

National Army Museum Information Sheet 2: Soldiers' Records 1660–1913



Introduction

There are a number of different places where you can find information on soldiers who served in the British Army before 1914. This guide is not intended to be exhaustive, but simply to help you to start in the right place.

A standing army only became a feature of government after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Parliament was suspicious of standing armies, and this ensured that the British Army remained comparatively small – its peacetime strength in the mid-eighteenth century rarely exceeded 20,000. As British imperial commitments grew, so did the size of the Army. By the later nineteenth century it was over 200,000 strong.

As the Army grew, so did the administrative structure necessary to run it. Army records are sparse before 1750; after this date they become progressively more detailed, and therefore more useful to the family historian. Nearly all surviving official Army records for the period 1660–1913 are held by the National Archives. Most of them were generated by the War Office and therefore carry a 'WO' reference. An essential guide to these records is William Spencer, *Army Records: A Guide for Family Historians*, Kew (2008).

Research at the National Army Museum: the Templer Study Centre (TSC)

Researchers who wish to view material held by the National Army Museum may do so in the Templer Study Centre (www.nam.ac.uk/tsc). This contains one of the largest collections of books and archives

relating to the pre-1914 Army in this country, including all the published works mentioned in this leaflet. The TSC is open from 10.00am to 5.00pm on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, and the first and third Saturdays of each month. It is closed from Sunday to Tuesday. If you do not already hold a Reader's Ticket, please bring with you some form of identification which has your name and address on it, such as a driving licence card, or a passport with additional utilities bill as proof of address.

Service records: Officers

The most useful source of information about the career of a commissioned officer is usually the *Army List*, published annually (later monthly), since 1754. The TSC holds a virtually complete run of these. Details of officers commissioned before 1727 can be found in Charles Dalton's *English Army Lists and Commission Registers 1661–1714*, London (1960), and *George The First's Army 1714–1727*, London (1910).

The *Army List* will tell you the name of the regiment in which an officer served, and the dates of his various promotions. From this information you can construct a broad outline of his military career. Promotions, resignations, and changes of regiment were also published in the War Office sections of the *London Gazette*. The TSC holds copies of these from 1852 to 1929; earlier issues are held by the British Library and the Guildhall Library.

Publications such as the *Royal Military Calendar*, London (1820) may provide some details of an officer's actual service, but for this type of information you will usually need to consult a published regimental history (see below).

Applications to purchase and sell commissions are contained in the Commander-in-Chief's memoranda held by the National Archives in WO 31.

These include accompanying correspondence which may occasionally give details of the officer's family background.

Surviving records of officers' military service compiled by individual regiments or the War Office are held by the National Archives in WO 25 and WO 76.

Service records: NCOs and Other Ranks

Service records relating to NCOs and other ranks were maintained by individual regiments, so it is important to have some idea of a soldier's dates of service and the regiment in which he served, or be prepared in some cases for a very long search.

Documents relating to soldiers who were discharged to pension between 1760 and 1913 are held by the National Archives in WO 97. There is alphabetical index of these up to 1854. Documents relating to soldiers who died in service, or did not receive a discharge certificate, have not survived.

If the soldier you are looking for is not included in WO 97, you may be able to find him in the regimental Muster Rolls and Pay Lists, which cover the period 1760 to 1898. These are held by the National Archives in WO 10 to WO 16, and are organised by regiment.

Identifying a regiment from its location

You may be able identify a soldier's regiment if you know where he was serving at a particular date. The location of regiments can be found in the *Monthly Army List*, and the Monthly Returns held in the National Archives in WO 17 and WO 73. There is also a lot of useful information in John M Kitzmiller, *In Search of the Forlorn Hope: a comprehensive guide to locating British Regiments and their Records*, Salt Lake City (1988).

Casualties

Before the First World War, it can be difficult to establish whether or not a particular soldier became a casualty. Published regimental histories may provide the names of officer casualties, but rarely those of NCOs and other ranks. If you know the soldier's regiment, you can examine the regimental muster rolls (see above), which were normally annotated to indicate when a soldier had died. Officers' deaths may be reported in publications such as the *Annual Register*.

In addition, there are publications covering the casualties of particular wars, for example;

Frank and Andrea Cook, *Casualty Roll for the Crimea*, London (1976)

South African Field Force Casualty List 1899–1902, London (1972)

Pensions

Army pensions were administered by the Royal Hospital Chelsea, and soldiers who received a pension were therefore often known as 'Chelsea Pensioners', whether or not they actually lived in the Royal Hospital. Records relating to Chelsea Pensioners are held by the National Archives in WO 116, 117, and 120.

Medals and Awards

Some soldiers received medals as early as the seventeenth century, but it was not until the nineteenth century that they were awarded on a large scale. An essential guide to these is John Hayward, Diana Birch and Richard Bishop, *Spink's British Battles and Medals*, 7th edition, London (2006). Medal rolls (lists of individuals eligible to receive the medal) are held by the National Archives in WO 100. Some medal rolls have been published, for example, *The Waterloo Medal Roll*, Uckfield (1992).

Going further: researching a soldier's regiment

For those who wish to dig deeper into a soldier's career, the next step is to study a published history of his regiment. The TSC holds one of the largest collections of pre-1914 regimental histories in this country. The following publications should enable the researcher to identify the work they need to consult.

A S White, *A Bibliography of Regimental Histories of the British Army*, 2nd Edition, London (1988)

Roger Perkins, *Regiments: Regiments and Corps of the British Empire and Commonwealth 1758–1993: a critical bibliography of their published histories*, Newton Abbot (1994)

The TSC also holds a large collection of regimental periodicals. Many of these started publication before 1914. They can provide a lot of information about the daily activities of a regiment, and frequently mention individual soldiers by name, particularly if they were expert marksmen or excelled at sports.

Regimental Museums

Regimental Museums may hold interesting background information on the regiment in which you are interested, but they are unlikely to hold detailed information on individual soldiers. An essential guide to regimental museums is *The AMOT Guide to Military Museums*, London (2007). Information is also available at www.armymuseums.org.uk.

County Record Offices

County Record Offices can sometimes be a rich source of background information on local military connections. Details of these can be found in Janet Foster and Julia Sheppard (eds), *British Archives: a guide to archive resources in the United Kingdom*, London (2002). The National Register of Archives (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra) holds details of

significant collections of manuscripts and historical records, many of them held in County Record Offices.

Local Newspapers

Military activities were nearly always of interest to the local press. Newspapers can often provide details of the activities of regiments stationed in the locality. County Record Offices may hold copies of local newspapers; the British Library newspaper collection holds over 52,000 titles, some going back to the eighteenth century.

Useful Books

J B M Frederick, *Lineage Book of British Land Forces 1660–1978*, Wakefield (1984)

Ian S Hallows, *Regiments and Corps of the British Army*, London (1991)

Allan Ramsey Skelley, *The Victorian Army at Home*, London (1977)

Arthur Swinson, *A Register of the Regiments and Corps of the British Army*, London (1972)

Useful Addresses

The National Archives,
Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

British Library, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB
www.bl.uk

British Library Newspapers, Colindale Avenue,
London NW9 5HE
www.bl.uk/collections/newspapers.html

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