

Civil Registration – Births, Marriages and Deaths

Civil registration

The registration of births, marriages and deaths, known as Civil Registration, started on 1st July 1837 in England and Wales. In Scotland registration started in 1855 and in Ireland 1864. Parents had 42 days to register births, marriages were registered immediately and deaths had to be registered in 5 days.

N.B: The Births and Deaths Registration Act of 1874 made it a legal requirement from 1875 to register births and deaths. In 1927, stillbirths and adoptions were included.

All English and Welsh births, marriages and deaths are registered locally with copies being sent to the General Register Office (GRO).

Civil registration indexes

There is an index to the births, marriages and deaths that are held by the GRO initially in London, now held in Southport. Every record has a GRO index reference number, including the year, volume number, page number and district in which the event was registered. From 1837 to 1984 this information is divided into quarters as follows:

- March quarter – events registered in January, February and March
- June quarter – April, May and June
- September quarter – July, August and September
- December quarter – October, November and December

As registration started on 1st July 1837, the earliest index is for the September quarter 1837. After 1984 the indexes are organized by year only. They are arranged in year order, and entries are listed alphabetically by surname, and then by forename.

TIP: be aware that if an event took place at the end of a quarter it may be registered in the following quarter e.g. a birth on 27th June could be registered in the Sept quarter (Jul, Aug, Sept).

Birth, Marriage and Death index records

The indexes include:

- Year and quarter the event was recorded in (top of page)
- Surname
- First name
- Registration district
- Volume and page number of the General Register Office index

Below are some variations for the specific records

Birth index records

- After September 1911, birth indexes include the mother's maiden name.
- Adoptions records – these records start from 1927, and are listed alphabetically by surname and then by forename.

Marriage index records

- To search the marriage index, you can use either the surname of the married man or maiden surname of the married woman as each husband and wife are recorded in the indexes separately.
- From 1912 the spouse's surname is recorded

Death index records

- After 1866, the age at death is listed, which helps to work out the person's year of birth.
- Children who died under the age of one are listed as 0.
- TIP: The age shown may have been estimated by whoever reported the death, and may not have accurately known the person's age.
- From 1969, the age at death is not on the index but the more accurate date of birth is. An age at death can then be calculated from this.

If you are looking at index records on research websites, you won't see everything from the record, this will only be possible if you purchase a certificate for the event.

How to order a certificate

There are a number of ways to order certificates-online, by phone, postal & local registry office. Private companies also sell these certificates, but they are more expensive.

Online from the General Register Office – order a birth, marriage or death certificate from the Government's official website <https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/login.asp>

By phone: 0300 123 1837 (Monday-Friday 8am – 8pm, Saturday 9am – 4pm)

By post: Certificate Services Section, General Register Office, PO Box 2, SOUTHPORT, PR8 2JD

For records in Scotland, contact the National Records of Scotland.

For records in Northern Ireland, contact the General Register Office for Northern Ireland.

N.B. during the Coronavirus lockdown the above services may not be available.

Full certificates will show the following details for births, marriages and deaths.

The birth certificate will tell you:

- names of the parents, including the mothers' maiden name
- date of birth
- address of the birth
- father's occupation
- date of registration

The marriage certificate will tell you:

- date and place of marriage
- full names, addresses and occupations of couple
- age (may say of full age)
- fathers' names and occupations
- witnesses
- who performed the ceremony

The death certificate will tell you:

- their name
- age
- sex
- date and place of death
- occupation
- cause of death
- signature, description and residence of informant
- the date of registration

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