



Serving King and Country

Army Records of the Great War

As your research approaches the early 20th century, it is highly probable that at least one of your ancestors will be found to have served in HM forces during the Great War of 1914-18. There is a wealth of information available online and more which can be found in regimental museums and record offices. It is unfortunate that you have considerably more chance of finding records of an ancestor who died than one who survived.

Name, Rank, Regiment and Number

The most basic thing you need to know is that the key to successful research is as early as possible to discover the regiment in which your ancestor served, the rank he attained and the service number which he was given. It is important from the outset to know that during the Great War service numbers were unique only within a regiment and so you may find many soldiers in different regiments with the same number. Note that a soldier may have been transferred between regiments during the war and so your ancestor may have had two or more service numbers during his term of service.

As this is such important basic information, here are some ways in which you may find some or all of this information:

- If the soldier's name is unusual, you may be able to find a record of him directly in one of the online sources. Once you have his service details, these will help you to find him in other sources.
- There may be a pay book or other documents or someone in the family may know the regiment in which he served.
- He may be remembered in a memorial on a family grave. This may provide some or all of the information or other details which may help you discover them.
- If his service records have survived, even though there may be many with the same name, you may recognise him from his birth date, birthplace or details of next of kin. The documents will provide the details you need.
- The Commonwealth War Graves Commission database often includes information about the family of a deceased soldier. This may enable you to identify your ancestor. The record will provide the information you need.

- Some war memorials record ranks and regiments and very occasionally service numbers. If you know your ancestor is named on a particular memorial, this may provide some of the information you need.

Soldiers' Records

In an ideal world we would have all of the service records for each soldier available online. Unfortunately during the Second World War, the building where the records were stored was damaged by incendiary bombs and 60% of the records were destroyed. Those which survived have been scanned and indexed and can be viewed on the **ancestry.com** and **findmypast.co.uk** web sites.

Fortunately, a number of soldiers' records had been duplicated for their pension records and these were not stored with the damaged records. These have also been scanned and indexed and are available online as above.

Soldiers' records will provide you with information about their enlistment and service. The content varies in extent, but may include information about illness, injury and disciplinary issues. Other documents may deal with a variety of issues which may be of interest.

Medal Cards

The importance of medal cards is that theoretically, every soldier who saw active service overseas should have received at least one of the main campaign medals (1914 (Mons) Star, Victory Medal and British War Medal). The cards record these awards. The cards have been scanned and indexed and can be seen on the above web sites.

Medal cards are not necessarily very informative. They may not record first names (sometimes only initials) and provide limited information about where the soldier served (only 'Theatre of War', though they will record the date of entry into this theatre. However, they will give his rank, regiment(s) and service number(s). Sometimes where a soldier died in service, the date of death may be noted. On rare occasions there may be other information, such as an address, written on the back of the card.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)

CWGC provide a free public database of soldiers buried in military and other cemeteries as well as the names of those recorded on battlefield memorials to those who have no known grave. The index on their web site cwgc.org can be searched by name and by other parameters such as regiment and service number. The search results provide Name, regiment, rank, service number, when died, how died (e.g. killed-in-action, died-of-wounds) and the cemetery in which they are buried or the memorial on which their name is recorded.

In addition, though this by no means applies to all of those recorded, there may be record of the name and address of their next-of-kin, who will usually be his parents or wife.

What's Special about Manchester?

The names of the soldiers who enlisted in the eight 'Pals' battalions (16th to 23rd) of the Manchester Regiment were recorded in a book 'Manchester City Battalions Book of Honour'. MLFHS has digitised the book and indexed the Soldiers' names. These appear in The Great Database.

MLFHS volunteers have photographed many of the war memorials in the Greater Manchester area and indexed the names. There is a public database on our web site which can be searched by name.

While the above provides an outline of how to find and use military records, the process can be considerably more complicated. The notes below explain the records in more detail.

Looking More Closely at Military Records

Introduction

The greatest difficulty facing the researcher is the loss of some 60% of soldiers' service records in 1940, the result of fire damage during the blitz. It is unfortunate that as a result, one has considerably more chance of finding records of an ancestor who died than one who survived. There is, however, a wide range of possible sources in which you may find information which will help in your research. The following notes summarise in brief the principal sources but those considering research in this area are recommended to consult one or more of the books listed at the end of this paper

Unless stated otherwise, the records described can be found on **ancestry.com** and **findmypast.co.uk** Another useful commercial online source for UK military records is **fold3.com**

The Medal Rolls

All who served in a theatre of war during WW1 were entitled to at least two medals. The Victory Medal and the British War Medal. In addition, those serving at the outbreak of hostilities were entitled to the 1914 Star and those who enlisted before the introduction of conscription were entitled to the 1914-1915 Star. In addition medals were awarded for gallantry. Microfiched copies of record cards recording each soldier's awards (in name order) are available at the Public Record Office (PRO). The information includes the soldier's regiment and service number. **It should be noted that officers were not automatically awarded campaign medals and had to apply for them. Consequently, if the medals were not claimed, there will be no record card.**

Soldiers' Records

As stated above, some 60% of records were lost but the remainder have been microfilmed and are available for consultation at the PRO in Class WO363. Records for a small percentage of soldiers who survived the war and were awarded a pension are also available at the PRO in Class WO364. Content of records varies but the Attestation Papers will usually include details of age, birthplace and next of kin as well as a physical description.

Indexes to Soldiers' Deaths (General Register Office)

The deaths of soldiers who died during hostilities or as a result of their wounds as late as 1921 should be recorded at the General Register Office. Indexes to these (separate volumes for officers and other ranks) are available at the Greater Manchester County Record Office (GMCRO) at Marshall Street. The index will give the regiment and service number. Certificates can be ordered but give little more information, beyond the date of death, than the index.

Soldiers Died in the Great War

Eighty-one volumes were published in 1921 listing the names and brief details for each

soldier killed. The original books, available on microfilm at Manchester Central Library (MCL), are organised by regiment and can be difficult to search. More recently a fully searchable version on CDROM has been published by Naval & Military Press. Details include Regiment and service number, date and place of enlistment, date died and theatre of war. The records are now available online.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)

The Commission, at Marlow, Buckinghamshire, has published registers of war graves including personal details of those killed. Copies of these are available at many record offices but since they are in arranged cemetery order, are difficult to search. The Commission have always responded to written enquiries but more recently have made their registers available on the internet at cwgc.org CWGC records will include regiment and service number, age, date of death and cemetery or war memorial. In many cases, details of next of kin will be found.

National Roll of the Great War

Following the end of the war, a commercial attempt was made to compile a full list of soldiers who took part but this failed. Several volumes were, however, published including two for Manchester and Salford respectively. These are now rare and expensive but the two local volumes are now available on CDs, copies of which are held by M&LFHS. The entries will include details of regiment and a brief outline of service including engagements in which the soldier was involved. Date and place of death are included if relevant and an address for the soldier or his next of kin is also given. Some of these volumes have been digitised and indexed and made available online.

Local Newspapers

Access to local newspaper accounts is seldom simple as there are few indexes and searches over long periods can be tedious. If, however, a date of death or award of a gallantry medal is known, this may narrow the search sufficiently to help you find an account. Local newspapers are usually available on microfilm at local studies units. Most local newspapers are only available in local libraries and record offices but an increasing number are available on the commercial web site britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

Memorial Inscriptions

The memorials on war graves record only name, regiment and service number (though the CWGC records will provide more details). If the soldier was buried in England, a more detailed memorial may be found. The CWGC should have records of soldiers killed in action but buried in English churchyards or municipal cemeteries. It is not uncommon, however, for a soldier who died overseas to be recorded on a family memorial and so wider research into the burial places of other family members can often prove fruitful. A great number of memorial inscriptions are available in the member area of this web site.

Regimental Museums

Although many museums do not have much information about individual soldiers, particularly 'other ranks', it is nevertheless worth making an approach. The Museum of the Manchesters at Ashton-under-Lyne, for example, has a database of soldiers for this period. Search online for details of museums.

Published Rolls of Honour

Many institutions including regiments, schools/universities and commercial organisations published rolls of honour of members who fought. Some record only those who died, others all soldiers. These can be found in libraries and some record offices. The Manchester City Battalions Roll of Honour was published in 1916 and includes both lists of the soldiers in the 16th to 23rd Battalions of the Manchester Regiment and rolls of honour published by many Manchester organisations. The book is now scarce but a digitised copy is sold on CDROM (in two parts) by MLFHS. The listings are indexed as part of The Great Database in the member area of this site.

War Memorials

War memorials were established both by local authorities and public/private organisations. They will seldom contain much information but can identify the regiment in which an ancestor served. There is no national index and a visit to the area is usually necessary (though some lists have been published on the internet). The names on many war memorials in the Greater Manchester area are indexed as a publicly available database on this site.

Useful Reading

Beginners to researching WW1 ancestors may find it useful to do some preparatory reading. The following titles may be helpful:

My Ancestor was in the British Army (M. J. & C. T. Watts) Society of Genealogists Publications

Sources for WW1 Ancestry (Norman Holding) - possibly out of print

More Sources for WW1 Ancestry (Norman Holding) *

Army Service Records of the First World War (Simon Fowler) Public Record Office *

Identifying your WW1 Soldier from Badges & Photographs (Iain Swinnerton) *

The National Archives publish a number of useful reader guides which can be obtained either from TNA at Kew or [from their web site](#)

* Available from the [Manchester & Lancashire FHS Online Bookshop](#)

Amended 17 June 2020 - John Marsden