

Understanding British Birth Certificates

Birth Certificate Heading

We might as well start with the top of the birth certificate with the heading because this does have some relevance to finding your way through the indexes.

When civil registration was first organized the most obvious unit that already existed and could be adapted to registration districts were the Poor Law Unions. Many of the original districts were a straight use of these and indeed those who administered the poor laws often became the first superintendent registrars.

Poor Law Unions were made up of several parishes and the Unions could sometimes cross the county boundaries. As a registration district could be quite large - especially in rural areas - the actual place of birth could be quite a long way - and in a different county - from the town that gave its name to the registration district. If you can find a birth registration at the right time but apparently in the wrong place close by it could be worth checking it out.

Some villages could lie in more than one registration district e.g. in my area the village of Colnbrook lay in 3 separate districts - one in Berkshire, one in Buckinghamshire and one in Surrey and this was not changed until 1994! That means that if a family moved down the road or across it they could be in a totally different registration district for the next child in the family.

A large registration district was divided into two or more sub-districts e.g. the Eton Registration district in 1837 had 3 - the Eton, Burnham, and Iver sub- districts. Each birth had to be registered in its correct sub-district.

Applications for a birth certificate can sometimes take quite a while to get to the correct current registration district. E.g. if you find a birth in the Dec quarter 1852 Eton district and ask where Eton registrations are held you will be told to apply to the Windsor and Maidenhead Register Office (because that is where current Eton registrations go). However, none of the Eton registrations before 1974 are held there - and most of them are at Slough so the application will be passed on to Slough. Slough only has 2 out of the 3 Eton sub-districts however, and once a search has been made of those it will be passed to Chiltern and South Bucks. Not surprising then if your certificate takes some time to get to you!

Entry Number and GRO reference

The first column on your birth certificate is the entry number in the register. This can be anything from 1 to 500. You can sometimes pick up twins from the fact that they might have the same GRO reference.

The GRO reference is for a whole page of a register which means 5 entries. If you have twins on the same page they will have the same reference number. However if the twins were the last entry on one page and the first on the next they will have consecutive reference numbers not the same. And if two different families with the same surname are on the same page it will look like twins when it isn't. This is not as unusual as you might think - I once had 3 Thornton surnames in 4 entries and none of the families were related to one another.

I will tell you how to know when you have twins in the next section.

Column 1 - Date And Place Of Birth

The date of birth should be clearly written in the form "Eighteenth May 1840" although some of the early registers have variations on that in the very first registrations.

You would have thought that the date would be accurate but there are an amazing number of people out there celebrating birthdays on days which are not their birth dates! One reason is that parents lied about the date of birth to bring their birth dates within the 6 week registration date. These days, birth dates are checked against other lists to confirm their accuracy but that is a pretty recent development. If you are getting one set of birth dates from one source such as a baptism and another set from the certificate have a look at column 8 on the birth certificate and see how close to the 6 weeks limit the registration was. There is no such thing as a "late" baptism and therefore less need for parents to massage the truth.

Parents with large families frequently muddle which child was born when especially when the birth dates are close to one another - a second reason why the date of birth is sometimes not accurate.

If there is a time against the date of birth then there was more than one child born alive at the birth. If however a mother had twins, one liveborn and one stillborn, then the live born twin will not have a time against the birth. Until 1926 there were no registrations at all of a still born child. Having said that, again the early registrations are not consistent. The registrar in the Eton district did not put the times of births of twins in the registers at all until 1845 while the one in Stoke-on-Trent put times against all the registrations up until about 1850. It is possible to check for twins by looking for identical or consecutive GRO references in the indexes.

If a child lived even for a few seconds there should be both a birth registration and a death registration but I think in the early days that this wasn't always done.

The place of birth is not terribly helpful in the early registrations. The description is likely to be just the village name although "posh" people with big houses sometimes got their house names even on the early registrations. By 1860 more of the address was commonly in use e.g., High Street Chalvey and you might get even more given. By about 1880 reasonably full addresses were in use.

You need to look at the place of birth against the informant and address in Column 7. If mother has registered and the names given in Column 2, and 7 are identical you have probably got mothers address at the time of the birth. Ditto for father. But if, for example, you have an illegitimate child born in the workhouse and the workhouse master registered - quite a common occurrence - then you have not got a permanent address for the mother of the child. What you have is the address at which the birth took place - the workhouse - and the address of the informant who lives at the workhouse. In early registrations the mother has probably not travelled far from home to give birth, but even so may have come from several parishes away. In later dates mothers often travelled very long distances from home especially when the baby was going to be adopted and the pregnancy hidden from the rest of the family/village.

Similarly if the mother went to her mother for the birth of a baby she could be quite a long way away from her real home but it will not necessarily show on the registration. What you could have is the address at which the birth took place - grandmothers - and the informants address which might be grandmother again as being present at the birth.

If the place of birth in Column 2 matches what you were expecting - fine. If you have rejected registrations as not matching exactly, maybe you should look again at the information you have and think again.

Hope you have enjoyed this so far!

Column 2 - Forenames

Oh dear - this is a minefield. Let's start with the obvious stuff.

The name(s) entered in Column 2 of a birth certificate is/are the forenames only.

A child can be registered without a first name and even today that is occasionally done. Sometimes that is because - despite nearly 9 months + 6 weeks to register in - the family has not yet chosen a name. Know the feeling actually - if we had had girls they would have been nameless! Sometimes that is because the baby has already died and the family is registering both the birth and the death and do not name the child. Sometimes this is because the baby is going to be adopted and the mother cannot cope with naming the child - it gives the baby more of an identity and makes it harder for the mother.

Whether or not the child has been named in Column 2, it is possible - by using Column 10 - to alter the name. The reason for this stems from the fact that the Church of England was the established church in existence before civil registration. Names by baptism in 1837 were considered of greater importance than names by civil registration and so the facility was given for the name to be changed by baptism provided the baptism took place within one year of the date of registration. The two critical words here are "baptism" and "registration", Provided the baptism was done within the year the actual change of name in the registers could be done many years later.

The change of name could be by adding a name, taking one out, altering the order, changing them totally, changing the spelling. I suspect that where it is a problem in finding an ancestor, one reason is that the child was registered in one name, baptized in another but the registration not brought up to date. Where a name has been altered by baptism or change of name and added to the register, the indexes should have been updated to show the new name.

These days the same facility to change the name has been extended by offering a "change of name" form for those whose children are not or cannot be baptized into the Christian church.

Children registered with two first names are frequently called by the second. One of my husband's family had 10 sons, all with two first names, and all those that survived without fail were called by the second one. This is fine if somewhere there is an indication that there was a first element not being used but if they marry and are in the census and die as Frederick it is difficult to match that with the birth registration index for William F.

Where a child was illegitimate with no fathers details in the register it is quite common to find a name such as William Johnston in column 2 which might possibly suggest a surname for the father of the child.

For the surname of the child you have to look at Column 4 or Column 6 where the parents names are recorded but I will look at that when I get there.

Unlike many countries there is no proscribed list of names from which the parents must choose. The only prohibitions on names are that they must not be blasphemous or obscene. If the parents wish to name their child Humpty Dumpty they can. Similarly there is no prescribed list of spellings for names either so you sometimes get very strange spellings in the name column - either because the parent chooses a name that they have no idea how to spell (amazingly frequent) or because they deliberately choose to spell it in the most obscure fashion

possible to make the child different. (They aren't going to have to go through life spelling it to everyone of course). Hope I am not treading on too many toes here!

Names can be very helpful in placing an approximate age on someone. A surprising number of people have a second name that is the place of a famous battle or after a soldier hero or politician or pop star or whatever.

Even more baffling are the people that have a name that bears no resemblance to any of their given names. Right now my father is sharing a 2 bed ward in hospital with someone whose proper name is evidently James but is always called Bill. My favorite of the moment was the man called Nicholas Curry who was always called Harry (You might have to think about that one - give you a clue - try reading it as Hari).

My father's half-uncle was registered as Luther but every single further reference to him is to Reuben. That was because his father registered him as Luther and his mother didn't like it and refused to use it so he was always Reuben. Since we know that was the case it hasn't caused a problem but once you've gone past the oral history stage it can **cause great problems**.

I am sure there are thousands of you out there with further examples!

Column 3 - Sex

Now we are beginning to get to the REALLY interesting parts! Before 1969 the sex of the child was denoted by boy or girl and after that date by male or female. And you would think that was the end of the matter, but you have to remember that the information is only as accurate as the person giving it makes it.

There have been mistakes made in the sex of the child. It can always be a problem if the child is being given a name which does not denote a sex e.g. Alex. Would you know automatically what sex a child named Storm or Aston is? And if the parents go in for very obscure names from mythology or strange first names which are part of the family tradition it can be even more difficult. Especially where parents are illiterate and cannot read the register for themselves to check it is right, it is quite possible for mistakes to be made in any part of the information including the sex of the child.

Sometimes is quite possible to be mistaken about the sex of a baby. I know it doesn't sound likely, but believe me it happens. I have an acquaintance who proudly phoned everyone to say his first child was a boy and then had to phone everyone again the next day to say - oops - actually it's a girl!

And on very rare occasions there are children born for whom it is very difficult indeed to ascertain the sex.

On both my husband's side of the family and mine there is a case of a child baptized as one sex but registered and named as the other. In one case it is fairly clear what has happened. The parents of the child were called John and Ann and the male child was registered and called John after his father but was baptized as a female child Ann after her mother. As a baptism is often written into the baptismal register sometime after the event it is possible that the minister could only remember that the child was named after one of its parents and got it wrong or the parents were not too sober at the christening!

In the other case there is at least some information because 60 years later the sex and name had to be determined in law because of a court case over a will (or lack of it). It would seem as though the first child of a marriage was born on 15th Nov 1842 and registered as a male, Joseph. However, by the time of the baptism in June the following year the child was named as a female called Mary. Each of the surviving 5 sisters and

brothers of Mary had to swear that they had never had a brother called Joseph and that Mary was the eldest surviving child of their parents. (Mary was definitely female as she had a family). It was not possible to squeeze two pregnancies in to the time scale and there was no death and no family recollection of a Joseph. While it is possible that a baptism was entered incorrectly because it was often written up sometime after the event, it is less likely that this sort of simple mistake was made at registration as that is completed and signed at the time. One can only wonder what happened at the registration. Did Joseph - the father of the baby - misunderstand the registrar's questioning?

It is quite possible for the sex of the child to be mistaken at birth although the mistake is usually very quickly realized. So if you have someone in the family who seems to have been born but never died or married and you have another one of the opposite sex of roughly the same age for whom you cannot find a birth registration.....maybe?

I can't be alone in having some odd goings-on in my past!

Column 4 - Father's Name

I am sorry if anyone gets upset at this section, but there is still a fundamental difference between the way children born inside and outside of marriage are registered because there are still differences in law between the two. For example inheritance was affected by legitimacy in the past and nationality of a child still is.

Whether father is entered in the register depends on two factors - were the couple married (always entered) and what date the registration was made (maybe - maybe not).

The early registrations between 1837 and approximately 1850 are a little mixed. The Act of Parliament of 1836 reads "And it be enacted that the father or mother of every child born in England.....shall within 42 days next after the day of every such birth give information upon being requested so to do to the Registrar, according to the best of his or her knowledge and belief of the several particulars hereby required to be known and registered touching the birth of such child provided always that it shall not be necessary to register the name of any father of a bastard child."

Now some registrars interpreted that quite freely and put father in even where the couple were not married and only mother or someone else was signing the register and some did not allow fathers details to be entered in the register. By about 1850 the situation had been clarified and the instructions read quite clearly "No putative father is to be allowed to sign an entry in the character of "Father" ". From that time, therefore there are 2 kinds of entries in the register

(1) Where the parents were married to one another, fathers details must be entered in the register and only one parent will sign the register (or some other informant)

(2) Where the parents were not married to one another there will be blanks in Column 4 (father's name) and Column 6 (his occupation).

This situation lasted until the Registration Act of 1875 where the instruction read "The putative father of an illegitimate child cannot be required as father to give information respecting the birth. The name, surname and occupation of the putative father of an illegitimate child must not be entered except at the joint request of the father and mother; in which case both the father and mother must sign the entry as informants". There are therefore 3 kinds of entry after this Act:

(1) Described above

(2) Described above

(3) Where the parents are not married to one another but both attended the register office together, fathers details are entered in Column 4 and Column 6 and both parents sign. Looked at a different way - if both parents have signed in Column 7 regardless of what names they are using then the parents were not married to one another at the time of the birth of the child.

This situation lasted until 1953 when the same 3 entries could still be made but there were other ways in which father when not married to mother could be included in the entry without being present to sign but I don't think this later period will be of interest to most family historians so I haven't included it. If a mother was widowed before the birth of her legitimate baby the entry will show (deceased) after fathers name.

The child will take its surname from that of father in Column 4 where the parents were married and from mother in Column 5 if they were not married and fathers name is not entered. The child could take either surname if it was a joint entry and both mother and fathers surnames are shown but are different.

The name given for father is the name he was known by at the time of the birth of the baby. These days if the father has changed his name between his own birth and that of his child he could be entered in the register as John SMITH formerly known as John GRAY but that was not the case until fairly recently. If a man adopted his stepfather's name or that of the family who brought him up or used his father's name even though only mothers was shown on his birth certificate, you are going to have a problem going back any more generations. You have to remember that until the recent advances in fertility treatment - the maternity of the child has never been in doubt but the paternity is known only to the mother! Seriously - it is the reason why the mother has always been the prime informant for the birth of a child even since 1837.

Column 5 - Mother's Name

Column 5 of a birth certificate shows the name, and previous names if any, of the mother of the baby. There are several combinations of name possible. If a woman has not been married there will be a sole entry for her name e.g. Martha Robinson. If a woman has ever been married there will be two names shown for her e.g. Martha Robinson formerly Wheeler. If a woman has been married more than once the names shown will be e.g. Martha Robinson late Wheeler formerly Gregory. If a woman has been married, all previous names should be shown whether the baby being registered was legitimate or not.

In later records it is possible to find a mother registered along the lines of Margaret Blinco otherwise Margaret Joel. This shows that she was using a name to which she didn't have legal entitlement e.g. she was living with someone called Blinco and using his name but was not married to him. Margaret Blinco otherwise Margaret Joel formerly Smith would show that she started life as a Smith, married and became Joel and was now living with someone and using his name.

The format of the registers changed in 1969 so that if a woman had married more than twice before her present marriage not all her previous married names would be shown.

It is important to remember that the definition of the maiden surname in registration is NOT the surname at birth but is the surname used at the first marriage. So someone who was born Ellen Hudson but who had changed her name to her stepfather's surname of Culshaw before she was married would have a maiden

surname of Culshaw not Hudson. The reason for that is when tracing back, the next step would be to find the marriage of a child's parents and so it is necessary to look for the names used at marriage. The marriage certificate should show the natural fathers name not the stepfathers and so therefore you would have the birth name. That's the theory! The practice is often different as we know.

Married women never apparently had an occupation! Being a wife and mother was all the occupation they were allowed. This was not altered until the late 1980's after a threatened legal action, when women were finally allowed to have an occupation shown against their name and only in the last few years has there been a dedicated space for a mother's occupation. However, mothers of illegitimate children had an occupation shown - one of the few compensations for finding illegitimacy.

All the problems associated with changes of name for one reason or another were covered in the tutorial on the fathers name.

Column 6 - Father's Occupation

This is the occupation of the father. Column 4 and Column 6 go together. If there is no father shown in Column 4 then there will be no occupation shown in Column 6. If there is a father shown in Column 4 but a line drawn through Column 6 it means that the father did not have an occupation or perhaps was not employed at the time of the registration or the informant did not know what father did.

Only paid employment is shown and, as in the census, men only had legal and respectable jobs, so you won't find pimp or burglar! On the other hand, before this century they probably had a more meaningful occupation than the ones you get at present - blacksmith, shepherd, coalporter or whatever rather than company director (owns his own window cleaning company) or office administrator (files bits of paper). Informants can be modest about occupations as well aggrandizing them.

Laborer might mean totally unskilled - heaving stuff about in a market - but could equally mean a quite specific skill e.g. many 'ag labs' (agricultural laborer's) were quite specialized workers such as hay trussers.

Especially in the past, occupations would show status such as "of independent means".

If a father of a legitimate baby had died before his baby was born then Column 6 would read something on the lines of "Railway worker (deceased)."

Column 7 - Signature, Description and Residence of the Informant

Starting with the signature. Once the entry has been checked by the informant, he or she signs in Column 7 - their usual signature. If the informant can't sign their name, then they make a mark and the registrar completes it with the words "The mark of.....". If you see this on a certificate warning bells should start to ring. It means that the informant has been unable to check the information for himself/herself and the registrar has done the best possible. Especially where a family has a name that is unusual in the locality where they are now living and where they have a strong accent, it is going to be lucky if the registrar hits on the correct spelling of it. After all how many of you would spell Kirkcudbright correctly if you did not already know how it was pronounced and spelt and you had someone in front of you saying Kecoobree?

If someone can sign their name but in a different script, then they sign in Chinese or Arabic or whatever and the registrar write "The signature of.....". Same problem really - the informants probably can't check for themselves.

A signature does not necessarily mean that the informant could read. Many people learnt to write their name but nothing else. In a way this is worse because you don't know if they could read or not!

Description of informant. The current list of eligible informants reads, in order of preference

- (1) In all cases - mother
- (2) Father - if he is married to mother
- (3) Father and mother jointly where they are not married to one another
- (4) A person present at the birth
- (5) The owner or occupier of the house or institution
- (6) The person in charge of the child

After 1875 a joint registration could be made by the mother and father of the baby together if they were not married. Before that fathers' details could not be given (from about 1850 to 1875) and before that it is a little bit variable, see [Column 4](#).

- (1) Mother - mother was usually not in doubt although it was not unknown in the past for grandmother to go the register office and register her daughter's illegitimate daughter as her own.
- (2) Father - he is the second choice by preference because - by biology alone - mother knows she is the mother and only she really knows (or might do!) who the father is. There is an assumption in law, however, that unless told otherwise, the husband is the father of the baby.
- (3) Father/Mother jointly. From 1875 only for couples who were not married. Both were present at the registration and both signed.
- (4) Person present at the birth. This covers a wide range of people - could be grandmother, aunt, sister, midwife, neighbour. The more remote they are in kinship from the parents of the baby, the less likely they are to give accurate information.
- (5) The owner or occupier of the house or institution. This includes the master of the workhouse, matron of a hospital, a relative or friend if the mother had gone to have the baby there.
- (6) The person in charge of the child. This could be the father of an illegitimate child - he could not register as father and have his details as father included but he could do the registration. It could be the master of the workhouse if an unmarried mother died in childbirth - or equally any vague relative or kind neighbor who took the baby in.

These days it is pretty rare for anyone other than mother or father or both to register although all the other categories are very occasionally used to affect a registration if mother and/or father are not available for

whatever reason. E.g., I have seen "in charge of the child" in a registration where father of the baby was not known, and mother was too mentally disabled to be capable of doing the registration.

The address of the informant. Remember that if a mother has a baby away from her own home and does not do the registration, you do not have an address for her. Addresses can be very vague before about 1880 - often just the name of the town or village is all that is given.

In 1837 the list included 1, 2, 4 and 5 and by 1875 the list looked much as today.

Column 8 - Date of Registration

This is very relevant to the indexes because birth, death and marriage indexes are compiled by the date of registration NOT the date of the event (in marriages these 2 dates are usually the same but can be very different in births and deaths). So a baby born on eg 25th November 1851 that was not registered until 2nd January 1852 would be indexed in the March quarter for 1852 not the December quarter for 1851.

In the early days the parents had 3 weeks to register in and could not register at all after 3 months. After a while this was changed to 6 weeks to register in, a late registration could be made up to a year after the birth if the superintendent took the information and signed the register too, and registration could not take place after 1 year without reference to GRO. Once the delay was this long then proof of the event had to be provided by other parties who knew of this event e.g., midwife or doctor or siblings alive at the time and able to recall the event. Even now, if it is not possible to provide the proof and/or the people who can attest to the truth of the event it is not possible to register and there are people walking around today with no birth certificate.

It means, therefore, that a birth registered very late could be in the indexes a whole year later or more than expected. It is also relevant in that there were penalties for late registrations that were quite severe in the beginning and rather than get into trouble parents would "adjust" the date of birth to fall within the specified time for registration. If you have a discrepancy between a date of birth on a certificate and one given on a baptismal certificate, have a look at the date of registration. If it is very close to the six weeks, it is quite likely that the parents didn't tell the truth at registration but did at baptism where there were no penalties. There were no checks on the dates of birth until well into this century.

Column 9 - Signature of Registrar

This is not particularly relevant unless you have an ancestor who was a registrar! If the registrar AND the superintendent registrar have both signed in Column 9 then there was something unusual about the registration - such as a late one or a re-registration of a birth.

Column 10 - Name Given After Initial Registration

This is for the entry of a name given after initial registration. This relates to the fact that before civil registration, the recording of the major life events was in the hands of the church and especially of course of the established church (Church of England). There was tremendous resistance to civil registration by the established

church who felt (rightly as it happened) that people would stop baptizing their children if they had an alternative piece of legal paper in a civil registration. And the church had had the power and responsibility for centuries.

If a child was registered without a forename and was then baptized, or if a child was registered with forenames that were changed at baptism - because baptism was in place before civil registration and was considered more important - then the facility was given to change the first names (but NOT the surname). These days the baptism must take place within one year of the date of registration but the alteration can be made to the register at any time once the baptism has been completed.

The importance of this is that very often a child had a name changed by baptism but the civil registration was not corrected. That means that the name used by the child will not match the indexes, which are amended if a space 10 correction is made. At baptism, the names may be altered in order, changed in spelling, new ones put in, names taken out or changed totally. These days there is a facility for names to be changed without baptism because of course many people are of other faiths or do not go to church.

Source Document – Barbara Dixon
Her WEB Site is no longer active.
Document changed to USA Spelling.