

# British Army: tracing soldiers

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## 1. Identifying regiments

Most records before 1873 are arranged by regiment. If you want to try to trace a soldier among the wealth of surviving records, you really do need to know which regiment he served in, especially if he was (like most soldiers) not discharged to pension. You may already have details of the regiment, from family knowledge or previous research. However, if you do not, there are still some possible ways to find out the regiment. One way is through the identification of uniforms from old photographs: see the article by D J Barnes, 'Identification and Dating: Military Uniforms' in *Family History in Focus*, ed D J Steel and L Taylor (Guildford, 1984).

## 2. Regimental registers of births, 1761-1924

The regimental registers of births, 1761-1924 are indexed: the index gives the regiment and place of birth of children born to the wives of serving soldiers, if they were attached to the regiment. If you have some knowledge of offspring or areas of service, this can be an easy way to narrow the field.

The index can be seen online at [findmypast.com](http://findmypast.com) The records themselves are held by the General Register Office, and are not on open access. To actually identify the correct child, parent and regiment, you may have to buy more than one certificate from the GRO.

## 3. Pension payments

If you know the county or country in which your soldier was living between 1842 and 1862 for England and Scotland, or between 1842 and 1882 for Ireland and abroad, you may be able to find the regiment fairly easily. Between these dates there are records of payment of pensions, arranged by the district pay offices, which name the regiment served in (**WO 22** , and **PMG 8** for payments in Hanover). For nearly 9,000 pensioners in India, Canada and South Africa between 1772 and 1899, taken from **WO 120/35** , **WO 120/69** and **WO 120/70** , see N K Crowder, *British Army Pensioners Abroad, 1772-1899* (Baltimore, 1995).

## 4. Registers of next-of-kin

If the soldier may have died in service, try the records relating to payments to next of kin of dead soldiers. There are gaps in these records but they are arranged alphabetically and are easy to use. The registers of authorities to deal with the effects (possessions) of dead soldiers, 1810-1822 (**WO 25/2966** to **WO 25/2971** ) give name, 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.

Less informative but still helpful, as they give the regiment, are: an index of effects, 1830 (**WO 25/2974** ); a register of effects and credits, 1830-1844 (**WO 25/2975** ); and record books of effects, 1862-1881 (**WO 25/3476** to **WO 25/3490** , indexed by **WO 25/3491** to **WO 25/3501** ).

## 5. Place of service

If you have any information on place of service, you may be able to identify the regiment stationed there at a particular time from J M Kitzmiller, *In Search of the 'Forlorn Hope': a Comprehensive Guide to Locating British Regiments and their Records* (Salt Lake City, 1988). For the Royal Artillery, there is a similar guide: M E S Laws, *Battery Records of the Royal Artillery, 1716-1877* (Woolwich, 1952-1970). The *Monthly Army Lists* and the *Monthly Returns* (**WO 17** and **WO 73** ) each show where regiments were stationed.

## 6. Longer searches

Other possibilities exist, although using the following suggestions may be a lengthy process. If a rough date of discharge is known, it may be possible to trace the regiment in which a soldier served by using various registers of discharges. These are not complete but they are a useful potential source of information. A number of these pieces contain information on soldiers whose discharge document would not, in any case, be contained in **WO 97** . These discharges were:

Year of discharge	Method	Catalogue reference(s)
1817-1829	by purchase	<b>WO 25/3845</b> , <b>WO 25/3846</b> and <b>WO 25/3847</b>
1830-1838	by own request	<b>WO 25/3848</b> to <b>WO 25/3849</b>
1830-1856	with modified pension	<b>WO 25/3850</b>
1838-1855	free or free deferred pension	<b>WO 25/3851-3858</b>
1856-1861	free permanent pension	<b>WO 25/3859</b> , <b>WO 25/3860</b> and <b>WO 25/3861</b>
1861-1870	free permanent pension, modified/deferred pension, or purchase	<b>WO 25/3863</b>
1852-1870	first period, incorrigible, ignominy, penal servitude, or 21 years with militia	<b>WO 25/3869</b>
1856-1857	regiment under reduction	<b>WO 25/3879</b>
1866-1870	Limited Service Act	<b>WO 25/3883</b>
1863-1878	on return from India	<b>WO 12/13077</b> to <b>WO 12/13105</b>
1871-1884	general register	<b>WO 121/223</b> to <b>WO 121/238</b>
1882-1883	Gosport discharge depot musters	<b>WO 16/2284</b>
1883-1888	Gosport discharge depot musters Index available	<b>WO 16/2888</b> to <b>WO 16/2916</b>
1884-1887	without pension (gives address to which discharged)	<b>WO 121/239</b> to <b>WO 121/257</b>

## 7. Army deserters

There is an incomplete card index at The National Archives to army deserters (1689-1830), compiled from bounty certificates of rewards paid out of locally-collected taxes to those who had turned the deserter in. The index covers only rewards paid out in London and Middlesex (from **E 182/594** to **E 182/673**) and in Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire and Cheshire (**E 182/2** to **E 182/114**). The main part of the index is of deserters, giving date and regiment:, as well as a reference to **E 182** by piece number and sub-number. There is also a sequence by county, as well as cross-references from entries like "Dragoons", "Fencibles" and "Militia" to the main sequence. If you order one of these **E 182** references, you will get one or more large boxes of tax documents, with no obvious clue as to where the bounty certificates will be. Look amongst the many unwrapped bundles of documents for a bundle wrapped up in linsen paper (a stiff brown paper).

There are registers of deserters, 1811-1852, in **WO 25/2906** to **WO 25/2934**. Until 1827 they are kept in three series, for cavalry, infantry and militia (the latter up to 1820 only). After 1827 they are arranged by regiment. These registers give descriptions, dates and place of enlistment and desertion, and outcome. There are registers of captured deserters, 1813-1845, in **WO 25/2935** to **WO 25/2951**, with indexes up to 1833 in **WO 25/2952**, **WO 25/2953**, and **WO 25/2954**. Deserters who surrendered themselves under proclamation, 1803-1815, are in **WO 25/2955**. On capture, some deserters were sentenced to imprisonment on the *Savoy* hulk: there are unindexed registers for the hulk, 1799-1823 (**WO 25/2956**).

Local newspapers and (for 1828 to 1845) the police newspapers *Hue and Cry* and the *Police Gazette* carried details of deserters, giving name, parish and county of birth, regiment, date and place of desertion, a physical description and other relevant information. For deserters in Australia (**HO 75**), consult Y Fitzmaurice, *Army Deserters from HM Service* (Forest Hill, Victoria, 1988)

## 8. Further reading

The following recommended publications are available in the **The National Archives' Library**. The National Archives' Library also holds medal rolls for all major wars. Where indicated a publication is also available to buy at **The National Archives' Bookshop**.

Soldiers died in the Great War 1914-19: a complete and searchable database (Dallington, 1998)

Amanda Bevan, *Tracing Your Ancestors in the The National Archives* (7th edn, 2006) - **Available to buy**

Christopher Chant, *The handbook of British regiments* (1988)

Norman K Crowder, *British Army pensioners abroad 1772-1899* (1995)

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

E. A. James, *British regiments, 1914-1918* (1998)

S D Jarvis and D B Jarvis, *The Cross of Sacrifice: an alphabetically compiled record of British Officers who died in service of their country identifying where they died and are commemorated* (1993), I-V

John F Kitzmiller, *In search of the 'forlorn hope': a comprehensive guide to locating British Regiments and their records (1640-WWI)* (1988)

Andrew Mollo, *Army uniforms of World War I: European and United States armies and aviation services* (1977)

Andrew Mollo, *Army uniforms of World War 2* (1973)

Roger Perkins, *Regiments: regiments and corps of the British Empire and Commonwealth 1758-1993. A critical bibliography of their published histories* (1992)

William Spencer, *Army service records of the First World War* (Public Record Office Readers' Guide, IXX, 2001) - **Available to buy**

Guide reference: *Military Records Information 14*

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<http://www.national-archives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/british-army-tracing-soldiers.htm>