

Finding Your Pre-WWI British Soldier

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OVERVIEW

The British soldier served all over the British Empire, many moving from one part to another. The major collection of British Army records are at The National Archives at Kew. However, the records you need to document his service may be scattered across the globe, as will be shown from the methodologies and case studies used in this presentation.

GETTING STARTED

British Military research is a very big and potentially complicated subject with lots of different records available, but some might only exist for a short period. Use guidance provided by TNA research guides - www.nationalarchives.gov.uk and look for how to books in the bibliography.

ARMY ORGANIZATION

Before 1660
1660-1750
1750-1870
1870-1945

TRACING A BRITISH OFFICER

To get a broad outline of an officers career use the Annual Army Lists (1754-1879), which are available online at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk. The lists are arranged by regiment for the regular army only, but are indexed from 1766. Engineer and artillery officers are not included in the index until 1803. Search Discovery - the catalog using the term Army List, limiting your search to WO 65, will provide a complete listing of all available. There are quarterly (1879-1922) and monthly lists (1798-1940). The unofficial Hart's New Army Lists are issued quarterly (1839-1915) - look especially at the footnotes which often provide details of service and campaign awards, though the information should be used carefully as it was often provided by the officer. Many of Hart's lists are available online at <https://archive.org/details/nationallibraryofscotland>.

Army Lists
Annual 1754-1879

Monthly 1798- Jun. 1940
Quarterly 1879-1922
Half Yearly 1923- Feb. 1950
Hart's Army Lists 1839-1915 (unofficial)

Records of Commissions, Transfers and Promotions

Search for gazetting of promotions at www.london-gazette.co.uk. Search for letters regarding events.

A detailed outline of the officers early career may also be contained in *Royal Military Calendar or Army Service and Commission Book*. 5 vols. 1820. Available www.archive.org

Seek Regimental Service records, often in WO 25 and WO 76.

Records of Service
War Office Returns (WO 25)
1 st series, 1809-1810
2 nd series, 1828
3 rd series, 1829
4 th series, 1847
5 th series, 1870-1872

Regimental Records
1755-1954 (WO 76)

Half-Pay and Pensions

Half Pay
Ledgers (PMG 4)
1737-1841 by Regiment
1841-1921 alphabetical
Lists (WO 24, WO 25)
1713-1809 by Regiment
1783-1813 British American forces

Retired Full Pay
Registers (WO 23)
Ledgers, 1813-1896 (PMG 3)

Widows Pensions
Children / Dependent Relatives' Allowances
Pensions for Wounds

Seek regimental histories, see White, *Bibliography of Regimental Histories of the British Army*, as officers are often named and careers described. Many histories are online at www.archive.org.

TRACING A BRITISH SOLDIER

The easiest starting point for records of a soldier's career is the incomplete collection of Royal Hospital Chelsea Soldiers' documents (attestation and discharge papers) in WO 97. These records can be searched by name and downloaded on www.findmypast.com. An index to the records can also be searched in the National Archives catalog up to 1854, this index allows some additional searches so it can be beneficial to use both indexes. For men awarded out-pensions by the Board of Kilmainham Hospital, there are certificates of service, 1783-1822, in WO 119, searchable by name in the National Archives catalog at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk.

Note that a soldier described as a pensioner usually means that he was receiving an out-pension from either Chelsea or Kilmainham, not that he was an in-pensioner living in one of these institutions.

To be an in-pensioner, a man was a life pensioner of the army (in receipt of a service or disability pension), aged 55 or more (unless with a disability pension) and free from the responsibility of supporting a wife or children. There are no records for Chelsea for the period 1813 to 1824. For 1824-1917 there are admission books and rolls in WO 23/162, and an alphabetical register for 1837-1872 in WO 23/146. For Kilmainham there are admission books 1704-1922 in WO 188 and a sample of pensioners' certificates 1798-1817 in WO 900/39-42.

Most soldiers are out-pensioners and their records consist of: admission books; regimental registers; pension returns, none of which are available online. Soldiers not usually found in WO 97 include:

- Soldiers who died in service
- Documents of soldiers discharged by purchase prior to 1883 (these have not survived)

Registers of next of kin - If family tradition suggests your soldier died in service, try these records relating to payments to next of kin. There are gaps in the records, but they are arranged alphabetically and are name indexed. The registers covering the period 1810-1822 are in WO 25/2966-2971. They are searchable by name in the National Archives catalog. The records provide the name of soldier, the regiment, period of death, amount of effects and credits, date of order to agent, agent's name, person applying (usually next of

kin) and his or her address. The records have not been scanned or microfilmed.

Royal Artillery soldiers - Artillery pensions prior to 1834 were paid by the Ordnance Office, later by the Royal Hospital Chelsea. Registers of Ordnance Pensions (1816-1844) are in WO 54/338-493. There are also pension minutes for 1808-1834 in WO 47/2760-2851 and for 1822-1855 in WO 55/540-572.

Supplementary records of Royal Artillery service are preserved, 1791-1855, and for the Royal Horse Artillery, 1803-1863 in WO 69.

Other Army Sources

- Campaign Medals, 1793-1912
- Meritorious Service Awards, 1846-1919
- Long Service & Good Conduct Medals, 1855-1909
- Distinguished Conduct Medal, 1855-1909
- Service Returns No.3, Discharges, 1783-1810
- Service Returns No.1, 1806
- Muster Master Generals' Index of Casualties, 1797-1817
- Casualty Returns, 1810-1840
- Index to Casualty Returns, 1810-1840
- Chelsea Pension Returns, 1842-1862
- Chelsea Registers of Out-Pensioners, 1820-1875
- Soldiers Documents, 1873-1882, 1883-1913

Records of Service (WO 97)

- Soldiers Documents 1756-1913
 - Discharged to pensions
 - 1 st series, 1756-1872, alpha by regiment
 - 2 nd series, 1873-1882, alpha for cavalry, artillery, infantry and corps.
 - 3 rd series, 1883-1913, alpha

Description Books 1756-1900 (WO 25)

Returns of Service 1793-1810 (WO 25)

Pay Lists and Muster Rolls

Casualty Lists (WO 25)

Pension Records (WO 97)

Out Pensioners- Main Series

Admission Books (WO 116 / 117 / 118)

Regimental Registers (WO 120 / 23)

Pension Returns (WO 22)

Special Series

In-Pensioners (WO 23)

You can ask your questions about the British Army in: britregiments@egroups.com

MILITIA

The militia were reorganized by the Militia Act of 1757. The militia consisted of one or more infantry regiments for each county, raised from volunteers and conscripts chosen by ballot from each parish (or substitutes purchased by the latter). The officers were responsible to and appointed by the Lords Lieutenant. In wartime they came under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief and were liable to serve anywhere in the British Isles, but not overseas.

After the reorganization of the Army in 1882, the county militia regiments became the third battalions and the volunteers units the fourth.

In 1906 the Militia was renamed the Special Reserve. The Volunteers and Yeomanry were renamed the Territorials.

Records of Militia Officers (HO 50)
Other Ranks (WO 13 / 96 / 128)
Miscellaneous Records (WO 68)

The records of militia soldiers discharged to pension in WO 96 for 1806-1915, are included in British Army Service Records 1760-1915 dataset on www.findmypast.com

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA - www.collectionscanada.gc.ca

Until 1871 the defense of Canada was primarily the responsibility of British military and naval forces. When the British forces left in 1871 many documents were transferred to England and are now in the National Archives at Kew. Many documents were left in Canada and have been gathered by Library and Archives Canada and regrouped in one major fonds, RG 8. This fonds covers a wide variety of subjects such as British Regiments in Canada, the Canadian Militia, the War of 1812, ordnance, fortifications, management of Indian affairs and much more. There is much correspondence relating to appointments and promotions, claims for losses, rations for military widows, deserters, settlers, etc. It includes muster rolls and pay lists for militia units and British regiments.

How to find the records. On the bottom of the home page choose "Browse by Product Type: Databases". From the long list, select: Microform Digitization. This

will highlight the most recent collection. Choose: Browse by Title. Choose: British Military and Naval Records (RG 8, C Series - Index only or after searching the index then Documents. Select the Title. This will take you to a list of microfilms numbers for the index (82 reels) and the documents (484 reels). Before starting consult the Help option which will explain how to use and decode the index cards to access these important records. For an overview of this collection read the Preliminary Inventory, available as a pdf on the help page.

Archived Guide to Canadian Military History

In the Discover the collections section, select Military and Peacekeeping. Then under Research Aids, select From Colony to Country: A Readers Guide to Canadian Military History, the War of 1812. This is an archived, not updated part of the collection.

Sections provided for:

General References
Government and the Military
Troops and Traditions
Personal Stories
Aboriginal People
Art, Music and Literature
Web Research

Other Record Groups

Record groups which may be of interest to War of 1812 researchers:

RG 7 Governor General's Office
RG 8 British Military and Naval Records
RG 9 Department of Militia and Defence
RG 10 Indian Affairs

INTERNET AIDS

Cyndi's List has a whole section for UK Military at www.cyndislist.com/miluk.htm.

National Army Museum - www.nam.ac.uk. Primary military museum in England for pre-WWI period. Helpful research guides and extensive bookstore.

Mailing Lists - To get answers to your questions there are mailing list for many of the wars in which the British Army was involved. Start with *Cyndi's List* under *UK- Military*, then under *Mailing Lists, Newsgroups & Chat Groups*. One especially useful list is: britregiments@yahoogroups.com

RESOURCES

Identifies resources explaining how to do research and to how find resources, their bibliographies will guide you to many other resources.

1. Bevan, Amanda, ed. *Tracing your Ancestors in The National Archives*. Kew, Surrey: The National Archives. 7th ed. 2007.
2. Blank, Dr. Stuart C. *Researching British Military History on the Internet: The British Army and the Armies of the Commonwealth, Empire and Dominions*. Paignton, Devon: Alwyn Enterprises. 2007.
3. Box, Allan. *A Soldier in the Family: A Source Book for Australian Military Genealogy - The First Fleet to the Gulf War*. Gippsland, VIC, AUS: Author. 1994. Especially chapter 2 which identifies sources for British regiments that served in Australia.
4. Brooks, Richard and Matthew Little. *Tracing Your Royal Marine Ancestors: A Guide for Family Historians*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword. 2008.
5. Chandler, David and Ian Becket. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Army*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1994
6. Cox, Kenneth G. *The War of 1812 in British North America, Searching for your Ancestor's Elusive War Records*. Ontario: Global Genealogy Press. 2017
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8. Fortescue, Sir John William. *History of the British Army*. London: Macmillan. 13 volumes 1910-1935. Available www.archive.org
9. Fowler, Simon. *Army Records for Family Historians. Public Record Office Readers' Guide No. 2*. London, England: PRO Publications 2nd ed. 1998.
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11. Gibson, Jeremy and Mervyn Medlycott. *Militia Lists and Musters 1757-1876: A Directory of Holdings in the British Isles*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publ. Co. 2nd ed. 1990
12. Hayward, John, Diana Birch and Richard Bishop. *British Battles and Medals, seventh edition*. London: Spink. 2006
13. Higham, Robin. *A Guide to the Sources of British Military History*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1971
14. Irving, L. Homfray. *Officers of the British Forces in Canada During the War of 1812-1815*. Welland Tribune Print. 1908. Available www.archive.org.
15. Jolly, Emma. *Tracing Your British Indian Ancestors: A Guide for Family Historians*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword. 2012
16. Jordan, Gerald. ed. *British Military History: A Supplement to Robert Higham's Guide to Sources*. New York. Garland Publishing. 1988.
17. Kitzmiller, John M. *In Search of the "Forlorn Hope": A Comprehensive Guide to Locating British Regiments and Their Records (1640- WWI)*. Salt Lake City, UT: Manuscript Publ. Foundation. 3 vols. 1988
18. Laws, MES. *Battery Records of the Royal Artillery, 1716-1877*. Woolwich, 1952-1970
19. Milner, Paul. "New Online British Military Index at Public Record Office" in *BIGWILL* (Newsletter of British Interest Group of Wisconsin and Illinois) vol. 9, No. 2, May 2002
20. Spencer, William. *Records of the Militia and Volunteer Forces*. Kew, Surrey: Public Record Office. 1997
21. Spencer, William. *Army Records: A Guide for Family Historians*. Kew, Surrey: The National Archives. 2008
22. Spencer, William. *Medals: The Researcher's Guide*. Kew, Surrey: National Archives. 2006.
23. Thomas, Garth. *Records of the Royal Marines. Public Record Office Readers' Guide No. 10*. London, England: PRO Publications 1994
24. Watts, Michael J. and Christopher T. Watts. *My Ancestor was in the British Army: How can I find out more about him?* London, England: Society of Genealogists. 1992
25. Westlake, Ray. *Tracing the Rifle Volunteers: A Guide for Military and Family Historians*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword. 2010
26. Westlake, Ray. *The Territorials 1908-1914: A Guide for Military and Family Historians*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword. 2011
27. White, Arthur S. *A Bibliography of Regimental Histories of the British Army*. Dallington, East Sussex: The Naval & Military Press. 1965
28. Wise, Terence and Shirley. *A Guide to Military Museums and other Places of Military Interest*. Knighton, Powys, Wales: Imperial Press. 9th ed. 1999.