



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 02722, 5 June 2017

Researching ancestry: access to civil registration records

By Catherine Fairbairn

Inside:

1. Obtaining copy civil registration certificates: current position
2. New arrangements for access to civil registration records in future
3. Online advice
4. Access to civil registration records in Scotland



Contents

Summary	3
1. Obtaining copy civil registration certificates: current position	4
1.1 Accessing civil registration information	4
1.2 Searching the indexes	5
GRO online historic birth and death indexes	5
FreeBMD project	5
Other sources of information	5
1.3 Ordering certificates	5
2. New arrangements for access to civil registration records in future	7
2.1 Labour Government proposals	7
2.2 Deregulation Act 2015	7
2.3 PDF pilot scheme	8
2.4 Digital Economy Act 2017	9
3. Online advice	10
4. Access to civil registration records in Scotland	11

Summary

Civil registration records, which date back to 1837 in England and Wales, and to 1855 in Scotland, have become a key source of information for family historians.

This briefing paper deals with current arrangements for access to civil registration information in England and Wales, and with new provisions intended to facilitate different ways of accessing this information in the future. It also includes a summary of how to access civil registration information in Scotland.

England and Wales

Current position

Anyone is entitled to search the indexes which the Registrar General and superintendent registrars are obliged to produce of all the records they hold. There is no charge for searching the indexes. It is possible to search for older records online.

However, at present, the only way to access the information included in the records is by buying paper certificates. Some people, including, for example, family historians, consider this to be an inefficient and expensive method of providing access to civil registration information.

For a number of years there have been calls for improved access to civil registration records. Proposals for reform of the civil registration system were considered by the Labour Government but were not implemented.

New provisions

The [Births, Deaths, Marriages and Civil Partnerships Records Regulations 2016](#) were made under new powers inserted into the main legislation governing civil registration by the [Deregulation Act 2015](#). The Regulations will enable the General Register Office (GRO) to provide information from civil registration records in a portable document format (PDF), as an alternative to certified paper copies, which could still be purchased.

The GRO has conducted a three phase PDF pilot scheme, which has now concluded. A review of the pilot is to be undertaken which will inform longer-term implementation.

The [Digital Economy Act 2017](#) will allow for electronic verification between public authorities and the General Register Office, removing reliance on paper certificates.

Scotland

The statutory indexes from 1855 to the present day have been computerised since 1989 and now include links to digital images of the register entries.

Records are available as index-linked digital images. It is also possible to order an official extract (or certificate) from the registers.

On the [ScotlandsPeople](#) website it is possible to search the indexes without charge, but payment is required to view and save images of records and to order certificates.

1. Obtaining copy civil registration certificates: current position

1.1 Accessing civil registration information

In England and Wales, civil registration records, which date back to 1837, have become a key source of information for genealogists and family historians.

Anyone is entitled to search the indexes which the Registrar General and superintendent registrars are obliged to produce of all the records they hold. There is no charge for searching the indexes. All births, marriages, civil partnerships and deaths registered in England or Wales have a GRO index reference number.

However, the records themselves are not available for scrutiny. At present, the only way to access the information included in the records is by buying paper certificates. The General Register Office (GRO) confirms the position:

Q2. Can I see a copy of the certificate before I order it online?

Current legislation in England and Wales does not permit the register entries (certificate information) to be made available online and information can only be provided in the form of a certificate.¹

Some people, including, for example, family historians, consider this to be an inefficient and expensive method of providing access to civil registration information.

The GRO advises that, to get the fastest response when ordering a certificate, the GRO index reference number for that certificate should be included in the application. However, it is possible to apply for a certificate even without the index reference number:

If you are unable to trace or do not have the index reference you may still apply online for any event which took place on or after 1st July 1837 to 6 months from the current date (for marriages this period is extended to 18 months) provided you have sufficient information to identify the entry. A 3 year search for the index reference will be carried out. You should supply the exact date of event if you have it. If you don't have the exact date, enter 01/01/YYYY and we will search the specified year and one year either side. If you do not provide an index reference number, your application will take up to 15 working days to process. There is a separate policy for events which have taken place in the last 50 years and full identifying information must be provided.²

¹ [HM Passport Office, General Register Office, Most customers want to know...What certificates can be ordered and how much does it cost?](#)[accessed 5 June 2017]

² [HM Passport Office, General Register Office, Most customers want to know...What certificates can be ordered and how much does it cost? Q3. What information do I need to apply online?](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

1.2 Searching the indexes

GRO online historic birth and death indexes

The GRO has created new online historic birth and death indexes from its digitised records: at present births from 1837 to 1916 and deaths from 1837 to 1957, but not marriages, which have not yet been digitised.³ "Historic" records are defined as being births over 100 years and deaths over 50 years.

Information about how to search the online indexes, which can be done free of charge, is available on the GRO website, [Guide to Searching the Online Historic Indexes](#).⁴

The GRO has set out the benefit of using the online index instead of those provided by other organisations:

Q9. Why is GRO publishing an online index when other organisations have already done this?

The new index will contain additional data fields to those which are already available and this will assist family historians to identify the correct record. In addition, the index is created from the digitised records and is not a copy of the existing index which is already made available by third party organisations. We will also be able to update our online index if errors or omissions have been identified.

FreeBMD project

[FreeBMD](#) is an ongoing project, the aim of which is to transcribe the civil registration index of births, marriages and deaths for England and Wales, and to provide free internet access to the transcribed index information. The FreeBMD website has a page of [FAQs](#) which provide further information about this service.⁵ This includes an explanation of how the index information can help genealogists to make use of the entries to purchase the certificate(s) which provide actual genealogical information.

Other sources of information

Some commercial companies also have the index reference numbers online, but charge for a search of their records.⁶

1.3 Ordering certificates

Information about how to order certificates is available on the [Gov.UK website](#).⁷ Guidance notes for applications by post include the information which is required to obtain a copy certificate.⁸

³ [HM Passport Office, General Register Office, Most customers want to know...Searching the GRO online historic birth and death indexes? Q3. Which records are available to search in the new GRO index?](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

⁴ Accessed 5 June 2017

⁵ [Free BMD, Frequently asked questions](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

⁶ Gov.UK, [Research your family history using the General Register Office](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

⁷ [Gov.UK, Order a copy of a birth, death or marriage certificate](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

⁸ [HM Passport Office, General Register Office \(GRO\) Application Form Guidance Notes](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

Further information about ordering certificates online is available on the [General Register Office website](#).⁹

An FAQ deals with access to recent records for which further identifying information is required:

Q7. Can I order a certificate for events which have taken place during the last 50 years?

GRO has a policy in place where full identifying information is requested for applications where the event occurred in the last 50 years. You will be prompted to supply this information when you order online and in the case of births, will be asked for the forename and surname recorded in the entry, the date and place of birth, father's full name (if shown in the entry) and mother's maiden name (if applicable).¹⁰

⁹ [HM Passport Office, General Register Office](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

¹⁰ [HM Passport Office, General Register Office, Most customers want to know... Important information on delivery times and policies](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

2. New arrangements for access to civil registration records in future

2.1 Labour Government proposals

For a number of years there have been calls for improved access to civil registration records.

The Labour Government intended to introduce legislative change covering a wide range of matters relating to civil registration, including improved access to historic registration records, by using the order-making powers in the *Regulatory Reform Act 2001*. The changes were to be made in two stages: first those relating to the registration of births and deaths and then, subsequently, those relating to marriage.

However, both the Parliamentary Committees which considered the proposals relating to registration of births and deaths concluded that they were not appropriate for the regulatory reform order procedure.¹¹ The then Government subsequently confirmed that they would not put forward a draft Regulatory Reform Order to reform marriage law.¹² As a consequence, the intended reforms were not implemented.

2.2 Deregulation Act 2015

The [Deregulation Act 2015](#) inserted new order-making powers into the main legislation governing civil registration, to enable birth, death, marriage and civil partnership information to be released in ways other than in the form of a certified paper copy. [Section 98](#) deals with information contained in entries of births and deaths and [section 99](#) deals with information contained in entries of marriages and civil partnerships.

Both sections provide powers for the relevant Government Minister to make regulations dealing with searching, and supplying information from, civil registration records held in the General Register Office.

The [Explanatory Notes](#) published with the Act give an example of how the powers might be used to bring the legislation in England and Wales into line with that in Scotland and Northern Ireland:

The sections provide regulation-making powers to introduce new products and services relating to birth, death, marriage and civil partnership records. As an illustration, new products could include plain paper extracts or PDFs as an alternative to watermarked paper certificates or online access to older records following precedent set by Scotland and Northern Ireland (where birth, marriage and death records are considered 'historic' at 100, 75

¹¹ [Regulatory Reform Committee, Proposal for the Regulatory Reform \(Registration of Births and Deaths\) \(England and Wales\) Order 2004, 20 December 2004, HC 118, Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, Proposal for the draft Regulatory Reform \(Registration of Births and Deaths\) \(England and Wales\) Order 2004, 14 December 2004, HL 14](#)

¹² [HC Deb 1 March 2005 c77WS](#)

and 50 years respectively, at this point becoming more openly accessible).¹³

The new provisions are not intended to affect anyone's entitlement to obtain a certified copy of a registration record.

2.3 PDF pilot scheme

The [Births, Deaths, Marriages and Civil Partnerships Records Regulations 2016](#) (the Regulations) came into force on 7 November 2016. The Regulations enable the GRO to provide applicants with information from civil registration records in a portable document format (PDF), as an alternative to certified paper copies, which could still be purchased.

An [Explanatory Memorandum](#) published with the Regulations provides information about a proposed three phase PDF pilot scheme, and the limitations on the use of a PDF copy:

In piloting the use of PDF copies, the intention is to support recipients, for example family historians, who simply wish to know the content of a civil registration records without requiring a certified paper copy. The PDF copy of a civil registration record will not be acceptable for use as evidence of an event e.g. when applying for a passport or a government benefit. As a copy does not contain the security features which are present on paper certified copies ("certificates"). This will be made clear to those ordering the PDFs, and to potential recipients such as Government Departments and other bodies.

In order to test the level of customer demand and the operational practicalities in providing PDFs as well as certificates, the intention is to hold a controlled three phase pilot which will start in early November. There will be no limitations in terms of the type or location of the applicant – the service will be available to access to all customers for the duration of the pilot phase – but there will be thresholds in place in terms of the number of transactions and a set time window.

Phase 1 will test demand for PDF copies of those civil registration entries that are held by GRO in a digital format. The application must be submitted online and contain a GRO index reference number (which identifies the record). These PDFs will cost £6. Phase 2 will test demand for PDF copies offered within 3 hours for those who order before 1pm. This service will cost £45 and will apply to all birth, death, marriage and civil partnership records, regardless of whether they have been digitised, and no GRO reference will be required. All applications must be made online. Phase 3 will test demand for PDF copies of those civil registration entries that are not held by GRO in a digital format. The application must be submitted online and contain a GRO index reference number. These PDFs will cost £8.

The pilot has now concluded.

A review of the phased pilot will inform longer-term implementation.¹⁴

¹³ [Deregulation Act 2015 Explanatory Notes, paragraph 456](#)

¹⁴ [Explanatory Memorandum to the Births, Deaths, Marriages And Civil Partnerships Records Regulations 2016, SI 2016/980, paragraph 7.5](#)

2.4 Digital Economy Act 2017

The [Digital Economy Act 2017](#) will allow for electronic verification between public authorities and the General Register Office, removing reliance on paper certificates.¹⁵ The [Explanatory Notes](#) published with the Act state the Government's view that "this will also reduce the risk of fraud in relation to forged or altered certificates".¹⁶ When sharing information, civil registration officials must have regard to a new Code of Practice to be issued by the Registrar General.

In addition, the Government sees the potential for public authorities to use the death information for "list cleaning" to prevent mail being sent to a deceased person causing unnecessary distress to relatives.¹⁷

¹⁵ [Sections 46 and 47](#) (not yet in force)

¹⁶ Paragraph 32

¹⁷ DCMS, [Digital Economy Bill: Impact Assessment](#), 18 November 2016, p21

3. Online advice

Information about researching family history in England and Wales is available online, including at:

- [Gov.UK, Research your family history using the General Register Office;](#)
- [The National Archives, How to look for records of a birth, marriage or death in England and Wales.](#)¹⁸

¹⁸ Links accessed 5 June 2017

4. Access to civil registration records in Scotland

In Scotland, compulsory civil registration of births, deaths and marriages dates back to 1855.

The statutory indexes from 1855 to the present day have been computerised since 1989 and now include links to digital images of the register entries.¹⁹

Records are available as index-linked digital images on the [ScotlandsPeople website](#), in the [ScotlandsPeople Centre](#) and at [Local Family History Centres](#). National Records Scotland states that, to protect the privacy of living persons there are cut-off dates for images of the record entries on the internet of 100 years for births, 75 years for marriages and 50 years for deaths.²⁰

It is also possible to order an official extract (or certificate) from the registers. National Records of Scotland provides further information: [How to Order a Certificate \(Also Known as an Official Extract\)](#).

On the [ScotlandsPeople](#) website it is possible to search the indexes without charge, but payment is required to view and save images of records and to order certificates.²¹ The website includes information about charges for pay-per-view and certificates.²²

¹⁹ National Records of Scotland, [Statutory Indexes of Births, Deaths and Marriages](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

²⁰ National Records of Scotland, [Statutory Registers of Births, Deaths and Marriages](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

²¹ ScotlandsPeople, [Frequently Asked Questions, What can I do for free?](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

²² ScotlandsPeople, [Our charges](#) [accessed 5 June 2017]

About the Library

The House of Commons Library research service provides MPs and their staff with the impartial briefing and evidence base they need to do their work in scrutinising Government, proposing legislation, and supporting constituents.

As well as providing MPs with a confidential service we publish open briefing papers, which are available on the Parliament website.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publically available research briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing only with Members and their staff.

If you have any general questions about the work of the House of Commons you can email hcinfo@parliament.uk.

Disclaimer

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties. It is a general briefing only and should not be relied on as a substitute for specific advice. The House of Commons or the author(s) shall not be liable for any errors or omissions, or for any loss or damage of any kind arising from its use, and may remove, vary or amend any information at any time without prior notice.

The House of Commons accepts no responsibility for any references or links to, or the content of, information maintained by third parties. This information is provided subject to the [conditions of the Open Parliament Licence](#).