

MASTERCLASS: finding birth certificates

It's very frustrating when you can't find an ancestor's birth certificate - but often the 'brick wall' only exists in our imagination. Let's look at some of the key reasons why a certificate can't be found....

The forename you know your ancestor by may not be the one on the birth certificate: sometimes the name(s) given at the time of baptism would differ from the name(s) given to the registrar of births; sometimes a middle name was preferred, perhaps to avoid confusion with another family member, often the father. *There can be all sorts of reasons why a different forename is used - one of my ancestors appears on some censuses as 'Ebenezer' and on others as 'John' (which I imagine was the name he was generally known by).*

Middle names come and go: at the beginning of the 19th century it was rare to have a middle name, but by the beginning of the 20th century it was unusual not to have one. Some people invented middle names, some people dropped middle names they didn't like, and sometimes people simply forgot what was on the birth certificate. *For example, one of my relatives was registered as Fred, but in 1911 his father - my great-grandfather - gave his name as Frederick.*

The surname on the certificate may not be the one you expect: if the parents weren't married at the time of the birth then usually (but not always) the birth will be recorded under the mother's maiden name (the exception is where the mother was using the father's surname and failed to disclose to the registrar that they weren't married).

You're looking for the wrong father: often the best clue you have to the identity of your ancestor's father is the information on his or her marriage certificate. Unfortunately marriage certificates are often incorrect - the father's name and/or occupation may be wrong. This is particularly likely if your ancestor never knew his or her father, whether as a result of early death or illegitimacy. Not many people admit to being illegitimate on their wedding day - and in Victorian Britain illegitimacy was frowned upon, so single mothers often made up stories to tell their children (as well as the neighbours). *Whether or not the birth was legitimate young children often took the name of the man their mother later married, so always bear in mind the possibility that the father whose name is shown on the marriage certificate is actually a step-father.*

You may be looking in the wrong place: a child's birthplace is likely to be shown correctly when he or she is living at home, but could well be incorrect after leaving home. Many people simply didn't know where they were born, and assumed it was the place they remembered growing up. *The most accurate birthplace is the one given by the father or (especially) the mother of the person whose birth you're trying to track down; the least accurate is likely to be the one in the first census after they leave home.*

You may be looking in the wrong period: ages on censuses are often wrong, as are the ages shown on marriage certificates - especially if there is an age gap between the parties, or one or both is below the age of consent (21). Sometimes people didn't know how old they were, and ages on death certificates can be little more than guesses. Remember too that births could be registered up to 42 days afterwards without penalty, so many will be recorded in the following quarter - and they could be registered up to 365 days afterwards on payment of a fine. *In my experience, where the marriage certificate shows 'of full age' it's often an indication that they were under 21!*

The birth was not registered at all: this is usually the least likely situation, but it did happen occasionally - most often in the first few years of registration, though it wasn't until 1874 that there was a penalty for failing to register a birth.

The GRO indexes are wrong: this is also quite rare, but did happen occasionally despite the checks that were carried out.

How can you overcome these problems? First and foremost keep an open mind - be prepared to accept that any or all of the information you already have may be wrong. This is particularly likely if you have been unable to find your relative at home with their parents on any of the censuses.

Obtain all the information that you can from censuses, certificates, and other sources (such as Army records): the less information you can find, the more likely it is that the little you already have is wrong or misleading in some way. For example, if you can't find your ancestor on any censuses prior to his marriage, you can be pretty certain that the information on the marriage certificate and later censuses is wrong in some material way.

Don't assume that just because something appears in an official document, it must be right. Over half of marriage certificates I have seen include at least one error, and as many as half of all census entries are wrong in some respect (I'm not talking about transcription errors, by the way). *Army records are particularly unreliable - one of my relatives added 2 years to his age when he joined the British Army in 1880, and knocked 7 years off when he signed up for the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1914.*

Consider how and why the information you have might be wrong by working your way through the list above - then come up with a strategy to deal with each possibility. Sometimes it's as easy as ordering the birth certificate for a sibling to find out the mother's maiden name; often discovering when the parents married is a vital clue.

If you can't find your ancestor on the census with his or her parents then you should be particularly suspicious of the information you have - it's very likely that some element is wrong, and it is quite conceivable that it is ALL wrong.

Middle names that could also be surnames often indicate illegitimacy - it was usually the only way to get the father's name on the birth certificate.

Make use of local BMD indexes (start at [UKBMD](http://www.ukbmd.com)), and also look for your ancestor's baptism - sometimes we forget that parents continued to have their children baptised after Civil Registration began. Consider the possibility that one or both of the parents died when your ancestor was young - perhaps there will be evidence in workhouse records. Have you looked for wills?

Could the witnesses to your ancestor's marriage be relatives?

Finally, remember that you're probably not the only one researching this particular ancestor - and one of your cousins may already have the answers you're seeking.

With thanks to Peter Calver, founder of LostCousins <http://lostcousins.com/> for permission to use this article on Devon FHS's Links page.