



How To Research Those Who Served In World War One

Research is complex due to the variety of records that exist. To start your research, you need to know as much information as possible. If you can, find out:

- Full Name
- Place of Birth
- Age/ Date of Birth
- Regiment/ Unit/ Ship
- Approximate dates of service
- Service Number
- Any Medal Entitlement
- Any Information about Campaigns served in

Photographs are also a helpful source, as well as discharge certificates, the 1901 census (available online in our searchrooms), medals (look for the regiment and number stamped on the rim), and local newspapers.

Local newspapers carried stories of local men when they enlisted, were wounded and/ or killed, and sometimes printed letters from the soldiers. In some cases, the paper may still be in print and may hold its own archive. If not, try the local Record Office, or contact the British Library Newspaper Library, 96 Euston Road, London, NW1 2DB.

Once you have the background information, you can begin the main body of the research.

British Army

Army Service Records. They detail a soldier's military career – enlistment and discharge, postings, health and conduct. The surviving service records (many were destroyed by bombing in the Second World War) for those soldiers whose service ended in or before 1920 (other ranks) and 1922 (officers) are available on microfilm at The National Archives at Kew (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk). Service records of soldiers are currently available on www.ancestry.co.uk –viewable in our searchrooms. Information about applying for service records for soldiers who served after 1920 (other ranks) and 1922 (officers) can be found at www.gov.uk/government/collections/requests-for-personal-data-and-service-records.

Medal Records. These show a soldier's entitlement to the campaign medals all men who served overseas qualified for. The index cards were created for each man, and are available online, from www.nationalarchives.gov.uk and www.ancestry.co.uk. The medal rolls contain information on entitlement to medals and the references for the issuing of them.

War Diaries. All units recorded their activities in operational records called War Diaries. Most have survived, and are available at The National Archives. Men of the other ranks are rarely mentioned, but officers and senior NCOs are named. Northumberland Archives hold a microfilm copy of the Northumberland Fusiliers diary.

Regimental Histories. These were published by each regiment after the First World War, and contain detail of the campaigns and information on individuals. They are housed at the Imperial War Museum (www.iwm.org.uk). Some copies of the Histories are available within the Local Studies collection at Woodhorn.

1918 Electoral Rolls (Absent Voters List). For the General Election in 1918, all those absent from their place of residence were listed on the Absent Voters Lists. Usually recorded were the regiment, number and rank, and home address. Northumberland Archives holds the 1918 Absent Voters Lists for the divisions of Berwick-upon-Tweed, Hexham, and Wansbeck. Other examples can be found through The National Archives Discovery Catalogue (<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>).

The London Gazette. The London Gazette recorded the promotions and appointment of officers, and the gallantry and special awards, including mentions in despatches. This can be searched online at Gazettes Online (www.gazettes-online.co.uk).

The Army List. The promotions and appointments of every officer in World War One were recorded in the monthly list. They also give dates of commission and promotion, and unit served with. The quarterly editions only list regular officers, but contain mini-biographies. The library at The National Archives holds a full set, as does the National Army Museum, London (www.nam.ac.uk).

Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Their website enables you to search, for free, for details of a casualty, and provides information such as rank, regiment, number, place of burial/memorial, names of parents or wife and their address (www.cwgc.org).

Soldiers Died In The Great War. This was published in 1919 in 80 parts, plus a separate volume for officers (Officers Died...). Soldiers Died provides the full military details of the soldier, and the place names of his birth place and where he enlisted. Officers Died only contains very basic military detail. These are now available on CD-ROM, and in book format, although they are very expensive to purchase. Familyrelatives (www.familyrelatives.com) offers the complete set through a search engine.

Pension Records. These can be found on Ancestry, but are not pension records at all. They are actually service records for men who were entitled to a pension, and contain medical histories and casualty forms for active and military service. Pension records can be found online at on www.ancestry.co.uk

National Roll of the Great War. This was published in the 1920s, a series of rolls of service by town, listing local men who had served or died. Individuals had to pay to be included, so not everyone is shown. The project was discontinued after a few volumes but they are still worth a look and can be found online at a number of sites.

Trench Maps. Once you know the regiment your ancestor was in, and you know where they were fighting, trench maps can help to pin point an exact trench where they fought.

Royal Navy

The Royal Navy resources available depend upon whether the ancestor was a commissioned sea officer (ensign, lieutenant or upwards), a warrant officer (boatswain, carpenter, surgeon etc), or a rating (ordinary seaman).

If your ancestor was a rating, the following records may prove of use:

- **Continuous Service Records 1852-1923**

These records should show dates of enlistment and discharge, service number, ships served on with dates, promotions, disciplinary records, and some personal details.

- **Ships Pay Lists & Musters**

The detail will obviously include rate of pay, but may also include age and place of birth. These records should be arranged by ship.

If your ancestor was an officer. The following records should be used:

- **The Navy List**

Similar to The Army List, the information regarding Navy officers was omitted. Instead, these can be found in the Confidential *Navy List* published each year in January, April, July, and October.

- **Officers Service Records**

- **Commission and Warrant Books**

- **Passing Certificates**

After undergoing an examination the successful applicant would receive a certificate listing age, place of birth, and the names of ships served on. The applicant had to be at least twenty years old, and have served three years at sea.

- **Appointments and Commissions**

- **Pension and Half-Pay Records**

These should give the age and date of death of the officer.

The Fleet Air Arm Museum, Yeovilton (www.fleetairarm.com), hold the majority of records for those who enlisted before in the Royal Naval Air Service 1925.

Operational records for ships involved in the First World War should also be researched, as should medal rolls. These exist for both officers and ratings for gallantry and campaign medals.

All records for men who were in the Merchant Navy in World War One have been destroyed, and information about your ancestor will only be found if he continued to serve after 1918.

Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force

Many people who served in World War One will have records in both the RAF and RFC papers, as the RAF was formed 1st April 1918 by the amalgamation of the Royal Flying Corps (Army) and the Royal Naval Air Service.

Records of service can be established for those who served before 1923. Again, many were destroyed in World War Two, but some still exist in The National Archives, and give biographical details, service number, next-of-kin, discharge, and details of service.

Casualty Cards. They are held by the Royal Air Force Museum (www.rafmuseum.org.uk), and comprise four sets of cards that cover medical history, next-of-kin details, postings and transfers, and death or wounding of RFC and RAF officers and aircrew from World War One.

Form 540s (Operations Record Books). Held at The National Archives, they are basically a daily diary of events, similar to the War Diaries.

Musters Roll. This provides a snapshot of the RAF, compiled on 1st April 1918. It lists every member of the new Royal Air Force, listing name, rank and trade in the Royal Flying Corps or Royal Naval Air Service, rank and trade in the new RAF, date of enlistment, date of last promotion, length of duration of the enlistment, and rate of pay. Copies are held at The National Archives and the RAF Museum.

Air Force Lists. Produced from February 1918 on a monthly basis, they list officers and senior Warrant Officers. They list all officers, their general trade (technical officers etc), rank, and date of last promotion.

The National Archives website enables online access to their collection of public records that have been digitised. These include family history sources.

The documents are topic-based, and can be searched or browsed. They are also helpfully divided into 'Family History' and 'Other Records'.

Records available that reference the First World War include:

- World War One Campaign Medals
- Selected First World War & Army of Occupation War Diaries
- World War One Prisoner of War Interviews
- World War One Women's (later Queen Mary's) Army Auxiliary Corps
- World War One Women's Royal Air Force
- World War One Women's Royal Naval Service
- Royal Naval Division
- Royal Naval Seamen
- Royal Naval Officers' Service Records
- The Victoria Cross Registers
- Cabinet Papers
- Digital Microfilm
- Military & Defence

The website is www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Northumberland Archives is committed to providing a quality service to all its users and therefore this information is also available in Large Print and via the Internet. The Internet address is

www.northumberlandarchives.com

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