

TRACING YOUR FIRST WORLD WAR ANCESTORS (11/2023)

More than nine million men and women are estimated to have served in the British armed forces during the First World War. There is therefore a strong chance that one of your ancestors was involved in the War effort. This is a summary of the wealth of sources available to help you find out more about your First World War ancestors.

The best way to start is by talking to your relatives and searching at home for any documents, photographs or objects which may give vital clues to help with your research. The minimum you need is your ancestor's name, but as there are likely to be many records for common surnames it would be useful to know either their place of birth, occupation, next of kin or regiment details.

A large amount of information is now available online, but in a few cases you will either need to visit yourself or hire a researcher to go for you.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)

The Commission's website features a free searchable database of war casualties at www.cwgc.org

- Search by name, branch of forces, year of death, country
- If you know the regiment or army number this will help you to identify your ancestor from others with the same name
- The website gives the location of the grave or memorial



Scottish National War Memorial (SNWM)

The SNWM website can include additional details not listed on the CWGC website, search the database for free at www.snwm.org

- Search by name, army number, date or month of death

Soldiers' Wills

Wills of Scottish soldier are held at the National Records of Scotland (NRS) in Edinburgh. The wills have now been digitised and made available via the ScotlandsPeople website (£) <http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/>

- For further information on the wills of service personnel see <http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/guides/soldiers-and-airmens-wills>

Soldiers Died in the Great War Collection

This is based on regimental records, and shows where a soldier enlisted, was born and sometimes their home address when they joined up.

- Available on CD-ROM in many libraries (free), on www.ancestry.co.uk (£) or in EDLC libraries via our subscription to Ancestry Library Edition (free)
- Also available (£) on the following websites:
www.familyrelatives.com
www.findmypast.com
www.military-genealogy.com

Local Newspapers

Newspapers published lists of local men serving in the forces, casualty lists and obituaries, occasionally including photographs. They also sometimes include letters to the editor from soldiers at the front and details of awards for gallantry. These are usually held on microfilm in local reference libraries. For example EDLC libraries hold the Kirkintilloch Herald (fully indexed to 1974) and the Milngavie & Bearsden Herald (partial index).

Rolls of Honour

Many Rolls of Honour were published in newspapers during and after the war, so it is worth checking local newspapers in reference libraries.

- For example, *The Evening Times* published short biographies of service personnel from the Glasgow area reported lost, missing or wounded during the war, often including a photograph. The index to this Roll of Honour is now available to search on the Mitchell Library website, the newspapers themselves are held on microfilm in Archives and Special Collections, see <http://www.glasgowfamilyhistory.org.uk/ExploreRecords/Pages/Evening-Times-Roll-of-Honour.aspx>
- The National Roll of Honour was published in 1919 in 14 volumes covering different parts of the country. It gives short biographies but is not comprehensive as a subscription charge was required to have someone included. It is available in libraries, and also on EDLC libraries via our subscription to Ancestry Library Edition (free), and on the following websites (£):
www.familyrelatives.com
www.findmypast.com
www.military-genealogy.com

- Available on microfilm at The National Archives
- These records are for soldiers of 'the ranks' who left the army by 1920 and non-commissioned officers (i.e. Sergeants and Corporals) who left by April 1922. The records of those who stayed in the army beyond this are still held by the Ministry of Defence, for information on how to request these see <http://www.veterans-uk.info/recordsmedalsbadges.htm>
- The service records for the Guards regiments (Scots, Coldstream, Grenadier, Irish or Welsh) are held at Wellington Barracks, Birdcage Walk, London SW1E 6HQ, applications should be made in writing and a fee may be applicable.
- Service records for soldiers in the Dominion forces of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa are held by their own national archives.

'Pension' Records

Although described as pension records by Ancestry, these records are actually the 'unburnt series' of the army service records. These escaped the 1940 bombing as they had been taken to the Ministry of Pensions for examination.

- The records are available on microfilm at The National Archives (Kew, London), or via Ancestry (£) www.ancestry.co.uk and in EDLC libraries via our subscription to Ancestry Library Edition (free)
- These records show soldiers who were discharged with a pension as a result of disabilities and can give details of injuries

Army Officers' Service Records

The records mainly give information on pay and pensions, but if an officer was 'missing in action' it will include statements from the men who saw him last on the battlefield.

- These are held at The National Archives and are not available online, there is an index (reference WO338)
- The officers' records were not affected by the bombing in 1940 for more information visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-army-officers-after-1913/>

Women's Service Records

Records of women who served with the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps are available to download (£) from the 'Discovery' section of The National Archives website (series WO 398). More than 7,000 women joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) between 1917 and 1920. The

WAAC became the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC) in April 1918 and was disbanded in September 1921. When the Royal Air Force (RAF) was created in 1918 a number of WAAC volunteers entered the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF).

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

British Army Nurses

First World War service records for nurses are available to download (£) from the 'Discovery' section of The National Archives website (series WO 399). <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

This covers those who served in the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (Reserve) and the Territorial Force Nursing Service during the First World War.

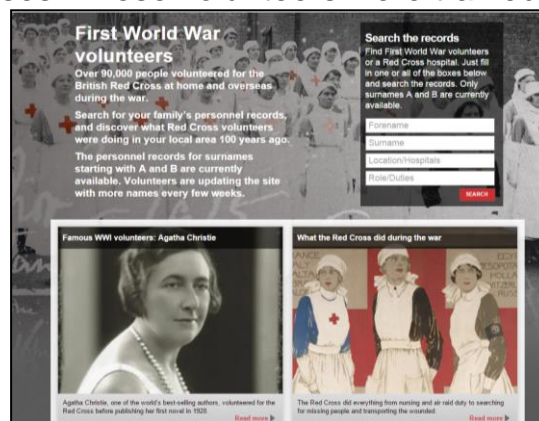
The vast majority of the records cover the First World War period only.

There are some records for nurses who served before 1914 and some for those who served after the war. There are no records, however, after 1939.

VAD Nurses

The British Red Cross hold records of First World War volunteers including Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurses. These volunteers were trained in first aid and nursing and worked in auxiliary hospitals across Britain. Some VADs were also sent abroad. The Red Cross has begun digitising its records and they can be searched online at

<http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/Who-we-are/History-and-origin/First-World-War>



War Diaries

Unit war diaries were completed daily by officers. They record battles and casualties as well as routine activities such as repairing trenches. It is much more common for officers to be mentioned than soldiers from the ranks and individuals are usually only mentioned for distinguished conduct or in lists of casualties. However, the diaries can help you gain an understanding of what your ancestor experienced. It is essential to identify the battalion before looking for unit war diaries.

- War diaries are held at The National Archives, reference WO95

- Some are available to download (£) on the 'Discovery' section of The National Archives website <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>
- Regimental museums will have copies and some have made transcripts available online For a list of regimental museums see www.armymuseums.org.uk
- Some libraries hold copies - EDLC has a copy of the 9th Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders.

Army Lists

The War Office published a monthly list of all officers, giving the date an officer was commissioned, name, rank and unit. A full set is held at The National Archives and some major city libraries.

The London Gazette

All gallantry medal awards and officers' promotions were published in the official Government journal *The London Gazette*, which is available to search online at <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/>

War Memorials

It is worth checking for your ancestor's name on the war memorial in their local area as sometimes this can also list their rank, unit and regiment. Memorials were also erected in churches, schools and businesses.

The Scottish Military Research Group run the Scottish War Memorials Research Project and volunteer researchers have posted photos and information to the project forum, see <http://www.scottishmilitaryresearch.co.uk/>

The UK Inventory of War Memorials also provides a UK wide database of war memorials and their locations see www.ukniwm.org.uk



Royal Flying Corps

The Royal Air Force (RAF) was not formed until April 1918. Prior to this the army and the navy each had its own air service, the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service respectively. These were amalgamated into the RAF. The service records of the RFC and RNAS are now available from the 'Discovery' section of the National Archives website (£) documents. <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Naval Service Records

The National Archives holds records for the following:

- Royal Navy (RN) ratings (ordinary seamen) and officers
- Royal Naval Division (RND) - made up of sailors for whom the Royal Navy had no ships and so incorporated into the army
- Royal Naval Reserve (RNR) - merchant seamen and fishermen to be called on in times of national crisis
- Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) - voluntary reserve force of men from all professions except fishermen

Some of the service records are available from the 'Discovery' section of the National Archives website (£) <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Regimental Histories

Most regiments have a published history but are unlikely to mention individual soldiers. However, they can provide detailed information on the movements of the soldier's battalion and the battles it was involved in.

- the regimental museum will hold copies of these histories; for a list of regimental museums see www.armymuseums.org.uk
- most libraries will also hold copies of the histories of local regiments

Prisoners of War (POWs)

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have digitised their POW records which can be accessed for free at <http://grandeguerre.icrc.org/>

The National Archives hold a small number of interview records for POWs records (£) find out more on their website <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-prisoners-of-war-1790-1919/>

Liddle Collection

The Liddle Collection, held in the Special Collections department of the University of Leeds, was set up to collect and preserve first-hand individual experiences of the First World War. It contains letters and diaries written by over 4,000 men and women, as well as photographs, newspapers, official reports and oral history recordings. The Collection may help to confirm some aspects of your ancestor's life. The catalogue is available to search on the website, but a visit will be needed to view any of the items listed <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections/collection/723>

Links checked and updated November 2023