

The Pre-revolutionary and Georgian era (before 1837)

One of the greatest periods of upheavals in English history, including religious and political schism; the English Civil Wars (1642-9); the execution of a King and a period of the Commonwealth and Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell; the first steps to creating an empire and tremendous developments in transport, technology and science.

Identify your immigrant ancestor by answering the key questions

When researching English Ancestors before 1750, particularly before 1700, it is vital to know as much about the immigrant ancestor as you can. *When did they arrive, where did they and their neighbours and network come from and when were they likely to be born?* Search FamilySearch and other major online sites with British records and Trees.

Establish if research been done before. As well as published pedigrees, be aware of major bibliographies that lead to published research in monographs, journals etc. Most of what is available about known early colonists is published through local state genealogical and historical societies. Read all appropriate literature, journals and be aware of current thought and research.

New discoveries will come from access to previously uncatalogued and unindexed sources such Chancery and other Equity Courts, Tax records, Manorial and Ecclesiastical Courts as they become more readily available. Make regular visits to TNA Discovery catalogue and websites/catalogue of the appropriate local English County Record Office.

Who governed the lives of our ancestors in the 17th century?

- **The Parish, Vestry and Parish Officials**
- **The Diocese and Archdeacon** – Prerogative (Archbishops), Consistory (Bishops) & Archdeaconry Church Courts
- **Quarter Sessions and Assize Courts**
- **Manorial Courts**
- **Equity Courts** – courts of chancery, exchequer, requests, star chamber, wards & liveries.
- **The Crown and Officers of State**

Heraldic Visitations

Visitations of the Heralds of the College of Arms took place every 30 years or so throughout the 16th and 17th centuries and provide a snapshot of the pedigrees of middle and upper class families that bore coats of arms. Most of these pedigrees are drawn from records at the College of Arms and the Harleian Manuscripts at the British Library.

Protestation Returns

Parish by parish lists of the names of those adult males who in 1642 swore an oath to support the Protestant Church of England (and many who did not) are held at the Parliamentary Archives. They provide the nearest thing to a census for this period.

Taxing Times

Many 17th Century Tax records at The National Archives, Kew provide name rich resources associated with local tax records.

Parish registers

Record christenings, marriages and burials from 1538 in England & Wales. Only 800 parishes have registers that survive to 1538

Wills

Most church courts which proved wills were in abeyance during the Commonwealth period. Wills that would usually be recorded in the local church courts were proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and hence the records are at TNA and readily online. Before and after this period, the probate records of local courts are found in local diocesan or county record offices.

The Victorian era (1837-1901)

Named after the monarch who presided over the British Empire during its golden age (a time when it covered almost a quarter of the globe). This period was a time of great demographic change, migration and technological advancement.

- **Census records**

Although the first national British census took place in 1801, only fragments survive. The first to be searchable almost in entirety is the 1841 census, then every 10 years after that until 1911 (due to a 100-year privacy rule in the UK). The 1921 census will be available in 2022.

In the 1841 Census, recorded ages were rounded down to the nearest 5 for those over the age of 15. Remember this when looking for your ancestors!

- **Civil registration**

From 1 July 1837 onwards in England & Wales, records of birth, marriage and death were kept by the government. Use commercial websites to search the index, then order copies of the original certificates with the reference numbers.

Although comprehensive, these records did have gaps!

- **Electoral Rolls**

At the beginning of the Victorian age, very few people could vote (wealthy and male). The franchise extended after great civil unrest. These are great records to place your ancestors between census records, but later records have many more names included.

- **Migration**

The era of mass migration began at this point. British passenger lists were nationally, centrally kept from 1890, before then – consult records at the port of arrival.

Immigration documents contain more information than that of those leaving, when you find an outgoing list, go straight to look for the arrival to complete the set.

- **Nonconformists**

The Victorian era was a golden age for nonconformists, those who did not follow the established Church of England. A law passed in 1836 caused many groups to send their registers to the Registrar General. These people were more likely to migrate, due to persecution in their local area.

- **Wills & administrations**

The Principal Probate Registry was established on 12 January 1858, keeping a copy of every will proved in England or Wales after this date, and copies of letters of administration (made when a person died without a will). This can be searched, and documents can be ordered online.

The 20th Century (1901-2000)

An era of continuity, privacy, and war.

- **Continuity:** Most of the record sources we use were established in the 19th century or earlier, and continue to be useful for 20th century research.
- **Privacy:** Some of the more recent records may be closed, or have limited access, because they may contain personal information about living people. The 'hundred-year rule' applies to some records, but for others it may be 75, 50 or less. Some records are open without restriction to anyone who wants to see them, but are not online. Even indexes may be restricted in some cases.
- **War:** Not just military records. Nationality and citizenship were not new, but they took on new importance. 'Aliens' might expect to be registered, or even interned, in wartime. Proof of identity was widely required, and there was National Registration in 1939. The Easter Rising, civil war and the creation of the Irish Free State had an enormous impact on records and record-keeping in both Ireland and the UK.

Civil registration and probate: Carried on as before in England, Wales and Scotland, but after Irish independence in 1922 Northern Ireland remained in the UK and events there were registered in its own new General Register Office, and not with the rest of Ireland as before.

Census: 1901 and 1911 censuses for England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, with extra detail in England, Wales and Scotland. The 100-year rule means that only 1901 and 1911 are open, with the 1921 census due in January 2022. In Ireland, there was no census in 1921 due to the Civil War, and the next one was in 1926. The 1931 census for England and Wales was destroyed by fire in 1940, but the 1931 Scottish census has survived. There was no census in 1941 because of the Second World War, so after 1921 the next census for England and Wales will be 1951. The 1939 Register is less detailed than a census, but is still a useful census substitute.

Military records: These include Ireland up to 1922, and most records up to the First World War are in The National Archives, later ones are still with the Ministry of Defence. Many soldiers' records were lost in the Blitz, but records of the Royal Navy, Royal Marines and Royal Air Force are complete. Prisoner of war records are available up to the Korean War. Merchant seamen

were heavily involved in both World Wars, although civilians, and it is actually easier to trace them in the 20th century than the 19th.

Other records: Too many to list, but some key ones are electoral registers, records of schools, and of some occupations, civil and criminal court records. Parish and Poor Law records were still kept, and although you can't believe everything you read in the newspapers, you should still look at them!

Resource Index

These resources are the perfect place to find more about your British ancestors, no matter which era of history they lived in.

- **GRO:** English & Welsh government website for official copies of BMD certificates.
<https://www.gro.gov.uk>
- **The National Archives help:** A collection of help and advice guides for all your British genealogical conundrums.
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/>
- **Discovery:** Catalog of over 2,500 archives across the UK.
<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>
- **E179:** The primary means of searching early records relating to lay and clerical taxation
<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/e179/>
- **Findmypast:** British and Irish specialists, home to over 9 billion records that can connect you to your family tree and help you tell the story of your past.
<https://www.findmypast.com>
- **Society of Genealogists:** The largest specialist genealogical library outside N America.
<https://www.sog.org.uk>
- **Medieval Genealogy:** Links to online copies of heraldic visitations.
<https://www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk/sources/visitations.shtml>
- **Civil Wills:** Searchable database of all England & Wales Wills & Probate after 1858.
<https://www.gov.uk/search-will-probate>
- **Parliamentary Protestation Returns:** The closest thing to a census in the pre-Revolutionary era. Unindexed but browsable by parish.
<https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/parliamentary-archives/explore-guides-to-documentary-archive-familyhistory/sources/protestations>
- **FamilySearch Catalog:** Home to many unindexed, browsable record collections – search by town and county for best results.
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/search>
- **FamilySearch Maps:** A great resource for understanding the differences between parish, civil and other boundaries.
<https://www.familysearch.org/mapp/>
- **ScotlandsPeople:** Home to Scottish census, parish and civil register images.
<https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk>

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