendance", which means either responsible for deceased or head of household in which death occurred. If there was an inquest, the informant could be the Coroner.