Searching Vital Records
Birth, Marriage and Death certificates

Birth, marriage and death (BMD) certificates are major building blocks in tracing our family history. Information on each type of certificate is as follows:

- Birth certificate: Date and place of birth; father's name and occupation; mother's name and maiden name; name, address and relationship of person registering the birth.
- Marriage certificate: Date and place of marriage; names, marital status, ages, places of residence, and occupations of couple; names and occupations of fathers of bride and groom; names of witnesses.
- Death certificate: Date and place of death; name, age, occupation (which can include details of spouse) of deceased person; cause of death; name, address and relationship of the informant, who can be a family member.

Notes:
- *The information below is about BMD registrations for England and Wales. Different procedures apply in other parts of the British Isles.*
- *Civil registration started at different times in different parts of the British Isles. See the Annex for details.*

Using BMD Indexes and certificates in your research

Once you have your initial family tree you should use the BMD indexes to confirm and add dates and locations. Locate each person's birth, marriage (if applicable), and death (if applicable) in the indexes and add the information to your tree.

Note: Events that happened at the end of one quarter may have been registered in the next, which could even be in the following year.

You can then use the information in the indexes to find more information about known ancestors or identify new ones.

The Bradshaw Twins

My Great-Aunt Winnie always told us that she had a twin but never gave us any further information, even the gender of her sibling. Twins appear together in the birth indexes so searching for Auntie Winnie in the birth indexes also gave me the name of her twin, a sister, Mary. Searching the death indexes located Mary's death at ca. around 1 year of age.

The indexes alone give useful information about Winnie and her twin, however to find out more I needed to purchase their birth certificates and Mary's death certificate.

The Bradshaw Twins

Time of birth is given on the birth certificates for multiple births so these told me that Mary was half an hour older than Winnie as they were born at 4.00 and 4.30 pm, respectively. The information on Mary's death certificate includes her cause of death: tubercular meningitis and exhaustion.

The new GRO birth indexes can be very useful in tracing families:

The Bradshaw Twins

The birth registration entries for Mary and Winnie give their mother's maiden name as "Bryson". A search in FreeBMD for a marriage between a Bradshaw and a Bryson gives only three hits: in 1899, 1931 and 1949. As Winnie and Mary were born in 1904, the first of these is virtually certain to be correct – even though the location was unexpected: Sunderland rather than Lancashire where my Bradshaw ancestors lived!

Where to find indexes to BMD certificates:

The quickest way to search the BMD indexes is online:

- FreeBMD. https://www.freebmd.org.uk/
- GRO. https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/indexes_search.asp
    - Births and deaths only.
    - Includes additional information over FreeBMD.
    - More limited search options.
- Subscription sites: Ancestry, FindMyPast, TheGenealogist etc.

Local libraries and County Record Offices (CRO) often have the GRO indexes for their area on microfiche or microfilm.

If you don't have a computer, you may be able to access the free sites at your local library. Many libraries and CROs also have Ancestry subscriptions which you can use for free on their premises.

Searching the indexes

The best place to start looking for a birth, marriage or death is usually FreeBMD. This is a free site created by volunteers. Coverage can be checked on the site but this is largely complete from 1837 up to the 1960s.

You can search specifically for births, deaths or marriages or do a general search for "all types".

Most frequently used search terms are:

- Surname
- First name(s)
    - The way these have been entered has changed over time. Second and other names and initials have not always been included in the indexes.

- Surname of spouse (for marriages)
- Surname of mother (for births)
- First name of spouse (for marriages)
- Date range

Searches can be restricted to a county or a registration district (not both). Both of these have changed over time so you need to be aware of the correct identification for the time period of interest.

Search terms can be truncated using an * symbol. Without this the search will look for exactly what you enter.

A search (all types) for "Thomas Tulip" in Co. Durham in 1853-1856 gives:

Surname	First name(s)	Age	District	Vol	Page		
Deaths Mar 1853 (>99%)							
Tulip	Thomas		Gateshead	10a	273	Info	
Births Sep 1856 (>99%)							
Tulip	Thomas		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Marriages Dec 1856 (>99%)							
Tulip	Thomas		Sunderland	10a	531	Info	

Each entry gives the year, quarter, registration district, volume and page – the information required to order a copy of the certificate.

Note: this search covers the period before the formation of Tyne and Wear when Gateshead and Sunderland were part of County Durham.

If you click on the registration district it will give you information on the civil parishes covered by that registration district and details of how these have changed over time.

If you click on the page number, you get a list of all the registrations of that type in that registration district in that quarter:

Surname	First name(s)	Age	District	Vol	Page		
Births Sep 1856 (>99%)							
Bell	Isabella Forster		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Birll	James		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Bowmaker	Catharine Ord		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Charlton	Francis Kirton		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Cowe	Alexander		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Cowe	Alexander Dodd		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Donafee	Isabella Child		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Gibson	Jane Ann		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Hastie	William Ballentine		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Hornsby	Barbara		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	
Tulip	Thomas		Gateshead	10a	506	Info	

In the earlier marriage indexes you just get a list of people married in that quarter, it doesn't specify who married whom. Other sources can be used to identify this or the certificate can be purchased.

Surname	First name(s)	District	Vol	Page
Marriages Sep 1867 (>99%)				
DIXON	Ralph	Gateshead	10a	766
Lambert	Isabella	Gateshead	10a	766
Lee	Mary	Gateshead	10a	766
TULIP	Thomas	Gateshead	10a	766

Age at death was added to the death indexes in 1866 and mother's maiden surname to the birth indexes in 1911.

The GRO have recently created updated birth and death registration indexes which include mother's maiden surname and age at death back to July 1837. These indexes are free to search at https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/indexes_search.asp but you will need to register to use the site. The main disadvantage over the FreeBMD indexes is that you have more restrictive search criteria:

- You have to specify male or female.
- Each search can cover the maximum of a 5-year timespan.
- There no search by county.
- There is no truncation facility.

However, once you have identified a registration then you will get additional information. For example:

Name:	Mother's Maiden Surname:	Order:
TULIP, THOMAS GRO Reference: 1856 M Quarter in HEXHAM Volume 10B Page 203	AUTHUR	Certificate / PDF
TULIP, THOMAS GRO Reference: 1856 S Quarter in GATESHEAD Volume 10A Page 506	THOMPSON	Certificate / PDF

This tells us that the maiden name of the mother of Thomas Tulip born in Gateshead in 1856 was Thompson. This may allow the marriage of Thomas' parents to be identified.

As mother's maiden name can be used as a search criterion, this search can be used to identify all the children of a marriage, including any that do not appear in the census returns.

The Thomas Tulip who died in Gateshead in 1853 was 65 years old – born ca. 1788.

Name:	Age at Death (in years):	Order:
TULIP, THOMAS GRO Reference: 1853 M Quarter in GATESHEAD Volume 10A Page 273	65	Certificate / PDF

Using these two sites in combination will frequently allow you to identify the births, marriages, and deaths of your ancestors.

Buying certificates
Certificates can be ordered from:

- General Register Office (GRO) (https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/)
- County register offices

Costs (GRO) as of January 2019:

- Birth, Death: £6 (pdf) (From 16 February 2019: £7)

- Birth, Marriage, Death: (£9.25) (certified copy) (From 16 February 2019: £11)

Certificates generally take ca. 1 week to arrive from GRO.

The same charges apply when ordering certificates from county register offices.

Certificates are identified by the following information:

- Name
- Year
- Quarter
    - Q1 = Jan, Feb, Mar
    - Q2 = Apr, May, Jun
    - Q3 = Jul, Aug, Sep
    - Q4 = Oct, Now, Dec
- Registration district
- Volume
- Page

Note: The reference for a certificate at a county register office will be different to that for the same certificate at GRO.

Certificates can also be ordered via subscription websites but these are usually more expensive and take longer to arrive than when ordered directly from a register office.

Before ordering a certificate you need to search one of the indexes to find the correct reference. It may also be that the index gives you sufficient information to continue your research, without needing to buy every certificate.

Hints and Tips

- You don't need to buy the certificates for every birth, marriage and death. Be selective, at least at first.
- Allow for variant spellings, transcription errors and unexpected locations, etc.
    - Make use of truncation and flexible search options
- Names did not have fixed spellings and were often recorded phonetically by the registrar. Don't assume because the spelling is not what you expect that it is not the correct registration.
    - For example, my own surname appears variously as Meades, Meads, Maids…
- If a direct ancestor was born before the start of civil registration, look for siblings born after the start of civil registration.
- Events that happened at the end of one quarter may have been registered in the next.
- People often "reused" forenames for a later child following the death of a sibling.
- Ages recorded by individuals at a marriage or a death can be wrong – allow for errors, deliberate or otherwise.
- Always "kill off" your ancestors.
- Allow for the unexpected: people did get married after the first child was born, women did have illegitimate babies, people did run away from their lives, etc.
- People travelled more than you may expect.
    - For example, my Derbyshire born-and-bred 4x-Great-Grandfather, George Wells, married Lucy Hare from Sussex in Lewes on the 26 September 1814. The couple then settled back in Derbyshire to raise their 9 children. How did they meet? (Actually, George was in the Royal Artillery and must have met Lucy when stationed on the south coast during the Peninsular War.)
- Finally, always do a sense check. Did someone really have a baby 3 years after she died? Did a girl get married at 9-years-old?

Annex

Dates of start of civil registration across the British Isles:

	Births	Marriages	Deaths
England and Wales	1 July 1837	1 July 1837	1 July 1837
Scotland	1 January 1855	1 January 1855	1 January 1855
Ireland	1 January 1864	1 April 1845 (not Roman Catholic) 1 January 1864 (all)	1 January 1864
Jersey	1842	1842	1842
Guernsey	1840	1919	1840
Alderney†	1925	1925	1925
Sark	1925	1925	1925
Isle of Man	1849 (non-Anglican) 1878	1849 (non-Anglican) 1884	1878

† Registration is with the Guernsey authorities

Disclaimer: This document is intended as a guide to get you started with researching your family history. It is not intended to be comprehensive and Cameo Family History does not accept responsiblity for errors and omissions.