



CHAPTER 7

Parish Records

The third of the four main sources that genealogists use are ecclesiastical records generated at local level by parish churches and various other religious organizations. Registers of baptisms, marriages and burials contain some biographical information that you can use to extend your family tree further back in time – theoretically to the sixteenth century, when parish registers were first introduced. This chapter explains what the records are, how you can use them, and where they can be found. It also lists some of the non-conformist records generated by religious groups outside the authority of the Church of England.

It is possible to make significant progress in building your family tree using the two sources discussed in the previous chapters – civil registration certificates and census records. However, if you want to work further back in time, pre-nineteenth century, you will have to turn to records generated at a local level, not by the State but by the Church. Together, these sources are loosely described as ‘parish registers’ and they record key events in a person’s life, such as baptism, marriage and burial. Since parish registers were introduced in the mid-sixteenth century, and continue to the present day, they are one of the longest continuous sets of record available – though a large degree of luck is required to find an ancestor in the earliest surviving registers.

Historically, Christian Britain was divided into dioceses, each administered by a bishop and consisting of smaller territorial sub-divisions known as parishes. A parish is a geographical unit under the administration of a local priest or pastor, and they have existed in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland since the end of the sixth century. By the nineteenth century, England and Wales had approximately 11,000

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parishes, varying considerably in size and population. Although there have almost always been religious minorities such as Jews in England, the vast majority of the population belonged to the Established Church of England from the sixteenth century onwards, when the country broke away from the authority of the Papacy in Rome. Those Christian minorities that did not thereafter subscribe to the Established Church, for example Quakers and Roman Catholics, came to be known as ‘non-conformists’. They remained small in number until the nineteenth century, in part due to the persecution they faced. Surviving records for these non-conformist groups will be discussed separately below.

Parish Records of the Church of England

In 1538, Henry VIII’s chancellor Thomas Cromwell introduced legislation that required every priest to record all baptisms, marriages and burials within his parish, and it is these surviving records that enable genealogists to trace their ancestors beyond the start of the great record series of the nineteenth century – civil registration certificates and census returns. Few records survive this far back – on average, most English parishes have records that start around 1611 though there are some examples in Wales from 1541 – because many of the early records were not kept with any degree of care, being written on loose sheets of paper which have not survived the passage of time. A further royal proclamation was issued in 1558 instructing that these parochial events be written on parchment rather than loose paper, which increased the chances of survival; therefore 1558 is generally recognized as the start date of parish registers.

Another Act of Parliament, passed in 1597, is also important as it led to the birth of what are known as ‘Bishops’ Transcripts’. As well as compiling their own parish registers, local clergy were instructed to make annual copies of each register and send them to the bishop of the diocese in which they served. Therefore these are very useful duplicate copies of the original parish registers and can be used as an alternative if the original does not survive (or is partly or wholly illegible). However, Bishops’ Transcripts sometimes contained less detail than parish registers, or recorded slightly different information, so it is worthwhile examining both sources where possible.

There are other factors to consider when viewing the earliest registers.

HOW TO...

...make the most of parish registers

1. Prior to the commencement of civil registration, parish registers that recorded baptisms, marriages and burials on a local level are our only way of confirming the births, marriages and deaths of our ancestors. These can be more difficult to trace, because there is not one centralized index and you usually need to know which parish your family was living in to be able to locate their entries. Parish registers also contain less detailed information than civil registration certificates, making it more challenging to compare details from record to record. Nevertheless, the fact these registers survive for some parishes as far back as the sixteenth century means there is a wealth of information about your ancestors waiting to be discovered, with a little patience and determination!

2. If you find civil registration documents for your ancestors that do not give the information you were expecting to find, it may be worth looking for the parish register of whichever religious ceremony would have marked the event to see if the two records corroborate one another.

USEFUL INFO

You can learn more about the precarious life of a debtor by reading Lester Markham's book

Victorian Insolvency:

Bankruptcy, Imprisonment for Debt, and Company Winding-Up in Nineteenth Century England.

Insolvent debtors were held in local prisons, but The National Archives holds the records of some major debtors' prisons in London, including Marshalsea, Fleet, King's Bench and Queen's Bench prisons in series PRIS. From 1861 insolvent debtors were allowed to apply for bankruptcy, and as of 1869 debtors were no longer routinely sent to jail.

Bankruptcy Records

- Most case files for bankruptcy hearings do not survive, though The National Archives has some records in series B 3 and B 4, and more records pertaining to bankruptcies can be found in B 1 to B 10.
- Notices of bankruptcies and insolvent debtors' cases can be found in local and national newspapers, and Commissioners of Bankrupts published notices in the *London Gazette*.
- The Court of Bankruptcy was established in 1832, but before this a creditor had to petition the Lord Chancellor to commission a bankruptcy case. Proceedings in the Court of Bankruptcy under the Joint Stock Companies Acts of 1856 and 1857 are in series B 10 for the period 1857 to 1863. After 1869 records of the Board of Trade contain bankruptcy proceedings.
- The records of district bankruptcy courts set up after 1842 are held at local record offices.

The National Archives research guides, Legal Records Information 5: 'Bankrupts and Insolvent Debtors 1710-1869' and Legal Records Information 6: 'Bankruptcy Records after 1869' take a detailed look at all the records for English and Welsh debtors. The Society of Genealogists has two Bankrupts Directories for 1774-86 and 1820-43, microfiche copies of which are at The National Archives.

Similar records for Scotland can be found at the National Archives of Scotland, and information about tracing the records can be found via an online research guide under Court of Session - Sequestrations, as this court handled the sequestration of bankrupts' possessions under various laws passed in the nineteenth century.

Merchants

Merchants were entrepreneurial businessmen whose prosperity grew from the seventeenth century as they sought trade with far-off places and brought riches to British ports. Renowned enterprises like the East India Company grew from humble origins, with a small group of

CASE STUDY

Nigella Lawson

Nigella Lawson already knew a fair amount about her family's background; her mother, Vanessa Salmon, was an heiress born into the Lyons Coffee House dynasty and, given the high profile of Lyons cornerhouse tearooms as a quintessentially British institution, Nigella was acquainted with the history of the company - for example, the little-known fact that instead of trading in tea they originally sold tobacco under the name Salmon & Gluckstein. Yet this information enabled her to uncover business archives surrounding the family, and learn more about some of the founders of the company to whom she was related.

The starting point for Nigella's investigation was her mother's family, the Salmons, and their links to Lyons. Nigella already knew that her grandfather, Felix Salmon, was instrumental in running the company and shaping its direction towards the famous Lyons cornerhouse tearooms. Travelling around London, many of today's famous landmarks such as the Trocadero and Hard Rock Café were formerly in the possession of Lyons. Yet despite his success, Felix Salmon came across in family stories as a melancholy man, and one possible cause was his role during the Second World War. Although he was in the catering corps, Nigella discovered from research at the Imperial War Museum that he was likely to have been attached to one of the regiments that liberated the German concentration camp at Belsen. One cannot begin to imagine the trauma of the event, particularly since he was also Jewish, and worked in the catering corps responsible for famine

relief for the liberated inmates.

Nigella continued to investigate the history of the company, and turned to Salmon & Gluckstein, the tobacco sellers, who claimed to be the largest in Europe at their launch in 1873. One of the founding fathers was her 2 x great-grandfather, Barnett Salmon. His surname was originally Solomon, and on the 1841 census it transpired that his father Aaron was a clothes dealer in the East End. Barnett started work as a travelling tobacco salesman. He married Helena Gluckstein in 1863, and went into business with his father-in-law Samuel Gluckstein. From consulting trade directories, where the business was advertised, and material in institutions such as the London Metropolitan Archives, Nigella was able to trace the success of the tobacco company, and the decision to branch out into other lines of business - and from these origins, Lyons was born in 1889. To ensure none of his family was ever threatened with poverty, Barnett set up a family fund, but equally insisted that none of the women were allowed to work. According to his will, Barnett was worth £3.5 million in today's money when he died, and - true to his word - he set up a trust fund for his wife worth £¾ million.



◀ One of the famous Lyons tearooms, along Piccadilly, London, in 1953.

Chart 1: Army Service Records, First World War

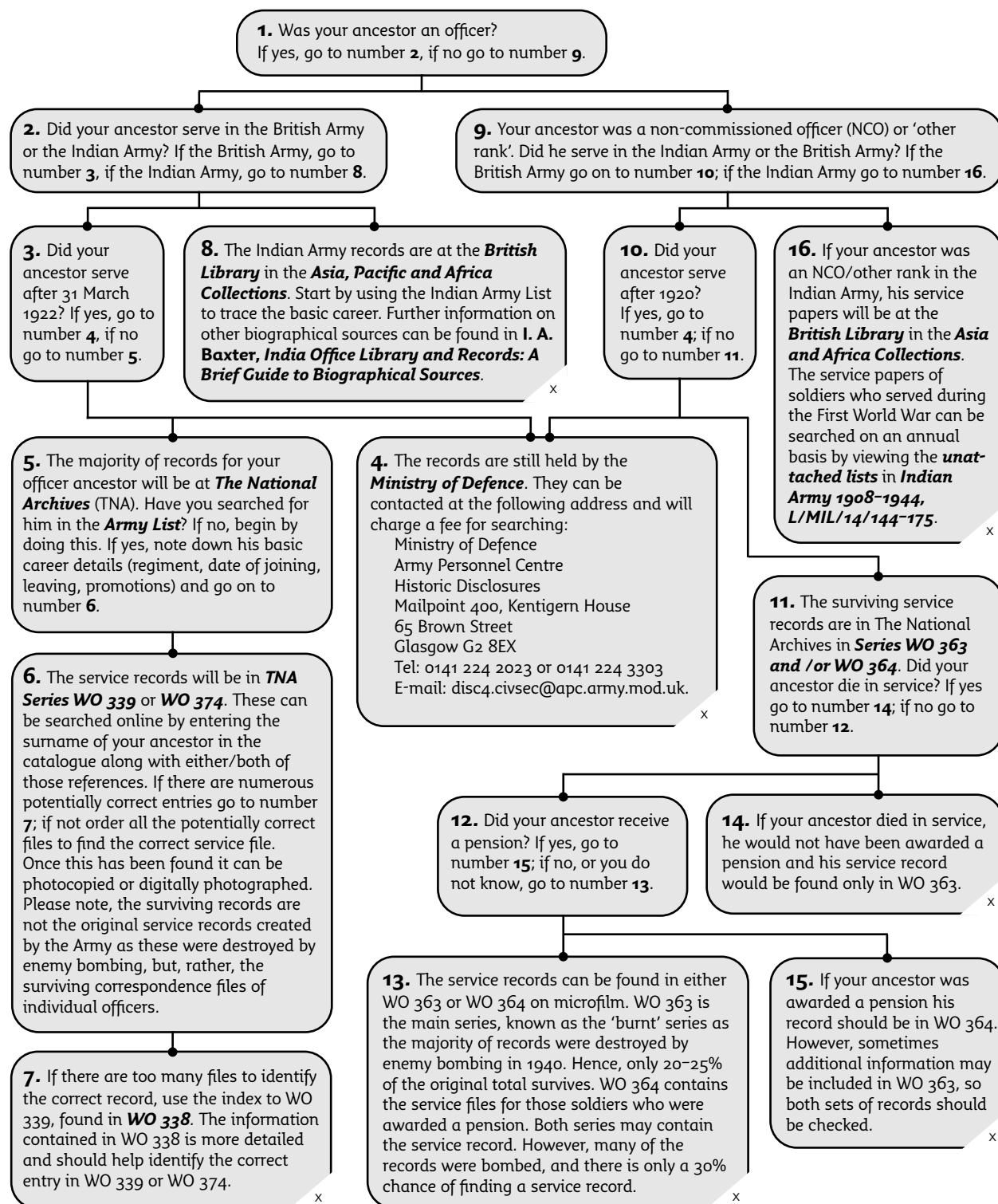


Chart 2: Army Service Medals, First World War

