



No Death Certificate?

We need to terminate the life of our ancestors. I am not suggesting you become a serial killer but too many family files have people who are born, some even married but there they stay in limbo. You need to terminate their lives as part of their social context and as good research technique.

Civil Registration:

If a death certificate is available it should be accessed. The date jurisdictions started registering deaths varied tremendously. Cyndi's List has a category which will give you the date of registration in your jurisdiction of interest <https://www.cyndislist.com/death/>

Death certificates can contain misinformation as the person who knows the details is dead and even if the informant is a close relative it is a time of grief and they may not be thinking as clearly for the details. Date, place and time of death should be fairly accurate but there can be issues with the other information.

Civil registration indexes can be useful depending on the amount of information given and if you are able to distinguish your John Smith from the many others. The new England and Wales Death indexes <https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/> have added an age in the index back to the start July 1837. One caveat is that 1 may mean age was one day, one week one month or one year.

The death certificate is not the only useful document of death, and this is not an exhaustive list. You will find in some specific geographic areas or among certain religions or cultures there will be other records, but it is a great start. (Mind-mapping can be a useful tool to think about categories. This was created using the free website <https://coggle.it/>)

Family Papers/Ephemera

These include Bibles, letters, photos, "Orders of Service", receipts for the undertaker, headstone etc These can also a source of death information. In Memoriam cards are often found within family papers. Review them carefully as they can contain clues as to the deceased's religion. Families may also have the "Dead Man's Penny" (given to the family of a soldier on his death in WW1 for the Commonwealth forces) or a memorial scroll in their possession.

Newspapers:

Newspapers are a wonderful source of death information and now we are seeing increasing indexing occurring it has become easier to find your person. There are a variety of death information in a paper: sickness in area, entry into hospital, death notice, funeral notice, in memoriam notice (these can be placed for many years and it is worthwhile following them through the years as extra bits of information can be given. One notice I saw at the tenth anniversary also had the date and place of the man's father's death and as there had been a name change this was essential information. There are also obituaries, transfer of land, probate, accident, murder, inquest and court notices and articles.

Australia: (Free) National Library of Australia: Trove <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>

For Australia the Ryerson Index is a wonderful resource for death, funeral, In Memoriam and probate notices. <https://www.ryersonindex.org/>

New Zealand: (Free) Papers Past <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers>

Cemetery Records

Burial records encompass the actual burial (who else is in the plot) as well as the headstone and potentially grave upkeep and also the Funeral Director records. As these are generally private companies they may not be the easiest to find and may not still survive. This will give the type of coffin, the cost of the funeral, who paid (often you will see some information about Friendly Society or military service as well). The details of the arrangements, did the body go from the home or the hospital or the coroner? Was there flowers sent by relatives far away, what newspaper notices were done? Was a grave being reopened? Cause of death is not usual on these records but may be present. Another reason to look at these records is for information on still births. While there are still birth indexes in many places, these are not open indexes and the way the remains are laid to rest differs in various time periods. I have seen still birth funeral records listed from the 1890s through to present day and this may be the only record you may find.

In Australia where a person was buried is listed on most certificates (except Tasmania and South Australia) but it is not listed on English certificates. In a rural area parish churchyards are a reasonable option although with the rise of non-conformity there was also a rise in cemeteries not associated with a particular church. In the city areas it became illegal in the 1850s, particularly in London to bury someone in a churchyard as there were major concerns of hygiene. Some churchyard ground levels were raised higher due to the burials and effluvia and decomposition became a major concern. There were simply too many people. London developed seven large cemeteries on the outskirts known as the Magnificent Seven. Deceased Online a pay site has been digitising burial records. You can search for free but then pay to view the image. Annual subscriptions are now available. <https://www.deceasedonline.com/>

Headstones

Headstones can also be considered a document of death but many caveats apply. These are usually put in place well after the death so names and dates can be incorrect. Not everybody

buried in the grave may be listed (very common for only one spouse to be on the stone while both are buried) so important to check cemetery records as these will usually give who is interred in that plot. There can also be people listed on the stone who are not buried in the plot.

The headstone can also give clues about the ancestor: membership in the Masons or a Fraternal Society or maybe an occupation by the inscription/symbol. Often you will see religious symbols, symbols of ethnic identity, again some caveats as some of these may be the desire of the family or the person paying for the headstone.

Billion Graves: (worldwide but coverage varies) <https://billiongraves.com/search>

Find a Grave (worldwide but coverage varies) <https://www.findagrave.com/>

Interment (worldwide but coverage varies) <https://www.interment.net/>

Inquests are a wonderful source of death information but a word of warning, they can be very graphically descriptive of the event. In Australia these are usually found in the relevant archive. In England you should be able to find these post-1900 in the relevant county archive. Survival prior to this can be patchy as the record was considered the property of the coroner and may not have been deposited in the archive. Newspapers are often the best resource initially. Be aware that often there is another series of records (which may not be a separate series but may be mixed in with other police records of determination of whether a full inquest is required or whether preliminary enquiries have determined this is not needed. In Australia police gazettes often have lists of inquests as do parliamentary papers as it was a government expense. As more of these sources become digitised and available online they will become more available. In Queensland there are also “Preliminary Inquiries” where some initial inquiries were done to determine if a full Coronial Inquest was required. This type of record also probably exists in other states but may be part of police station records.

Probate: “where there is a will there should be a genealogist!” as these are a great resource. In Australia it is not uncommon to find death certificates in with the probate packets at the archives. You may also find other certificates or items of identification used to prove entitlement under the provisions of the will. Again there are some caveats. Be aware of the date the will was written in comparison to the date of death. The information contained within should be reasonably accurate for the time the will was written so the married name in the will might not be the name of the legatee at the time of death (or even the time of probate). Wills of spouses are not always proved straightaway. I have seen a husband’s will proved 45 years after his death. He had left everything to his wife and it was only on her death the children proved his will and also her will.

Gazettes: Police and government gazettes are also useful for deaths of government personnel. Police gazettes also list murders, deaths in custody, executions, murders, inquests, unknown bodies found (often with great detail listed about the clothing etc in a bid to identify the body).

Government gazettes will also list deaths. These might be at Government Asylums, probate records, transfers of land etc.

Hospital record survival of patient details is very patchy and usually has a minimum 100 year closure if they have survived. This varies by state (South Australia it is 60 years). Usually patient files have not been considered archival material and it is an index book of admissions that may have survived. Archives are the usual repositories, it is rare that a hospital will have retained these records.

Immigrations records can also be good sources. The passenger list may state a death, the surgeon's report of the voyage, a newspaper report of the voyage, quarantine station records also if the ship has illness on board when it arrives in port. If it was a UK registered ship the captain was obliged to register the death in London (listed at Findmypast) and also in the GRO UK Deaths at Sea index. You can then purchase a certificate. For young William Busby who died aboard the Mhari Bhan in 1882, I have the Surgeon's report, the Queensland death certificate (gives the latitude and longitude of the burial at sea), the English death certificate the digitised copy of the London book on Findmypast, the newspaper report and the word died on the passenger list!

Electoral rolls are another source. In the earlier days eligible electors were listed in newspapers and lists of those who had died or had left the area were printed. Annotated rolls (both Commonwealth and State) can also be seen at the relevant archives and these may have the date of death listed on the roll.

Military Records

The Australian attestation files will give the date of death if it occurred while the person was still within the military while the New Zealand files follow the soldier until later in life and their death date and place is listed (even into the 1960s+). Military Units histories may also give information about the death, more usual to name officers than soldiers and not all units have had histories written and published.

In Australia the Australian War Memorial (AWM) has digitised the unit diaries and these are available on the site. Again officers are more likely to be named but you can get an idea of the action that was occurring at the time. The AWM has also digitised the Red Cross Enquiries into Wounded and Missing men. It is a sad fact of the Great War that so many men were never found and identified and this meant the families never knew what happened and lived in hope. The Red Cross made enquiries and interviewed people where possible about what had occurred. There are around 36,000 files so not a file for every missing person but well worth a look.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) site lists military of the Commonwealth who are buried and where as a result of active service. After the Great War units worked to consolidate graves and put the bodies into War cemeteries. This information has now been digitised and is available on their site. An example of this is this one for Norman George Busby: Buried in isolated grave, Right of road between Wervicq and Brielen 2½ miles North West of

Wervicg and 4¼ miles E.S.E. of Ypres. Body exhumed and re-buried at Zantvoorde Military Cemetery 4½ miles South East of Ypres 1-9-25. The UK has death certificate indexes for military of WW1 and WW2 in separate indexes to the usual GRO indexes. However the amount of information is often no more than you will get from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission site <https://www.cwgc.org/> . In Australia certificates were not issued for our war dead except in two states. Queensland's Registrar in 1922 created an index of Queensland War Deaths. Information was provided by family.

There are also many World War 1 Memorial books. The information in these is usually given by the family and may be incorrect and not everybody submitted their details. With the commemorations more of these are being found and digitised. Honour boards and War Memorials are another source but again these can have omissions or be incorrect as to detail. Families may also have the "Dead Man's Penny" or a memorial scroll in their possession.

Masonic Records and Friendly Societies: These societies will record death information for their members. The Friendly Societies were a mutual benefit society where members put in regular (usually weekly) amounts of money, then if they or their family fell on hard times money could be given to them for sickness benefits, doctor's visits and funeral costs.

This is not an exhaustive list. I am sure you can find many other sources of death information including professional organisations newsletters/journals

The important thing is to find the information to complete your ancestor's life. Even if you are able to get a death certificate it is worth looking for the other "Documents of Death" to put your ancestor's death into the social context. By finding these you are not just filling in the death date but also giving context and completeness of their life from birth until the end.

