



Researching First World War Ancestors

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Family history is more than just names and dates, it's a story, a life lived. You can delve deeper into the story of your family in Great Britain and Ireland on Findmypast. This session will cover a wide range of information focused on the British forces during World War I and how to get started in pursuing your own military ancestors.

Findmypast is uniquely dedicated to the history and culture of the British Isles. If your research takes you to England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland, or any of the outlying dominions, territories, or historic British Empire, you will want to explore the resources available on Findmypast.

The site includes more than just historical records and by utilizing all that Findmypast has to offer, from our family tree to advanced newspaper search, you can truly start to understand the daily world in which our ancestors found themselves.

The Great War

It is difficult to overstate the impact of the war on the people of Britain.

World War I began in 1914, and Britain initially went into the conflict with a small, professional army which was designed to police its overseas empire; the entirety of its force included just over 250,000 Regulars. There were an additional 250,000 Territorials and 200,000 Reservists - a total of 700,000 trained soldiers. Compared to Germany, France and Russia, this was a suicide mission. Great Britain would end the war with more deaths than they started the war with soldiers.

Thousands volunteered. Conscription began in 1916. By the end of the war, the Army had expanded to a force of over 4 million men. Soldiers from the Commonwealth added to the total forces, including India, the Caribbean, Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and South Africa

The statistics are staggering:

- 6 million men served in the war from Britain alone
- Over 750,000 deaths
- Over 2 million wounded
- 46% of all men aged 15-49
- 2/3 of men in their 20s

In addition, The First World War saw more than 700,000 British soldiers receive limb wounds and more than 41,000 underwent amputation. This became one of the largest amputee cohorts in history. Up to 33,000 of them would have potentially experienced post-amputation pain.

But of course, the military forces of the United Kingdom are not limited to just the Army. The Royal Navy, in and of itself a global super-power, and the Royal Air Force, or RAF, but originally the Royal Flying Corps, share their own piece of military history.

There are countless sources of information for all three divisions available to us today, from the official histories to the amateur collecting information on a specific unit or engagement. For understanding each part of the military and the organization specifically during the Great War, a basic timeline of events should be consulted and available to the researcher consistently.

It will also benefit you to have a general understanding of how the forces were organized, the British Expeditionary Forces, and the implication of unique recruitment campaigns, such as PALS Brigades.

Key points to remember:

- Start with what you know and the primary question(s) you want to answer.
- Keep an open mind and be willing to review historical documents that don't include your ancestors name specifically, or without an exact match.
- Document your findings as you go, tracking all possible service numbers for cross-referencing.
- Take your time! There are a lot of records and newspapers, and many opportunities to explore this history.

Census Records

Since the Great War is sandwiched between the [1911 Census for England and Wales](#) and the [1921 Census of England & Wales](#), start by identifying your ancestor and their families in these two records. Note names of parents, siblings, and nearby relations, as well as the address at which they are enumerated from both census years. This allows you to frame your research process knowing both what the family looked like entering the war as well as their post-war structure.

On the 1921 Census in particular, watch for changes to orphan status for all members of family (including cousins!) as that will be a strong indicator that a family member was lost to the conflict or the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic. Additionally, the 1921 Census enumerated the armed forces overseas, which includes 35 volumes for the Army, 11 for the Royal Navy, and 1 for the Royal Air Force. They are [grouped geographically](#) and includes all armed forces establishments globally, including temporary camps, training sites, military hospitals, detention barracks and married quarters. The only exception to this is those stationed in Scotland, or at sea in Scottish waters, as they will appear in the 1921 Census of Scotland.

Not all of these military enumerations directly related to WWI, as the inter-war period was strife with conflict all over Europe, but the material may prove helpful to many.

Records Overview

Findmypast publishes new records and newspaper content every single week. You can monitor these updates easily through our email updates or [via our blog](#).

While engaged in military or war research, you will find yourself utilizing a variety of records, including service records, civil registration and parish records, newspapers, medal cards, enlistment records, POW records, census records and embarkation records, to name just a few.

On Findmypast, the military collection is quite extensive and covers a huge range of archival records. This list is not exhaustive, but examples include:

British Army Service Records	Militia Service Records (through 1915)	British Army Service Records, 1914-1920
Royal Hospital, Chelsea	British India Office: Army & Navy Pensions	Royal Navy 1914 Star Medal Roll
Royal Navy Officers 1899-1999	Sailors Died in the Great War 1914-1920	Royal Naval Division records 1914-1919
Royal Naval Division Service Records 1914-1919	Merchant Navy Service Records 1918-1941	Royal Navy Seamen 1899-1919
Royal Marines Service Records, 1899-1919	Royal Navy Officers' Medal Rolls 1914-1920	Merchant Navy Medal Cards, 1914-1925
Royal Air Force: airmen's service records 1912-1939	Royal Air Force: officers' service records 1912-1920	RAF Muster Rolls
Prisoners of War, 1715-1945	Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) 1918-1920	Women's Land Army Service Cards
Women's Royal Naval Service Officer Files, 1917-1919	Women's Royal Naval Service Ratings' Service Registers, 1918-1919	Absentees & Deserters

Findmypast Features & Technology

We've always been proud of our search functionality, built specifically for UK records. Enjoy short cuts directly to the **1921 Census of England & Wales**, digitized and published on Findmypast; as well as **address search**, **photo search**, and the long-important **radius search**.

Specifically for military research, Findmypast offers a [detailed search structure](#) including the ability to search by Regiment, Soldier Number, and optional keywords, expanding your ability to locate all records associated with a particular person, unit, or event.

Resources

- Timeline of the British Army: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_British_Army
- British Army During the First World War: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Army_during_the_First_World_War
- Digitised First World War Records (TNA): <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/first-world-war/centenary-digitised-records/>
- Royal Naval Division Numbering: <https://www.royalnavalddivision.info/numbering.htm>
- British Army war diaries 1914-1922: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-army-war-diaries-1914-1922/>
- Findmypast Guide to Military Records: <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/blog/help/military-records-your-guide-to>
- Findmypast British Army Service Records: <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-records/british-army-service-records>

How to reach us

You can contact Findmypast directly, and we invite you to do so:

Customer Support is available 9:00 am – 5:30 pm, Monday through Friday, UK time (7 hours ahead of mountain time zone)

US friendly: 855-246-8234

Website functionality, design, and features change over time. Your suggestions and comments are always welcome, please address those to support@findmypast.com or utilize the on-screen live chat.