



North West Kent Family History Society

(N W Kent and ancient Kent parishes now S E London plus incorporating TWFHS)

How to start tracing your World War 1 Ancestors

Millions of men served in the army, navy and new air force during the First World War. Record keeping was far from perfect and many records have been destroyed, so you need to gather as much information as possible to help pick out your relative from all the others.

Where to start: what you need to know and what do you know already?

You will probably know some of this from family knowledge or your own research but other details will only come to light as you search further.

- **Full name:** from family knowledge or birth, baptism, marriage and death certificates. But did he use a shortened version or a middle name when he joined up?
- **Date and place of birth, and next of kin** (usually father, mother or wife)
- **Area where he was living** and probably joined up from. Many – but not all – men joined local regiments
- **Branch of the services:** did he serve in the army, Royal Navy, (including the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service as the Royal Air force was not formed till 1918) or merchant navy.
- **Regiment and regimental/service number:** this might be on official documents or the individual's medals kept by the family. If your relative married or had a child during the war, the rank, regiment and number may be on his marriage or child's birth certificate.
- **Rank:** most men who served would have been "other ranks", mainly holding the rank of private. Some became non-commissioned officers. Some ranks are unique to particular units and can be a clue for further research. If your relative was a commissioned officer, service records were normally held separately.
- **What did he do; where did he serve?** Memories and family stories can get confused and distorted over time and as they are passed down generations – but they often contain clues for further research.
- **Memorabilia:** do you have any photographs, documents, medals, cap badges, artefacts etc? Many soldiers kept small items or their discharge papers. Or does a cousin have something? Such items may have gone to the eldest son or the daughter who cared for him in old age rather than your line.

Medal Index Cards

Campaign medals were issued to men who served in particular theatres of war within specified dates. Most men (except those who served only in the UK) were entitled to the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, so the medal cards are almost an index of those who served and are available at www.ancestry.co.uk (pay site but free in most local libraries). Many cards use initials rather than full name and there are many with similar names. But the card will give regiment or corps and number, which medals were awarded and sometimes a little additional information about the issue of the medals.

Gallantry medals are awarded for a specific heroic action. Citations (rarely giving details of the exact action) should appear in The London Gazette www.london-gazette.co.uk and there are also separate medal cards.

Service Records

Unfortunately many service records were destroyed during the Second World War. Those that survived, "the burnt records", are at the National Archives and can be viewed at www.ancestry.co.uk. The type of surviving documents varies from soldier to soldier but may include details of enlistment, the regiments(s) he served with and where, and next-of-kin. (Records for soldiers who served after WW1 are still with Ministry of Defence.)

Service records for soldiers and non-commissioned officers in the Household Cavalry and Guards regiments survive: the records of the Household Cavalry (including the Life Guards, Royal Horse Guards and the Household Battalion) are at The National Archives; contact the relevant regimental HQ in London for Grenadier, Coldstream, Scots, Irish and Welsh Guards.

Local newspapers or a particular organisation's journal (such as a church or company magazine) often carried names of men who had joined up or been killed or injured.

Officers' records were kept separately. Check out the following for more information www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-person/officerbritisharmyafter1913.htm

Was your ancestor invalidated out?

Many men survived injuries or disease but were unfit for further service. A Silver War Badge was issued to officers and men from 1916 who had been discharged due to their injuries.

Pension Records

Men disabled by their injuries may have claimed a pension. Pension records which include some service records are available on www.ancestry.co.uk

If your ancestor died

Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)

All soldiers who died abroad should either have a CWGC grave or be remembered on an official memorial if they have no known grave. The CWGC's database can be searched for free at www.cwgc.org (again many records are by initials). It will show details of the soldier's regiment, place of death and burial and may also show details of the next of kin. Soldiers who died in the UK or after discharge may have either a war grave or be in a family grave.

War Graves Photographic project www.twgpp.org

An ongoing project which aims to photograph every individual war grave and memorial. If your ancestor's grave has been photographed you can obtain a copy for a small cost.

Soldiers Wills

Men on active service were encouraged to leave a Will and over 200,000 Wills of soldiers who died while serving with the British forces can be downloaded from www.gov.uk/probate-search for a fee. Some may only be a couple of lines saying "I leave everything to my wife".

Women

Some women enlisted in the armed forces, carrying out support roles. Surviving records of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), Women's Auxiliary Air force (WAAF) and the Woman's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) are at the National Archives as are the records of Queen Alexandra Imperial Nursing Service (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk). The records of the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) are held by the British Red Cross Museum and Archive.

Many other women did war work (e.g. munitions) or took over men's job – there is a small chance that company records may have survived. Try the relevant local library to start with.

Where to find out more

General information - many websites give a great deal of general information about the war, such as the Imperial War Museum, the National Archives, www.1914-1918.net and the BBC.

Further research – the National Archives website has a wide range of research guides. Commercial websites e.g. www.ancestry.co.uk; www.findmypast.co.uk have much more data. A more detailed guide to many useful websites can be found on the NWKFHS website, www.nwkhfs.org.uk