

# **The Kresen Kernow Guide to researching service personnel from the First and Second World Wars**

There are a number of sources of information which can be used to identify and learn about the men and women who served with the armed forces and related organisations during the two world wars. This guide outlines the main local and national records which can be consulted.

## **1. Commonwealth War Graves Commission**

Possibly the most useful place to start is the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) website [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org). Their database contains information on all UK and Commonwealth service personnel and civilians commemorated on CWGC memorials across 153 countries.

The website is free to use and the data can be searched in a number of ways. A typical entry for service personnel will give the person's name, age, regiment/service, final rank, service number, date of death and details of the location of their grave or the memorial on which their name is recorded. Family details may also be given. The website provides background information on the cemeteries and memorials, accompanied by site plans and photographs.

The CWGC database includes men and women of the Merchant Navy, fishing fleets, HM Coastguard and Lighthouse service who died as a consequence of warfare and usually records the name of their vessel or station.

The names of 67,092 civilians of the Commonwealth who died as a result of enemy action during World War Two are commemorated in the Civilian War Dead roll of honour held in Westminster Abbey, London. The roll can also be searched on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website.

## **2. Local war memorials and rolls of honour**

It is worth checking to see whether any records survive relating to the erection of a local war memorial, as these might include information on some or all of the deceased. The committee responsible often invited the local community to submit names for inclusion and there may be draft lists or letters from family members. Some churches and other organisations also compiled rolls of honour during one or both wars and correspondence, draft lists of names and other records relating to the roll may survive.

Kresen Kernow looks after records from Church of England parishes, Non-Conformist churches and Parish, Borough and Town Councils in Cornwall, and are listed and described in our online catalogue.

Searching on the name of the organisation, for example, 'Fowey Borough Council', will bring up records created by that body. The search can be limited by date: enter 1914-1925 to cover the era of the First World War and the years immediately following, during which most war memorials were erected. Alternatively, records relating to war memorials can be found by searching on the term 'war memorials'. Some Second World War memorials were not erected until the late 1950s, due to the shortage of wood and metal immediately after the war.

After the First World War, Truro Diocese compiled a roll of honour listing people from across Cornwall who had died as a result of the war. Each parish forwarded the names of all local residents who had died. A similar roll of honour was compiled after the Second World War. The records are held at Truro Cathedral: to view them, it may be advisable to contact the cathedral office in advance to arrange a specific time - please ask one of the vergers. The Second World War roll book is on display at the cathedral and the pages are turned daily.

### **3. Local sources**

Other records which can be helpful include census records, records of birth and baptism, and school admission records.

- Census records from 1841-1911 are available on various fee-paying websites and for free on FreeCen.
- Kresen Kernow holds registers of baptism, marriage and burial for the majority of Cornish Church of England parishes, as well as Methodist chapels and circuits and other Non-Conformist places of worship. The office also holds school admission registers for many Cornish schools. Full details can be found on our catalogues.
- The General Register Office (GRO) index to the registration of births, marriages and deaths is available online. It can be searched free of charge on the Freebmd website [www.freebmd.org.uk](http://www.freebmd.org.uk). Copy certificates can be obtained from Certificate Applications, Cornwall Registration Service for events registered in Cornwall, or from the GRO, for a fee.

## 4. Cornish newspapers

### First World War

Local newspapers are a rich source of information, in particular the *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, which in 1914 declared its intention to maintain a roll of honour for the duration of the conflict. The newspapers published details of those who had just enlisted or departed on active service, those home on leave, outcomes of military tribunals, letters sent to family from the front, photographs, details of bravery awards, names of those killed, wounded or missing, letters of condolence received by families, obituaries and wartime rolls of honour compiled by local communities. After the war, the newspapers reported on communities' plans for memorials and described the unveiling ceremonies.

### Second World War

Reporting restrictions and censorship introduced early on in the war means that information is more limited, but the newspapers still published articles and photographs of those reported as missing or killed.

## 5. First World War service medals

The majority of service and Merchant Navy personnel and some civilians qualified for service medals (also known as campaign medals). The British Army created index cards for its soldiers: typically a card records all ranks held, regiments, service numbers and service medals awarded; it may also the date the person entered a conflict and their date of death, if relevant.

The index cards have been digitised and are available on both the National Archives website (free to search and view index entry, but fee to view and download card), as well as on other fee-paying websites.

Information on medals awarded to Royal Navy personnel is published on Ancestry; the Merchant Navy records are on the National Archives website and can also be searched on Find My Past.

Royal Flying Corps airmen who served before 1916 are also listed on Army medal index cards. Those who served overseas in 1916 or later had their medals issued by the Air Ministry and not the War Office, so they are not included on the Army index.

## **6. First World War service records**

Unfortunately, the building in which the British Army's First World War era service records were stored was bombed during World War Two: only about 40% of the records survive and some of those have been damaged by fire or water. Service records for ranks other than commissioned officers are available on Ancestry and Find My Past. Service records for commissioned officers are available via the National Archives website.

Service records for Royal Navy ratings are available on Ancestry and Find My Past; those for naval officers are on the National Archives website.

The service records of Royal Flying Corps airmen who died or were discharged before April 1918, when the RAF was created, are held with the British Army records.

The National Archives website contains detailed guides to all its First World War era records, including medals for bravery, Army pension records, seamen's employment records and British Army war diaries, with details of how to access the records online or in person at Kew, see <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/>.

## **7. Second World War records**

The British Army WWII roll of honour is available on Ancestry and Find My Past. Army, Navy and RAF service records, medal rolls and other records which contain personal information are not generally available online. The National Archives website contains guides to what information is available where. Service records for the Army and Royal Navy are held by the Ministry of Defence; RAF records are still with the RAF. It is possible to apply for an individual record (fee to pay, forms can be downloaded from the Veterans UK website) but not all of the information in the record may be released.

## **8. Migrants**

Some memorials include the names of local men (and occasionally women) who moved abroad in pursuit of new opportunities, particularly between 1900 and 1914. Canada was a popular destination. Following the outbreak of war in 1914, a number of Cornish men joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Their enlistment ['attestation'] papers can be viewed free of

charge on the Library and Archives Canada website. The Canadian virtual war memorial commemorates those who died and is published on the Veterans Affairs Canada website.

## **9. Other sources**

- Find My Past also includes pension records, casualty lists and the National Roll of Honour 1914-1918. You can currently access Find My Past for free in Cornwall's libraries and at Kresen Kernow.
- Merchant Navy records are available for the First World War via the Royal Navy's First World War – Lives at Sea database.
- The National Maritime Museum in Greenwich has lots of advice and guidance on researching naval ancestors.
- The Imperial War Museum is also a source of lots of information about tracing military ancestors.
- If you have an ancestor who was in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry then Cornwall Regimental Museum in Bodmin have extensive records and helpful volunteers who may be able to help you find what you're looking for.