



Early 20th century family and social history research

The 1930s, an era of defining events that would change the course of many families for decades to come. Victory in 1918 inspired a robust sense of patriotism, yet the inner war years were marked by class conflict and inequality, and living through the depression in the 1930s.

An enormous advantage is when our living relatives, particularly our most elderly, is able to recall in great detail about their recent past but the moment comes when we need to solely rely on surviving earlier documentation and for most of us family historians, that point will arrive somewhere within the first half of the 20th century.

At the start of the 20th century, we were well into the Civil Registration period when it comes to births, marriages and deaths, and records can be found on **FreeBMD**, **Ancestry.com**, **Findmypast** and if you need a certificate with all the important details on it you go to <https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content> if its needed for Scotland or Ireland, go to www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk or www.irishgenealogy.ie

However, there can be some research obstacles, online digital access to **birth** records that are less than 100 years old are not available, to protect the privacy of those who are still alive and there are similar closure periods for **deaths** for 50 years. The Scottish and Irish closure period for **marriages** is for less than 75 years so; these records are available to order in paper certificates.

One major record collection that genealogists rely on also suffers from such protection, in that 100 year closure period is the decennial **Census**, records every 10 years from 1801 (1821 in Ireland).

For the 20th century we can consult the 1901 and 1911 Census...

- **The 1921 Census** will be available online January 2022
- **The 1931 Census** was destroyed during the war in December 1942
- There wasn't a **1941 Census** and the **1951 Census** will not be available until January 2052

Fortunately, however, there is a very useful census substitute recorded for the whole of the UK in September 1939:

- **The 1939 National Register** -

Records for England & Wales are available to search on Findmypast, Ancestry and MyHeritage, also free at the LDS Church, **FamilySearch** Family History Centres...

For Scotland, access is by an application to the **National Records of Scotland** at;
<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/guides/national-register>

Electoral records –

In the First World War, the vote was extended in 1918 to all men over the age of 21, and to all women over the age of 30, with the age for both men and women equalised in 1928 to 21. It suggested that before you start your search, you explore the link at the British Library, due to the many boundary changes;

www.bl.uk/collection-guides/uk-electoral-registers

Findmypast in partnership with the British Library have the 1920/1932 records online and do not forget, the **Absent Voters List 1918** available on **Ancestry.com**

Directories and Phone Books –

Commercial trade and residential directories make for another useful substitute and can be consulted in libraries and record office archives across the UK, and another useful resource for Britain and Ireland is the **Ancestry.com** [‘British Phone Books 1880–1984’](#) sourced from the BT Archives in London...

Military ancestors –

The first half of the 20th century was dominated by the absolute carnage of the two world wars with the First World War recently commemorated;

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/first-world-war/centenary-digitised-records

For the Second World War, many veterans are still around and records have yet to be readily available online, they must be ordered from **Veterans UK** at;

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/veterans-uk

British Army Casualty Lists 1939 – 1945

Was your British ancestor among the thousands of nurses, officers, and other ranks listed as casualties, prisoners of war, or missing during the Second World War;

Findmypast in partnership with The National Archives at Kew, has an extensive list to research your ancestors...

The British in India –

The first half of the 20th century saw the beginning of the end of the British Empire culminating with the loss of India after the Second World War. To research families in British India Society, visit: **<https://fibis.org>**

Ireland at war –

Ireland was never a comfortable member of the United Kingdom since its forced integration in 1801 until it became an independent republic from 1949...

Ireland's Military Archives www.militaryarchives.ie offers free access to records of those who served during the period from the Easter Rising (1916) and in the Civil War (1922 – 1923)

Newspapers –

One massively important resource from the first half of the 20th century is that of the mass media. Since 1869, through legal deposit, publishers of British and Irish newspapers must send a copy to the British Library and this is great for social history research <https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/newspapers>

Also, the British Newspaper Archive free to search online at; <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>

The London Gazette the '*official record journal of the Crown*' is free to search and view events such as World War One & Two at; <https://www.thegazette.co.uk>

Finally, the print era, was joined by the embryonic broadcast media, with newsreels an important resource to watch eagerly in cinemas across the county during both world wars.

The British Pathe Archive offers many free-to-view films, including the **Reuters** film collection dating back to 1910 at; <https://www.britishpathe.com> and there are many historic collections from all the newsreel providers, free at: <https://www.youtube.com>