

## What does a Birth Certificate tell you?

Assuming that you have been able to trace the birth certificates of your parents, grand-parents or further back, what do they actually tell you? Firstly this depends on if you have a full or a short birth certificate, the short certificates are cheaper and are often the version issued at the time of registration, however for Family History research a short certificate is of little help. The full birth certificate however provides much useful information; here is a general guide to what this tells you.

The Registration District is shown this is useful in avoiding confusion about the location of the birth. Many place names can cause problems, for instance we all know that there are two places called Hartley and two called Ash in Kent alone, and there are also Farnborough in both Kent and Hampshire and St Ives in Cornwall and Cambridgeshire. Births are registered in the district where the birth occurred which may not be where the family lived.

The date of registration and name of Registrar is shown but this is not of particular interest.

The date of birth is shown and this will normally be correct, however, there are fines for late registration so in the past it was not unknown for parents to 'move' the birth date if they had been tardy in visiting the registrar within the 42 days required. If a time of day is given as well as a date it is almost certain that this was a multiple birth.

The place of birth is usually shown as an exact address in towns but in the country may only show the village name. As your research goes back in time this will rarely be a hospital, more commonly it will be at home or at the home of the mother's parents, sometimes it will be the home of some other relative. A lot of births took place in the workhouse, this often means that the family were very poor but the workhouse often included the nearest equivalent to a local hospital. Any place other than the family home can give clues to the extended family.

Bear in mind that all of the remaining information is written by the Registrar based on what he is told by the informant and if the informant could not read the spellings are based on what the Registrar thought he heard.

The given name or names are shown but you may find that where more than one name is given the order in which these are used may have changed by the time the child became an adult. An additional name was often added at baptism and there is a column for this to be added to the register later but not everyone advised the Registrar.

There is a column for gender which may say male/female or boy/girl and is sometimes useful when you are looking at an uncommon name or a 'unisex' name, particularly where this certificate is for a sibling or cousin and you don't have any other clues.

The Father's name is shown if a) the parents are married or b) the Father is present at the registration of the birth. If the father is named you will also get his occupation which can help for example when there are two families in the same village headed by *John and Elizabeth White*.

In theory the Mother's name, maiden name and any previous names are all shown. However, the name from a previous marriage is not always declared and often the mother would claim to be married so that the father's name will be shown on the certificate. Sometimes she is simply pre-empting the marriage but it may be total fiction the father may even be married and living elsewhere.

There is also space for the Informant's name, relationship to the child and address, usually the informant is one of the parents but it may be another relative or a neighbour. If not one of the parents there may also be a comment of 'present at the birth'. The entry will also indicate if the informant made their mark rather than signing, if it doesn't say and there is no X shown then they signed, which gives some indication of literacy but some people learned to sign their name but could not read beyond this.

Note that either the original certificate or a certificate produced by photocopying the register will all be in the Registrar's handwriting not the informants.

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