

TRACING YOUR FIRST WORLD WAR ANCESTORS

A GUIDE FOR FAMILY HISTORIANS

SIMON FOWLER



TRACING YOUR FIRST WORLD WAR ANCESTORS

FAMILY HISTORY FROM PEN & SWORD

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A Guide for Family Historians

Simon Fowler



Pen & Sword
FAMILY HISTORY

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by
PEN & SWORD FAMILY HISTORY

an imprint of
Pen & Sword Books Ltd
47 Church Street
Barnsley
South Yorkshire
S70 2AS

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ISBN 978 1 78159 037 9

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
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Typeset in Palatino and Optima

Printed and bound in England by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Pen & Sword Books Ltd incorporates the Imprints of Pen & Sword Aviation, Pen
& Sword Family History, Pen & Sword Maritime, Pen & Sword Military, Pen &
Sword Discovery, Wharncliffe Local History, Wharncliffe True Crime,
Wharncliffe Transport, Pen & Sword Select, Pen & Sword Military Classics, Leo
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PREFACE

I started this book with the best of intentions. It was going to be a straightforward guide to researching men and women who served in whatever capacity during the First World War. I would discuss the records and show readers how to get the best from these resources and the related indexes. But somewhere along the line some of the people who were there found their way into the text. Initially I only included my family as examples, partly because I had used them before, but I soon realised three men and one woman could not represent the experiences of millions. So I added in several dozen or so men and women from each of the services and the various theatres of war. Their choice was more or less random. Some I searched for, like Florence Green née Paterson, who when she died in February 2012 had achieved a certain notoriety as the last known person to have served in the war, while others just emerged during the research, like Company Sergeant Major Belo Akure, Nigerian Regiment.

I have tried to avoid the famous and the infamous, although there are three Victoria Cross winners. And I have tried to thread their stories – or what I could discover of them – into the narrative as examples of what you should be able to do with your own forebears.

Of course, each person had their own experience of the war. Some men spent months at the front, while others never left Britain let alone met a German. Some soldiers were like Sergeant James Byars, Machine Gun Corps, a pre-war regular who served in Gallipoli, Palestine and the Western Front before being demobbed in 1919 not having received, his service record suggests, a single scratch during his time in the forces. While others like Philip Forster of the Norfolk Regiment died of wounds within weeks of the outbreak of war (and to add insult to injury the authorities spelt his name wrong on his gravestone), or Staff Nurse Phyllis Pearce who was based hundreds of miles from the front but still saw the awful results of the fighting.

And this is reflected in the records. For some men there are full records, as for James Byar, while for others there is virtually nothing, just a bare entry on a medal index card, as for my Great-Uncle Stanley and Cecil Pike, of the North Devonshire Yeomanry (and even here the local newspaper managed to mess up his obituary completely), to indicate the role they played in the Great War for Civilisation. But it safe to say that if your ancestor wore uniform and went overseas then there will be a record for him or her. However, you are likely to find more for officers and men who fell for their country and for those who served during the first two or three years of the war.

One of the great changes of the war was the acceptance of women in the services, and the increasingly important role women played in the war effort as a whole, although records about women in the services are patchy, and almost non-existent for any woman who did not wear Army or Air Force khaki or Navy blue.

The interest in the First World War has grown enormously in the past thirty years or so. When I first went to the battlefields of the Western Front in the mid-1980s it was just a select few enthusiasts who could be found in the cemeteries or marching along what was once the front line to the bemusement of local farmers and cafe owners. The only records readily available were a few memoirs and the war diaries, which were largely the preserve of academics and PhD students. But as the last veterans slowly passed on so the interest in the war grew exponentially. There were television programmes (most notably Richard Holmes' series of War Walks and Channel Four's *The Trench*), novels (like Sebastian Fawkes' *Birdsong* and Pat Barker's *Resurrection* trilogy) and non-fiction reassessments (such as Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War* and Gary Sheffield's *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities*).

But above all there was the inspiring dignity of the veterans themselves, such as Harry Patch and Henry Allingham.

It was natural that genealogists, local historians and military enthusiasts should want to research the men who were there. Fortunately, by the end of the 1990s the records had largely been released, and with the arrival of commercial data providers, notably Ancestry which put much of this material online, it is now fairly simple to build up an idea of a man's service in a couple of hours. This is something that would once have taken Army clerks weeks of painstaking checking to do.

Researching a grandfather's or great-grandfather's military career is now one of the most popular genealogical research projects. It can be a particularly attractive project to undertake, because of the variety of records and advice available. In addition, it can still be an emotional subject, asking how we would have coped in the circumstances. (Badly in my case, I fear.)

This book shows you how to get started on researching men and women who participated in the First World War from Britain and its Dominions. It is based on my book *Tracing Your First World War Ancestors*, which was published by Countryside Books (and I am grateful to their MD Nicholas Battle for his permission to reuse the material), but it has been thoroughly updated and expanded to include new material and my own experiences of research in these records over the past decade or so.

Some of the examples used here are based on papers that I gave at the Ontario Genealogical Society in Toronto in March 2012, in particular a paper on the events of 31 March 1917.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to:

Melody Amsel-Arieli; Nicholas Battle, Countryside Books; Sue Cox, British Red Cross Society Archives and Museum; Adrian and Nicholas Lead; Janice Taylor, Archivist, Honourable Artillery Company; Paul Jones and James F S Thomson of the Ontario Genealogical Society; David McCrone for letting me use James Byars DCM as an example; Paul Wilkinson for a couple of illustrations; and Alison Miles for her editing.

As always, all errors and omissions are mine.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A2A	Access to Archives
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
ASC	Army Service Corps
BEF	British Expeditionary Corps
BL	British Library
CEF	Canadian Expeditionary Force
CWGC	Commonwealth War Graves Commission
FAAM	Fleet Air Arm Museum
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
MiD	Mentioned in Despatches
MoD	Ministry of Defence
NAM	National Army Museum
NCO	Non-commissioned Officer
NMM	National Maritime Museum
NRA	National Register of Archives
QAIMNS	Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service
QARNNC	Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Corps
RA	Royal Artillery
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAFM	RAF Museum
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RE	Royal Engineers
RFA	Royal Fleet Auxiliary
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RN	Royal Navy
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
RND	Royal Naval Division
RNM	Royal Naval Museum
RNR	Royal Naval Reserve

RNVR	Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
SOG	Society of Genealogists
TNA	The National Archives
VAD	Voluntary Aid Detachment (member)
WAAC	Women's Army Auxiliary Corps
WFA	Western Front Association
WRAF	Women's Royal Air Force
WRNS	Women's Royal Naval Service

The Long, Long Trail has a comprehensive list of the most common abbreviations you may come across in the records at www.1914-1918.net/abbrev.htm.

Chapter 1

STARTING OUT

Records Online

The majority of records for the men and women who served in the First World War are online. This means that with a bit of luck you can very easily build up a fairly good picture of your ancestor with very little effort.

There are two major commercial data providers with significant First World War content: Ancestry and The National Archives' (TNA) Online Records Service, although Findmypast has increasing amounts of material. In addition, there are a few small databases that appear on a number of different sites. These include:

- Soldiers Died in the Great War.
- De Ruigny's Roll of Honour: A Biographical Record of His Majesty's Military and Aerial Forces Who Fell in the Great War 1914–1917.
- Ireland's Memorial Records of the Great War.
- National Roll of the Great War.
- Distinguished Conduct Medal Citations, 1914–1920.
- Naval Casualties.
- Royal Navy Officers' Medal Roll.
- Royal Marine Medal Roll, 1914–1920.

Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk)

If you are researching the Army then you will probably need access to Ancestry because it has the core material of medal index cards and other ranks service records (see Chapter 3). In addition, they have campaign medal rolls for the Royal Navy (RN) and a large range of smaller databases which could prove useful. They are described in the appropriate place in the text.

Ancestry is the largest data provider both in terms of content and

subscribers, and it can be very good. It is a subscription site: you pay for a year's unlimited access to the data. If you are not already a subscriber, it is worth trying the free fourteen-day trial. Alternatively, access is free at TNA, the Society of Genealogists (SOG) and many local libraries.

However, Ancestry can be difficult to use, because the indexing is at best erratic and it is not always easy to find particular databases. It is hard to suggest a way round this, but if you are new to the site then it is worth using the various tutorials before you do any real research. Otherwise, it is a matter of trial and error. You may be lucky, but occasionally you may have to trawl through page after page of names before you find your man.

The National Archives Online Records Service
(www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/our-online-records.htm)

TNA's Online Records Service (which until fairly recently was known as Documents Online) is different to other providers because you pay for each document you download: at the time of writing the fee is £3.36 per item. However, some records (generally non-genealogical sources) can be downloaded for free.

There is a wide variety of sources for the First World War, particularly for the RN, which include:

- Medal index cards (which largely duplicate what Ancestry has).
- Some war diaries.
- RN service records for ratings, non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and officers.
- Royal Marine (RM) service records.
- Royal Air Force (RAF) officers service records.
- Merchant seamen medal cards.
- Nursing and women's service records.

These records can be accessed through the main Records homepage, which includes the Discovery catalogue to the holdings of TNA or through www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/our-online-records.htm. This is not particularly easy to use, but once when you have found the individual whose record you want to download it is simple and secure to do so. It is important to remember that you should use double quote marks, such as "Douglas Haig", around the name you are searching. If you do not do so, you will come up with all the Douglasses and all the Haigs.

Other Providers

The other major commercial data provider is Findmypast (www.findmypast.co.uk), and although its holdings for the First World War are growing rapidly, they are still rather disappointing. It does have indexes to birth, marriage and death records for service personnel. Its holdings, specifically for the First World War, mainly consist of databases sourced from the Military Genealogy website. It has an increasing number of unique sources including several databases relating to military nursing. However, it does have a complete set of the 1911 census, and the surviving pre-1913 soldiers' documents which might be worth checking out if you are researching an old soldier who re-enlisted on the outbreak of war.

Brightsolid, the company that owns Findmypast, also owns Genes Reunited (www.genesreunited.co.uk) and has made almost all of Findmypast's record collections available here as well. In the text you can assume that if a resource on Findmypast is mentioned it is also available on Genes Reunited. Brightsolid also owns ScotlandsPeople (www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk), which is the major online resource for Scottish genealogy. There's very little here of a military nature, let alone specifically about the First World War, to be found here except registers recording the deaths of Scottish soldiers in what is called 'the minor records'. ScotlandsPeople also has the 1911 (and other) Scottish censuses. One tangential source is the Valuation Roll for 1915–16 which gives the valuation of property for taxation purposes, listing heads of the household and their landlords.

A specialist provider is Military Genealogy (www.military-genealogy.com) which has a number of databases relating to the First World War. However, Naval & Military Press, which owns the website, has licensed the data to other users so this information is available on Findmypast and Ancestry. There is little point joining unless you do not have access to other sites, although it has to be said that their rates are competitive.

TheGenealogist (www.thegenealogist.co.uk) has the 1911 census and an index to war deaths compiled by the General Register Office, together with odd Army and Navy Lists and related records. FamilyRelatives (www.familyrelatives) also has the war death indexes, a few Army and Navy Lists and material licensed from the Naval & Military Press.

There is also Forces Records (www.forces-war-records.co.uk) which claims to have records on over 2 million forces personnel going back to about 1350 (7 million men and women served in Britain's armed forces during the First World War alone). It is impossible to find out exactly what they have without subscribing, which I have not done. In addition, several of my students who joined have reported that it is not worth the money.

There are several more specialist websites which will be discussed in the appropriate place in the text.

Archives

Old documents and archives are kept in archives. Depending what records survive for your ancestor and how much research you want to do on them, you may need to visit several during the course of your searches or none at all. There are several thousand archives, large and small, across Britain, but relatively few will have any records that will be of immediate interest. If you want to know more about what archives are and how to use them there are a series of Quick Animated Guides at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records.

For researchers of the First World War there are three major types of archives that you may want to use. There can be a slight overlap between their holdings, but where this is the case this is made clear in the text. In order of likely importance they are described below.

TNA in Kew has almost all the surviving service and operational records for the three services plus much else besides. In fact, it is the repository for British Government records going back to Domesday Book. This is the first (and possibly only) place that you need to visit, although you may never



The entrance to TNA at Kew.