

BRITISH MILITARY RECORDS

WHY MILITARY RECORDS?

Military records can be a rich source of information for family historians. They usually provide some identifying details such as age, physical description, next of kin, place of birth, and current address. They can also show date of birth, date of marriage, names and dates of birth of children. WW2 records usually include a photo of the person.

The military records provide a history of the movement of your service person while they are serving. Once you can decode the military speak, you can find out where they were, whether they were hospitalised for illness or were wounded, if they had VD and if killed in action some details of how they may have died. Particularly if you marry this up with other sources such as official military documents, books, or websites.

And sometimes the records will help reveal some interesting information that could help break down brick walls or reveal a family secret. However, don't accept everything in a military document as true – people could and did lie about their age, address or marital status. Always check against other sources.

WHAT ARE MILITARY RECORDS?

One category are official records produced by the military such as enlistment forms, embarkation records, muster rolls, pension records, repatriation files, court martial records, pay cards, regimental and unit histories, unit diaries, Red Cross files, and rolls of honour.

However, not all records are available. According to FindMyPast, only 40% of British First World War records have survived. Many UK records were destroyed during the blitz. A number of US records were also destroyed in a fire in 1973.

Even if records are available, they may not be digitised. In fact, most won't be as digitisation can be both costly and time consuming. Check with the agency involved to see what documents they may have. Be prepared that there is usually a cost involved in providing you with a copy. Or, if they have been digitised, there may be a cost to view the document, or the document can only be viewed via a subscription website such as FindMyPast.

You might be lucky and find more personal records such as diaries, letters, postcards, souvenirs, newsletters, etc. Some potential websites and sources are listed below.

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WHERE CAN I FIND THESE RECORDS?

United Kingdom National Archives

There are many records held in the UK National Archives, 5% of which are available online. To view these records for free, you need to create an account and sign in.

<https://secure.nationalarchives.gov.uk/Login/Register>

You can do your own searches via the Discovery catalogue OR you can go straight to the 5% that has been digitised.

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/?research-category=online>

Don't discount the value of official records such as Battalion War Diaries. They may not name your relative personally but they can provide useful details such as what the unit was doing, and where it was, on certain dates.

There are many records in the UK National Archives which have not been digitised – you will need to email them for a quote for copying this and sending to you (note, this can be expensive).

You can also access the UK National Archives, Ancestry.com and FindMyPast via e-resources on the State Library of WA website (you will need a State Library of WA card which is free to apply for via SLWA).

Genealogical websites

Genealogical websites such as [Ancestry](#) or [FindMyPast](#) can be a rich source of information. Some UK records may only be available via these subscription websites, for example FindMyPast has many British military records. If you don't have a subscription to either of these sites, FamilyHistoryWA members can access them for free via the FamilyHistoryWA library or the State Library of WA.

- Some of the records on Ancestry may be stored in a sub site called '[Fold3](#)' which requires an additional subscription. A number of Military SIG members have this subscription and are happy to look up a record. Email the convenor for assistance.
- Check out Ancestry trees for the person you are researching – you might find another branch of the family has items such as photos they have added to their tree or have done additional research they have shared online. The owners of the family trees in the UK may be willing to do some research on your behalf. Don't forget that descendants may have migrated to countries such as Australia, New Zealand or the USA – expand your search beyond UK trees. You are an example of this.

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[FamilySearch](#) has some military records available (FamilySearch is free to access but you need to create an account to view). Search via the ‘records’, ‘catalog’, etc. Their ‘research wiki’ is useful to find out where to access records on other sites - search via ‘England Military Records’ or search via the place you are interested in.

The FHWA Library also has subscriptions to **The Genealogist** (this site has some different record groups to the other sites) and **Scotland’s People** (Scottish soldiers and airmen’s wills and military tribunal records).

Other useful websites (*caution, not all websites are still current*)

- [The Great War 1914 – 1918](#) – Links to places to find WW1 records.
- [The Long Long Trail](#) – Researching soldiers of the British Army in the Great War of 1914–1918. Information on soldiers, battles, battlefields, photos, and more with great research tips and guides; free site. They have a forum as well <https://www.greatwarforum.org/>
- [British Battles.com](#)
- Search for specific place and infantry websites, e.g. [Durham at War](#)
- Service records may also be located in local county offices and museums, e.g. [Durham County Record Office](#).
- [Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#) - information and the graves of British and Commonwealth servicemen from WW1 and WW2; free site
- [The Sandhurst Collection](#) - This website has records from the Sandhurst officer training college since the 1700’s; free to search and pay to download
- [The Museum of Military Medicine](#) - The four collections of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), Royal Army Veterinary Corps (RAVC), Royal Army Dental Corps (RADC) and Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps (QARANC).
- [The Gazette](#) - Official publications of the British Government; contains deployment and promotion details; free to view
- [Imperial War Museum](#) – covering all three services
- [Ministry of Defence](#) (service records after 1920) - service records of Army, Navy and Air Force after 1920. All other records, go to the National Archives.

Also remembering that descendants travelled to other countries, some valuable information can be found on websites based in countries outside the UK.

1. [Australian Joint Copying Project](#)

A collection of unique historical material relating to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific available on the National Library of Australia website. This includes [War Office Records](#) that cover troops stationed in the colonies during the 19th century. Some papers relating to the 2nd World War.

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2. Websites by Diane Oldman – 19th century British soldiers who came to WA

[Crimean War Veterans in Western Australia](#)

[Redcoat Settlers in Western Australia 1826 – 1869](#)

[Sappers and Miners in Western Australia](#)

Naval & Maritime records

- [Naval-History.net](#) – Naval history research & memoirs
- UK National Archives
- [Maritime History Archive \(Canada\)](#) – holds approximately 75% of surviving British crew lists
- [Crew List Index Project](#) -set up to assist research into the records of British merchant seafarers of the late 19th and early 20th century.

Here are some suggested websites that have personal documents such as diaries and letters

- Imperial War Museum – [Lives of the First World War](#) and [Voices of the First World War](#)
- [Canadian Letters and Images](#)
- [WA Military Digital Library](#) - a free and publicly available website that is a repository of military documents and items with a connection to Western Australia. The website includes many items from those who served in the British military, both colonial and in the 20th century.

Newspapers

Newspapers are a great resource – your person may be mentioned, for example if he was injured or killed in action. There may also be information on actions the unit was involved with.

- [Trove](#)
- [British Newspapers Archive](#) – this is a subscription website but you can access the British Newspapers Archive via the State Library of WA e-resources, or via the FHWA library (sign in to your account when you are at FHWA and the records can be accessed for free).
- Other historical newspapers can also be accessed via e-resources on the State Library of WA website (sign in required). Including Gale NewsVault and Irish Newspaper Archives.
- There are also [US](#) papers and [New Zealand](#) papers online.

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Books, Journals & Magazines

These are a wonderful resource. Check the index for a mention of your person (you never know). Even if you can't find your person, books, journals and magazine can provide the context of what your person would have experienced:

- The FamilyHistoryWA Library catalogue has a number of military related items including biographies, battalion and battle histories, books about researching British Military ancestors, medals and uniforms.
- [State Library of Western Australia](#) has a large range of both physical and e-resources (e-books, newspapers not available via Trove, Discovery). For example, a search on 'Durham Light Infantry' reveals a handful of e-books that may be of interest.
- [Archive.Org](#) is an online library of free books, movies and more.
- [World Cat](#) is a catalogue of the holdings of libraries worldwide. You can search for books held by libraries near you.
- [Naval & Military Press](#) - a website devoted to books on military history.