

## FIRST WORLD WAR Facts

Researching your ancestors who served in WW1 can be difficult because many records were destroyed in a fire during the WW2 raids on London and only about 30% survived in 33,000 boxes (that is, about **2** million soldiers records). These are known as the “burnt” documents and relate to soldiers who died and those who survived to be demobilised

Most service records of officers in WW1 were destroyed in the Blitz but 217,000 files of correspondence survived and are held at The National Archives, Kew – reference **WO 339** and for the Territorial Army **WO 374**

About **8** million men & women – 1,700 Infantry Battalions and 4,000 other units took part in the war.

Thousands of men volunteered to serve, but because casualties were so high, conscription was introduced in January 1916 for all men aged 18 to 41 who were single and widowers (without dependants), except those who were unfit for service or who undertook indispensable civil work. Conscription was extended to married men in May 1916

The surviving records of non-commissioned officers and other ranks who served in WW1 (up to 1920) were transferred and are now at The National Archives at Kew – reference **WO 363** and **WO 364** together with records of the army, the Royal Marines, the Royal Artillery, Colonial Troops, the Royal Air Force (RFC), the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy

[www.discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/start-here.htm](http://www.discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/start-here.htm)

From 1918 servicemen could vote in their home constituency and the **Absent Voters Lists**, dated 15 October 1918 and the 15 April 1919 is important research lists, since most men were not demobilised until 1919, search at Ancestry or Findmypast

**Attestation & Discharge Papers (or “soldiers’ documents”)**

A recruit completed an attestation form when enlisted and received discharge papers when he left. These survive in TNA reference **WO 97** for most men who were discharged to pension, they do not survive for soldiers who were killed in service. They are arranged alphabetically by surname (whatever unit a man served in)

**Army Officers records** – TNA reference **WO 25 / WO 76** from 1829 to 1913 (after 1922 records are held by the Ministry of Defence) may contain officer’s marriage, wives & children names with ages or date of births may also be given. Until 1871 officers could purchase commissions, see **WO 31**

**British Army Medal Index Cards 1914 – 1920** are the most useful records at TNA - reference **WO 372** with over 5 million record cards, with regimental numbers, all viewable online. Information about medals awarded to soldiers since 1919 is held at the MOD Medal Office, Room G36, Innsworth House, Imjin Barracks, Gloucester GL3 1HW (written application with as much information as possible and an SAE) or email **DBS-Medals@mod.uk**

**Commonwealth War Graves Commission** – is important for research, with about 1.1 million Imperial Forces who died in WW1 and about 580,000 who died during WW2 and other conflicts. All database records are free online and is very easy to use

[www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org)

**Soldiers’ wills** – look if your ancestors will is available at;

[www.gov.uk/probate-search;soldierswills](http://www.gov.uk/probate-search;soldierswills)  
[nationalarchives.ie/search/sw/home.jsp](http://nationalarchives.ie/search/sw/home.jsp)  
[scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://scotlandspeople.gov.uk)

**Servicewomen** – due to the heavy casualties of WW1 the army was persuaded to permit women to enlist (although not for combat roles). About **57,000 women** served with the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) which was formed in 1917, renamed Queen Mary's Auxiliary Army Corps in 1918 but disbanded in 1920 - **10,000 women** transferred to the Women's Royal Air Force when it was created in 1918 and their service records are in TNA – reference **AIR 80**  
Many WAAC service records were destroyed in the Blitz, but about 9,000 women's records survived and are arranged alphabetically on microfilm at TNA Kew – reference **WO 398**

### ***Records since 1920 –***

Records of officers and other ranks who served after 1920 are held by the Ministry of Defence in Glasgow.

Information from records is only released to the next of kin (or to others with the next of kin's consent). Applications must be made in writing using their application form and a possible fee of £30 ([www.gov.uk/requests-for-personal-data-and-service-records](http://www.gov.uk/requests-for-personal-data-and-service-records))  
The MOD also has an enormous archive of personnel records of about 1.9 million civilians who have worked for the military or related organisations over the last 100 years