

Civil Registration Indexes of England and Wales



In 2008 the Public Search Room of the General Register Office (GRO) for England and Wales closed forever. Some of the parchment volumes now in storage are as old as Civil Registration itself, their pages had been in use since 1837.

Generations of researchers have searched these indexes, for all kinds of reasons, many of them individuals looking for their own birth or marriage certificates to get a passport, a pension or a divorce. Nowadays the searcher identifies (or hopes to identify) the entry they need by typing information into a search box, rather than looking through individual quarterly bound volumes, but the information is still derived from the same source, albeit with a couple of extra copying stages added.

It is fascinating to look into the background, to see how details from birth, marriage or death registers became search results on a website. This is not just idle curiosity. Understanding the process will always help with understanding the record itself, and this applies to indexes such as these. Knowing their strengths and weaknesses is very useful in overcoming some of the problems you may encounter.

The indexes

In 1837 copying was done manually at every stage, and the only way to convey information over a distance was by post. Today we can use computers to make multiple copies, and communication is instant, regardless of distance, but the basic process is unchanged. An event is registered in a local Register Office (or some other venue in the case of marriages), and the register is kept there. Copies are made of every entry, and at prescribed intervals these copies are sent to the General Register Office (GRO), where register entries from all the local offices are consolidated into a national register for that period, and then indexed.

The local offices also create indexes from the original records in their custody, so the searcher has the choice of using either the national or the local indexes if they know where and event was registered. In theory, there will be identical information in both, but in practice, as every genealogist knows, there will be discrepancies!

A birth or death was notified to the local Registrar of Births and Deaths, who would write the details in the register, then ask the informant to check and sign it. If they could not sign, they would make their mark 'X'. At the end of each quarter, the registrar made copies of all the births and deaths for that three-month period (Jan-Mar, Apr-Jun, Jul-

Sep or Oct-Dec) on special transcription sheets, with up to ten entries on a page. These copies were known as the quarterly returns. The completed quarterly returns were sent to the GRO at Somerset House, where they were sorted into volumes, according to district, and then the pages were numbered.

Next, the details to be included in the index were copied onto special transcription pages, which were then cut into individual slips. These slips were sorted manually, and the final alphabetical index was written up on parchment pages, then bound into volumes which sat on the search room shelves for up to 150 years.

Printed, and subsequently typed, index volumes were introduced later, but the initial copying and sorting stages remained largely unchanged. It was not until the late 20th century that it was possible to send facsimile copies of entries – with the original handwriting and signatures – from local offices to the GRO. From 1984 the indexes were 'born digital' and instead of quarterly index volumes, annual indexes were created from these digital files.

Marriages

The process for marriages was the same as for births and deaths where the marriage register was kept by the local Registrar of Marriages. However, most marriages were performed in the Church of England until well into the 20th century, and the arrangements for these were slightly different. By virtue of their office, Church of England clergy were automatically empowered to perform marriages, as they had done for centuries before civil registration.

They each kept two identical register books, and both were signed by the bride and groom. Quarterly returns were made just as for births and deaths, and sent to the local Superintendent Registrar who sent them on to the GRO. But the local register office did not have a copy of a church marriage register until it was full. Only a Registrar of Marriages could perform marriages in churches of other denominations until 1899, when nonconformist clergy could be authorised to perform marriages and keep their own registers. Then they too were responsible for making their own quarterly returns and sending them to the Superintendent Registrar.

General Register Office

The GRO has only recently provided its own indexes to SOME of the records they hold. They are not transcriptions of existing indexes, but have been created directly from the Quarterly Returns. Birth indexes (1837-1916) include mother's maiden name for all years, and death indexes include age at death for all years. NB the number may be the age in days or months, not years.

Civil Registration Index Timeline

1837 1 July Start of civil registration of births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales. Quarterly manuscript indexes were produced for all three events showing full name, registration district, volume and page number.

Volume numbers were Roman numerals starting with I (London) to XXVII (North Wales). Each regional Volume contained several Registration Districts. There were up to ten births or deaths or up to four marriages on each page.

1852 – Volume numbers were changed from Roman numerals to numbers and letters, from 1a to 11b, covering the same areas as before. The number of marriages on a page was reduced to two.

1866 – Index volumes were printed, and the age at death was listed in the indexes. Only the first forename was shown in full, then initials, **for 1866 only**. From 1867 the first two forenames were shown in full.

NOTE: When looking at the images of index pages between 1837 and 1865 you will see that some were typed. This was done in the 1960s and 1970s when some of the parchment volumes became worn, so the typed volumes were copies made from them.

1910 – From the September quarter the indexes were typed, and only the first forename is shown, then initials.

1911 – From the December quarter the mother's maiden name appears in the birth indexes

1912 – From the June quarter the surname of the spouse appears in the marriage indexes

1946 – From the September quarter a new system of volume numbering was introduced from 1a (Northumberland, Durham and Cumbria) to 10f (Lancashire).

1966 – First two forenames shown in full, then initials, in the birth indexes only.

1969 – From the September quarter computers were used to prepare and print the indexes. Death indexes show the first two forenames in full, then initials, also date of birth, instead of age at death.

1974 – Local government reforms caused major changes in registration district names and boundaries, and new volume numbering from 1 (Northumberland, Durham and Cumbria) to 40 (Lancashire)

1984 – Indexes are now ‘born digital’ and there are no page images to view online, therefore online indexes can be searched, but not browsed. Indexes are now annual, not quarterly, and each entry shows the month of registration, with an entry number, a register number, the name and number of the registration district and the number of the sub-district. There are no longer any volume and page numbers.

Online indexes - national

FreeBMD – births, marriages and deaths 1837-1983

<https://www.freebmd.org.uk/>

Ancestry – births 1837-2006, marriages 1837-2005, deaths 1837-2006

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/>

Findmypast – 1837-2006, marriages 1837-2005, deaths 1837-2006

<https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>

Indexes on the three sites above have all been created from hard copy indexes (up to 1983) or from film, fiche or online versions of them. Indexes later than 1984 were acquired from the GRO as data files.

General Register Office - births and deaths 1837-1916

https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/indexes_search.asp

Online indexes - local

UKBMD – various years, incomplete; indexes from registers held in local Register Offices. <https://www.ukbmd.org.uk/>

Offline indexes

Microfiche and microfilm indexes are still available, and from 2006/7 the only indexes available are on microfiche at 7 selected locations in England and Wales. Full details are on the GRO site (above)



Audrey Collins, Records Specialist - Family History <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>