



Tracing Nurses

A guide to British nursing sources for researching family and local history

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Introduction

Welcome to this guide, designed to help you find details of a nurse you might be interested in. Be they family or friend, if you are lucky and persistent you will trace that nurse and discover significant information about them and what their life might have been like.

The guide seeks to help you in your quest. It sets out the records you should look for and some of the reasons why you might not succeed. One challenge is the size of our profession. Nursing is the largest profession in the UK, with more than 700,000 registered nurses, plus nursing associates and health care support workers. As a result, surviving lists of nurses contain repetitions of people, and of those with similar or identical names. As a profession, nursing is predominantly made up of women, and although some men have always been engaged as nurses, the ratio has remained static for more than 100 years, at about 90% women and 10% men. It can be challenging to trace women, with them tending to be less well documented and with name changes due to marriage.

Nursing is a relatively new profession, with state registration of nurses approved in 1919 and the first nurse's register published in 1922. Nurses can be traced in the censuses and other documents before this time. The definition of what makes a nurse means that many will not be listed in the records we describe. Bearing that in mind, exploring the world of nursing, the different care settings, levels of expertise, the diversity of the nurses themselves and the life stories that come through, make this research enjoyable and immensely rewarding.

We would love to hear about the stories you find, so do let us know via the email honf@rcn.org.uk

Dianne Yarwood

Chair of the RCN History of Nursing Forum

Not sure where to start?

*Try searching the nursing registers on
Ancestry, following the guide on p.29*

What to look for: records at home

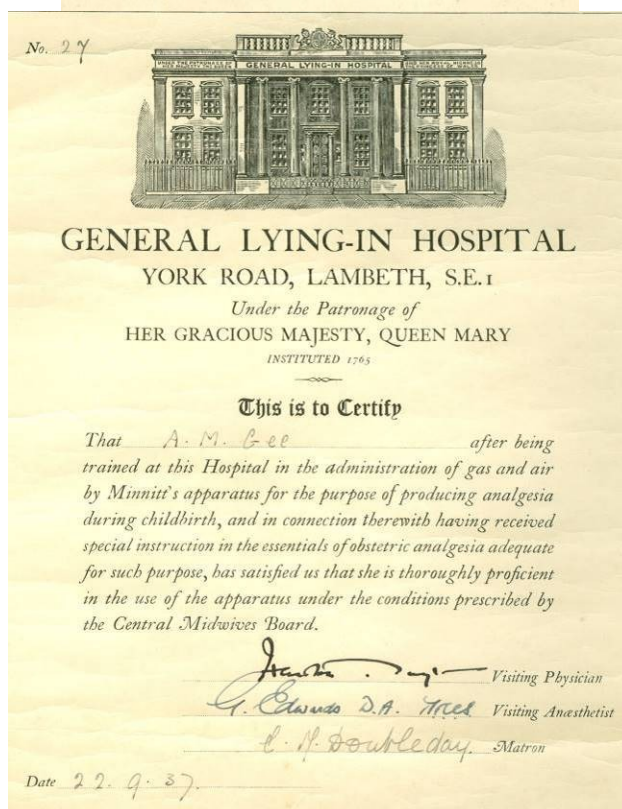
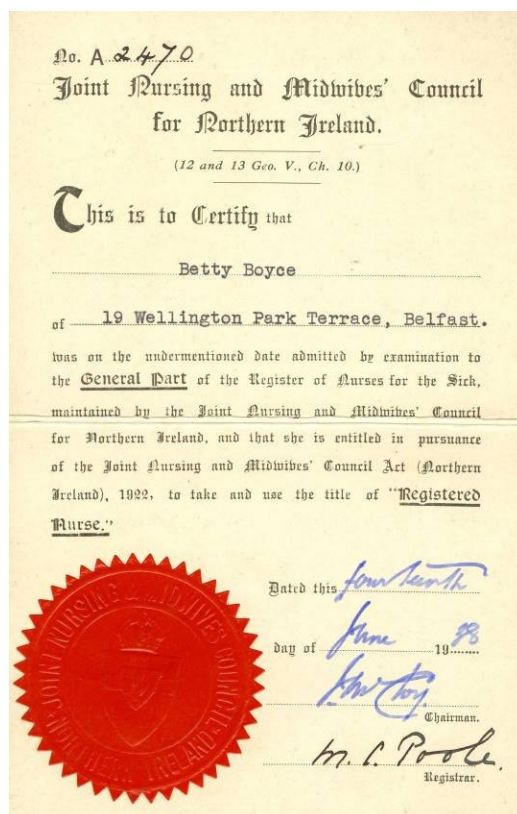
Before you start looking for official records relating to your ancestor, have a look at home and ask other members of your family for items or memories that may help. As well as diaries and letters, you should look for the following nursing-specific items.

Nursing certificates

Nurse training, like most other forms of education, awarded certificates when successfully completed. These outline where and when someone trained and what level they achieved.

Nursing is a profession that requires training to become a “registered nurse” and lifelong learning with certificates being awarded when further career development is pursued. There have been many changes as nursing and nurse education have advanced and developed over time. Certificates are kept by individuals, because they represent proud achievements, but also because they are the proof required to practice.

Certificates are sometimes framed and hung on the wall, but often are held in files and carefully stored. You will find them stored in cardboard rolls – sometimes rolled up with posters to keep them clean.



Images © RCN Archives

Left: Betty Boyce Registered Nurse certificate, Northern Ireland 1938 (Ref C883)

Right: Anne Gee, General Lying in Hospital Lambeth Certificate, Sep 1937 (Ref C678)

Badges

Nurses often own some small badges or medals. These give vital clues about where somebody trained, worked, lived, or nursing organisations that they were affiliated with. Badges are also useful for local history research.

'Hospital badges' are very common, awarded at the completion of training. From the 1870s-1990s most nurses were trained in hospitals, initially undergoing a one-year training which was increased to three years by the end of the nineteenth century.

Usually made of silver and coloured enamel, these were often worn whilst on duty to indicate where the qualified nurse had trained. Each hospital had its own unique design; often heraldic in nature, they include symbols and images specific to the hospital. The designs tend to stay the same over time. Nurses wore these throughout their careers, including when they moved hospitals.

On the reverse of the badges, you will sometimes find inscribed the individual nurses' name, their number, and/or dates of training.

As well as training on the wards in different hospital departments student nurses attended regular lectures in addition to their practical work. As students and probationers, they had to undertake a series of rigorous examinations, both written and practical, before they could progress to the next stage of training.

On successful completion of training, student nurses were awarded their certificate and their hospital badge.

The Royal College of Nursing Archives has a large collection of [hospital nursing badges](#) from across the UK. The badge will usually contain the name of the hospital.

More details of how to locate hospital records are given further below in this guide.

With the move to university-based nurse training in the 1990s hospital badges ceased, though some universities have since introduced badges for their alumni.



Images © RCN Archives, left to right

St. Lawrence's Hospital, Caterham, Surrey c.1958 (Ref B_20)

Glasgow Royal Maternity Hospital c.1960 (Ref B_776)

Prince of Wales's General Hospital belt buckle, c.1924 (Ref B_1148)

General Nursing Council (1922-1983) badges

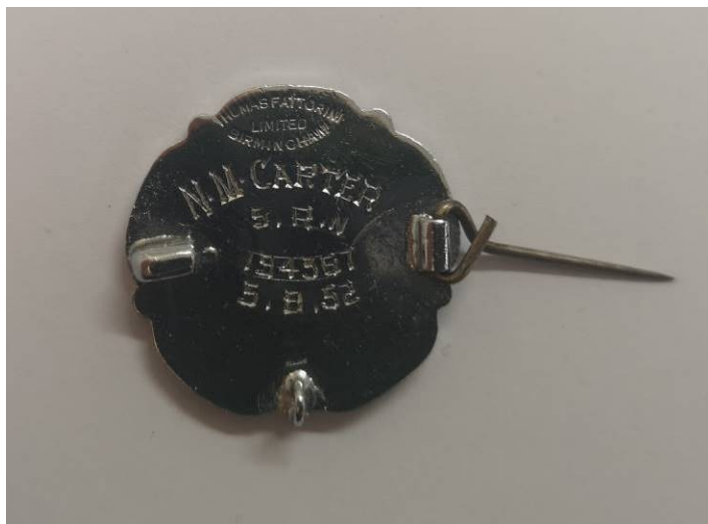
After qualification came registration with the General Nursing Council (GNC). This single design was awarded to all state registered nurses in England and Wales. Northern Ireland and Scotland had different badges. If your ancestor was awarded one of these, you should be able to locate them in the General Nursing Council Registers.

Blue enamel and silver (real silver to 1940 and chrome thereafter), the reverse often had the name and GNC number of the nurse it was awarded to – though not always. Some badges came with a short pin and chain to keep it securely fixed to the nurse's uniform – reflecting the professional value of these badges in the workplace.

The badge is in the shape of a rose, symbolising England, with daffodils symbolising Wales on either side of the figure. The figure is Hygeia, the Greek goddess of good health, cleanliness and hygiene. The inscription is 'The General Nursing Council for England and Wales'.

The GNC required badges to be returned to them when a nurse ceased practicing, or at the very least upon their death; such was the importance of protecting the status of professional nurses. However, many badges were kept by nurses and their families, especially with the end of the GNC and the ceasing of badges in 1983.

More details of how to search the general nursing registers are given further below in this guide.



Images © RCN Archives, left to right

GNC Badge (Ref B_30 - C26A_B)

GNC Badge, reverse with inscription (Ref B_1485)

Badges of affiliation

Badges were, and are, produced to show affiliation to different nursing bodies. These might include the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Midwives, other

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unions or nursing bodies such as The Cavell Trust. If your nurse held one of these, you may be able to find further information about them in that organisation's archives. See the section on Specialist Nursing Associations below.

District nurses were often affiliated to the [Queens Nursing Institute](#) (QNI) founded in 1887, or to local district nursing associations. Like hospital badges some of the early membership badges have a name or membership number inscribed on the reverse; they were often ornate. In recent years badges for daily wear have been introduced, these are much simpler smooth designs which can be easily cleaned to meet infection prevention control guidance.



Images © RCN Archives, left to right

Royal College of Midwives (RCM) (Ref B_39)

District Nursing Institute (Ref B_254)

RCN badge (Ref B_49)

RCN Blue & red hands logo (Ref B_1223)

Buckles

Some hospitals issued simple buckles for the belt that formed part of most nursing uniforms. You may find an ornate silver belt buckle in your ancestor's belongings. Upon successful completion of hospital training, a silver buckle was traditionally given as a present by the nurse's family. The buckle was a personal gift and design often reflected links to family values, beliefs or experiences, as well as to the fashion of the time. It tended not be worn on regular workdays but was kept for 'dress uniform' and special occasions. You may find family photographs or letters related to the buckle, but not official records.



Image © RCN Archives. Belt buckle on dark red belt c.1985 (ref B_1168)

Photographs

Look for photographs, these may help date or place your nurse. Look for inscriptions on the reverse listing names, places and dates.

The photographer will sometimes include their details which can help date and place a photograph. The Royal Photographic Society has an online guide to [Researching Historic Photographs](#).



Image © RCN Archives. Papers of Margaret Horn. Night shift nurses at Ancoats Hospital. March 1915 (ref C_488_P)

What to look for: Nursing records

Ancestry

Many of the registers described below are available to search via [Ancestry](#). This was the result of a digitisation project between the Royal College of Nursing and Ancestry which went online in 2016.

Registers included in Ancestry are indicated in the text.

Details of how to search the nursing registers in Ancestry can be found on the same webpage as this guide.

RCN membership records

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) was established in 1916 as a professional association for nurses, and later became a trade union.

There is a published RCN membership register covering the period 1916-1923 (available on Ancestry). This gives each member's name, joining date, address and qualification.

Beyond the register, the RCN Archives cannot disclose confidential membership information under the Data Protection Act 2018.

State registration of nurses

Since 2001, the statutory regulatory body of nursing in the UK has been the [Nursing & Midwifery Council](#) (NMC). The NMC was preceded by the UK Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC), which worked in conjunction with four national boards and dealt with educational standards (1983-2001).

Before the UKCC, there were three General Nursing Councils (GNCs): one for England & Wales, one for Scotland and one for Ireland. The GNCs were established in 1921, each with clearly prescribed duties and responsibilities for the training, examination and registration of nurses and the approval of training schools for the purpose of maintaining a Register of Nurses.

The State Register of Nurses

The three GNCs each published an annual Register of Nurses from 1922 until the late 1960s – available on Ancestry. For the period 1922-1947, these volumes list nurses by name (including maiden name where appropriate), registration date and number, place of registration (always the GNC headquarters in London, Dublin or Edinburgh), permanent address at that time, and where they qualified with dates. Please note that England and Wales ran a joint register from London.

From the 1950s, the GNC Registers only list newly qualified nurses for each year and do not give their address. They are arranged as quarterly lists, repeating four times in each volume. They include lists of 'deletions' from the Register, through retirement etc.

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Originally the Register had a main, 'General' part and supplementary 'mental', 'male', 'fever' 'mental defectives' and 'sick children's' parts. These supplementary parts have changed over the years. When searching, check all parts of the Register as well as the late entries list, which sometimes appears at the end of the 'General' part.

THE REGISTER OF NURSES FOR 1922 (England and Wales)	3
GENERAL PART OF THE REGISTER	3
SUPPLEMENTARY PART OF THE REGISTER—	
1. Male Nurses	349
2. Mental Nurses	350
3. Nurses for Mental Defectives	360
4. Sick Children's Nurses	361
5. Fever Nurses	370

Nurses would pay an annual fee to be on the Register. Registration was initially voluntary and many who chose to register were hospital nurses. After the 1943 Nurses' Act it became compulsory to be a State Registered Nurse (SRN) and this is still a legal requirement to practice nursing in the UK. In Scotland, the term originally used was Registered General Nurse (RGN).

Publication of the Register ceased in 1968 when it moved to a digital format. The NMC still maintains the Register which is available to [search online](#). However the register is no longer an open publication – it is a tool for those with a legitimate interest, such as prospective employers, to check an individual is currently a registered nurse. The NMC cannot give out any personal information under the Data Protection Act 2018.

The Roll of Nurses

Another type of nurse appeared in the 1943 Nurses Act, the State Enrolled Assistant Nurse (SEAN). Large numbers were entered onto the roll by dint of past experience and in 1953 mental and mental sub normality enrolled assistant nurses were introduced. In 1961 the title changed to State Enrolled Nurse. These were not at the same level as an SRN or RGN but were recorded in the same way by the GNC, who also set the syllabus for examinations and approved the schools of nursing within hospitals.

Nursing registers in Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland

The GNC for Ireland maintained the Register of Nurses from 1921-1950. In 1922, this body was replaced in Northern Ireland by the Joint Nursing and Midwifery Council (JNMC), which took over publication of the Register and later the Roll of Nurses. The current Republic of Ireland registration body, *An Bord Altranais* (Irish Nursing Board), was established by the Nurses' Act of 1950 in place of the GNC for Ireland and the Central Midwives Board for Ireland.

Physical locations of registers and rolls

Note: The following registers are **duplicate print copies** of what is held on Ancestry:

Registers held at RCN Archive:

- GNC England & Wales Register of Nurses, 1922-1968.
- GNC England & Wales Roll of Nurses, 1947-1968 (parts of 1947-1948 missing).
- CMB England & Wales Midwives Roll, 1979-1982.
- GNC Scotland Register of Nurses, 1945-1948, 1948 supplement, 1950, 1955 and 1957-1967.
- GNC Scotland Roll of [Assistant] Nurses, 1946 and 1956-1966.
- CMB Scotland Midwives Roll, 1917-1968; plus a manuscript Roll for 1981-1984.
- GNC Ireland Register of Nurses, 1939, 1943 and 1945-1948. No copies of the Roll held.
- JNMC Northern Ireland Register of Nurses, 1943, 1946, 1956 and 1959.
- JNMC Northern Ireland Register of Nurses and Roll of Nurses combined, 1949 and 1951.
- JNMC Northern Ireland Midwives Roll, 1959.

The National Archives (TNA): a full run of the GNC England & Wales Register and Roll (Register of Nurses and supplementary registers, 1921-1973: reference DT10). TNA has a guide to [records on doctors and nurses](#).

National Records of Scotland: holds a full run of the GNC Scotland Register and Roll of Nurses (Register of Nurses, 1921-1983; Roll of Nurses, 1944-1983; Register of Health Visitors, 1933-1983: reference GNC 12, 13 and 14). At present, access to the original volumes of the Register and Roll is closed for 75 years from the date of creation. These registers include inconsistent manuscript additions, particularly related to service in the First and Second World Wars.

Cambridge University Library: GNC England & Wales Register of Nurses, 1922-1968, & Roll of Assistant Nurses, 1947-1968.

Oxford Libraries Online (SOLO): GNC England & Wales Register of Nurses, 1922-1968; GNC England & Wales Roll of Assistant Nurses, 1948-1961; GNC England & Wales Roll of Nurses, 1961-1968; GNC Scotland Roll of Assistant Nurses, 1950-1966.

Manchester Central Library's Technical Library: GNC England & Wales Register of Nurses, 1946-1968 (reference 610.73 GI).

Wellcome Library, London: GNC England & Wales Register of Nurses, 1930-1944 & 1946-1947; supplementary registers, 1948-1950.

Trinity College Dublin: GNC England & Wales Register of Nurses, 1967-1969; GNC Scotland Register of Nurses, 1961-1967; GNC England & Wales Roll of Nurses, 1967-1969; GNC Scotland Roll of Nurses, 1961-1964 & GNC Scotland Roll of Assistant Nurses, 1960. These registers include inconsistent manuscript additions, particularly related to service in the First and Second World Wars. A digital copy is available onsite only at Trinity College.

The British Library, London: GNC England & Wales Register of Nurses, 1922-1968 and Roll of Assistant Nurses, 1947-1948; GNC Scotland Register of Nurses, 1957 and Roll of Assistant Nurses, 1959-1964.

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National Library of Ireland, Dublin: GNC England & Wales Register of Nurses, 1930 onwards. No copies of the Roll are held here.

University College Dublin: GNC Ireland Register of Nurses, 1921-1985. No copies of the Roll are held here.

Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI): Joint Nursing and Midwives' Council for Northern Ireland/Northern Ireland Council for Nurses and Midwives, Register of Nurses, 1922-1983. These registers include inconsistent manuscript additions, particularly related to service in the First and Second World Wars.

Scottish nursing registers

The National Records of Scotland holds the following early nursing registers, which predate the GNC Register:

- Local Government Board (Scotland). Register of trained sick nurses appointed to poorhouse institutions, 1905-1927 (reference HH2/33).
- Scottish Board of Health. Register of trained sick nurses appointed to poorhouse institutions, 1906-1930 (reference HH2/34).
- Scottish Board of Health. Index to register of trained nurses, 1885-1930 (reference HH2/35).
- Scottish Board of Health. Special register of certified nurses, 1907-1923 (reference HH2/36).
- Scottish Board of Health. Register of nursing examination candidates: appointments and subjects passed, 1904-1913 (reference HH2/37).

Nursing and hospital directories

Burdett's Directories - Sir Henry Burdett, a Victorian philanthropist, published *Burdett's Official Nursing Directory* from 1894-1899. The *Directory* was an annual volume containing the law pertaining to nurses, the particulars of nursing institutions and training schools in the UK and abroad, and a list of nurses giving their names, addresses and a very brief résumé. Inclusion was optional and nurses could pay to appear on the list, which many London-based nurses did.

The RCN Archive has copies of the *Directory* for 1898 and 1899 (these are available on Ancestry).

Sir Henry also published *Burdett's Hospital Annual* (1890-1893), which became *Burdett's Hospital & Charities Annual* (1894-1930). This publication lists the hospitals, institutions, charities and organisations then existing in the UK. It contains details of the membership of hospital boards, the names of senior nursing and medical staff, the training available, the size of each hospital and its nursing staff, etc.

The RCN Archive holds editions for 1922-1923 and 1928 (available on Ancestry). Physical copies of additional directories can be located via [Library Hub](#).

Hospital yearbooks and directories - Burdett's Hospital & Charities Annual amalgamated with the Annual Report of the Voluntary Hospitals in Great Britain (excluding London) to become the Hospitals Yearbook (1931-1967). This publication lists each Area Health Authority in the UK and the various hospitals, clinics and units falling under their administration. After 1967, it was known as the Hospitals Yearbook and Directory of Hospital Suppliers.

Additional directories, including those only available in physical format, can be located via [Library Hub](#).

The RCN Archive holds editions for 1977, 1979 and 1985, as well as a copy of its successor publication, *The Hospital & Health Services Yearbook*, for 1990.

London County Council handbooks

The London County Council (LCC), now the Corporation of London, included the Metropolitan Asylums Board (MAB) and employed many nurses across the city. Its

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annual handbook, *LCC Staff and General Services*, contains the names of nurse employees from 1909-1939, and may be consulted at the London Metropolitan Archives. See [their](#) History of Nursing Guide for more details.

The RCN Archive holds:

- *Who's Who in the Nursing World. The Nursing Yearbook 1929. Professional Publications Ltd, London.*
- *Guy's Hospital Nurses' League Register & Nursing Guide.* Ash & Co, London (1937, 1950, 1960, 1997 & 2000).
- *Royal British Nurses Association Roll of Members 1909.*

These and later hospital directories are available from health libraries around the UK.

Hospital records

In general, student nurses undertook training in hospitals until the 1990s when training was passed to universities. If you know where your ancestor trained or worked, you should see what records survive for that institution.

Hospital records may include student, probationer and training records, as well as staff registers. The staff registers may include nursing staff – such as nursing assistants, state enrolled nurses and health care assistants – who do not appear in the GNC state register of nurses. As well as staff registers there are often board minutes, staff magazines, photographs, annual reports, which sometimes mention nursing staff by name. In larger hospitals nursing committees were created to oversee recruitment, training, discipline, terms of condition and complaints.

'Character Books' are very useful resources where they survive. Originating in the Victorian period, these remained in use by some hospitals into the late 1960s. The volumes contain manuscript entries, one for each nurse, often with specific information set out in a form across a whole page. These entries contain the matron's views of each nurse's character, their hygiene, self-sacrifice, and respectability. Sometimes insightful, the testimonials reflect the culture of the time as well as individual prejudices; for example black nurses in the Windrush era were often unfairly judged (see Dr Catherine Babikian's talk [West Park Hospital character books, 1924 to 1969: overseas nurses in the NHS](#)).

Many hospital records relating to nursing have not survived to the present day, but those that do can include records that are useful for family historians.

In England and Wales, possible locations include the County Record Office in the area where the hospital was located. The National Archives has an online directory where you can [find a records office](#) by name or geographic location.

The Hospital Records Database Online held by The National Archives, was removed in 2023. Instead search [Discovery | The National Archives](#) for the hospital name to find out if any records survive.

[Historic Hospitals](#), an online architectural gazetteer has useful lists of hospitals with dates, information on where they were located, and what they looked like. It aims to cover all the UK. This may give a useful overview if you are unsure which hospital your ancestor worked at.

In London the records may be at [London Metropolitan Archives](#) (LMA). The LMA has produced a [Research Guide to Nursing History](#). The LMA holds the archives of St Thomas's Hospital, home to the Nightingale School of Nursing. The first 148 Nightingale nurses, trained 1860-1870, were listed by Monica Baly in a book chapter 'The Nightingale Nurses: The Myth and the Reality', published as part of *Nursing History: The State of the Art* by Christopher Maggs (Routledge, 1987).

Some hospitals have published books on their history, including some specifically on nursing such as *Nursing through the Years: Care and Compassion at The Royal London Hospital* by Loretta Bellman, Sue Boase, Sarah Rogers and Barbara Stuchfield (Pen and Sword, 2018). These give useful background information on what it would have been like to work there - sometimes with very detailed information on what it was like to be a nurse in that institution. The RCN Library holds reference copies of some hospital histories, as does the Wellcome Library.

Some hospitals have web pages on their history, occasionally with specific history of nursing content, such as this [Nursing History at Northampton General Hospital](#).

Hospital-based archives

Some hospitals maintain their own archives. These include:

University College London Hospitals NHS Trust [Archive](#) - UCL hospitals include: The Middlesex Hospital; The Hospital for Women, Soho; St Peter's Group; The Eastman Dental Hospital; The Hospital for Tropical Diseases and The National Temperance Hospital.

St Bartholomew's Hospital Archive and the Royal London Hospital run a combined service at [Barts Health Archives](#) - include records for the following hospitals: St Bartholomew's Hospital Archives; Royal London Hospital, The Alexandra Hospital for Children with Hip Disease; The Eastern and the Homerton Hospital; The German Hospital; The Hackney Hospital; The Metropolitan Hospital; The Mothers' Hospital; St Leonard's Hospital and St Marks Hospital.

[Imperial College Hospital Archives](#) include the records of Charing Cross, Hammersmith, Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea and St Mary's hospitals.

In Cambridge there is the [Addenbrookes NHS Trust Archives](#).

[Oxfordshire Health Archives](#) has a useful historical [list of hospitals](#) in Oxfordshire, with details of any known surviving archives. They hold archives for:

The Radcliffe Guild of Nurses. The alumni organisation for nurses who trained at the Radcliffe and associated hospitals. Memorabilia 1920-1991, photographs 1897-1975, uniforms and medical instruments.

The Wingfield League. The alumni organisation for [nurses](#) and staff of the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre. Records of the League 1955-1996, photographs 1934-1994 and memorabilia 1917-1996

Health boards

In Scotland, hospital records were the responsibility of the Health Board (or Service) for each region. These records have mostly been absorbed into university archives when the universities took over the role of training nurses, such as:

- [NHS Grampian Archives](#) held by the University of Aberdeen.
- [Lothian Health Services Archive](#), held by the University of Edinburgh which has online guidance on their [records about nurses](#).
- [NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde Archives](#). As at 2023 NHS GGC were reviewing service options.

Nurses' leagues

The records of nurses' leagues are a great source for personal names and details of individual nurses. The first nurses' league was formed in 1899 as an association for the trained nurses of St Bartholomew's Hospital. It was a great success and many of the larger hospitals had leagues, which published a regular magazine for alumni to keep in touch. With the movement of nurse education into higher education, some leagues have become university alumni associations, and only a few remain. Magazines and records of Nurses' Leagues may survive in hospital archives, local record offices and local history libraries.

Nursing League records and magazines survive across the UK. Some of the magazines have been digitised such as the [Stirling Royal Infirmary Nurses' League](#) held at NHS Forth Valley Archive. Each magazine contains a full list of the League's members and there are regular notices of births, deaths and marriages along with examination results and prize givings. This is typical of a Nurses League Magazine.

Name Indexes of Nurses

Some archive offices have indexed records by nurses names, here are a few examples:

Norfolk County Record Office has an online [guide to nursing and midwifery records](#). In 2021 an index to the [Norfolk and Norwich Nurses' Register, 1900-1928](#) was made available online. The index is an integral part of their online catalogue. To locate a nurse, simply search for the reference number and a name, for example, NNH 114 Florence. Norfolk have filmed an event where the archivist gave an overview of local [Norfolk records relating to nursing](#).

Glasgow City Archives hold an index to Scottish Women's Hospitals personnel files, including around one hundred and sixty names with occupations given as either Nurse, Nurse Sister and Nursing Sister. As of Spring 2024 the index was not yet available online; contact archives@glasgowlife.org.uk to request a staff search of the index.

St George's Archive hold many south London nurse training schools' collections. These have been catalogued to include individual nurses or nursing students names. There is a separate searchable / browsable [online name index](#). An overview of the nursing collection can be read in their [online catalogue](#), or you can search their archive catalogue for people's names to see details of oral histories or personal papers that are in the [collection](#).

Census

The census is a population survey taken every 10 years, which commenced in 1801. From 1841 onwards, the census records include information on individuals and may indicate or confirm that your ancestor was a nurse or midwife. The census records their address, which may be a hospital or a nurses' home. For many nineteenth-century nurses the census is the only surviving record of their career. The returns for individual hospitals, workhouses and asylums list everyone present in the building on census night, although patients or inmates are sometimes only recorded by their initials.

It is important to note that census returns use a variety of occupational terms to describe nurses. They are sometimes classed as domestic servants with responsibilities for childcare. Some of the other terms used include:

- Subordinate or Subsidiary Medical Services (abbreviated to SMS)
- 'Poor Law Officials' (sometimes used to describe nurses in Poor Law Hospitals).
- Monthly Nurse
- Sick Nurse
- Attendant or Ward Attendant.

It should be noted that a person recorded in the census as a 'nurse' did not necessarily have any formal nursing training or qualifications.

England and Wales: [The National Archives Census Guide](#) records for 1841-1921 gives an overview of how to access these online. Local county record offices tend to have the returns for their own respective county and sometimes for adjoining counties.

There is a useful [Guide to Records](#) for searching records of births, marriages, deaths, adoptions and civil partnerships.

Scotland: The National Records of Scotland's website [Scotland's People](#) is dedicated to family history research, including access to the online 1841-1911 censuses.

Ireland and Northern Ireland: unfortunately, little information survives from the Irish censuses for 1841-1891. 1901 and 1911 census for Ireland are available to search on the web (via the National Archives). Contact the [Public Record Office for Northern Ireland](#) and the [National Archives of Ireland](#). No census was taken in Ireland/Northern Ireland in 1921 owing to the War of Independence.

This will greatly add to our knowledge of nursing staff as the 1921 census required information about the profession and branch within it. It asked for the place of work and their employer's name. Marital status, including divorce was required for those over 15 years old. It asked questions on part time and full-time education which could help track nursing staff.

The 1921 Census was released January 2021 and is available online via [FindMyPast](#), and onsite at The National Archives, Archives+ in Manchester and the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth. In terms of occupation and employment, the 1921 Census asked for details of the nature of employment, the capacity in which they were employed, to list the employer if they had one, and the place they were employed. The census makes enquiries about whether individuals were in full or part time training or education. Some of the nurses' homes feature as institutions (owing to the

scale of their occupancy) which may be useful for young women in the early stages of their career. As indicated elsewhere in this guide, nurses often lived onsite at their workplace, so this census will reflect this in the entries. The data in the 1921 Census is searchable by occupation so this offers interesting possibilities for research, particularly for those researching local or hospital histories.

The 1921 Census may be used in conjunction with the 1922 state register of nursing to build up a wider picture of those who registered with the GNC; the Census will include several people who did not register themselves as nurses with the GNC but who self-identified as nurses.

The 1921 Census and the 1939 Register are particularly important as the 1931 Census returns were destroyed in a fire and the 1941 Census did not take place due to the Second World War.

Beginners' guides to using the census and more specialised publications can be purchased from the [Federation of Family History Societies](#).

The 1939 England and Wales Register

From the 1921 census there is a gap until the 1951 Census which has not yet been released. The 1939 is the only similar resource available for this period. Each entry includes details of all occupants of an address and gives some detail of each person's occupation. The register required people to explain exactly what they did for a living, rather than using broad general terms. The data gathered resulted in identity cards being issued, was updated over time and eventually formed the basis of the NHS registration system. This guide to the [1939 Register - The National Archives](#) gives more details about the Register and how to search it via Ancestry or FindMyPast.

Trade and Post Office directories

Nurses and midwives are sometimes listed in eighteenth and nineteenth-century trade and Post Office directories. For England and Wales, these publications can be found in most County Record Offices and some public libraries.

Digital versions of 700 [Scottish post office directories](#) for 28 towns in Scotland, spanning the period 1773-1911, may be searched free of charge.

Selected [street directories for Northern Ireland](#) are available to search via the Public Records Office for Northern Ireland.

Specialist Nursing Associations

As indicated in the Badges of Affiliation section above, nurses often affiliated themselves to specific nursing associations. These associations included networks for specialist areas of the profession, religious beliefs, or the country of origin for migrant nurses. There is a [List of nursing organisations in the United Kingdom on Wikipedia](#) that includes historic nursing organisations.

You can search [The National Archives](#) to see if there are any surviving records for any of these organisations.

Tracing Nurses

Here are some examples of specialist nursing organisations archives with member information:

- [The Royal British Nurses' Association \(RBNA\) / British College of Nursing](#) archive is held at [King's College London Archives](#). Their [Pioneering Nurses](#) resource is a free online index of 3,500 members in the British Nurses' Association register to 1932. Brief biographies of the first 1,000 pioneering nurses on the register are included - backgrounds, training and professional achievements. (The RCN Archives holds a physical copy of the RBNA membership register, covering the first 10,000 members from March 1890-June 1966).
- The [Royal Medico-Psychological Association \(RMPA\)](#) archive is held at [Royal College of Psychiatrists Archive](#). RMPA trained and registered Mental Nurses or Attendants and is seen as initiating the professions of learning disability nursing and mental health nursing. An overview is available of their [Nursing Examination Records \(including Registers of successful candidates 1891-1951\)](#).
- The Catholic Nurses Guild, now the [Association of Catholic Nurses England and Wales](#) have digitised copies of their magazine 1933-1959. Whilst the [Guild of St Barnabas: Association of Anglican Nurses \(1876-2012\)](#) records are held at Lambeth Palace Library.

Midwifery records

The Midwives Act 1902 (England & Wales only) enabled the state enrolment of midwives and established the Central Midwives Board (CMB) for England & Wales. The Midwives Institute, established in the 1880s and known from 1941 as the Royal College of Midwives, played a crucial role in the application of the Act. Practising midwives were given until 1910 to enrol with the CMB.

A Midwives Act was not passed for Scotland until 1915, but Scotland had by then learned valuable lessons from the experience of the CMB for England and Wales and drew upon these in setting up the CMB for Scotland. In each country, the CMB operated independently from the GNC or from any nursing infrastructure, although many midwives were also qualified nurses.

- [The Royal College of Midwives \(RCM\) Library](#) has transferred their archive including midwifery certification and membership to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG). The archives can be accessed by contacting the [RCOG library](#).
- The Midwives Roll, 1904-1959 is available to search on Ancestry. You can locate the Midwives Rolls by following the instructions in 'How to search the nursing registers on Ancestry' on the same webpage as this guide but replacing 'Nursing' with 'Midwives' in the Ancestry 'card catalogue' search. This collection was created from the Wellcome Library's copies of the Roll. Records include details of the individual's name, address and date of enrolment. Physical copies of the Roll are held as follows:
 - o The CMB England & Wales Roll of Midwives, 1902-1983 is held at the National Archives at Kew.
 - o The RCN Archives holds copies of the CMB Scotland Roll of Midwives, 1917-1968; the CMB England & Wales Roll of Midwives, 1981-1984; and the JNMC Northern Ireland Roll of Midwives for 1959 only.

Tracing Nurses

- o The CMB Ireland Roll and Register of Midwives, 1919-1985, and Registers of Pupil and First Certified Midwives, 1938-1983, are held at University College Dublin Archives.

Defence nursing records

No Army Nursing Service records dating from before 1902 are known to be in The National Archives.

In 2024 [The National Archives](#) website had five guides related to military nursing. These include links to online lists of nurses that are available to search and details of physical records available for research

- [British Army nurses](#).
- [British Army nurses' service records 1914-1918](#) over 15,000 individual nurse records available to search online.
- [Royal Air Force nurses](#).
- [Royal Navy nurses and medical officers](#).
- [Military nursing](#).

A sixth guide which was archived in 2022 remains relevant: [Nurses in the Crimea](#).

For service records of the Queen Alexandra Royal Army Nursing Corps (QARANC) 1939-1945, write to:

- Ministry of Defence, Army Personnel Centre, Historic Disclosures, Mailpoint 400, Kentigern House, 65 Brown Street, Glasgow G2 8EX.

[The Forces War Records](#) website includes online indices of some nursing units - charges apply to some of the content in this site

- [WW1 & WW2 Nurses Records](#)
- [QA Royal Naval Nursing Service](#)

Service Museums - The following have very interesting collections which give wider context to your nurse's experiences, so are worth visiting. However, please note that the Service Museums do not hold personnel service records.

- The [Museum of Military Medicine](#) (formerly the Army Medical Services Museum) in Aldershot
- The [Royal Naval Museum](#) in Portsmouth
- [The Royal Air Force Museum](#) in London and Cosford.

British Army nurses

The QARANC Association and QARANC Association Heritage Committee manage a website on [British Army Nurses](#). This is the official site for the history and heritage of the Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps and its antecedents.

The website has a growing number of resources, including an index of the nurses awarded the [Royal Red Cross](#).

The website [Scarlet Finders](#) has some very useful resources – please note that from 2016 this website was no longer being updated.

World War One and World War Two - Rolls of Honour

Two volumes containing more than 2,000 names of nurses, researched and identified by Yvonne McEwen. This includes nurses from the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the British colonies and dominions. The rolls are arranged by country and unit, then listed alphabetically.

McEwen self-published her research with volumes being deposited in each of the five countries.

Copies were deposited with the Royal College of Nursing in 2010 and are displayed in the London headquarters. Researchers may access the rolls by prior appointment with the RCN Library.

Irish Nurses in World War Two

The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) host a [Biographical Dictionary of Irish Nurses during the Second World War | nidirect](#). This was created by the RCN History of Nursing Group. This identifies nurses from the island of Ireland who died in the Second World War (1939-1945), both military nurses and nurses who died in the United Kingdom as a result of enemy action such as the Blitz. It includes key biographical details about the nursing career of each person.

British Red Cross ‘VADs’

The Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) were started by the Red Cross and St John’s Ambulance Service to help army medical services during World War One (1914-1918) and World War Two (1939-1945). The volunteers were trained in first aid and other skills. During the Second World War they came under the jurisdiction of the military despite being civilians. Information on the VADs’ wide range of roles can be found at the [Imperial War Museum](#).

The British Red Cross has its own [Museum and Archive](#). As part of First World War commemorations, the service records for [British Red Cross VADs](#) were digitised and indexed. This free online resource allows you to search by name as well as by location – a benefit to local historians.

Poor law and workhouse nursing

Details of individual nurses and the local history of nursing can be found in poor law and workhouse records. In England, Wales and Ireland poor relief dates from 1601. From 1834 (1838 in Ireland), individual parishes were responsible for caring for the elderly, children, infirm, sick, mentally ill and those with a learning disability. In Scotland, poor relief dates from 1424 however few records detailing individuals survive from this period. From 1574-1845 responsibility for the poor fell on the parish

Tracing Nurses

jointly with local landowners (heritors). Some parishes had workhouses or poor houses which employed nurses.

As the nineteenth century progressed nursing staff, often without qualifications, were increasingly employed as part of poor law provisions. Workhouses had sick and lying-in wards or separate infirmaries where nurses attended to patients, under the directions of the Medical Officer. Midwives were employed by some unions.

In England and Wales surviving records are held by local authority record offices. These may include staff registers. The National Archives at Kew hold staff registers for all unions in England and Wales (Series MH9). Series MH12 contains correspondence from Poor Law unions, including appointment forms for individual nurses from the 1840s onwards. The National Archives has guides on [Poor Law](#) and on [Workhouse Inmates and Staff](#).

In Northern Ireland poor law records are the archives of the Boards of Guardians (PRONI ref BG/). Information on their content and a list of poor law unions can be found on their website [Poor law records | nidirect](#). In Ireland, poor law records are also the archives of the Board of Guardians [Guide to the archives of the Poor Law - The National Archives of Ireland](#) The National Archives holds several very complete collections of workhouse records relating to the North Dublin Union, South Dublin Union, and Rathdown Union (part of counties Dublin and Wicklow) and some smaller unions.

In Scotland poor relief records prior to 1845, are recorded in the kirk session and heritors' records for a parish: search the National Records of Scotland online catalogue [[NAS Catalogue - welcome \(nrscotland.gov.uk\)](#)] enter the parish name in the search box and then the reference (HR or CH2). After 1845, parochial boards were established, creating Rolls which can be searched. The National Records for Scotland has produced a guide to [finding poor law records in Scotland](#).

[The Workhouse](#) gives extensive information on workhouses, and details of where local records survive.

District nursing

The Queen's Nursing Institute (QNI), founded in 1887 has a useful overview of [QNI history](#) on its website. Believed to be the oldest nursing charity in the world it was established to train and support district nurses – for example, nurses working in local communities. They have a [QNI Heritage Website](#) which provides useful information and photographs on their history.

The *UK & Ireland, Queen's Nursing Institute Roll of Nurses, 1891-1931* have been digitised and are available via Ancestry. The [Wellcome Collection](#) holds the Queens Nursing Institute (QNI) registers and records for district nursing in England and Wales, not for the whole of the UK as Ancestry implies [Records of the Association of Queen's Nurses/Association of District Nurses | Wellcome Collection](#)

The Queens Nursing Institute for Scotland (QNIS) is a separate charity and has its own [QNIS History](#) available online. [The RCN Archive](#) holds the records of QNIS including a card index of the names and service histories of district nurses (deceased).

For Ireland, the Archives of University College Dublin hold Registers of 'Jubilee' Nurses, 1890-1967.

Mental health and asylums

The National Archives has a useful guide to records related to [mental health and asylums](#).

[The Asylums List](#) is a useful resource, listing asylums by name, location and county, indicating which have been demolished and which are still in use.

[The Museum of the Mind](#) holds the archives of Bethlem Royal Hospital (south-east London), the Maudsley Hospital (south London) and Warlingham Park Hospital (Surrey). They have digitised their staff registers up to 1932 with [Find My Past](#). Digitised patient records to 1913 are available via Find My Past - nurses also appear as patients at Bethlem.

When searching for your ancestor, remember that Mental health nurses were referred to “attendants” up to at least 1900; after 1900 the term remained in use, especially for men.

Historic Hospitals, an online architectural gazetteer has a section dedicated to [Mental Hospitals in Britain and Ireland](#). This has useful lists of hospitals with dates, information on where they were located, and what they looked like. This may give a useful overview if you are unsure which hospital your ancestor worked at.

Additional employers

Nurses have been employed in a wide variety of settings including prisons, factories, schools, charities or friendly societies. Nurses have often filled occupational health roles in industrial and office settings. You may find a mention of your ancestor in surviving records or staff magazines.

Religious orders often had nuns who were nurses, working within the community or as missionaries. Check if the religious order has any surviving archives for details of your ancestor. Check for the archives of the local church nearest to where your ancestor was based as there is often cross over within the community.

Try by searching The National Archives to find out if any organisational records survive. If you know the original location of the organisation, ask the local record office if they know of any surviving records.

Occasionally organisations, such as Boots (which employed nurses in their shops) or Sainsbury's, have large archives where you can find out if there are any surviving staff records.

Many archives have online catalogues available to search for surviving organisational archives. Remember that you are unlikely to find the name of your ancestor in the catalogue. Instead, you are looking for places your ancestor may be mentioned, staff records, staff registers, payroll lists, annual reports, or staff magazines.

Nursing journals

Matrons, assistant matrons, superintendents and nursing leaders are often named in the nursing press. Journals can help to trace awards, military postings, promotions and obituaries. They also hold a number of stories on workplaces, such as openings, events, or local people. Many historic nursing journals are available through the RCN Library.

Tracing Nurses

Twenty-two historic nursing journals from the RCN collections are now available online through a collaboration with Gale's *Women's Studies Archive* programme: *Female Forerunners Worldwide*. The full list of national and international nursing journals dating from 1891-1986 is:

Australian Bush Nursing Journal; The Australian Nurses' Journal; Bedside Nurse; The British Red Cross; Society Quarterly Review; The Catholic Nurse; District Nursing; Gown and Gloves; The International Nursing Bulletin; Jamaican Nurse; Nigerian Nurse; The Nightingale Fellowship Journal; Nurse Education News; Nurses' Journal of the Pacific Coast; Nursing Notes; The Nursing Record; Nursing Times; Philippine Journal of Nursing; Quarterly Journal for Chinese Nurses; Queen's Nurses' Magazine; South African Nursing Journal; The Trained Nurse; and The Zambia Nurse

All RCN members (full, student and retired) can find out more about the [RCN historic nursing journals and access](#) using their membership login details. For non-members, access is mainly provided through academic libraries including the British Library – you may need to ask your librarian to arrange access.

One of the oldest journals held at the RCN Library is also freely available to browse and search online: [British Journal of Nursing / Nursing Record 1888-1956](#).

Oral history collections and personal papers

Many archives hold oral history interviews with or personal paper collections of nurses. For example the [Royal College of Nursing Oral History Collection](#) and the [Royal College of Nursing Personal Papers Collection](#) [Collections about personal \(epexio.com\)](#)

Often these sources name nurses they were trained by, worked with or became friends with. It is worth checking catalogues or online indexes for the names of your ancestor, or of people they had known relationships with just in case you come across a connection. It is highly unlikely that you will discover a connection this way, but it is worth considering – especially if your ancestor held a significant position, such as matron or sister-tutor.

Awards, news stories and malpractice

There are many other records where nurses are identified such as:

- **National awards** listed in [The Gazette](#) 1665-present. These awards include OBEs, MBEs, wartime despatches, and similar. Freely searchable by name.
- **National and local new stories** can be found in the [British Library Newspaper Archive](#) these include obituaries, appointments and local news and events. Freely searchable by name, there is a fee for accessing the online content.

Mistakes and malpractice occasionally result in court records. These are usually physical records held in local record offices. One notable exception is the freely searchable [Old Bailey](#) online. This includes testimony given by nurses and matrons as reliable witnesses.

Migration and Nursing

Professional nurses have skills that are often in high demand. Nurses migrate across the globe, bringing them and their families social and economic benefits. This includes nurses coming to the UK, but also nurses emigrating overseas.

Useful books about nurses migrating to the UK include:

- *Family History on the Move: Where Your Ancestors Went and Why* by Mark Pearsall, Roger Kershaw (The National Archives 2006).
- *Against the Odds, Black and Minority Ethnic Clinicians and Manchester 1948 to 2009* by Emma L Jones and Stephanie Snow (Manchester 2010).
- *Many Rivers to Cross – the History of the Caribbean Contribution to the NHS* Ann Kramer (Sugar Media 2006).
- *Ireland's Loss Britain's Gain: Irish Nurses in Britain Nightingale to Millennium* by Ethel Corduff (Rainbow Valley Books 2021).

Useful online resources about migration to the UK include:

- [A Guide to the Passenger Lists - The National Archives](#) The majority of inward passenger lists from 1878 to 1960 and outward passenger lists from 1890 to 1960 have survived.
- [A Guide to Immigration and immigrants - The National Archives](#)
- [Moving Here](#) archived website – not updated since 2013, this remains a useful resource.
- [Southwark Guide to Caribbean Family History \(pdf\)](#)
- The Guardian published an article on [Researching your Caribbean family history](#) in 2007 which remains useful.
- Exploring Surrey's Past website February 2022 had a useful page on [Black Health Care Workers in Surrey](#). Also, the Surrey History Trust hosted a talk in October 2021 by Dr Catherine Babikian on [West Park Hospital character books, 1924 to 1969: overseas nurses in the NHS](#).
- The Families in British India Society (FIBIS) have produced a [nursing guide](#) for searching nursing ancestry in India during the colonial period. It covers civil nursing (training, hospitals, registration, associations, journals), religious orders and military nursing. It has useful links to online and physical resources.
- The RCN Historic Nursing Journals include a number of overseas titles, such as *Australian Nurses Journal*, *Nigerian Nurse* or *Philippine Journal of Nursing* – details are given in the above section 'Nursing Journals'. These give details of nurses coming to the UK, but also of nurses moving or returning to other countries.

Nurse training came with student accommodation in nurses' homes – this was very attractive for migrant women. There were strict rules for student homes, which helped make nursing a respectable career for young women away from their families. Student nursing homes for male students were less common, except for some mental health nurse training schools. Migrant male student nurses experienced real difficulties to

Tracing Nurses

find accommodation with many facing 'No blacks, no dogs, no Irish' signs well into the 1980s.

Nurse training schools across the UK taught migrant nurses, not just places like London or Bristol. For those that came with government backed schemes, their early careers were sometimes tracked in official records held at The National Archives. This was especially the case for those who were on schemes where they were expected to pay the British government back the money for the fare to England. More details can be found in the physical records held at The National Archives, such as this Ministry of Health file:

[MH 55/2157](#) *Nursing recruitment: migration of nurses to and from United Kingdom 1947-1962.*

Nurse registration in British colonial countries were sometimes recognised in reciprocal arrangements. These are detailed in the preface of each GNC register (see image below) and changed over time. Some nurses trained in the UK, returned home to practice, and joined the register in their country (or occasionally vice versa). Many British nurses have emigrated, developing their careers overseas.

UK & Ireland, Nursing Registers, 1898-1968

Register of Nurses > 1934

Save

LIST OF HIS MAJESTY'S DOMINIONS WITH WHICH RECIPROCAL REGISTRATION HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED

Country	Registration Authority	Date of Agreement	Register
Scotland	General Nursing Council	4th November, 1921	All Parts
New Zealand	Nurses' and Midwives' Registration Board	6th October, 1922	General
Northern Ireland	Joint Nursing and Midwives' Council	15th October, 1923	All Parts
Irish Free State	General Nursing Council	27th March, 1923	All Parts
South Australia	Nurses' Registration Board	24th September, 1926 18th March, 1927	General Mental
Queensland	Nurses' Registration Board	24th September, 1926 16th December, 1932	General Mental
Western Australia	Nurses' Registration Board	17th December, 1926	General Sick Children
New South Wales	Nurses' Registration Board	23rd September, 1927 28th September, 1928	General (for Nurses registered by Examination) General (for Intermediate)

Nurses who migrated from the UK across the British colonies to work often returned 'home' to retire. They usually belonged to one of the following organisations, whose records cover nurses experiences abroad and in the UK:

- [Overseas Nursing Association](#) (previously known as the Colonial Nursing Association) 1896-1966, records of which are held at the Bodleian Library and at the National Archives
- [The Colonial Nursing Service](#) 1896-1966, records of which are held at The National Archives

Further reading

Tracing Your Medical Ancestors, A Guide for Family Historians by Michelle Higgs (Pen and Sword 2011).

The RCN [History of Nursing Library Subject Guide](#) gives a useful overview of resources.

The RCN Library holds many nursing memoirs from different places and time periods which you may find interesting.

Paid for research services

If you need help in carrying out research, especially onsite research at archive offices then the following lists of researchers may be of help:

- [Register of Qualified Genealogists](#).
- [Find A Researcher : AGRA : Association of Genealogists and Researchers in Archives](#).
- [List of Freelance Consultants \(archives.org.uk\)](#) – search for genealogical research.

History of nursing networks

Royal College of Nursing members are encouraged to join the [RCN History of Nursing Forum](#).

The [UK Association for the History of Nursing](#) is open to anyone with an interest in history of nursing, they hold an annual symposium.

There are some local history of nursing networks in the UK such as the [Nottingham Nursing History Group](#) which was active in 2021 or the Bournemouth group [Memories of Nursing](#).

The [European Association for the History of Nursing](#) is useful – their list of [member organisations](#) gives an indication of the wider network of history of nursing groups; there are similar associations across the world.

Social Media hashtags **#HistNursing** and **#HistMed** are useful ways to identify content and people actively research the history of nursing.

History of nursing at the RCN

The RCN holds significant [library and archive collections](#), mostly dating from the 1860s to date, focusing on nursing activity in the UK.

The largest library collection is held at the main library in London, and holds the historic journals, rare books, and historical books. The Edinburgh, Belfast and Cardiff libraries all hold reference books reflecting the history of nursing in their countries; these are all included in the RCN Library catalogue.

The RCN Library holds many memoirs and biographies, many of these are self-published and cannot be located anywhere else. If you want to research more on what life was like for your ancestor these can be a useful resource.

Tracing Nurses

The RCN Archive has a growing number of [brief online biographies](#) for key nurses who were active in the RCN, or whose papers they hold.

The RCN runs an [exhibition and event programme](#) much of which is open to the public both onsite and online. Many of the past exhibitions and events are made available online.

History of nursing collections

Museums holding nursing material include the [Florence Nightingale Museum](#), the [University of Chester Riverside Museum](#) and the [University of Dundee Tayside Medical History Museum](#)

The freely available [Florence Nightingale Digitization Website](#) allows researchers to search the original letters of Florence Nightingale – including by personal names.

International archive collections include the [Barbara Bates Centre for the History of Nursing](#) in the USA.

The [London Museums of Health and Medicine](#) are all interesting places to visit. Most run events programmes.