

Handout BIFHSGO Fall Conference 2011

How to Find Your Ancestors in the British Army 1760-1945

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If you are serious about pursuing your British Army Ancestors you should obtain a copy of the following paperback book which you will refer to constantly:

My Ancestor Was in the British Army: A Guide to British Army Sources for Family Historians by Michael J. Watts and Christopher T. Watts, London: Society of Genealogists, 2nd.edition, 2009, 303 pages

Most of the original documents associated with British Army family history research are located at The National Archives of the United Kingdom located just outside London at Kew with the archival classification of WO (standing for War Office).

Please remember that a sizeable minority of individuals serving in the British Army were from Ireland, Scotland, and Wales so that British Army records may help you solve the great mystery of where your ancestors came from Ireland as one example.

There is almost a rigid dividing line in British Army Records between those surviving records for Officers and Enlisted Men. The following pages contain a select list of various types of records that may help you to find out whether your relatives and ancestors served in the British Army

Officers Records:

There are Official Lists of Officers in the British Army beginning in manuscript form c1702, printed books beginning in 1754 (Indexed from 1766) and starting in 1881 brief details of service. Lt.General Henry George Hart 1808-1878 was dissatisfied with the information contained in the Official Army Lists so he created his own unofficial Army List which tended to have more information than the Official Lists. His lists of officers came to be known as Hart's Army List or The New Army List. They were published 1839-1915. Check your closest major library to see what copies may be available locally and always check now websites like Google Books to see what books you can download for free.

As an Officer was promoted, went on half pay, resigned, retired you would see normally a reference to that event published in the London Gazette. You can search for free, copies of the London Gazette at www.london-gazette.co.uk.

There are a wide variety of service files for Officers. The following are a few of the most important:

WO 76: Regimental Returns of Officers Service 1764-1913c arranged by regiment

For selected years the British Government did surveys of Officers in the Army:

1809-1810: WO 25 in Alphabetical Order

1828: WO 25 in Alphabetical Order of Retired Officers on Full and Half Pay contains family information

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1829: WO 25 Arranged by Regiment of Serving Officers contains family information

1847: WO 25 in Alphabetical Order of Serving Officers contains family information

1870-1872 WO 25 by Regiment and year of return contains family information

Enlisted Men also known as Other Ranks:

Again, there is a wide variety of British Army records available. The following are only some of the most important types of records. More and more British Army records are becoming online on Ancestry and Find Your Past so always see what is new on these websites.

WO 97 commonly known as the Pension Records 1760-1913 available on Find My Past

1760-1882: discharged to pension 1883-1913: discharged from the army

WO 25 Regimental Description Books 1756-1878 survive primarily for selected regiments during the early part of the 19th century

WO 12 Muster Rolls and Pay Lists: Using these records you would be able to follow a typical soldier from the beginning of his career until the end. The problem with these records is that they have not been digitized yet so that they are not on the Internet with few exceptions.

WO 100-102 1793-1949 Campaign Medals and Award Rolls: Information about soldiers who received a Medal for service in the 19th century is appearing on Ancestry and Find My Past and various other websites.

World War One Service Records: WO 363 and WO 364 the surviving service records of the enlisted men are available on Ancestry. Roughly 60% of the service records were destroyed in a fire in September 1940. However, since almost everyone who served in World War One got a medal you can check the Medal Registers for World War One on Ancestry.

Perhaps, your ancestor got married and had children while he was in the British Army. Besides looking at the usual sources of Indexes to Civil Registration or church records have a look at the Regimental Registers of Birth 1761-1925, Chaplains' Returns of Birth, Marriage, and Death 1796-1880 and the Army Returns of Birth, Marriage, and Death 1881-1955 available on Find My Past and other places.

War Diaries have been used by the British Army since 1907. Once you know the regiment and battalion in which you ancestors served you can follow the activities of your ancestors' units during World War One and World War Two almost on a day to day basis. Some war diaries are now online at The National Archives for World War One.

Once you know the regiment in which your family members served and even if you have found service records whether they were officers or enlisted men this is just the beginning of your historical research as now you want to find published histories of the regiment to add all the important details about where

he or she may have been and what dangerous activities or military engagements in which they may have participated.

Items of interest:

British Army Regiments in Canada

Still the best book that I have seen on the subject is C.H.Stewart , *The Service of British Regiments in Canada and North America*, Ottawa: Dept. of National Defence, 1962

There is a website that has short details of British Regiments in Canada. It has a long web address, simply put in Google "British Regiments in Canada". It will appear right away.

The following are a select group of websites that I have found of particular interest over the years:

1: Napoleonic War Period

www.napoleon-series.org (excellent site on all aspects of the Napoleonic Wars)

2: 19th Century

www.britishmedals.us "Asplin Military History Resources" (excellent site for British Army Medal and Casualty Rolls with numerous military case histories)

3: 19th Century

www.dnw.co.uk (excellent site for 19th century British Army Medal Rolls) Dix Noonan Web

4: 19th century

www.surreygenealogist.com (various medal and casualty rolls)

5: 19th century and 20th centuries

Glosterson.tripod.com "Officers Died" (list of British Army officers who died in various conflicts)

6: Boer War

www.angloboerwar.com (excellent site on all aspects of the Boer War)

7: World War One

www.1914-1918.net "The Long Long Trail" (excellent site for information on British and Commonwealth Military Units during World War One)

8: World War Two

www.unithistories.com (see the section on British Army Officers during World War Two)

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