

History of the British armed forces

- **Army**

Derived from the early militia organized by locals, hired mercenaries and private forces run by nobility, the English army was established as a standing military force in 1660, built from the ashes of the Civil War 'New Model Army' (the first full-time, professional army in the British Isles). It was unified with the Scottish military in 1707.

The original four regiments of infantry and cavalry that existed at foundation grew to 8,900 soldiers (7,500 marching, 1,400 garrison) by 1685, increasing to 20,000 due to a rebellion in that year. During the **Franco-Dutch War** this became 37,000 by 1678 and internal politics led to further expansions to 94,000 by 1694.

From 1700, British policy in Europe was to maintain a status quo on the continent and containing any dominant power, as well as expanding and defending the Empire. At the peak of the **Napoleonic Wars** of the early 1800s the Army contained over 250,000 men.

Increasingly overstretched military resources led to the late-19th-century **Cardwell and Childers Reforms**, which gave the army a new regimental system that endures even today. The 1907 **Haldane Reforms** created the Territorial Force as the army's volunteer reserve component, combining the Volunteer Force, Militia and Yeomanry.

The First World War (1914-1918) was the most devastating in British military history, with the Army losing almost 800,000 men and more than 2 million wounded (the British Expeditionary Force, first to the continent was almost entirely destroyed and replaced by volunteers firstly, then conscripts). The Army fought in Europe, North Africa and the Far East until victory in the **Second World War** (1939-1945), after which it became much smaller, although National Service continued until 1960.

- **Navy**

The first standing Navy began in the 1500s, during the reign of Henry VIII, slowly forming into a larger service (often supported by private vessels), officially becoming the Royal Navy after the restoration of Charles II. Over the 1600s, this transformation continued from semi-amateur to fully professional with a professional officer class, growing to a size of 323 warships by 1697.

During the 1700s and 1800s, the Royal Navy remained the largest maritime force in the world, with superior organisation, hygiene and warships. They destroyed the early American fleet during the **War of Independence** but were outnumbered by the combined forces of American allies (France, Spain, Netherlands) and were unable to secure supply lines that were required for final victory. This culminated in the **Battle of the Chesapeake** (1781), where failure effectively ended North American hostilities.

The late 1700s and early 1800s saw the Navy become the first line of defence for Britain against France, leading to the **Battle of Trafalgar** in 1805. This ended Napoleon's ambition to invade England. This need for dominance required considerable size, with around 1000 ships in service by 1859.

The **First World War** saw the Royal Navy mostly fighting in the North Sea, most notably at the **Battle of Jutland** in 1916. After victory in this war, the Navy was greatly reduced, only increasing again in response to the threats of the 1930s. At the start of **World War II**, the Royal

Navy was the largest in the world, with over 1,400 vessels, playing a critical role in defending supply lines from enemy attack. By the end of this war the Navy totalled over 4,800 ships, the second largest fleet in the world.

- **Air Force**

The RAF is the first independent air force in the world, founded on 1 April 1918, through the amalgamation of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). It began as the largest air force in the world but was reduced drastically after **World War One**. The naval branch (Fleet Air Arm), was founded in 1924 but given to Navy control at the end of the 1930s.

- **Marines**

The Marines were formed on 5 April 1755, divided into 50 companies and 3 divisions with headquarters at Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth (with a 4th division based in Woolwich formed in 1805. They served in amphibious landings and as soldiers on ships all over the world, to maintain discipline in naval crew and to engage enemy crew during battle. The Marines were often looked down on and through much of history were seen to have a lower standing than the Navy.

During the **First World War**, in addition to their usual duties, Royal Marines were part of the Royal Naval Division which served on the Western Front. Post-war demobilisation reduced their number from 55,000 to 9,500.

Key record sets

- **Military lists**

Records of officers of the army officers were kept from early as 1702 (regular, colonial and militia), with the first official list in 1740. These lists contained names, their regiment, and often includes the date they received their commission and retirement details.

Both official and unofficial lists were created and continue to the modern day (Hart's List is unofficial but contains details of war service long before Government editions).

Army indexes can be useful during census years to track down missing ancestors who disappear from other records.

- **Service & pension records**

From 1760 to 1920, records of service of those who served in the Army, Navy and Marines are available online. After this point they are still held by the Ministry of Defence and must be applied for.

These can be the most comprehensive records available for early soldiers and give physical descriptions, medical histories, details of where served and military awards. Owing to a fire, around 40% of service records from the First World War survive.

- **Medal rolls/awards**

These don't often contain much biographical information but serve as a very good springboard into other records and in some cases can be all that survives. With the service number obtained, process of elimination can help to deduce which record may be an ancestor.

- **Military BMDs**

Those who were married or had children whilst serving had their own military records of birth, marriage and death (from the early 1700s onwards). Consulting these for those stationed in other locations are invaluable for finding genealogical information.

- **Muster rolls and pay lists**

Regimental musters were taken regularly from the early 1700s for accounting purposes. They, along with pay lists, were effectively the main everyday service records kept by the army of men in active service. They give enlistment dates, movements and dates of discharge.

From about 1868 musters can also include Marriage Rolls, which give details of any children and wives occupying married quarters.

- **Prisoners of war**

There is no comprehensive list of those taken prisoner, but records do exist, and can be found from 1715 onwards. These are both official and non-official sources (the Red Cross have a good collection), and many government copies of these records are available on Findmypast.

- **Military deaths**

There are a number of sources to find those who fall in battle. Service returns for those in Scotland are searchable among civil BMDs, but for the most part, these records are held separately (both from every-day civil registers and by service).

As well as looking for more traditional 'death' records, consider rolls of honor, military memorials, casualty lists, newspaper articles and wills for those who died from 1850-1986.

- **The Militia**

Militia lists and muster rolls are available from the 1500s onwards. These can be wonderful census substitutes and list all able-bodied men in an area.

- **The Gazette**

Soldiers, sailors and marines who were given military awards, promoted or taken prisoner of war were often mentioned in The Gazette (fully digitized, OCR indexed and available for free). Cross-reference these with medal rolls to discover more.

- **Regimental diaries**

These are invaluable for WW1 research, but they vary in depth. Some giving little more than statistics and map details, but many can give reports on operations, intelligence and more.

Some diaries record little more than daily losses and map references whilst others are much more descriptive, with daily reports on operations, intelligence summaries and other material. They are known to sometimes contain details of individuals, but when they don't can often still tell you more about the situations in which your ancestor fought or died.

Resource Index

- **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>
- **Discovery:** Catalog of over 2,500 archives across the UK, hosted by the National Archives. This contains a host of local military attestations, oaths and rolls.
<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>
- **The Long, Long Trail:** A very detailed WW1 resource, full of contextual information and research assistance for the period.
<https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk>
- **British Army Ancestors:** A website devoted to collecting and displaying details (and photographs) of every British soldier in WW1
<https://britisharmyancestors.co.uk>
- **The Victorian Wars Forum:** A gathering of experts in British military conflicts from 1837-1902, a great place to ask questions.
<https://www.victorianwars.com>
- **Napoleonic Wars:** Another great forum for any questions you might have relating to the period 1792-1815.
<http://www.napoleonicwarsforum.com>
- **Trafalgar Ancestors:** An ongoing project to list all of those of the British side who served in the Battle of Trafalgar along with their service history and biographical detail.
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/trafalgarancestors>
- **Army Service Numbers:** Have a service number and little else? This can use those regimental numbering sequences between 1881 and 1918 to reveal more.
<http://armyservicenumbers.blogspot.com>
- **Army Ancestry Research:** A blog that offers tips, links and articles from a British military history expert.
<http://armyancestry.blogspot.com>
- **Uniformology:** A website devoted to the study of military uniform and insignia. A great place to help identify photographs you may have of relatives.
<http://www.uniformology.com>
- **Wartime memories Project:** A website devoted to collecting memories of the First and Second World War from those who lived through it.
<https://wartimememoriesproject.com>
- **British Medals Forum:** A place to identify British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, Indian, South African and Commonwealth Medals, or learn more about their history.
<https://britishmedalforum.com>
- **Soldiers of the Queen:** A virtual museum of antique Victorian-era British military photographs and associated biographical research
<http://www.soldiersofthequeen.com>

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