



Image credit: Extract from the pedigree of the Smyth family of Long Ashton (ref. AC/F/1/5)

Bristol Archives: Useful links and resources for getting started with family history research



- Online catalogue archives.bristol.gov.uk
- Website www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/bristol-archives
- Email archives@bristol.gov.uk
- Telephone 0117 922 4224

Introduction

This is a guide to some of the resources available to use at Bristol Archives which are useful for family history research. It is intended as an introduction and is not an exhaustive guide.

Many resources for family history research are now available online. Some can be accessed anywhere for free. Bristol Archives and Bristol Libraries provide free access to some subscription sites when used on their computers.

[The Bristol and Avon Family History Society \(BAFHS\)](#) also have some very useful indexes which are available to purchase from them, or copies can be viewed in the Bristol Archives searchroom. They also provide [in person help](#).

Contents

Civil Registration	Page 3
Parish records	Page 4
Census records	Page 6
Other useful sources	Page 7
Other online help	Page 9
Physical documents	Page 10

This guide is correct in July 2024. Please note that websites, links, and accessibility / charging structures may have changed since then.

Finding civil registration information (England and Wales)

Civil registration of births, marriages and deaths began in 1837 and is a primary source for family history researchers. Prior to this, a key resource is the records of baptisms, marriages, and burials made by individual parishes.

[Free BMD \(Births, marriages and deaths\)](#) (free to use anywhere)

Transcribed records of civil registration in England and Wales. This is an ongoing volunteer project to transcribe the indexes to the registers of birth, marriage and death in England and Wales. This is not a complete transcription. You can see which years have been covered [here](#). At the time of writing this was:

Births: 1837 - 1989

Marriages: 1837 - 1990

Deaths: 1837 - 1986

Searching for births and deaths is fairly straightforward. Marriages pre 1912 can be a little more complicated because the marriage indexes of that time did not include the name of the spouse. Some tips to deal with this can be found on [this page](#). There are also some [free transcriptions of census and parish records](#) from the same volunteer group but only a very small percentage of the national data is available.

[The General Register Office \(GRO\)](#) (free to search from anywhere, registration and account required)

The index of births and deaths can be searched for free; it provides the same information as FreeBMD but covers some later years not yet indexed there. If you need to order a certificate this is a direct source and the cheapest place to get it from. At the time of writing the years included were:

Births: 1837 - 1934

Births: 1984 - 2020

Deaths: 1837 - 1957

Deaths: 1984 - 2020

Note: These are indexes only and don't provide the full information you will get from a certificate. If the marriage you are looking was in a church, or there is an associated church baptism or burial you may be able to get the same information from parish records. Parish marriage records contain identical information, whereas baptism and burial records usually give significantly less information than a birth or death certificate.

Even if you have access to subscription websites, both of these free sites can be an excellent starting point as they filter out a lot of the duplicate and less reliable hits those sites can generate from different indexes.

Ordering Birth, Death and Marriage certificates

Sometimes the only way to get the information you need is to pay for a copy of the certificate. These can be ordered centrally from the General Register Office (above). To order you need to know a name, the quarter the event was registered, the place of registration and the volume and page number. Between the GRO and FreeBMD websites it's possible to obtain all the information you need to order a certificate. You can also request copies from the local register office (for Bristol see [here](#)) however the General Register Office generally has more capacity to supply them.

Finding parish records (baptisms, marriages, burials)

We hold registers and records of Church of England parishes in the City and Deanery of Bristol (later the Archdeaconry of Bristol) which is part of the Diocese of Bristol. These cover the city of Bristol, some parishes in southern Gloucestershire, the north and east of Bristol, plus a few parishes in north Somerset. Some registers go back to 1538, when parish registers were first introduced.

We also hold some non-conformist records for groups such as the Baptists, Congregational, Unitarian, Society of Friends (Quakers), Methodists, and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Clifton.

You can see a list of the registers we hold in our handlist of parish registers which can be found on our online [source guides](#) page.

The majority of our parish registers are available to view online via Ancestry and this is the easiest way to view them (see the 'Ancestry' section below for more details). Online they can be searched by name and date, so it is less vital to know which parish an event happened in, or exactly where your ancestors lived, than when they were only available on microfiche or as hard copies.

Not all parish registers from other areas are digitised or available online. Those that are, will mainly be found on Ancestry or Find My Past. These sites will have different ones, so it is worth checking both. Occasionally, local archives have made digitised records available online, so it is worth checking their websites too. Church of England registers tend to be easier to find than non-conformist and other religions, as Anglican parishes are obliged to deposit their records with an appropriate repository.

Online Parish Clerks, part of [UKBMD](#).

This contains links to many volunteer listing projects of parish records and sometimes links to where original records are held. Always try and see a scan of the original record, if possible, to rule out transcription errors.

[Ancestry](#) (subscription site, free to use at Bristol Archives and Libraries)

Ancestry includes numerous record sets which are of use for family history. Most notable for us, it includes scans of the earlier Parish Registers we hold at Bristol Archives. Ancestry can be a little confusing because some datasets have previously been made available as transcriptions and this causes some records to be duplicated. It's not always clear how to access a digitised image.

To find the index that leads to our digitised parish registers, open the search menu and select 'card catalogue'. In the 'keywords' box type "Bristol Archives" and click search. The first five results are our parish registers. You can select and search any of these record sets and you'll get an option to view the original documents.

You can use the 'Browse this Collection' dropdown on the right-hand side to check that the parish and date you require is within the collection. You can also use this menu to browse through the scans of the individual volumes.

Ancestry includes many different record sets from all over the world. It's often a good idea to use the card catalogue feature or at least narrow down the number of record sets you are searching, so that you are targeting your search as much as possible.

[Find My Past](#) (subscription site, free to use at Bristol Archives and Libraries)

Find My Past is similar to Ancestry but holds some different record sets. Most notably, it includes the 1921 census which is not included with Ancestry. It is always worth trying both to see if they have the record that you are looking for. Find My Past has a similar function to the Ancestry card catalogue. Find this by selecting 'search' (top menu), then 'all record sets' which you will find on the right-hand side. You could for example search for a county name to see what records are held.

[Scotland's People](#) (pay per view)

This is the official site for the records of people living in Scotland. The indexes are free to use from anywhere, but charges are made for viewing or downloading records. Records include statutory records of births, marriages, and deaths (from 1855), church registers, and census records. You can find more details of what is

available from this page of the website: <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/what-records-are-in-the-site>.

Irish Genealogy (free to use from anywhere)

This includes many Irish civil, church and census records. There are also many more links to sources of records for Ireland and Northern Ireland available on the [NI Direct](#) website.

Finding census records

A census has been taken in England, Scotland and Wales every 10 years since 1841 and is released to the public after 100 years. The information recorded on the census varies each time, but they generally include the names of residents in each household, their relationship to the head, age, occupation, and place of birth. They can be very useful for tracking ancestors and their relationships to each other.

Both Ancestry and Find My Past have the England, Wales and Scotland census up until 1901, and England and Wales for 1911. It can be worth trying both sites because there can be transcription errors and omissions. Only Find My Past has the 1921 census for England and Wales. Find My Past also makes it easier to search the census by address, so we recommend using it if you wish to search in this way.

On Ancestry, the England, Wales and Scotland censuses are all separate, so you may need to search them all if your ancestors moved around. On Find My Past all these records are combined. It's worth remembering that the census is a snapshot of where people were on that night, so if your ancestor is not where you expect them to be, they could have been visiting friends or relations or working away.

The Scotland Census for 1911 and 1921 is only available at [Scotlands People](#).

The 1921 census is the last census release we will have until the 1951 census is released in 2052. The 1931 census returns were destroyed during WW2 and none was taken in 1941 due to the war. There is an interim record however...

The 1939 Register for England and Wales

This register looks very similar to a census and includes some of the same information. However, it was compiled for different reasons. It was not a snapshot like a census, it was designed to be a comprehensive list of the population to

organise identity cards and ration books in the early days of WW2. This register is available to search on both Ancestry and Find My Past. Because it has been released within 100 years of its compilation, the names of anyone with a birth date less than 100 years ago has been redacted from the register (unless they have been notified as deceased). This has been done by covering the entry, so it is clear when you look at the register where this has happened. The other thing that is different with this register is that it was used post-war by the NHS. You will notice some additions in green ink - these are mostly changes of name, most commonly when women notified the NHS that they had changed their name on marriage.

The 1939 Register records for Scotland and Northern Ireland are not available online. These can be applied for from [National Records of Scotland](#) (£15 fee) and the [Public Record of Northern Ireland](#) (via freedom of information request).

Other useful sources

Bristol Archives [website](#) (free to search from anywhere)

This includes [our catalogue](#) which lists the collections that we hold in our strongrooms. Most of our holdings have not been digitised but some photographs are available to view online, such as the [Vaughan postcard collection](#) and the [Public Relations Office photographs](#).

Our website also includes a number of useful indexes:

[Index of Wills 1605 – 1864](#) – An index of the wills which are available to view on microfiche in our searchroom.

[Index of early black presence in Bristol](#) – A compilation of results from multiple sources within our collections

[Index of ships, captains and muster rolls 1747 - 1795](#)

We also have a number of source guides to help you with your research which can be downloaded for free here: [Source guides](#)

Arnos Vale Cemetery Registers (available in Bristol Archives searchroom)

Arnos Vale provides its own paid search service (see their [website](#) for details). The only free way of accessing these burial records is via our dedicated media PC in the searchroom. This contains images of the church, chapel (non-conformist) and cremation registers, and images of their accompanying indexes. There is an instruction sheet explaining how to navigate through the images next to the machine.

Bristol and Avon Family History Society

The Bristol and Avon Family History Society [website](#) includes several online databases which can be searched for free, including a database of local church inscriptions.

BAFHS have also indexed other datasets which are available to purchase from them via their website, or accessed for free on the computers in the Bristol Archives searchroom (select "Indexes" from the home page), these include:

Burials

Many of these include dates of death as well as the burial date.

Municipal Burials at Greenbank (1871-1991)

Municipal Burials at Avonview, Brislington, Canford, Henbury, Ridgeway Park, and Shirehampton (1883-1991)

Burials at Bunhill Fields (1805-1880)

Apprenticeship and Burgess books

These can be useful to confirm a person's trade. As well as listing the apprentice's trade, they also list their fathers name and trade as well as their master's name. For a long time, being a Burgess of the city was the only way to be entitled to vote.

Apprenticeship Registers (1532-1724 and 1724-2009)

Burgess Books (1557-1995)

Creed Registers

These are a form of admissions register for the workhouses, they not only give the religious creed and dates of admission to the workhouse but can also include details about next of kin.

Eastville Workhouse Registers volumes 7-13 (1875-1882)

[British Newspaper Archive](#) (free to use at Bristol Archives)

You will need to create an account to use this site, but you can view pages for free whilst using it at Bristol Archives and libraries. A number of Bristol newspapers have been digitised and made available on this site. The best way of seeing which ones are included is to scroll down the homepage until you see the map of the UK. In the "Choose a county" box select "Bristol". The results page that comes up has a list of newspapers down the side, you can find out what dates are held by clicking on a newspaper title then selecting "more details". It is also worth searching the whole record set as many Bristol stories will also have been reported in other areas.

We don't keep runs of newspapers at Bristol Archives but the Bristol Reference Library has a lot of newspapers available on microfiche - a list of these is available on the computers in our searchroom.

[Know Your Place - Bristol](#) (free to use from anywhere)

This is a very useful site featuring layered maps of Bristol, which can be easily compared to each other. Choose which maps you would like to see from the “Basemaps” menu top right.

Street names can be searched for using the search box in the top left. Please note these only relate to current street names, so to find a street that no longer exists you will need to inspect the map of the correct period.

There’s lots of information on Know Your Place, indicated by coloured dots on the map which you can click on – so experiment with the various layers to find out what is there. There are some guides available here: [Know Your Place \(kypwest.org.uk\)](http://kypwest.org.uk).

The ‘historic parish’ layer can be useful to find the boundaries of historic parishes. While on this layer you can also access the ownership and tenancy information from the 1840 tithe apportionment. To do this, click anywhere in the parish you are interested in on the map, select the > arrow in the box that appears, click “more info,” the document may show straight away, or you may be prompted to download it as a PDF. The plot numbers on the document relate to the numbers on the 1840 tithe map, so it’s also important to have that map selected when using the PDF.

There are a few other Know Your Place sites for [nearby counties](#), but currently Bristol has the most detail. London has its own version called [Layers of London](#).

Historical maps of the whole country can be found online at the [National Library of Scotland](#).

Other online help

There are many websites which are helpful for family history and people research. We would highly recommend the research guides on the [National Archives website](#) as a great place to get advice about lots of different topic and record types.

You will also find some useful links, including many of those mentioned in this guide via the ‘useful websites’ section of the home page on the computers in the Bristol Archives searchroom.

Physical documents

We hold a lot of physical documents which may help with Bristol based family research. These can be found via [our catalogue](#) and requested in our searchroom.

Some of the most commonly used physical documents are [Street Directories](#) and [Electoral Registers](#).

Our collection of street directories runs between 1768-1973, but this is far from a complete run as they were not published every year. The area covered and the information included does change within the run. The bulk of these provide a useful alphabetical list of city streets, the name of the head of household for each property and an alphabetical list of head of household. They can be useful for finding people in between censuses and locating streets which don't survive today. Bristol Reference Library also holds an incomplete run of them.

Electoral registers are arranged by street, within ward and division so you can only find people via their address. Ward and division boundaries change over the years, we have a guide which can help to locate which volume you need so please ask. For many years this only existed in hard copy in the searchroom but it is now one of our online [source guides](#). Please note that we cannot supply information from registers less than 10 years old - they will need to be viewed in person, and only handwritten notes can be taken.

We also hold records relating to [schools](#), [hospitals](#), [courts](#), [workhouses](#), [workplace records](#), and [crew lists](#) for ships registered in Bristol (please note that we do not have passenger lists). Each of the links above will take you to a page of our catalogue which highlights collections for that topic, these are an introductory overview and not a comprehensive listing of everything under that topic.

Please note that some records will be restricted under the Data Protection Act 2018, because they potentially include sensitive information about living people. We are sometimes able to provide access to a record, or provide a transcript of it, if you can provide proof that the person it concerns is deceased. Otherwise, records are normally open after 100 years have passed since the creation of that record. Where a record is restricted, this is noted on the catalogue.

If you are researching a death, we hold some coroner's records. Pre-1836 these are within the [Quarter Sessions records](#). Unfortunately, the records for 1836-1936 were destroyed by the coroner, and post-1936 requests must be made directly to the coroner. We therefore generally recommend searching the newspapers, as inquests were often reported there.

For further family history guidance, please see our hard copy 'Family History' source guide available upon request from staff in the searchroom. We hope to have an updated version online in the future.