

EVERYONE HAS ROOTS

No. 6 – Records created after death

Records relating to your ancestor do not cease at death. In fact, many of the records created after decease provide cast iron evidence of relationships. Ignoring these records could cause you to research the wrong family or to mix up generations.

Gravestones and memorials

Gravestones and their inscriptions serve as a memorial to the dead. Gravestones normally show the deceased's date of death and their age but in some instances may also show the birth date of the deceased or at least the year of birth. There is also normally some sort of inscription recorded such as a verse of scripture or a proverb which had special meaning to the deceased or next of kin.

Many parishes and cemeteries have a plan showing the location of the graves so you can establish whereabouts your ancestor was buried even if there is no gravestone or if it has been removed or deteriorated because of weathering.

Most people were buried in a churchyard until c1853 after which they began to be buried in cemeteries because the church yards became "full". Some parishes along with municipal authorities had to open cemeteries because the church graveyard could not accommodate any other burials. It was around this time that nonconformist chapels also began to open their own burial grounds which may still be in use today.

The position of burial in a churchyard was often an indication of the social status of the deceased. On the north side of the burial grounds and in the shadow of the church away from the warmth of the sun, were buried paupers, the unbaptized, the excommunicated, and those who had committed suicide. Very often there is no gravestone.

It is not uncommon to find a husband and wife buried together, sometimes with a child so several generations may be discovered which can help you to determine family relationships. Families also tended to be buried in adjacent or nearby graves thus, separate families (although having the same surname and often identical Christian names), can be differentiated by the gravestones, whereas in the church burial register there is no indication of family identity. Different branches of the same family can similarly be distinguished. This is especially helpful if a married daughter is buried in the same family location because her married name could be recorded on the gravestone.

Gravestones as sources of genealogical data have deteriorated quickly in the past three decades. The weather has been aided by both pollution and vandalism in the destruction of irreplaceable data. Family History Societies and some individuals have recorded details of the inscriptions before they deteriorate further (and are still doing so) which are either published in book form or available on websites for reference. Many churches also hold the complementary copy given to them once the transcriptions had been completed.

Many poor/working class people did not mark the graves because the family could not afford the cost of even a simple gravestone. If the deceased was from a poor family then it is likely

that the grave was initially or temporarily marked with a wooden cross, or similar, which means the grave would now be unmarked as the wood rotted.

The footstones and curb stones that surround a grave can often retain information which has been lost from the headstone. Tombstone inscriptions can be lost for various reasons, including erosion. Erosion is usually less if the stone has been kept vertical or inclined slightly forward and facing away from the prevailing weather.

Tombstones are also misused. Some may be used for mending barns and churchyard walls, laying paving and the practices of churchyard clearance and stacking headstones against the wall mean that the value of the churchyard plan is lost.

You may find the cemetery in which your ancestor was interred is in an overgrown state especially if the cemetery is no longer in use making it difficult to read the grave inscription. Removing ivy from a grave may further damage the surface and the inscription.

You may also have to look at various cemeteries in the area, especially if the person died in a city, in order to find your ancestor's resting place. Virtually all cemeteries keep grave registers which, when your ancestor's grave is located, will usually give the name of the undertaker and possibly even the stonemason responsible for producing the gravestone.

Many people consider that cremation is very much a 20th century innovation however, it became legal in 1885 with the first crematorium at Brookwood cemetery, Woking. Golders Green was the first crematorium in London, opened in 1902. Today most crematoriums operate at about 2,000 cremations per year and maintain their own registers many of which are available to search on Deceased Online for which a subscription is needed to see an often-redacted record.

If your ancestor was killed or died of wounds during the First or Second World War, it is worth checking the local war memorial and role of honour to see if their name is listed. Many soldiers who were killed in action are buried in military cemeteries in the country in which they lost their lives. Those graves are cared for by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, whose website allows a search for your ancestors.

In some cases, gravestones act as memorials only, as the person named on the gravestone was not buried there.

Finding grave locations is becoming increasingly easier with the advent of websites such as Find A Grave and Billion Graves. Both of these sites are free to search and often include grave location plans and, in many cases, actual photographs of the graves. Both sites are community based so anyone can contribute.

The sites offer worldwide coverage but on both web sites there are an increasing number of English and Welsh cemeteries and churchyards included. The following example shows my grandmother's details found on the Find A Grave database.

Francis M SHOULER

BIRTH unknown
DEATH Jan 1988
Northamptonshire, England
BURIAL [Newton Road Cemetery](#)
Rushden, East Northamptonshire Borough, Northamptonshire, England
PLOT F1318
MEMORIAL ID 193921049 - [View Source](#)

The information found on a gravestone or memorial supplements the standard sources of genealogical information, but sometimes they represent the only information that can be found pertaining to the birth and death of an ancestor. Using these records requires specific knowledge of their content, availability and location.



If you are really lucky you may find a family genealogy incorporated onto a gravestone. I have only ever seen one grave with such information but I doubt it is unique.



Some burial grounds are no longer in existence and the records can be found in series RG37 held at the National Archives covering the period 1923 – 2007. Catalogued by location, site title and years covered by inscription on the tombs and gravestones; the main date corresponds to when the graves were removed. Some of the records include details of reinternment. 175,000 records from 200 cemeteries on Deceased Online. For example, piece RG37/180 relates to Bedford Holy Trinity with graves from 1841-1922.

Using the cemetery grave registers can lead you to the records of the undertakers. Many undertaker records have been deposited in local record offices. Many independent undertakers are happy to allow you to search their records and one or two of the consortiums are beginning to build their own archive of records. Once you establish who the undertaker was, try and find out if they still operate and where their records are. I would stress that these are private records and it is at their discretion whether they allow you access.

Once you locate a grave then you are going to want to record the information. It is important to write down what you see as well as taking a photograph for your records. Because of condition there may be some problems in reading all of the memorial.

It is best not to photograph in direct sunlight as certain stones reflect light. This can further be affected if using a flash. It is difficult to photograph a kerbstone so better to transcribe what is seen and just take a generic photograph of the grave. Always look at the back of the gravestone as there may be information about the stonemason and in some cases additional wording may also exist to aid identification when walking around a cemetery. In some instances, the inscription does not face the grave so the front of the headstone may appear blank.

Don't rely on being able to read the inscription from the photograph you have taken. Always transcribe whilst at the grave itself rather than trying to do it remotely.

If the inscription is not clear fill in the inscription with a non-destructive material such as talcum powder or white chalk, so that it stands out well. On some stones you can also try wetting with water but this is not always successful.

Never ignore wills

Wills are invaluable for providing concrete evidence of family connections and sometimes identifying ancestors you did not know existed. Your ancestors didn't have to be wealthy to leave wills. They are an underused source of information so always look for a will.

Ignore them at your peril – why? Because they provide:

Cast iron evidence of family relationships

Indication of wealth of testator

May provide burial information

Assists with building a contemporary history of the family.

Irrespective of your ancestors status, it is essential to always look to see if they left a will. You will also find that in many families it was a "tradition" and the leaving of wills often became generational.

Wills and associated probate records may mention emigrant relatives. Probates of persons dying overseas who owned property in England should have been proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (pre-1858) or through the Principal Probate Registry (post 1857).

Virtually every will provides the following family history information:

- Name of the testator
- Address at the time the will was produced
- Occupation of testator
- Date will made – testator must have been alive
- Significant pre-amble
- Burial instructions
- Names & relationships of beneficiaries, trustees etc.
- Property (real and personal as bequeathed)
- Attached inventories or codicils
- Names of executors, trustees, witnesses.

Modern Wills post 1858

All wills proved in England and Wales since 11 January 1858 can be found using the National Probate Calendars on Ancestry up to 1995 with a small gap between 1967 and 1972. Copies of those wills can be ordered by using <https://www.gov.uk/search-will-probate>. The will calendars also provide useful information in their own right.

HILL Thomas.

Personal Estate £374 16s. 8d.

13 May. The Will of Thomas Hill late of Low Spennymoor in the Parish of Ferryhill in the County of Durham Grocer who died 30 November 1882 at Low Spennymoor was proved at Durham by Robert Mimmo Junkepeer and Richard Dobson Butcher both of Low Spennymoor the Executors according to the Tenor.

Name of testator, date of probate, address and occupation, probate registry where the will was proved, death date and place, executors and the value of the estate.

Wills were usually handwritten up to the 1920s after which the majority are typed.

Those in the lower social classes had possessions they wanted to bequeath. Nearly 60% of proved wills were made by ordinary working-class people.

Some people died intestate i.e. without leaving a will but many entries for Administrations exist in the calendars. In such cases Letters of Administration (admons) were granted to a surviving spouse or next of kin.

Intestate estates are distributed in accordance with fixed rules and under court supervision. Precedence of who can administer an estate laid down by statute:

Spouse
Children
Parent
Brother or sister
Uncle or aunt
Anyone at the discretion of the court.

Pre-1858 wills

Ecclesiastical courts were responsible for the proving of a will prior to 1858 and most of those records are available in local archives. Some pre-1858 wills and probate records have been digitised and indexed for online access particularly the Prerogative Court wills.

The court used to prove a will was usually determined by the location of the land or property of the deceased.

Researching a pre-1858 will requires a strategy because of the vast number of church courts able to administer probate.

Try searching the indexes of Province courts first, namely the PCC (Prerogative Court of Canterbury). These wills can be located using ancestry.com and include over 1,000,000 wills proved between 1383 and 1858.

Then try the PCY (Prerogative Court of York) if your ancestor died in the north of England. There are indexes from 1389-1858 at the National Archives, online at Findmypast and name indexes with original wills at the Borthwick Institute in York.

If these searches are negative then try locally held wills. These are usually found in the Diocesan Record Office (often the same as County Record Office). Use “Phillimore Atlas & Index of Parish Registers” maps to locate the ecclesiastical court. Most repositories have a copy on open shelves. A colour coded key gives details of the courts and shows the extent of the various jurisdictions in any one county. The maps are also accessible using this link; <https://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=8830s>

Most Diocesan Record Offices will hold county wide indexes to the wills in their custody. These may be organised by the Ecclesiastical Court in which they were proved or alphabetically for the total holding. Make sure that you are in the correct place to look for the wills. Some locally held wills are also available online.

Death duty registers

The Death Duty registers 1796 – 1903 are among the most important genealogical records in England and Wales but are overlooked and thus underused. Estate duty (tax) had to be paid on all bequests and succession to property over a certain value. The amount levied varied over time and according to the relationship of the beneficiary to the deceased. Very

small estates, and those who died serving their country in the military or navy were excluded from paying the required duty.

The Estate duty indexes and registers provide a solution to the complexities of finding a pre-1858 will but duty continued to be paid thereafter. The registers could remain “active” and be annotated for many years, with such important details as listing date of death of the spouse, marriage and death dates of beneficiaries, births of children or grandchildren born after the duty was paid, and have cross references to other entries.

The registers are held at the National Archives at Kew and supplement information found in the original will or administration. They show:

Name, address and last occupation of the deceased

Date of death

Place and date of probate

Names of heirs and their relationship to the deceased, even if not mentioned in the will

Residence or death of heirs (rarely)

Names, addresses and occupations of the executors

Details of estates and related matters

Amount of the duty paid

Undertakers records

Funeral records can be a valuable source of information to help with identifying where an individual is buried. Burials sometimes took place away from where a person resided.

Most funeral directors and undertakers will, from around the mid-1800s, have kept intricate records of the funerals at which they officiated. These are normally in the form of register books which detail such items as name, date of death and address of the deceased, what type of funeral service they had, where they were interred, who paid the funeral costs, the grave number, stonemasons instructions etc. They can be a valuable resource in identifying next of kin and also grave locations.

Some records are held by county record offices but many funeral directors will allow access to their records even if they have not been deposited with the local archives. Where funeral directors are now part of a consortium such you may find that the organisation has a central or regional “archive” where the independent undertakers who are now part of such organisations have deposited their records. You need to make enquires locally and refer to the grave or cemetery registers which usually name the funeral director who officiated.

Because of the value of funerals in the Victorian period particularly, you may also find receipts, funeral mementos and service programmes and items of mourning wear within a family archive.

WHERE NOW?

Now that you have got yourselves organised you can progress further and begin the research. The following guides are available to help you gain an understanding of how to research and what you can discover about your ancestors.

EVERYONE HAS ROOTS (a series of helpful research guides)

No. 1 It starts with you

No. 2 Ready to begin your research

No. 3 Birth, marriage & death certificates

No. 4 Grow your tree with census returns

No. 5 Baptism, marriage & burial registers

No. 6 Records created after death

No. 7 Discovering more about your ancestors

No. 8 The military connection

No. 9 Tracing your ancestors when they moved

No. 10 Proving your research is correct