

How to look for records of the... 1939 Register

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

11 mins read

1. What are these records?

The 1939 Register provides a snapshot of the civilian population of England and Wales just after the outbreak of the Second World War.

As the 1931 census for England and Wales was destroyed by fire during the Second World War and no census was taken in 1941, the Register provides the most complete survey of the population of England and Wales between 1921 and 1951, making it an invaluable resource for family, social and local historians.

The Register is available to search and view on our partner sites Findmypast.co.uk (£) and Ancestry.co.uk (£). For more details see [section 5](#).

You can learn more about the 1939 Register by watching our webinar on [Using the 1939 Register](#).

2. When and why the Register was compiled

The 1939 Register was taken on 29 September 1939. The information was used to produce identity cards and, once rationing was introduced in January 1940, to issue ration books. Information in the Register was also used to administer conscription and the direction of labour, and to monitor and

control the movement of the population caused by military mobilisation and mass evacuation.

3. What and who the Register records

The 1939 Register was designed to capture the details of every member of the civilian population on a specific date – military personnel were not recorded (see below for more information on who was and wasn't recorded). It contains details of around 40 million people, recorded in more than 65,000 volumes (transcript books).

While the 1939 Register is not a census, it is arranged along similar lines and includes similar, if less detailed, information. It does, however, show exact dates of birth where census returns simply give a person's age.

3.1 The civilian population

These records **do** include the civilian populations of:

- England
- Wales

These records **do not** include the civilian populations of:

- the Channel Islands
- the Isle of Man
- Scotland (for information relating to records of individuals in Scotland at the time of the 1939 Register please contact [National Records of Scotland](#))
- Northern Ireland (for information relating to records of individuals in Northern Ireland at the time of 1939 Register please contact [Public Record Office of Northern Ireland](#))

3.2 Exceptions and anomalies among armed forces personnel

Registration of members of the armed forces was dealt with by the military authorities, so the 1939 Register does **not** include service personnel in military, naval and air force establishments. Nor does it include members of the armed forces billeted in private homes, including their own homes. However, since conscription did not begin in earnest until January 1940, most people who subsequently served in the armed forces during the Second World War were still civilians in September 1939.

The records **do** include

- members of the armed forces on leave
- civilians on military bases

3.3 The information recorded for each individual

For each individual the following details are included:

- address
- schedule number
- sub number
- surname
- first name(s)
- role (for institutions only – Officer, Visitor, Servant, Patient, Inmate)
- gender
- date of birth
- marital status
- occupation

4. How the Register was compiled and arranged

Information is arranged by:

- enumeration district – each enumeration district has a unique four- or five-letter code, and large enumeration districts may comprise more than one book
- household or institution – each household or institution is represented by a schedule number. A large institution such as a hospital may be an enumeration district in its own right
- national registration number – each person is represented by a sub-number within the household or institution

When preparing the Register, the General Register Office used the plans already in place for what would have been the 1941 Census. It was based on registration districts and sub-districts, and was administered by Superintendent Registrars and Registrars of Births and Deaths.

The enumeration districts used for the Register were based broadly on those used for the 1931 Census, adjusted to account for the population movements since 1931. They were sub-divided into smaller units for National Registration purposes. The general rule was that an enumeration district should contain no more than 300 households, not counting institutions.

The final arrangement of the Register was not by registration district, as in a census, but according to the boundaries of local government units. These were the bodies responsible for the Local National Registration Offices and Food Offices, who maintained and updated information in the Register. These were County Boroughs, Municipal Boroughs, Urban Districts and Rural Districts, except in London which was made up of Metropolitan Boroughs and the Cities of London and Westminster. For more information about enumeration districts and area codes, please read [understanding the 1939 registration districts](#).

5. How to access and search the Register

It is only digital copies of the 1939 Register that are available to the public. The original register books are **not** held at The National Archives and have been retained by the Health and Social Care Information Centre, now called NHS Digital. Short descriptions of the records are available to view in our catalogue, in record series [RG 101](#).

You can search for and view open records on our partner site [Findmypast.co.uk](#) (£). A version of the 1939 Register is also available at [Ancestry.co.uk](#) (£), and transcriptions without images are on [MyHeritage.com](#) (£). It is free to search for these records, but there is a charge to view full transcriptions and download images of documents. Please note that you can view these records online free of charge in the reading rooms at The National Archives in Kew.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways to search the records on Findmypast.co.uk:

5.1 Using the Advanced search

Use the [Advanced search](#) to search by name, date of birth, gender, occupation and marital status. You can also include the name of another person expected to be in the same household. There is also an exact reference search and several 'place' fields, as well as a separate tab for an address search.

5.2 Using the 1939 Register Browse

Use the [1939 Register Browse](#) to browse the records by

- place ('Borough/District')
- document reference ('Piece Number'), for example RG 101/1234a
- enumeration district code ('ED Letter Code') such as DVIA

- numbers from National Registration Identity Cards or ration books, or from pre-1991 NHS Medical Cards – some of these forms of identification included the enumeration district code ('ED Letter Code'), a four- or five-letter code followed by two numbers (these two numbers are the schedule number and the sub-number)

You can learn more about the 1939 Register by watching our webinar on [Using the 1939 Register](#).

6. Why can't I find the person I am looking for?

6.1. They were born less than 100 years ago

The record of anyone born less than 100 years ago is closed unless they are known to have died. For more information see [section 9](#).

If someone was born less than 100 years ago, and has died, their record may still be closed if their death was not notified and recorded in the register. Deaths that occurred outside the United Kingdom are unlikely to have been notified. These include the majority of Second World War deaths.

6.2. They were not in England or Wales on 29 September 1939

People who were born after 29 September 1939, or who arrived in the country after that date, are listed in separate registers not yet publicly available.

6.3. They were not included in the original Register, or appear under a different name

Despite the best efforts of the registration authorities, a small number of people were missed out, and had to be registered later. A few deliberately failed to register, possibly because they thought they could avoid being conscripted.

A very few enumeration district books (Transcript Books) are known to be missing from the 1939 Register. The people in those districts would have been registered and received their identity cards and ration books, but unfortunately the books themselves are not included in the register that has been released because they arrived too late at the Central National Registration Office

6.4. Names may not appear as you expect them

Try different spellings, or use a wild card. The names in the Register were copied by the enumerator from the household schedules, hand-written by the householders. The Register was subsequently in constant use for more than 50 years so some entries will have become hard to read through frequent handling. Middle initials are generally included, but middle names rarely appear in full.

6.5. Incomplete, inaccurate or too much information

The information in a huge database such as this will inevitably contain some errors, either in the original information supplied, or in the course of copying and indexing. You should be flexible and imaginative when searching and try any combination of the following:

- Search with just one or two search terms (such as name and date of birth), resisting the temptation to fill in all the search boxes you can
- Search with just a surname
- Search by address

- Try multiple searches for the same person, varying the information you search with each time

See Findmypast's [Frequently asked questions](#) for more guidance on searching.

6.6. They were living apart from their families

By 29 September 1939 there had already been mass evacuations of the population so many people may be listed in an entirely different location to the rest of their family. Many seasonal workers, such as hop-pickers, were still in the countryside when the Register was taken, and not at their normal home addresses in urban areas.

If you can't find an individual in the place you thought they lived or where their family lived, try searching in 'reception areas'; these are the rural counties where evacuees were sent.

The whole of the following counties and areas were designated Reception Areas:

- Bedfordshire
- Berkshire
- Buckinghamshire
- Cambridgeshire
- Cumberland
- Dorset
- Herefordshire
- Huntingdonshire
- Northamptonshire
- Oxfordshire
- Rutland
- Shropshire
- Suffolk

- Sussex
- Westmorland
- Wiltshire
- the Isle of Wight
- the Isle of Ely
- the Soke of Peterborough
- the Holland and Kesteven divisions of Lincolnshire

6.7. Change of street name

If you are searching for a particular street and are unable to find it, remember that street names may have changed, or that the street may have been built after 1939.

Small villages and hamlets can be very difficult to find because house or street addresses may not include the name of the hamlet or village. This will depend on how each enumerator chose to record this information in the limited space allowed for it in the register books.

Village and hamlet names, along with the Registration District and Sub-district number and other detailed place information, were recorded in the description pages at the start of each Enumeration Book. These were the equivalent of the Enumerators' Summary Books that accompany the 1911 Census. Unfortunately, these books have not survived, so there is no simple way to identify the area covered by every enumeration district.

7. Why do some entries show the married names of women who did not marry until long after 1939?

The Register was continually updated while National Registration was in force, when it was a legal requirement to notify the registration authorities of any change of name or address. This ended in 1952, but since 1948 the

Register had also been used by the National Health Service, who continued updating the records until 1991, when paper-based record keeping was discontinued.

Changes of name for any reason were recorded; in practice this was mostly when women changed their surnames on marriage or re-marriage, but also includes changes of name for any other reason, such as by deed poll.

The majority of these name changes appear in the indexes so you can search for a person using either their name in 1939 or any subsequent name.

8. What does it mean when an entry is crossed out and marked 'See page...?'

These refer to 'continuation entries' where the line in the 'postings' column (see [section 9.3](#)) against a person's name was full up, and a new line had to be created for any new entries.

The new line was added at the back of the enumeration book or sometimes at the back of the next book in large enumeration districts that comprised two or more books. You can browse to the page containing the continuation entry if it is in the same book; if it is in the next book you can use the browse function described in [section 5.2](#) to go there, and then browse to the right page. However, this is very unlikely to contain any additional information.

9. Living individuals and closed records

Some online search results of the Register will have a number of blanked out lines, indicating that the record is closed because the individual may still be alive.

9.1 Why records are closed: the 100 year rule

In February 2004 the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council on National Records and Archives considered and accepted a proposal for the use of a standard closure period, and that a lifetime of 100 years should be assumed.

Individuals' records remain closed for 100 years from their date of birth or until proof of death. Information relating to living individuals is withheld under sections 40(2) and 40(3)(a)(i) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

9.2 Some records of people born less than 100 years ago are open

From 1948 the Register was also used as the National Health Service (NHS) Register, and was updated until 1991, when the paper-based system was discontinued. This included notification of deaths, so the records of people born less than 100 years ago, but whose death was reported to either the National Registration authorities or to the NHS, will be open (see also section 8).

Findmypast have checked the names and dates of birth in the 1939 Register against the General Register Office indexes of deaths in England and Wales and opened many records where exact matches are found. Furthermore, the records of individuals born 100 years ago (according to the date of birth shown in the Register) are opened on a regular basis.

The version of the 1939 Register on Ancestry.co.uk will be updated annually to show the records that have been opened during the past year.

9.3 The 'postings' column

Each entry in the Register extended across a double page spread. However, the accessioned digital record does not include the 'postings' column on the right hand page which contains various codes used for National Registration

and National Health Service purposes. The National Archives does not have access to this column and the information it contains.

10. How can I open a record of an individual I know to be deceased?

Findmypast.co.uk subscribers can request a check of the closed records free of charge and if successful, the record will be made available via the online service. Please note in order to access this service you will be required to provide proof of death, mostly commonly by providing a death certificate.

Non-Findmypast.co.uk subscribers should use The National Archives [Freedom of Information \(FOI\) request form](#) to request a search of closed records from the 1939 Register. If the record can be opened, we will send you a full transcription of the information held in the record. The opened record will be available to view on Findmypast.co.uk ten working days after the notification of a successful request. Please note there is a fixed charge of £23.35 for this service.

The transcription is likely to include the following details: schedule number, sub-schedule number, name, address, date of birth, gender, marital status and occupation.

11. How can I see my own record?

An individual is entitled to submit a Data Subject Access Request to obtain their own record information within the 1939 Register. You can use [this form](#) if you are searching for information about yourself in the 1939 Register. You can also use this form if you are acting on behalf of someone who was in the Register and has authorised you to request information on their behalf.

These requests fall under the [Data Protection Act 1998](#). Please note that the information will only be disclosed to you, and the record itself will remain closed.

12. The NHS Central Register

The records of the 1939 Register were subsequently used by the National Health Service at its inception in 1948 and became the NHS Central Register, transferred to the Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) in 2007, and now called [NHS Digital](#)

The records remained with the NHS up until 1991 – therefore most changes of name between 1939 and 1991 are listed in the records. Although all changes of name or address should have been notified, this did not always happen, and it was no longer a legal requirement after the National Registration Act was repealed in 1952. Changes of address were recorded only at the local level, and so do not appear in the 1939 Register.