

Researching a pre-WW1 military ancestor

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 years before 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 bookstore.

The first step in your research is to speak to your relatives. They may have documents, medals or photographs which can assist in your research, or they may remember stories they were told by older family members. Remember that anecdotal information is never entirely accurate – your ancestor may have embellished their military service to make it more interesting, or stories from one serviceman in the family may be mistakenly attributed to another over time.

If someone in your family holds medals for an individual 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 his rank and regiment, but also his service number. This will be incredibly useful to you in your research.

Once you have spoken to relatives, it is now time to dig a little deeper, and we hope to show you some sources that will be of use.

Service Records

If your ancestor served in the British Army and survived his service and was discharged then it is likely that his service record will have survived. The website **Find My Past** has these service records available to view. You may find more than one service record for a man – he may have initially joined the Militia before serving in the regular army – there would be a record for both of these.

The records will show date and place of enlistment, how old he was at the time, and his previous employment. It will also include a brief physical description. It will then detail the circumstances of his service – where he served, what medals he was entitled to, any injuries sustained etc.

For men who served just prior to the First World War and then re-joined at the outbreak of WW1, the records for those men would have been amalgamated with the First World War service records. If that is the case then they may not have survived due to them being damaged during the London Blitz in the 1940s – only some 40% of them have survived.

The First World War service records can be viewed online at either **Ancestry** or **Find My Past**, so it is worth checking both in case you locate a pre-WW1 record.

For those of you whose ancestor served in the Navy, **Find My Past** has a small selection of naval service records dating from 1899 onwards. For earlier service records, **Ancestry** also has a variety of Naval services records – these include records for the Royal Naval Reserve and the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve.

If your ancestor was an officer, you can trace his career by consulting the Army or Navy 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, London and National Archives, Kew. Other local libraries may have copies and some are available on subscription websites. A large volume of the Lists are available to download free of charge from the **Internet Archive**.

Medals

In addition to service records, medals are the most useful items to assist you in your research. Men were awarded medals for serving in a particular campaign, and within that campaign they could then be awarded "bars" to the medal for particular battles or phases of a campaign. With these bars you can work out reasonably accurately where and when your ancestor served.

Ancestry have the campaign medal and award rolls for campaigns starting from 1793 for both the Army and Navy; these include campaign medals, gallantry medals and also medals awarded for long service and good conduct.

Both **Ancestry** and **Find My Past** have the medal roll for the Battle of Waterloo – the first battle for which a specific medal was awarded.

If your ancestor was lucky enough to be decorated for a gallant action, you may be able to find the citation which describes how he won his 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.

Casualties, Rolls of Honour and Memorials

Unlike the two World Wars, there is no register for those killed in service. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission only began recording names from the First World War. For earlier conflicts, there are sources available although they are less accessible.

A register for casualties of the Boer War 1899-1902 is available on both **Ancestry** and **Find My Past**. It details those killed and wounded, although the information is very sparse.

For other campaigns some casualty rolls have been published but they tend to be out of print – search local or national libraries to see if they have any available.

The **General Register Office for Scotland** has some records of military deaths before 1914 and these can be viewed online at the **Scotlandspeople** website. These include Army returns of deaths of Scottish persons at military stations abroad (1881-1959) and a register of Scots deaths in the Boer War. The army returns are generally quite sparse, and only detail name, rank, number, date and cause of death.

The wills of Scottish soldiers are now available through the **Scotlandspeople** website. In most cases the information is very basic indeed (commonly stating that they leave everything to their mother) but some are very detailed – in some cases they are part of a much longer letter. The majority are for the First World War, but a small number are for pre-1914.

While most Rolls of Honour were published after the First World War; a small selection were published for earlier conflicts, most notably the Boer War. The counties of Perthshire and Angus have detailed books listing all those who served in the South African War, including many photos of almost every man listed. Both “A Military History of Perthshire” and “The Muster Roll of Angus” can be downloaded free from the **Internet Archive**.

War Memorials are more common to the First and Second World War, but communities had erected memorials to their war dead before this. In fact the earliest memorial to a community's war dead dates from the Crimean War, in the parish of Balmaclellan in Dumfriesshire. The South African War also saw a number of local community war memorials. Regiments also listed their dead from campaigns on memorials which can be found in churches and other places of worship. 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. The number of graves commemorating pre-1914 service is a lot smaller, but they do exist and it is worth looking to see if the family mentioned a loved one buried elsewhere.

Other sources?

Regimental histories tend to be fairly general in their scope and don't focus on the individual soldiers, especially the older the campaign is, 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 histories can also be found on the **Internet Archive**.

It can also be worthwhile 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 **National Army Museum** and the **National War Museum of Scotland** – both are well worth visiting and possess extensive libraries.

Local newspapers frequently reported on men from their area that had been decorated for gallantry or had been wounded in conflict. 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 and **The Times** and **The Scotsman** newspaper have their own archives online at a fee, although your local library may have free access. The information in national newspapers may be restricted to officers.

There are many useful online sources of information and we can only draw attention to a select few.

For military ancestors from Fife, the **Fife Military History Project** aims to bring together in one place a wealth of information on the historical military forces from Fife.

The **Asplin Military History Resources** page has a number of medal and casualty rolls, as well as several other useful lists.

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. Two useful forums to look into are the **Victorian Wars Forum** and the **Napoleonic Wars 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 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/>

Other online resources

Ancestry: www.ancestry.co.uk

Find My Past: 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/>

The Victorian Wars Forum: <http://www.victorianwars.com/index.php>

The Napoleonic Wars Forum: <http://www.napoleonicwarsforum.com/>

Fife Military History Project: <http://thaneofife.org.uk/intro.html>

Asplin Military History Resources: <http://www.britishmedals.us/kevin/intro.html>

Museums

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/>

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/>