

## NORFOLK FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY: LONDON GROUP

### OUR MEETING ON OCTOBER 19TH 2019

Our talk this afternoon was “Hatch, Match and Despatch: a few lessons from civil registration” presented by Antony Marr – in which he shed much light on the documents that are the backbone of family history research.

Antony retired from his work as a police officer in 2012 and turned his hobby of genealogy into a business. He also worked as a deputy registrar in Buckinghamshire. It was impressed upon us that the correct term is Registration or Register Office, not Registry Office!

The theme of today’s talk was to approach civil registration from the actual perspective of the Registrar and to explain why documents are written “as they are” and what the wording actually means.

Registration of births was compulsory from 1837 (but was badly worded in the original Act – stating parents “may” register the birth; this was amended to “shall” in 1874). Within three years of the 1836 Act, people were being taken to court for not supplying information to the registrar. In the early years, there was around 6-8% non-registration. It improved as the years passed, but there was still some non-compliance.

The original document is a “Birth Register Entry” – not what we refer to as a “Birth Certificate”.

The Birth Register Entry is a unique document, bearing the signature of the informant. A Certificate can be issued on the day of registration, but each such document is a “certified copy” of what is in the actual Register. Certificates will not have the original signatures.

Some officials will photocopy the original when requested by a researcher, while others will just write out by hand or type up the information into a blank document.

Every quarter, the Registrar would copy out the information for the General Registration Office, which is then re-copied. The documents in the GRO are copies of a copy!

Marriage registers from churches on sites such as FindMyPast and Ancestry are scanned from the originals.

### BIRTH

The Registrar needs to make 4 checks:

- Is it a live birth?

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- Did the birth occur within the specific registry district?
- Is it within the time limit that a Registrar is able to register a birth (up to twelve months)?
- That the birth has not already been registered. (Unless, for some reason, it is a re-registration).

### Surname

The child itself has no surname entered before 1969. The surname was initially only required for the parents. Births are indexed by surname or surnames of parents, depending on marital status, although indexing rules have differed.

### No father named

From 1874, an unmarried father had to be present in order for his name to be entered in the Register. Regulations were vague before that. Some Registrars would add an unmarried father's name, if known, without him being there (but this was not policy).

### Informant

The information in this column reflects how someone signed their name, rather than their actual name.

Qualification to be the informant was usually "father" or "mother" and the address would be where they were residing when they informed the Registrar of the birth (rather than where the birth took place).

The mother was always the primary informant. If the father, on his own, informed the Registrar, this meant he was married to the mother (or claiming to be!). Informants can also be the occupier of the premises where this birth has taken place, any other person present at the birth, or another person in charge of the child.

The information in the birth informant column can indicate:

- One informant, and father named (the couple are married).
- Two informants, mother and father, both with different names (they are not married, at least not to each other!).

What is a woman's maiden name (in the Birth indexes)?

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The actual definition of “maiden name” for registration purposes is the “name in which a woman first contracted a marriage”, so it is not always the same as the name at birth, e.g. in cases of adoption, taking a step-father’s name, or any other change of name prior to marriage.

By GRO definition, an unmarried woman has no “maiden name”, which is correctly reflected in the new GRO birth indexes.

### Late registration

Most of what seem to be cases of “late registration” are in fact “re-registration”, sometimes years after the actual birth.

This could occur for a number of reasons:

- On the instructions of the Registrar General, because fraud had been detected.
- To legitimise a child born to unmarried parents (after 1926, and now compulsory).
- To add the names of an unmarried father not named in the original registration (after 1953).

## MARRIAGE

Marriage certificates are still completed by hand. The Registrar attends the venue with blank documents and the requisite fountain pen, which must be used!

### Witnesses

A couple can have as many witnesses as they like. There is no minimum age, the witnesses do not need to know the couple and no details are recorded except the signature.

They are witnessing that the couple have said the oaths of marriage in front of them.

The Registrar will copy the signatures on the document in the style of the original.

In a church wedding, the officiating minister in effect becomes the Registrar under Civil Registration. In the past, for non-Conformist and Catholic weddings, the Registrar would also attend.

### Multiple marriages

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People who marry twice can present all sorts of problems – especially if it is to the same person!

Antony showed as an example where a couple got married when they were in fact still married to other people (stating they were a widower and a widow) – hence a bigamous marriage – but, later they were able to divorce their respective spouses and remarried (as divorcees).

There were bigamy spikes during both the World Wars.

A Marriage Certificate is not always proof of a valid marriage (e.g. it might be bigamous, or otherwise invalid).

## DEATH

Three different certificates are required to register a death:

- Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD) – completed by the doctor.
- Death Certificate – produced from the Registry.
- Certificate for burial / cremation.

### Cause of death

Note the numbered causes of death on a Certificate:

- Firstly – the primary cause of death.
- Secondly – what caused the above condition.
- Thirdly – any underlying condition or other contributory factors.

There are differences between “modes of dying” (such as “cardiac arrest”) and “cause of death” (“old age” is still an acceptable term).

### Informant

If the coroner is the informant, this means that the death went to inquest (but does not necessarily mean it was held in court with a jury).

A great deal of information can be obtained from the informant column. The informant can be:

- Any relative by blood, marriage or adoption, but not ex-spouses.

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- Anyone who was “present at the death” or “in attendance” or an occupier of the same house (e.g. a Workhouse) can be an informant.
- Anyone causing burial or cremation (including live-in partners), but this does not mean a funeral director.

Note that on older Certificates, it was not necessary to state the relationship to the deceased.

### Form 9

The “Green Form” required to authorise burial or cremation, which can sometimes be given before the registration of the death. The section of the form with the place of burial listed is only kept for six years under current regulations.

Antony showed us a recent fake death certificate which had been made up in order to make an inheritance or an insurance claim in the USA. The giveaway was that the doctor was shown as the informant, with a signature – something that would not be present in an original document.

Antony answered questions from the audience before, during and after the talk, and applied both his genealogical expertise and knowledge as a Registrar to problematic certificates brought in by attendees, and any other questions relating to registration, both civil and otherwise.

It was a very informative session which gave us a lot to think about when we come to interpret what is written on Civil Registration certificates and what this information might mean for our research.