

YOUR  
FAMILY  
HISTORIAN

# Where the Information Comes From



**Thomas Cromwell:** Introduced Parish Registration of Baptisms,  
Marriages and Burials In England & Wales in 1538

## A Guide



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# INTRODUCTION



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When I started looking at my Family History – many, many years ago – there was no alternative but to visit the various establishments where records were kept and laboriously trawl through them.

On-line Family History sites have revolutionised the hobby, but the same basic principles apply now as applied back when I started.

On-line sites provide an interface in which the various records are presented as a single, seamless database. But to make the full use of this I think that it's important to have at least some understanding of where this information comes from and what individual types of records are available.

This is an updated version of a basic 'How To' guide I put together back in the 1990's for various people who asked me how to get started in their Family History research. I include it as a (hopefully) useful reference.



# Types of Record

In Family History Research there are two main types of record:

## Civil Records

These are records which the Government requires to be kept of its citizens. This includes events like births, adoptions, marriages, civil partnerships and deaths.

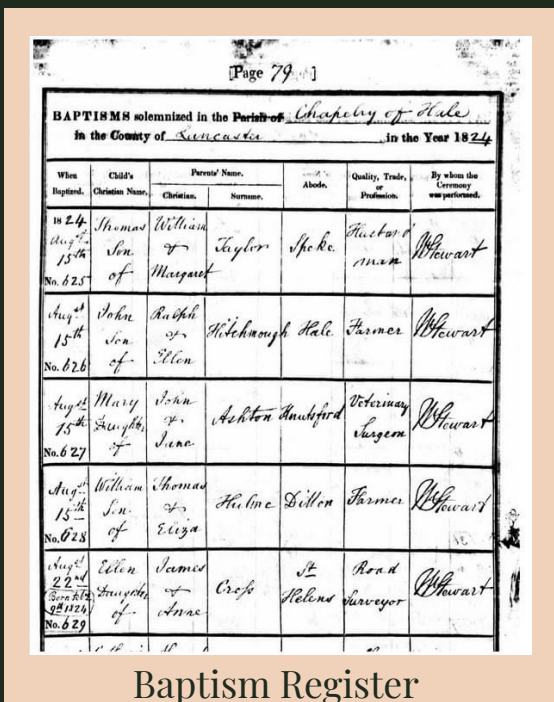
For the Family Historian the key records are:

- Birth
- Marriages
- Deaths



Birth Certificate

Census Returns are also a form of civil record. Civil Records will form the backbone of your research from the mid 19th Century onwards.



Baptism Register

## Church Records

Before Civil Registration of Births, Marriages and Death (BMD) was introduced (1837 in England and Wales, 1855 in Scotland, 1864 in Ireland) the main records in existence were Parish Records of Baptisms, Marriages and Burials (BMB).

Note the subtle difference between BMB and BMD!





## Where to Find Records

Civil and Church records are in existence for just about everywhere in the country, but only the local records will be kept in local record centres. The main places to find these records are:

### Local Libraries

In the North-East, the best is probably Newcastle Central Library which has a whole department devoted to family history. Generally you can just walk in and use a reader.



### County Record Offices

These hold records for the whole of a given county. For example, there are 3 in the North-East: Northumberland (based at Woodhorn Museum); Durham (based in Durham City) and Tyne and Wear (based at Blandford St - off Westgate Rd - in Newcastle). Generally these are pretty busy and you will need to book ahead to use a microfilm reader.

### Local Registry Offices

The place you go to register a Birth, Marriage or Death holds records of every event recorded there

The staff at all these places are usually pretty friendly and quite knowledgeable on the subject.

Loads and loads of additional information is available on a given area (unofficial censuses, land records, wills, etc. etc.), but just what has been recorded depends very much on where that area is. Generally, the further back in time you go, the more 'gaps' will appear in the records; there are a couple of parishes in Northumberland, for example, whose Church records before about 1900 have been lost in a fire.

Most books tell you to start with Civil Registration - from 1837, all Births, Marriages and Deaths have had to be registered by law. Local Records for these are kept in local Registry Offices with a central depository at St.Catherine's House in London.

However, getting access to Civil Records is expensive - about £11 per copy certificate at the moment. You also have to give the Registrar detailed information before they can find the certificate you want (you can't search through the records yourself). Conclusion? Only use Civil records when you absolutely have to.

Indexes for these records (basically name, event and date and no more) are available at most big libraries if you really need to order a certificate.



# Census Records

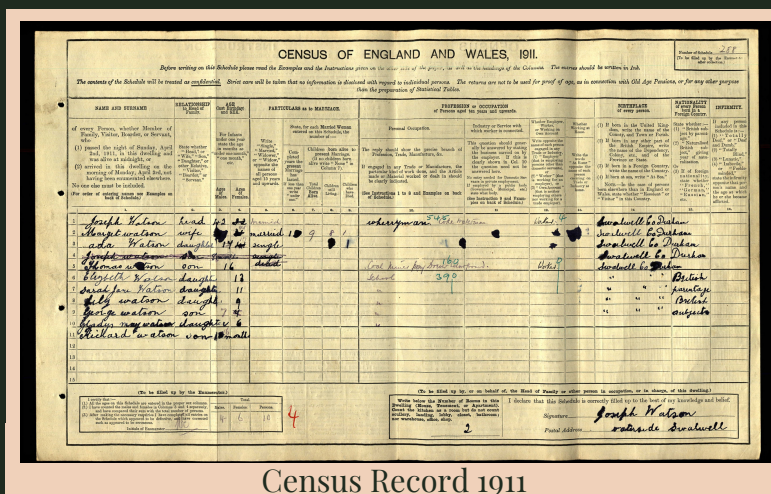
One aspect of Civil registration that is REALLY useful, however, is the Census.

A census has been held in this country every ten years since 1841 (the last was in 2011). They give you very detailed information you can't get anywhere else and, since big local libraries usually hold copies, you can get at them for free.

Records have been released for the Censuses held in 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911; the idea being that everyone mentioned should now be dead, the so-called 100-year rule.

Records for later censuses are still withheld from the public; the 1921 Census won't be released until January, 2022 at current estimates.

The Census will give you the Name, Age, Relationship to the head of the Household, Occupation and Place of Birth for every person staying in a house on Census night. Many indexes have been created for the various Census records. Which makes your job a lot easier.



Census Record 1911

1939 Register - A recent addition to the Census list is the 1939 Register. This was created to provide a list of citizens for Identification Cards. It provides slightly different information to the Census records – no relationships or places of birth, but dates of birth are included – and helps bridge that (sometimes) ominous gap from the present to 1911.

The register became the responsibility of the NHS and was kept up to date until the 1980's. This means that the married names of children were added later – a great resource for family history research. Unfortunately the 100-year rule still applies, and any persons listed on the Register who were either not known to have died, or who would have been less than 100 years old at the time that the Register was released for public viewing, have their details blacked out.



# Parish Records

Since 1538 Churches have been obliged to keep records of all Baptisms, Marriages and Burials that occurred in their Parish. These are the main sources of information before 1837 and, as I have found, are the cheapest and most accessible after that too.

Unfortunately, only at irregular periods has the information to be included on these records been stipulated. More usually it was simply left to the initiative of the individual Priest performing the ceremony.

You'll therefore find (sometimes quite big) differences between what is recorded at different Parishes, or at different time periods in the same Parish. Sometimes you get unlucky and records for a particular Parish have been destroyed or lost; fire, flood, incompetence, etc. In such cases you may be able to get the information you need from the Bishop's Transcripts. Basically, at regular intervals representatives of all the Bishopricks went to the individual Parishes that they administered and made copies of their Parish records. Now this can be a bit hit-and-miss, and such transcripts are prone to the usual 'copy-and-paste' errors. But if you've got nothing better then you need to make do.

All too often Church records are sparse in the extreme. If you're really unlucky you might only get:

*'10 March, 1774, John Smith was baptised'*

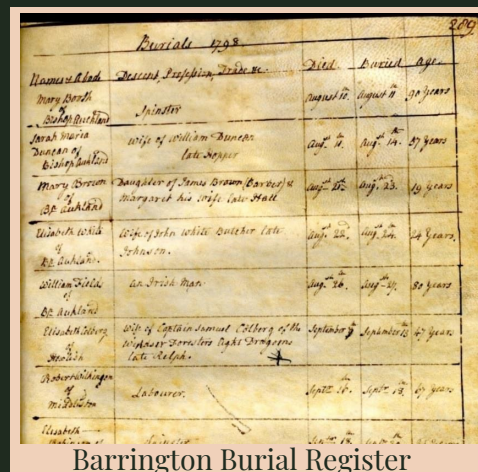
In which case you've got your work cut out.

There was a golden period when the Barrington & Dade Registers were used in some Parishes. Again, much was left to the initiative of individual Priests, but these can include such things as the names of all 4 of a child's grandparents. Fantastic!

Below is an entry for an ancestor I was researching from Slaley, Northumberland:

Baptised 26 January, 1811 (born 26 August 1810)  
Hannah Nevin of Steel Hall. 1st daughter of Christopher Nevin, Farmer, son of Christopher Nevin, Farmer, native of Rowley Head, by his wife, Mary, daughter of Henry Carr, Husbandman, of Hill House, Hexamshire.

Thank you Bishop Barrington!



Barrington Burial Register

The County Record Offices have complete Church records for the local area. At one time, it was necessary to wade through pages and pages of microfilm in order to find the entry or entries you are interested in. Recently, however, most of the local parishes have had indexes produced for their Church records (mainly by local family history societies).

Marriages and Burials have been indexed for the whole of the country between 1813 and 1837 (the start of civil registration), for example.



# International Genealogical Index

The International Genealogical index (IGI) is a database of genealogical records compiled from several sources and maintained by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day-Saints (LDS).

The IGI was compiled as a result of a core tenet of the LDS faith – that the dead can be baptized into the faith. For Latter-Day-Saints genealogy is a way to save souls and strengthen the eternal family unit.

This belief is very lucky for genealogists as the index contains billions of records of individuals who lived between 1500 to 1900 primarily in the United States, Canada, Latin America and Europe.

The IGI is really useful; most Record Offices hold copies. The IGI for England is one of the most complete, but only before about 1810. You will not need to worry about this, therefore, until you are back a few generations.

SEARCH FOR ANCESTORS

INTERNATIONAL GENEALOGICAL INDEX

Enter at least your deceased ancestor's first name or last name and the region.  
[Tips on How to Search the International Genealogical Index](#)

\*First Name \*Last Name Father Last Name  
Mother Last Name  
Spouse Last Name  
Event Year Year Range  
Region Country County  
Batch Number Serial/Sheet Number Film Number  
 \* Use exact spelling Search Clear

Since I first wrote this the Church of The Latter Day Saints has gone from strength to strength in their provision of Family History Records. They now have an entire website dedicated to the subject at :

[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

At the last count this site's database contained 5.8 billion records and is entirely free to use!





# Summary

In summary, your research can broadly be divided into 3 stages;

## 1. The latest Census (1911) to present day.

Frustratingly, the most recent past can be the hardest to untangle. There are more records available, but there are usually also many, many possible candidates to be your ancestor.

## 2..The period covered by Census records (1841-1911).

This is really a golden age for Family History. The information available is regular and detailed and, even if you are researching a common family name, your path should be reasonably straight-forward.

## 3. Pre-Census records

The Census will give you the age and place of birth of your earliest ancestor. But after that you're reliant on Church records and, if you're lucky, supplementary information such as trade guild records, land ownership records, wills, etc. If you come from a landless family – as most of us do - then you'll find that it's unusual to get back further than the mid-1700's with any certainty. The records just don't exist. For some branches you won't even get back this far.

# A Final Word

Family History Research is utterly addictive as a hobby and the development of online sites such as Ancestry.co.uk mean that it has never been so easy to get access to the records you need. Hopefully this guide will have given you some idea of where the individual records come from and therefore a feel for both their availability and limitations. I have derived decades of pleasure and satisfaction from my own research and hope that it is the same for you.

If you need help on your Family History journey then please contact me for support. We offer workshops and 1-2-1 tuition and are happy to provide a fresh pair of eyes if you get stuck or want to talk through a problem you've encountered. Details of our services can be viewed by clicking the button below

[Services](#)

## Good Hunting!



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