

Researching a First World War Ancestor

Version 2: January 2015

The purpose of this guide is to provide some useful resources and addresses to enable you to find out more about your ancestor's service in the armed forces in the First World War. For reasons of space we cannot list every available source and this can only serve as a basis for further research. There are several books available which cover military research in more depth – check with your local library or book shop.

The first step in your research is to speak to your relatives. While there are no longer any surviving veterans of the First World War, other older relatives in your family may remember what your ancestor did in the war. Always be wary of second-hand knowledge, however; what you are told may not be one hundred per-cent accurate. Your relatives may also know of documents, medals or photographs held by your extended family which can assist in your research.

If someone in your family holds medals for First World War service it can be useful to check the rim or the back of the medals – for enlisted men this will give you details of not just a rank and regiment, but also a service number. This will be very useful to you in your research.

Once you have spoken to your relatives, and hopefully have some basic information, it is now time to dig a little deeper.

Did your ancestor survive the war?

If your ancestor survived the war, then the first item to try and find would be a service record.

Army records only partially survive due to fire and water damage during the London Blitz in the Second World War - only some 40% of them have survived. Those which survived can contain a wealth of information. They will tell you such things as your ancestor's previous employment, next of kin, the date of enlistment, the units they served in, the theatres of war they served in, any wounds, awards and potentially punishments!

The First World War service records can be viewed online at either **Ancestry** or **Find My Past** – both charge to view the records, and both have a varying assortment of other records, so it might be useful to subscribe to both or see if you can access them through your local library.

If your ancestor served in any of the Guards regiments (Scots, Welsh, Irish, Grenadier or Coldstream) then these service records have been retained by the regiments. They are not complete as some were damaged during the Second World War bombing too. Appointments to view documents can be made by contacting the regiment as appropriate.

Service Records for First World War officers are now held at the **National Archives**. These have not been digitised, so to see the records you will need to either visit in person or hire a researcher. Officer service records are held under references WO339 (for regular army officers) and WO374 for Territorial Army officers.

For those of you whose ancestor served in the Navy, **Find My Past** has the naval service records for the First World War. These records are rather more basic than the army service records, in most cases only being one page, with bare details of where a man was posted. **Ancestry** also has Naval services records dating from 1802 to 1919 – no service dates are listed after 1912, but many of the men on the **Ancestry** service records may have served during the First World War.

Service records for the Air Force can also be viewed on **Find My Past**.

For those searching an army ancestor and not lucky enough to find a service record, there are other sources which can be used. The Medal Index Cards are available on **Ancestry**, and as the name suggests are the index to the actual Medal Rolls for each regiment. The card will tell you an individual's name, rank, number, regiment, and what service medals they received. The scans on **Ancestry** include the back of the card, which can sometimes contain additional information such as the name and address of the next of kin for those medals which were awarded to men killed. These can also contain some Royal Flying Corps men, but not all.

Several other useful resources are available on **Find My Past** and **Ancestry**. Both have the roll for men awarded the Silver War Badge. This was given to men who had been wounded and then honourably discharged, and will detail the name, rank, unit and dates of enlistment and discharge for a man. It will also detail if he served overseas and what the cause of his discharge was. **Ancestry** also holds the register of Soldiers Effects, 1901-1929. Each record typically lists the soldier's name, rank, regiment, date, place of death and next of kin. For 1901 – 1914 records, trade before enlistment is also listed. For many, this can be very useful in confirming a family connection.

If you want to know what your army ancestor did during his life in service, it is possible to find out a little more detail. Each battalion in the British Army which served during the First World War kept a War Diary – this was a written summary of each

day's activities. While it is highly unlikely to mention your ancestor by name, it can be useful to trace the movements of the men he served with. It is also possible that it may mention an act of gallantry, or in the case of men killed, it may detail the events that led to their deaths. Some War Diaries can be viewed online at the **National Archives**, but many regimental museums also have copies. Some now offer the opportunity to download transcriptions of the war diaries.

If your ancestor was taken prisoner, you will hopefully find a record for him in the records of the **International Committee of the Red Cross**. The site is free to use, and offers scanned images of the original records. The information can be quite basic, but will detail exactly when a man was taken prisoner. Some civilian prisoners are also listed.

If your ancestor was lucky enough to be decorated for a gallant action, you may be able to find the citation which describes the actions behind the award. Citations for the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest award for gallantry, are fairly easy to obtain via the internet or several published books, but other gallantry awards can also be obtained. The citations of the Distinguished Conduct Medal can be found on **Ancestry**.

Gallantry awards for all branches of military service were published in the **London Gazette** – many of them including the citation. The Gazette is now available to view online and can be searched. The search function can be difficult to navigate but eventually worthwhile.

Survivors of the war can also be found in local sources – local newspapers frequently reported on men from their area that had been decorated for gallantry or had been wounded. Your local library may have historic local newspapers on microfilm or will know where they can be viewed. A few are online at the **Google News Newspaper Archive**, and an ever-increasing number can be found at the **British Newspaper Archive**. The National Library of Scotland has access to some newspapers through its digital archive facility. **The Times** and **The Scotsman** newspaper have their own archives online at a fee, although your local library may have free access.

If your ancestor was an officer, you can trace his career by consulting the Army, Navy, or Air Force List. This was published monthly by the War Office and was a complete listing of every officer in the relevant branch of service. All men were listed in ascending order of the date they were promoted and show the dates they were promoted to each rank. Each volume is indexed so if you do not know your ancestor's regiment it is still possible to locate him. Complete sets of these lists are available at the Imperial War Museum and the National Archives in London. Your local library may have copies of some editions. Alternatively, many are now available as scanned downloads from the **Internet Archive**.

It should also be noted that the Air Force list only covers officers from the formation of the Royal Air Force in April 1918. If you want to find an airman before that date, the relevant information will be in either the Army or Navy List, depending if his service was in the Royal Flying Corps or the Royal Naval Air Service.

Did your ancestor die in the war?

It is a sad fact that it is easier to trace a man who did not survive the war than one who came home. This is mainly due to the larger number of sources for fatalities in the First World War.

The first, most important resource to check is the Debt of Honour register maintained by the **Commonwealth War Graves Commission** (CWGC for short). Their database can help you locate the actual burial place of your ancestor. Generally each record will contain the following:

- name
- initial(s)
- nationality of the armed service
- rank
- regiment or service
- date of death
- service number
- reference for the grave or place of commemoration as a Plot, Row and Grave reference
- historical details about the cemetery or memorial
- where to find the cemetery or memorial

Records will also occasionally contain other information, such as the individual's age at the time of death. The next of kin were invited to submit some further information at the time the records were compiled, and this can include the names of parents or spouses, place of birth, and sometimes previous employment.

The register has many entries and if your ancestor has a fairly common name it can be difficult to locate your exact individual, so narrowing your search down to a year, or perhaps a regiment or approximate date of death will help.

Scotland has a counterpart to the CWGC register in the form of the **Scottish National War Memorial**. The actual memorial itself is located in Edinburgh Castle, and contains rolls of the fallen for each Scottish Regiment, as well as registers for Scots killed while serving in other regiments. These registers can be searched online and will occasionally provide further information such as place of birth.

All military deaths recorded abroad were registered at the **General Register Office for Scotland**, and these deaths can be viewed online at the Scotland's People website. Entries for soldiers killed are fairly sparse and generally only contain name, rank regiment and number. The place of death is generally recorded as "France and Flanders" or any of the other theatres of war, but occasionally a more specific place will be listed, such as a casualty clearing station or a military hospital. The cause of death is also generally vague, but will sometimes have more detail which will not be found elsewhere.

Some wills of Scottish soldiers are now available through the **Scotlandspeople** website. In most cases the information is very basic -commonly stating that they leave everything to their mother -but some are very detailed indeed and in some cases they are part of a much longer letter.

Many Rolls of Honour were published during and after the war, and still continue to be published today. One of the largest is *Soldiers Died in the Great War*, which was published by HMSO in the 1920s in eighty volumes. A companion volume, *Officers Died in the Great War*, covered, as its name suggests, all officers. These publications can be viewed today in various formats, either in reprints of the original volumes, or by purchasing them in a database on CD-Rom. They can also be viewed online at **Ancestry** and **Find My Past**.

Another detailed Roll of Honour was published in 1922 by the Marquis de Ruvigny. Originally available in several volumes, this contains short, sometimes very detailed biographies of approximately 25,000 men killed during the war, from all services of the military, many of which have a photograph of the individual. While the entries date right to the end of the war and beyond, the majority of entries date from the earlier years of the war. The Roll can be purchased in reprinted form, or can be viewed on several pay per view websites. Some volumes are available to download free of charge from the **Internet Archive**.

Many local Rolls of Honour were published, and these can contain lists of the survivors of a community as well as the fallen. The level of information can range from very brief to highly detailed, and many local libraries may have a copy of the Roll for their community. Larger libraries such as the **National Library of Scotland** (NLS) have a greater number of Rolls of Honour to view; in fact the NLS have digitised a large number of their Rolls of Honour which can be viewed on the **Internet Archive**.

Almost every community in Scotland erected a war memorial to its fallen, and it is possible for an individual to appear on a number of them, such as memorials for churches, schools, places of work, and places of leisure such as golf clubs. Many of these memorials can be viewed online thanks to the work of the **Scottish War Memorials Project**, which seeks to document every military memorial in Scotland or with a Scottish connection outside of the country. It is possible to search for an individual on their website, and you can view photographs of the memorial your individual is listed on as well as possibly finding out some additional information carried out by the members of the Project.

A sister project to the **Scottish War Memorials Project** is the **Scottish War Graves Project**, which has a similar aim to document every military grave in Scotland. If your military ancestor is buried in Scotland, their grave may be on their website. Importantly, those buried abroad may be commemorated on a family gravestone in Scotland, so it is worth searching in order to locate some additional family information.

Local newspapers usually covered casualties relating to the community, sometimes including photographs. It is worth searching the previously mentioned newspaper archives for possible information unavailable elsewhere. National newspapers can also contain information on casualties, although the information tended to be less as the war continued. The information can also sometimes be restricted to officers.

Other sources?

Regimental histories tend to be fairly general in their scope and don't focus on the individual soldiers, but they can give a flavour of the involvement your ancestor had in particular battles or campaigns. They can be found in libraries or bookshops, and occasionally can be found via regimental museums (either by visiting or downloading from their website). Some regimental and battalion histories can also be found on the **Internet Archive**.

It can also be worthwhile considering visiting the museum of the Regiment your ancestor served in – it will contain artefacts and information which will help build a picture of what life was like for your ancestor in wartime. Most regiments have a website and may offer research. A quick search should locate the website of the particular regiment you seek. The website of the **Ogilby Trust** also lists all regimental museums in the British Isles. The museum may offer a research service for a fee – this can vary in the amount of information you will receive. It is usually better to do your own research, so find out if they allow visiting researchers – each museum will offer a slightly different service.

Other larger museums include the **Imperial War Museum**, the **National Army Museum** and the **National War Museum of Scotland** – all are well worth visiting and possess extensive libraries but may have restricted opening hours for the libraries.

The **Royal Air Force's** website has short histories of all existing as well as disbanded squadrons which are useful for a very short insight as to what type of aircraft your ancestor would have either flown or maintained and what services they performed.

The "**naval-history.net**" is a goldmine of naval information including casualty lists, and details of ships lost during the First World War – an ideal starting point for researching ancestors in the Royal Navy.

Online discussion forums can be an invaluable source of expertise – many visitors to forums have incredibly detailed knowledge on their specialised subject and are often happy to share that information with others. A useful First World War forum is the **Great War Forum**. The aforementioned **Scottish War Memorials Project** and **Scottish War Graves Project** also have members willing to assist with queries.

Websites and places to visit

Main sources

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2 Marlow Road, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 7DX

Website: www.cwgc.org

The Scottish National War Memorial, The Castle, Edinburgh, EH1 2YT

Website: www.snwm.org

The General Register Office for Scotland, New Register House, 3 West Register Street, Edinburgh, EH1 3YT

Website for online research: www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk

The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU

Website: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Guards Regiments [Grenadier, Coldstream, Scots, Welsh, Irish]: write to Wellington Barracks, Birdcage Walk, London SW1E 6HQ

Other resources

Ancestry: www.ancestry.co.uk

Findmypast: www.findmypast.co.uk

The Scottish War Memorials and War Graves Projects: www.scottishmilitaryresearch.co.uk

The Internet Archive: www.archive.org (to find scanned books for download, use the search box and select "text" in the next box marked "media types")

The London Gazette: <http://www.gazettes-online.co.uk/>

Prisoners of the First World War, ICRC Archives: <http://grandeguerre.icrc.org/>

The Great War Forum: <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/>

The British Newspaper Archive: <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

Google News Newspaper Archive: <http://news.google.com/newspapers/>

National Archives British Army War Diaries: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/war-diaries-ww1.htm>

Naval History: <http://www.naval-history.net/index.htm>

The Royal Air Force: <http://www.raf.mod.uk> (click on "history")

Museums

The Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London, SE1 6HZ

Website: www.iwm.org.uk

The National Army Museum, Royal Hospital Road, London, SW3 4HT

Website: <http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/>

National War Museum, The Castle, Edinburgh, EH1 2NG

Website: http://www.nms.ac.uk/our_museums/war_museum.aspx

Royal Naval Museum, HM Naval Base, Portsmouth, PO1 3NH

Website: <http://www.royalnavalmuseum.org/>

The Royal Air Force Museum has two locations, at Colindale in North London, and at Cosford near Birmingham. The website is <http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/>

There are many Regimental museums, and the best way to find one is to visit the website of the Ogilby Trust, which is described as "the definitive guide to the regimental and corps museums of the British Army spread throughout the United Kingdom". The website address is: <http://www.armymuseums.org.uk/>

