Research Guide: Tracing your ancestor’s military records

Tracing your ancestor’s military career is often a powerful experience. Through your research, you may be able to glimpse what life could have been like for an individual during a time of great upheaval and unrest. Muster rolls, service records, maps and plans all help to build a clearer picture.

This document covers the main areas you might be interested in and the resources which are available at the John Gray Centre, in the National Records of Scotland and online. Staff are happy to help with your research needs and suggest other resources which might help you.

Have a look also at our blog ‘Grandpa served in WWI – how to trace a WWI ancestor’.

Scottish soldiers before 1603

Unfortunately, no lists appear to have survived from the time of the Scottish Wars of Independence 1296–1329 and the Anglo–Scottish conflicts between the 1340s and 1603.

Scottish soldiers 1603–1707

The National Records of Scotland (NRS) in Edinburgh holds muster rolls arranged by regiment and company or troop. Most of these date from after 1680, although some do exist from 1641. These list all the officers and men in a troop or company at a certain place and date. Their rank is also given. It is much easier to do this if you know the regiment which they belonged to.

If your ancestor was an officer from 1670, it should be simpler to trace them. They may be listed in the warrant books of the Secretary for Scotland, held by the NRS. These volumes are indexed and give information on name, rank, company and regiment.

Scottish soldiers in the British army after 1707

After the Act of the Union was passed in 1707 creating the United Kingdom, the army was controlled from London and many military records are held in The National Archives at Kew.

However, many of the Scottish regiments have their own museums:

The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), Hamilton
The Royal Scots, Edinburgh Castle
The King’s Own Scottish Borderers, Berwick-upon-Tweed
The Black Watch, Perth
The Highlanders, Inverness
The Royal Highland Fusiliers, Glasgow
The Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, Stirling Castle
The National War Museum is also based at Edinburgh Castle.
The General Register Office for Scotland holds the following records:

- Army Returns (births, deaths and marriages of Scots at military stations abroad between 1881 and 1959);
- Service Department Registers (births, deaths and marriages from 1959 which took place outside the UK for Scots serving or employed by HM Forces);
- Marriages by army chaplains outside the UK since 1892;
- War Registers listing the deaths of Scottish soldiers during the South African War (1899–1902); Scots serving as Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers or Men in the Army (but not officers), plus Petty Officer or Men in the Royal Navy (1914–1918) and Scots in the Armed Forces (1939–1945).

**Militia records**

The only large group of post-1707 military records held in Scotland are for the militia. The NRS holds many of these from mainly 1800–18. At this point, conscription was by ballot and healthy men between the ages of 18 and 30 could enlist. After 1802 however, the upper age limit was changed to 45. Apprentices and poor men with more than two children were exempt from service. Militia records are often very revealing, with details including name, profession and place of abode. Sometimes, age and birthplace are also listed.

We hold Militia and Lieutenancy records from 1797 to 1921. These include Minute Books of General Meetings of the Deputy Lieutenants, Lieutenancy Minute Books and Lieutenancy Letter Books. We also have letters relating to the volunteer militia in North Berwick.

**Online resources**

There are a number of excellent resources which you can access online. These include:

- The [Commonwealth War Graves Commission](http://www.cwgc.org/) cares for the memorials and cemeteries of the 1.7 million servicemen and women of the Commonwealth who died during the World Wars. They also created the Register of War Dead, which includes the names of 935,000 identified war dead and the 212,000 unidentified individuals.
- The [Armed Forces Memorial Roll of Honour](http://www.veterans-uk.info/afm/index.htm) lists members of the UK armed forces, both regular and reserves, who have been killed on duty, or as a result of terrorist action, since World War Two.
- The [Ministry of Defence](https://www.gov.uk/requests-for-personal-data-and-service-records) provides detailed information on the process of requesting service records. There is usually a £30 charge and they recommend searching the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and Armed Forces Memorial Roll of Honour in the first instance.
- The [Ancestry](http://www.ancestry.co.uk/) website also gives information on Service Records (1914–20), Prisoners of War (1939–1945), Victoria Cross medal winners (1857–2007) and the Waterloo medal list (1815). However, this is a fee-paying site.
- Edinburgh’s War 1914–1918 is a website created by Edinburgh University and Edinburgh City Libraries to give a unique insight into the people of Edinburgh, Leith and the Lothians during the Great War. [http://www.edinburghs-war.ed.ac.uk/](http://www.edinburghs-war.ed.ac.uk/)
- The [Imperial War Museum](http://www.iwm.org.uk/) has a series of films, photographs and audio clips relating to conflict and active service which the affected the people of the United Kingdom.
Related resources at the John Gray Centre

Local newspapers such as the Haddingtonshire Courier and the Musselburgh News are good resources for finding out what life was like for the residents of East Lothian during wartime. They contain articles on the fighting, efforts to raise funds and Rolls of Honour. We have them available on microfilm for you to browse and print out.

There is a ringbinder on the Local History shelves containing a photograph index of the East Lothian and Musselburgh men who fought in the Great War. This is a very useful starting point for visitors tracing their family during the First World War.

The Local History reference library also has various books on the battles which took place across East Lothian, the World Wars and guides to researching your ancestors in the military. Please feel free to browse these on the shelves and make copies of relevant pages.

Furthermore, our extensive photograph collection can be consulted for images. These have not yet been digitised so they are not available online at present.

The Archive also has some personal accounts of active service and the Volunteer Artillery:

List of available resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archive reference no.</th>
<th>Title and Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EL102</td>
<td>Papers of Andrew Dickson who served with the Royal Engineers during World War One (1915–1919)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL146</td>
<td>John Penn’s account of his life and military career, particularly the Charge of the Light Brigade (c.1880)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EL251</td>
<td>Print of a sketch of the Battle of Pinkie (2011) [1547]</td>
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<tr>
<td>EL286/5/18</td>
<td>David Wood’s Papers including information on army service in World War One (1925–1943)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EL286/5/21</td>
<td>Notes for trial of Warrant Officer Longman stationed at RAF base, East Fortune (1942–1945)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL379</td>
<td>Draft editions of magazines commemorating the Battle of Prestonpans (n.d.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAD/4/6/55</td>
<td>Discharges and other papers relating to composition paid by the burgesses of Haddington for remaining away from the army (1568–1579)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NB/14/33</td>
<td>Resolutions of a meeting of the inhabitants of North Berwick and neighbourhood for raising a Volunteer Artillery Corps (8th December 1859)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NB/14/34</td>
<td>Rules and regulations of the Dunbar Volunteer Artillery (c. 1860)</td>
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The archive also contains town council, parish and school records which might all give you further information on the First and Second World Wars from a different perspective.
Contacts

Ancestry
www.ancestry.co.uk

The Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders Museum
The Castle
Stirling
FK8 1EH
(01786) 475 165
Online enquiry form
www.argylls.co.uk

Armed Forces Memorial Roll of Honour
Armed Forces Memorial Trust
National Memorial Arboretum
Croxall Road
Alrewas
Staffordshire
DE13 7AR
Online enquiry form or info@thenma.org.uk
www.veterans-uk.info/afm/index.htm

The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) Castle & Museum
Balhousie Castle
Hay Street
Perth
PH1 5HR
(01738) 638 152
Online enquiry form
www.theblackwatch.co.uk

Commonwealth War Graves Commission
Online enquiry form
www.cwgc.org
Archive Research Guides (4)

General Register Office for Scotland
New Register House
3 West Register Street
Edinburgh
EH1 3YT
(0131) 334 0380
Online enquiry form: http://gro-scotland.gov.uk/index.html

The Highlanders’ Museum
Fort George
Ardersier
Near Inverness
Highlands
IV2 7TD
(01667) 460 466
Info@thehighlandersmuseum.com
www.thehighlandersmuseum.com

The King’s Own Scottish Borderers Association
Regimental Museum
The Barracks
The Parade
Berwick-upon-Tweed
TD15 1DG
(01289) 307 426
kosbmus@milnet.uk.net
www.kosb.co.uk/museum.htm

Low Parks Museum
The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) Museum
129 Muir Street
Hamilton
ML3 6BJ
(01698) 328 232
lowparksmuseum@southlanarkshire.gov.uk
www.cameronians.org

Ministry of Defence
www.gov.uk/requests-for-personal-data-and-service-records
Archive Research Guides (4)
The National Archives
Kew
Richmond
Surrey
TW9 4DU
(020) 8876 9198
Online enquiry form: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

National Records of Scotland
H.M. General Register House
2 Princes Street
Edinburgh EH1 3YY
(0131) 535 1314
enquiries@nas.gov.uk
www.nas.gov.uk
www.nrscotland.gov.uk

The National War Museum
Edinburgh Castle
Edinburgh
EH1 2NG
(0131) 225 9846 (Castle number)
No e-mail address or online enquiry form
http://www.nms.ac.uk/our_museums/war_museum.aspx

The Royal Highland Fusiliers Regimental Museum
518 Sauchiehall Street
Glasgow
G2 3LW
(0141) 332 0961
research@rhf.org.uk
www.rhf.org.uk

The Royal Scots Museum
Edinburgh Castle
Castlehill
Edinburgh
EH21 2NG
(0131) 225 9846 (Castle number)
Online enquiry form: www.theroyalscots.co.uk