

British paper vital record indices now extinct

By Helen Osborn

The British government withdrew the paper indices to all vital events since 1837 and closed its central London search rooms at the end of October 2007. This decision was made without public consultation and seemingly against its statutory obligations. As one national newspaper put it, “Indexes online? These aren’t even on paper!” The genealogical community was given three months notice of this, to the general dismay of researchers. For those of you who have English or Welsh ancestry and have been used to using the General Register Office (GRO) indices on fiche, or for those who have been using some of the online sites, perhaps the problems now occurring have passed you by.

The British government’s argument that it is undertaking a completely new digitized index—known as DOVE (Digitization of Vital Events)—and that the indices are freely available on the Web, does not cut the mustard with UK genealogists in the know. The promised new index, due in April, is now a full twelve months behind and the freely available indices are either pay to view or not complete. The worst hit in the genealogical community are probate and other genealogists working on behalf of solicitors, who need access to the most accurate indices. Those people who need to get a copy of their own birth certificate for passport applications and to apply for government benefits are also affected. It is simply fantasy to expect these people to be able to find their entry on a commercial database on the Internet and apply online. The personal help from knowledgeable staff with the more difficult and hard to read entries, particularly with re-registered events, is gone forever.

The [Society of Genealogists](#) has responded to the withdrawal of the indices with a strongly worded critique of the government’s handling of the situation.

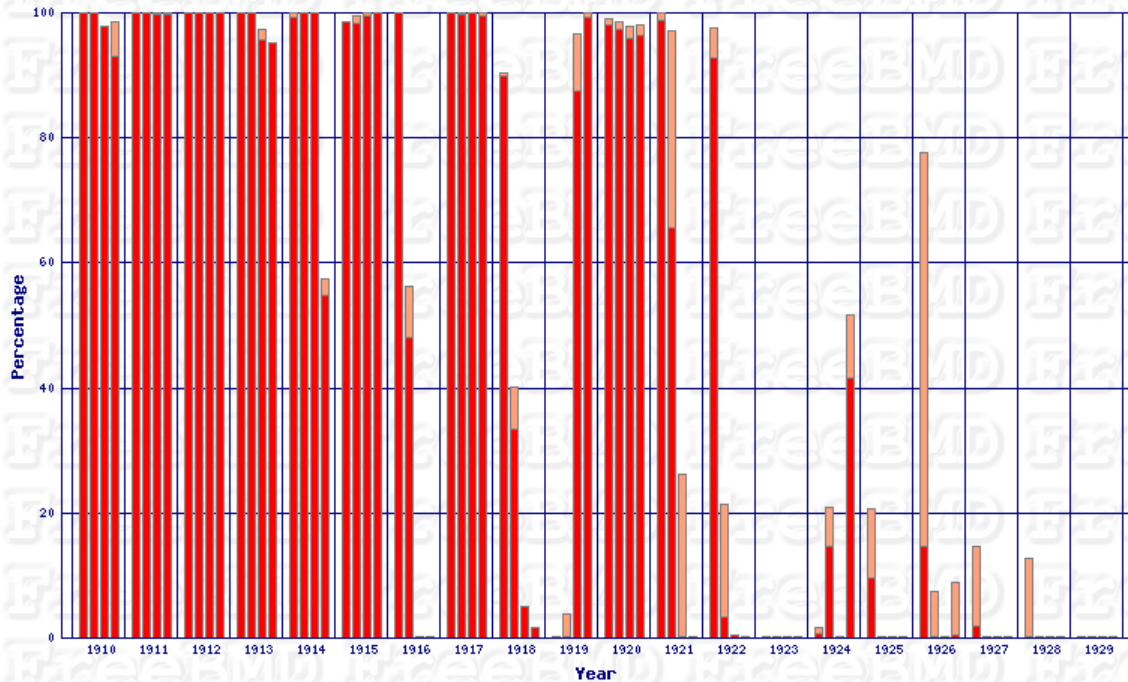
Index history

Sometimes the process of digitization creates more problems than it solves, at least in the interim period when indices are available, but are incomplete. In the past it was simple. Nothing was online, but the fiche of the indices to vital events from 1837 onwards were (and are) widely available in LDS Family History Centers. If you couldn’t find what you wanted, it either remained not found or you had the option of writing to either the local district registrar or the General Register Office in Southport, England, for a search. If you could visit London, then the original indices were available on the shelves in books just as they had been in central London since the service started in 1837. Sure, they had moved from Somerset House to St. Catherine’s House, and then in the mid 1990s, under a joint initiative with the Public Record Office, to the Family Records Centre, but the service was always free to onsite researchers.

The [Family Records Centre](#) was an overwhelming success and the only fly in the genealogical ointment was the fact that the GRO indices were flawed, being compiled from local indices, with all the attendant missing entries, bad handwriting, and sloppy record keeping that is bound to happen in any handwritten system that continued for 130 years. (The indices have been computerized since 1967 and have suffered less mistakes since then.)

One small problem with the widely available microfiche, that many genealogists seem to be unaware of, is that they have missing pages, where the paper index perhaps had two pages turned over at once during the filming process. A leading British firm of probate genealogists has identified more than one thousand missing pages. Fiche users beware! Of course, this was not a problem for those using the paper index in London.

Percentage of Births held in FreeBMD by year (1910 - 1929)



Coverage of births at FreeBMD.

Commercial companies

The big changeover started to happen when the first commercial companies that had bought sets of the microfiche from the GRO put the fiche version online. First up was at 1837online, now [FindMyPast](#). It has a business model based on charge per view, and provides digitized images of the fiche. Searching can only be done by a range of names, page by page. Being owned by probate genealogists, the company is also trying to make pages missing from the fiche available.

At around the same time, a huge volunteer indexing project had begun and [FreeBMD](#) was born. This (a project that is still ongoing) is a complete re-indexing of the GRO indices. As it has grown, it has become more and more useful and is now a “must use” site for anybody searching in the GRO indices. It is also totally free. However, although it is a vast improvement on searching fiche by fiche, or even page by page in a book, it still contains some of the mistakes of the

originals and it is very far from complete. At the time of writing, it has most of the events from 1837 to 1915 available, with some notable gaps. The period 1915–1929 is presently being worked on. You need to [check](#) that the years you are interested in have been covered before you do a search.

The FreeBMD project is now under threat from the withdrawal of the paper indices. Its indexing relies upon digital photographs of the actual pages, taken by volunteers, which enhance those pages that are difficult to read on the microfiche. Inevitably this will slow the project down and may mean that some entries remain forever doubtful.

Following these pioneers, two other commercial Web sites have entered the arena: [Family Relatives](#) and [Ancestry](#). Both sites currently host the full set of scanned fiche, totally free and no subscription required. Family Relatives has been re-indexing the fiche and provides the indices in two ways—some years can only be searched by name and range, but re-indexed years can be searched by surname. Family Relatives has also made the overseas GRO returns free to search. Researchers

