

You've read the notes on Getting Started and have started to fill in your Pedigree Chart, now to start filling in the gaps.

The two most common records you're going to use to start researching are Birth, Marriage and Death registrations, and Census Records. BMD Registrations go back as far as 1837 and Census records to 1841. There are some more in-depth guides to these records in the more experienced section of our Research Resources, but for now we will keep it very simple.

Copies of BMD Certificates are available, at a cost, more or less right up until the present day, but Census Records are closed for a hundred years, the latest one we can use is for 1911. Family History researchers use the information contained in both these sources, in conjunction with one another, picking up clues as they gather evidence

Initially you are going to have to use BMD certificates to get back to 1911. So let's start with your own birth certificate, this will give the name of both your parents and your mother's maiden name. It should now be relatively straight forward to search for your parents' marriage certificate. A marriage certificate should give both the groom's and bride's fathers' names and occupations. Now you can look for their birth certificates and keep repeating this process until you are back before 1911.

Certificates cost £10.00 from local Register Offices and £9.25 from the General Register Office, so it pays to have done some preliminary research before you start buying anything. Check with all your relatives to see if any of them have kept important documents like these and ask if you can copy them.

There are a couple of free websites where you can search through the BMD Indexes:

[UKBMD.org.uk](http://UKBMD.org.uk) Prize winning site which covers indexes from local register offices, in Cheshire, Cumbria, Lancashire, North Wales, Staffordshire, West Midlands, Wiltshire, Yorkshire, and Bath. This is your **number one choice** if your area is covered, but it is still a work in progress. Click on Local BMD and then the county of choice. On the drop-down menus at the top of the page there is a link to check the **coverage** of the various events. It's important to check these, since it isn't much use looking for a death, for example, if the group of volunteers working in your area of interest haven't got up to that date yet. There are a number of reasons for choosing to buy from local register offices and to search using UKBMD. These are set out in our more detailed guide to Birth Marriage and Death Certificates.

[FreeBMD.org](http://FreeBMD.org) which covers the national General Register Office (GRO) indexes. Their indexes are more or less complete from 1837-1952. Recommended as **second choice** and to use for areas not covered by UKBMD. A few years are missing so please read the second paragraph on the home page: '**PLEASE NOTE: WE HAVE NOT YET TRANSCRIBED THE WHOLE INDEX.** A breakdown by event and year can be viewed here'. Click on the word 'here'

The **full** GRO indexes are available on both [fimdmypast.co.uk](http://fimdmypast.co.uk) and [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk). These sites have more or less complete coverage but are pay sites, so make use of the free sites first.

### **Census Returns:**

Are probably the most used records for researching your family history. They are one of the richest sources of clues to help progress your research and to add colour to your ancestors' lives. The census was taken every ten years from 1801, but the first one likely to shed light on your research is the 1841, before this the returns were more or less a simple headcount and once the information had been extracted the records were mostly destroyed. There is almost complete survival of records from 1841-1911.

The 1841 Census contains less information than those which followed, for instance it does not show the relationship between the occupants to the head of the household, exact ages or place of birth, but it is still useful for pinning down your family in a particular area. The question about where born can be particularly frustrating for people living near county boundaries, because the question on the form was a simple Yes or No as to whether they were born in or out of the county. From 1851-1901 the information is broadly similar, the main difference being that early censuses didn't always give an exact address, just a reference to a township, hamlet or small village. Later on, full street and house numbers start to appear.

From 1851-1901 you can expect to find:

- Whole family groups together
- The relationship to the head of the household for anyone in that property
- Marital status
- The place they lived
- Everyone's ages – more or less exact (but our ancestors did tell fibs)
- People's Occupations
- Where they were born

The 1911 Census is very different from those which went before. For the first time you can see the actual sheet completed by your ancestor with their signature. It was the first where couples were asked how long they had been married, how many children in total had been born alive and how many had died. You can also obtain more detailed information about their occupations – it might even say who they worked for. As a bonus for people trying to find out where their ancestors came from in Ireland, for the first time it does ask for their birthplace and not simply 'Ireland'.

If you're lucky it can be quite easy to get back to an ancestor born around 1800 taken from, their birthplace in the 1851 census, but life often complicates this. People may not have married, have been adopted, illegitimate, living under an alias or have emigrated. Then things get complicated and you will probably have to seek help.

### **Some Pitfalls when using Census Returns.**

**Transcription Errors** - Even with the best will in the world, everything is open to human error and it can be extraordinarily difficult sometimes to read some names and places on the enumerators' census sheets; even if you are familiar with local names and places. How much more difficult is it then for transcribers outside these shores when they also have targets to meet. You must start to think laterally and use soundex (sound alike) or wildcard search techniques. Despite trying everything including using siblings or spouses' forenames, some people refuse to be found.

**Age Differences** - Remember that your ancestors were human and could lie about their age, especially when one member of a couple was much older than the other, and they had to continue this subterfuge on census night. Sometimes people who were born before civil registration had only a vague idea about when they were born or how old they were. Remember that the information was only as good as the person giving it to the census enumerator, and that on the 1841 census, the enumerator could round the age down by as much as 4 years.

**Birth Places** - You might find that your ancestor gave three separate places on separate census returns. They might give the name of the first place they remember living, the nearest big town, the name of the actual village or any name they thought the enumerator might be familiar with.