

Marriage Certificates

You may have found a marriage certificate either in your family papers or from the ONS or Local Registrar but what does it tell you and should you believe it? While the vast majority of certificates are factual (give or take a bit on the ages) there are problems which you need to be aware of. The format of the England and Wales Marriage Certificates has been the same since civil registration began in 1837.

If you are embarking on tracing your family history please don't be disheartened by what follows which is intended just to warn you not to be misled by information which appears to be 'official'.

Firstly you have the date and place of the marriage, also if it was a religious ceremony this will show which religions rites were used. This will all be correct as will the name of the Registrar or Cleric.

The names of Bride and Groom shown are the names which they were using at the time of the marriage. Forenames may differ from those given at birth because they have been shortened, added, swapped in order e.g. Harriett Alice is now Alice Harriet or changed to a well know alternative such as Jack for John, Harry for Henry, Sally for Sarah or Dolly/Molly/Polly for Mary. Further changes could also happen after the marriage. There can be other errors if either party could not read or write their name and the clerk made their own assumptions over what name they had heard and how it was spelt.

The Groom may have a different surname from at birth if he has taken the name of a step or foster father. The same applies to the Bride who also may have a new surname if she was a widow or divorced. In more recent times it is common for a divorced woman to revert to her maiden name and anyone can change their name just because they choose to.

The Ages given may be slightly inaccurate by error or intent, particularly where there is a large age gap or the Bride is older than the Groom one or both may give an incorrect age sometimes stretching the truth by quite a number of years. Also be aware that if both Bride and Groom are shown as aged 21 it is possible that this is shorthand for 'over 21', which may also be shown by the phrase 'of full age'. By the time that 'full age' was reduced to 18 it is much more common for the exact age to be given.

The certificate will not give any indication of adoption, but that would give a separate set of complications in tracing the family.

The next column is headed 'Condition' this will be completed for both parties as Bachelor, Spinster, Widower, Widow as appropriate. In the case of someone who has been divorced various wording may be used and sometimes the name of the former spouse is given.

The Occupation of the Groom and Father's of both Bride and Groom should be shown but the further back in time the less likely that the Bride's occupation will be shown even if she had one. If either of the Fathers has died then occasionally Deceased is shown in the occupation column but more often this will appear after their name or Late as a prefix to their name. Of course some occupations have become obsolete or changed name or status over time. One word of warning here

I spent a very long time looking for a death for an ancestor shown as 'Late Coachman' before I realised that this meant Retired Coachman.

The place of residence is shown for both Bride and Groom, in towns this may be an exact address but in the country will often only state the village or parish. It must be remembered that it was far from uncommon for people to move into temporary accommodation for long enough to be able to marry in the church of their choice or in a parish far from home to blur the time period between marriage and the birth of the first child. Brides very frequently married from their parents home and gave this address, also it was quite common for one or the other to use the address of a relative in a different parish if that church was more attractive or convenient.

It appears quite simple that the Father's names were asked for both bride and groom, however, this is possibly the most problematic piece of information. The same changes to names over time as stated above apply but there are also other possibilities. The name given is often the name of the person taking the role of father, this can be a foster- or step-father, uncle or grand-father. Before I understood this I was concerned that I had found a case of incest in my family.

In the case of the marriage of an illegitimate child this box on the certificate can be a blessing or a nightmare for any family history researcher. Sometimes this will be the only place where the name of the true father appears in existing records. Sometimes rather than leave the box blank a totally fictitious name is given.

Also where the father has been deceased or absent for a long time the name given can be partially incorrect being either mis-remembered or assumed.

For both bride and groom plus the witnesses you will be able to see if they signed their name or simply made their mark (which would have usually been a cross). This gives an indication of the level of literacy although some people learnt how to write their name and nothing else. It was not unknown for a bride who could read and write to simply make her mark if the groom was not able to sign his name.

Never ignore the witnesses who will often be relatives. I have frequently found cases of the two witnesses themselves marrying within a few months of the first wedding. I actually have one example where the two witnesses married later the same day with the bride and groom from the first marriage witnessing the second (the bride now using her new name) in the adjoining parish.

Note that unless you are looking at the actual Parish Register (paper or image) or the certificate issued at the time of the ceremony you are not seeing anyone's signature but a transcription of it.

One last point on certificates of marriage in England and Wales, you may be interested to know that there has been a campaign to have the certificates redesigned so that in future the Mothers names will also be shown, and in August 2014 the Government announced that this will happen but no date has yet been announced. In Scotland and Northern Ireland this is already the case.

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