



AIATSIS

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Sources – birth, death and marriage records

Births, deaths and marriages [BDM] form a chain linking one generation of your family to the next and one branch of your family to another. You can use the BDM information you find to follow these links back through your family tree.

Realistically, you will probably spend a significant amount of time tracking down BDM records as you do your family history research.

Australian government BDM records are indexed, which means you can search by name, place and date within the date ranges which are open for public searching access. Working backwards from yourself, you should think of all the family names you know, the year your family members were born, married or died and where they were from. These can be keys for your search. If you don't know all these things, just one can be a starting point.

Three types of BDMs

There are two main types of 'mainstream' BDM records: **civil registrations** (which are government records) and **parish registers** (which are church records).

Information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander births, deaths and marriages, however, may have been recorded differently. For example,

- In the Northern Territory nearly all Aboriginal people were named in a Register of Aboriginal Wards published in the *Northern Territory Government Gazette*, no. 1913, on 13 May 1957. It recorded place of residence, tribal and language groups and dates of births and deaths. A copy is now held by the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages in Darwin.
- Aborigines protection and welfare boards often recorded Aboriginal births, deaths and marriages of people who were defined as 'Aborigines' and 'supervised' by the board.
- Church bodies that managed missions and other institutions recorded BDM information about people under their control. Some, like the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM), published newsletters which announced births, deaths and marriages.

When doing Indigenous family history research it is important to search both mainstream sources of BDM information and Aboriginal-specific sources. Remember that there will be many people for whom there is no official or other type of birth record. This guide also provides information about what to do if this is the case.

What information will you find on BDM certificates?

BDM certificates can provide a wealth of information beyond dates and places of birth, death and marriage. They often include addresses, names of witnesses who might be family members or friends, maiden names or former married names of women, ages, occupations and religions.

However, the information found on certificates varies. Earlier records are likely to have less information. Some states collected more information than others.

Parish records might have extra information, such as your ancestor's original signature.

Information you might find on birth, death or marriage certificates

Birth certificate:	Marriage certificate:	Death certificate:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surname • Given name of the child • Date of birth • Place of birth • Sex • Father's name • Occupation • Mother's name • Mother's maiden name • Ages • Other children of the union • Place of residence • Registration number 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Names of the bride and groom • Bride's maiden and former name/s • Their occupations • Usual place of residence • Where they were born • Any previous marriages • Names of their parent(s) • Registration number 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name of deceased • Sex • Date of death • Cause of death • Place of death • Age • Occupation • Residence • Place of birth • Place of marriage • Name of spouse • Children of the union • Where buried • Who the informant was • Registration number

Points to remember

- Information is only as reliable as the source. The informant on a death certificate may, for example, have hardly known the deceased person.
- Be mindful of spelling variations as people often recorded information as it sounded and in earlier times many people could not read and write.
- Try to double-check information on certificates with other records such as cemetery records, headstone inscriptions or other records.
- A marriage certificate may give details of the parents of each spouse, and is the most reliable certificate for information as both parties were present at the event and could give their own information.

- Birth, death and marriage certificates will sometimes include statements as to Aboriginality, especially in earlier records.
- Births, deaths and marriages of Aboriginal people were often not registered. This was sometimes related to legal restrictions such as the Queensland *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of Sale of Opium Acts 1901*, which prohibited the marriage of Aboriginal women to non-Aboriginal men without the express permission of the government. However it also occurred for many other reasons such as the remoteness of a birth place.
- Births of Indigenous children were not often registered in order to protect them from removal policies. Large number of Indigenous people worked on pastoral stations where events were recorded in station papers, diaries and resources rather than in the standard birth death and marriage registrations. Sadly many of these records have not survived because most stations were privately owned and preservation of documents relied on the individual owners.
- Sometimes you will see the word 'native' on a birth, death or marriage certificate. Be aware that this notation, especially on early records, does not refer to Aboriginality but refers to a person born in Australia rather than immigrating from England or elsewhere.
- How far back do BDM records go?

Compulsory civil registration of births, deaths and marriages was introduced in Australia in the middle of the 19th century. This meant that people were required by law to register these events with government authorities. Despite this, events were sometimes not registered, particularly in remote and rural areas.

In the early days of Australian colonisation the churches alone were responsible for recording baptisms, weddings and burials within their jurisdictions. These records are known as 'early church records' or 'parish registers'. Churches also continued to record events in parish registers after civil registration was introduced.

Government registries have tried to combine the information in early parish registers into the civil registration indexes where possible. If you don't find a registration in the indexes, think about what religion your ancestor might have been to and check if parish registers exist.

In early times BDM registrations were recorded by District Registrars and then sent to a central register in the cities. Occasionally the records never made it to the city. If you are unable to find a record in the main BDM index, you can also try a search of the district registers for the place you believe your ancestor was born. These are usually held in State libraries.

Year that civil registration of births, deaths and marriages began

- New South Wales 1856
- Victoria 1853
- Queensland 1856 (as New South Wales)
- Western Australia 1841
- South Australia 1842
- Tasmania 1838
- Northern Territory 1870 (formerly included in South Australia)
- Australian Capital Territory 1930 (formerly included in New South Wales)

Searching for historical BDM registrations

Some of the historical Australian BDM records have been indexed, meaning that you can search for BDM certificates by name, place and date. Anyone can use the BDM indexes where they are available

You can do online name searches of historical BDMs for the states listed below. You can use google to search for different BDM websites by typing in something like 'BDM NSW'. Their webpages will provide you with other information about the Registry in that state or territory such as their contact details and how to apply for certificates.

- New South Wales (or search for 'NSW BDM')
<https://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au/Pages/family-history-research/family-history-search.aspx>
- Northern Territory – no online access
- Victoria (or search for 'Victoria BDM')
<https://online.justice.vic.gov.au/bdm/indexsearch.doj>
- Queensland (or search for 'Queensland BDM')
<https://www.qld.gov.au/law/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces/family-history-research>
- Western Australia (or search for 'WA BDM')
<https://bdm.justice.wa.gov.au/apps/pioneersindex/default.aspx>
- South Australia (or search for 'SA BDM') access is via Genealogy SA online database, which also indexes Advertiser newspaper BDM notices
<https://www.genealogysa.org.au/resources/online-databases.html>
- Tasmania (or search for Tasmania BDM) best access is via the LINC website Names Index https://linc.tas.ent.sirsidynix.net.au/client/en_AU/names/

You can also access some BDM indexes through Ancestry.com and Family Search. Many libraries and family history societies have copies of BDM indexes in printed volumes, on CD-ROM and/or microfiche.

If you are having trouble finding particular information using the online indexes, try those on CD-ROM. Although not as simple to use as the online indexes, you can do more complicated searches in the CD-ROM databases. This is useful if you only have limited information, for example, if you are looking for the birth of a child and you only know the mother's given name and an approximate year of birth.

Remember you can ask your local librarian or family history society staff for help. Some of the BDM registries also provide specialised services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Are all BDMs available?

Open period BDMs. Anyone can apply for copies of historical certificates. These are considered 'open'. The table below shows the open periods by state and territory. Note that they are all different!

Closed period BDMs. Concerns about privacy and identity theft mean that more recent BDM events are not available. These are considered 'closed'.

What historical BDMs are available (years ago by state and territory)

State	Birth	Marriage	Death
New South Wales	100 years ago	50 years ago	30 years ago
Queensland	100	75	35
Northern Territory	100	75	30
South Australia	100	75	30
Victoria	100	65	30
Tasmania	100	75	25
Western Australia	100	75	30
Australian Capital Territory	100	75	30

Access policies

Each BDM authority has rules about the availability of its records to the public. There are also rules about when you need to show permission from the person named in the certificate or show proof of your relationship to them (for example, your parents, children or grandparents).

- Australian Capital Territory:
https://www.accesscanberra.act.gov.au/app/answers/detail/a_id/18/~/apply-for-a-birth%2C-death-or-marriage-certificate
- New South Wales: <https://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au/Pages/family-history-research/family-history-research-nsw.aspx>
- Northern Territory: <https://nt.gov.au/law/bdm/search-births-deaths-and-marriages-records>
- Queensland: <https://www.qld.gov.au/law/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces/family-history-research/information-and-how-to-access-and-order-records/information-you-can-access/>
- South Australia: <https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/family-and-community/births,-deaths-and-marriages/family-research>
- Victoria: <https://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/about-us/legislation-policies-and-practices/access-to-registry-information/information-is>
- Western Australia:
http://www.bdm.dotag.wa.gov.au/C/certificate_access_policies.aspx

Where to get copies of BDM certificates

Each state and territory in Australia has a registry of births, deaths and marriages. You can apply to the registry for official copies of certificates via their websites. Unfortunately certificates are costly to purchase.

To find BDM websites with addresses and contact information, remember to just do a google search like NSW BDM or Vic BDM.

Transcription services

In some states you can use a transcription service to record what is on a certificate. Transcriptions provide the same information as certificates and are usually cheaper and quicker, but can't be used for legal purposes. Ask the BDM registry if there are any transcription services in your state.

Some states have specialised information or services to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to find and get access to BDM information. Links to information in New South

Wales, Victoria and the NT are below or you could contact the registrar and ask if they have an Indigenous staff member to help you or someone to assist with Aboriginal BDM records.

New South Wales: <http://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au/aboriginal>

Northern Territory: <http://guides.naa.gov.au/tracking-family/chapter5/5.19.aspx>

Victoria: <https://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/koori-services/culturally-sensitive-services>. Email bmindigenousaccess@justice.vic.gov.au

What if you can't find BDM records?

It may be difficult to find BDMs for family members. Some common reasons are:

- the registration name was spelled differently from the one you searched for
- the registration name was different from the name the person was usually known by
- the birth was registered under the mother's maiden name
- the registration name was a nickname or alias
- the event was never registered, due to reasons such as distance, suspicion of the system, and natural events like floods or fires
- the event was registered in an unexpected place – for example, the person was born at one place but registered in a different town
- information provided at registration was incorrect, either deliberately (for example, to hide illegitimacy or under-age marriage) or because the correct information wasn't known
- information recorded at registration was incorrect because the registrar misheard, misspelled or misinterpreted the information told to them
- a keyboard error or an error in interpreting the original handwriting was made when the index was compiled
- the event is outside the open period for access to BDM records.

What you can do

You can try to find other records for birth, death and marriage information, for example:

- BDM certificates of other people in the family, such as brothers and sisters of the person you're researching
- Trove digitised newspapers – birth, baptism, death, marriage, funeral and in memoriam notices for family members; reports on inquests, divorces, etc.
- Other online indexes of birth, death and funeral records in newspapers – Genealogy SA online database (birth and death notices in the South Australian Advertiser newspaper), Ryerson Index <https://www.ryersonindex.org/> (death and funeral notices in Australian newspapers) Savill Index <http://www.slsa.sa.gov.au/fh/savill/> (Advertiser funeral notices).

- Mission records – especially registers of baptisms, marriages, births and deaths
- ‘Protection’ and welfare records – letters, reports, censuses, diaries, records of children in training institutions
- Tindale genealogies or other ethnographical or anthropological collections
- War service records
- Divorce records
- Cemetery records
- Inquest records
- Electoral rolls
- Census records
- School and/or hospital admission registers
- Family Bible

See CoraWeb – <http://www.coraweb.com.au/categories/birth-death-and-marriage-records> for more ideas.