

# The British Overseas

A family listens to a letter from emigrants being read to them by a young man, 1891.

Since the 17th century millions of British people have made new lives overseas, and **Simon Fowler** suggests records available in the UK and Ireland that might help you research them.

financial support from the colony to which they were going, a British charity or the parish they came from.

## Where to begin

Start your research with the Immigration Ancestors Project website ([immigrants.byu.edu/main\\_page](http://immigrants.byu.edu/main_page)), which uses a wide variety of records to locate information about the birthplaces of immigrants in their native countries not found in records at their destinations.

Surprisingly there are few British and Irish records about emigration. In particular, there is no central list of migrants from the British Isles, and what records there are have been scattered across many archives. So you need to have your wits about you.

In general there is likely to be more information where they landed rather than where they left.

## Government schemes

The reason is largely down to British official indifference to migration. With the exception of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission there were no bodies regulating or encouraging emigration. The commission was established in 1840 to send emigrants to Australia and New Zealand (more than 300,000 were helped) as well as supervising the departure and passage of ordinary emigrants.

The peak of the commission's work was in the late 1840s and early 1850s. An article in *Household Words* in 1852 described 'the stream of fustian jackets, corduroy trousers and smock-frocks... the chattering excited parties of half-shaved mechanics, slatternly females and slip-shod children' thronging the 'much-sought office' of the commissioners.

Surviving records are at The National Archives (TNA) at Kew, but individual applications and related paperwork have almost all long since been destroyed. However, there are three volumes of applications to emigrate to the new colony of South

Australia between 1836 and 1839.

In addition the records of the New Zealand Company, also at Kew, have applications from potential migrants and details of emigrants who wanted to go to New Zealand in the 1840s.

The British Government involved itself directly in a number of small emigration schemes, including the settlement of old soldiers and their families in Canada, New Zealand and South Africa in order to provide a basic level of defence. The Royal New Zealand Fencibles consisted of 2,500 discharged British soldiers and sailors, who settled around Auckland between 1847 and 1852 to protect settlers from Maori attack. These schemes were failures largely because few of the servicemen had any skills outside fighting (and drinking) so tended to drift to the towns in search of work. There are some records at Kew.

In the decade before the First World War, the Government helped thousands of unemployed men and their families move to Canada and Australia. In early 1906 some 4,500 unemployed men and their families went across the Atlantic to new lives in Canada, three-quarters of whom came from London. Unfortunately there is very little about them at TNA, although some records of Distress Committees may be held locally.

## Indentured servants

During the 17th and 18th centuries, bonded or indentured servants, usually in their late teens, were bound for a passage to North America, particularly Maryland, Virginia and the West Indies. Most were indentured to a master who had paid their passage for a period of seven years. In effect this was a form of slavery. As conditions were harsh many, perhaps most, indentured servants eventually ran away to settle the new lands in the west. Years ago I researched John Cook, a bricklayer from London, who left for Baltimore on the *Maryland Merchant* in February 1775. Soon after his arrival he fled from the plantation ▶

For 350 years, the English, Scots and Irish (and of course not forgetting the Welsh and Cornish) have spread across the world. Some, like the Pilgrim Fathers, left for religious reasons, but most crossed the seas to make a better life for themselves or to join family members who had already made the journey. Others went because they were forced to, such as convicts

transported to Australia. Orphan and pauper children were also often sent abroad by charities. Their reasons were summarised by a reporter describing emigrants at the Plymouth Emigration Depot in 1849: 'Some were going out at the earnest wish of their friends who had previously emigrated and much improved their position; others were leaving England because work was scarce and poorly

remunerated, and one stated that he left because in England "masters were a deal too saucy and did not know how to treat working men".'

The most popular destinations were naturally Canada and the United States, New Zealand and Australia, but Brits could be found almost anywhere. I've recently been researching a British Army officer, William Smith, who became a big wheel in the politics

of Venezuela in the 1840s and 1850s.

A fair number came home after a few years, either because they had failed in their new lives (or occasionally made their fortunes) or their employment had come to an end, but mostly men and women returned because they had become overwhelmed by homesickness.

People made their own way overseas or, if they were lucky, received

Names	Where Convicted	When	Term	Names	Where Convicted	When	Term 1825
Edward Wright	London	5 <sup>th</sup> April 1827	Seven years	Samuel Wilson			99
Henry Goate	London	27 <sup>th</sup> October 1825	Seven years	Edward Webster			
George Lewis	London			James Wilson	London	1827	Life
John Stokes				Frederick Langley			
John Brown		22 <sup>nd</sup> June 1826	Seven years	Richard Hayes			
John Camp				David Burns			
James Bishop		26 <sup>th</sup> October 1826	Life	Samuel Austin		1827	Seven years
John Hall				Thomas Byatt			
William Smith				Charles Howard			
Thomas Braham				John Davis			
John Andrew		7 <sup>th</sup> December 1826	Life	George Avery		1827	Life
Henry Wright				Thomas Fowler			
Thomas Wilkinson				William Fox			

Thomas Fowler in the Australian Convict Transportation Registers in 1827, available at Ancestry.co.uk.

he was indentured to and eventually settled in the Shenandoah Valley in Western Virginia with his wife Nellie Pemberton, another former indentured servant.

Peter Wilson Coldham has listed the vast majority of indentured servants in a series of books (see panel on opposite page). And some indexes are available on Ancestry. Some records are at TNA in series T 53.

**Transportation**

It is well known that convicts were the first settlers in Australia, but did you know that many thousands of convicts were sent to the American colonies before 1776? And small numbers of convicts also endured conditions in Bermuda and the Caribbean colonies.

It was a well-regulated system, particularly after 1788 (when convicts were sent to Australia) with the result that there are masses of records, many of which are now online. Unfortunately there are very few records for men and women sent to America, but most are listed in Peter Coldham's *Complete Book of Emigrants in Bondage 1614-1775*.

For Australian convicts the best place to start is the British convict transportation registers 1787-1867 database at [www.slq.qld.gov.au/resources/family-history/convicts](http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/resources/family-history/convicts). Ancestry has criminal registers between 1791 and 1892 that provide details of all convicted men and women and their fates. Also on

Ancestry is information about the convicts who sailed with the first three fleets to New South Wales between 1788 and 1791, as well as registers of later ships and the prison hulks where prisoners awaited transportation in very grim conditions. Some prison records are also with Findmypast, but these do not specifically relate to transportation. An unusual source are the journals kept by medical officers on board convict ships, which describe, often graphically, illnesses and afflictions of the men and women.

Thomas Fowler, for example, was transported in 1827 on the *Prince Regent*. On the voyage he suffered from dysentery. The medical officer noted that he was 'a groom by profession and sentenced to transportation for life for highway robbery. Put on sick list'.

The criminal registers indicate that he was originally sentenced to be hanged, but a Home Office file at TNA contains a petition from his family and friends pleading for clemency, claiming that he was 'innocent, onlooker at incident only, pregnant wife and two small children, previous good character'. Thomas was transported for seven years, but there is no evidence that he returned to London.

**Emigration schemes**

Few working-class families had enough savings to emigrate to Canada, let alone Australia or New Zealand,

without financial assistance. Many schemes offered to help potential migrants. With a few exceptions they were only to colonies and dominions within the British Empire.

The dilemma for the colonies was that the quality of most emigrants did not match up to their expectations. There was always a shortage of intelligent hard-working men and women with the skills the colonies needed. But these people could prosper at home or preferred to go to America where it was easier to make their fortunes.

The largest and most successful schemes were run by the colonies themselves. Most British ones tended to be small, helping just a few people.

Some parishes and, from 1834, poor law unions also sent out small numbers of poor people to start new lives in the colonies. In the 1830s and 1840s about one in 10 parishes or unions took the opportunity to send one or more families overseas. They were largely in the depressed agricultural areas of Southern England and East Anglia. The numbers were always small and would have been greater but for the reluctance of Whitehall to approve expenditure from the rates for this purpose. In 1842, for example, English and Welsh poor law unions helped just over 1,000 paupers to emigrate out of a total of 120,000 people who left British shores during the year.

The authorities saw it as an opportunity to reduce the poor rates and, more positively, to give paupers the chance of a better life elsewhere. But critics claimed parishes took the opportunity to 'shovel out' troublesome families. In 1832, Charles Disher was paid £2 by churchwardens of Roxton in Bedfordshire to 'go to America and trouble the parish no more'. The 1841 Census suggests that Disher took the money, but moved just a few miles away.

There should be evidence in the parochial or poor law records, particularly in vestry and guardians' minutes and parish accounts. In 1831, for example, Lacock (Wiltshire) vestry voted to borrow £500 'to defray the passage of such persons as may be disposed to emigrate to Canada'. And in April 1838 the guardians of

**Read up on it**

- The National Archives has a detailed guide to sources for emigration at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/emigration](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/emigration);
- *Migration Records: a guide for family historians* by Roger Kershaw (The National Archives, 2009);
- *American migrations, 1765-1799* by Peter Wilson Coldham (Genealogical Publishing Company, 2000);
- *Bonded Passengers to America 1615-1775* by Peter Wilson Coldham (9 vols, Genealogical Publishing Company, 1983);
- *The Complete Book of Emigrants 1607-1775* by Peter Wilson Coldham (6 vols, Genealogical Publishing Company, 1987);
- *The Complete Book of Emigrants in Bondage 1614-1775* by Peter Wilson Coldham (Genealogical Publishing Company, 1988);
- *The Convict Settlers of Australia* by LL Robson (Melbourne University Press, 1965).

Medway Union in Kent ordered 'that £7 be allowed toward the Expenses of Emigration of Henry Pollen and family to South Australia'.

Charities also played their part in supporting emigrants, particularly during the last third of the 19th century. Charitable bodies argued

that they were offering slum-dwellers and other unfortunates a chance to start new lives in a decent environment.

Several charities specialised in sending women (of whom there was a great shortage in the colonies), such as the Female Middle Class Emigration Society. In 1862, it despatched 99 teenagers to the infant colony of British Columbia as governesses, but most of the unfortunate girls were untrained orphans. It was not a happy experiment. One colonialist grumbled: 'Half of them married soon after arrival or went into service, but a large proportion quickly went to the bad, and, from appearances had been there before... To speak gallantly, but truly many of these ladies were neither young nor beautiful.'

Most charities only existed for a short period, perhaps to meet a short-term need. Charities in the East End of London, for example, sent out 20,000 poor people to Canada in 1867 and 1868. A year later local charities helped send 1,600 workers and their families to Canada when Woolwich Dockyard closed.

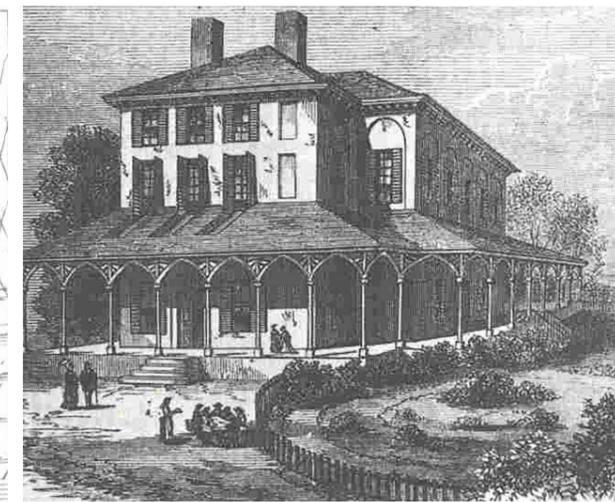
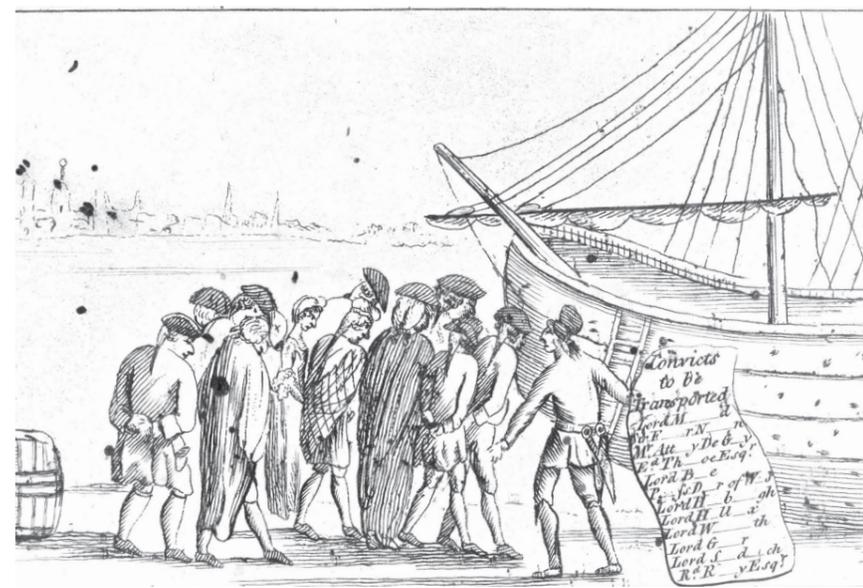
For nearly a century between 1873 and the late 1960s orphanages sent tens of thousands of children to start new lives in the overseas dominions, particularly Australia and Canada.

Some 100,000 children were sent to Canada alone, and about a quarter of all Canadians have a home child on their family tree. As well as populating the empire with sturdy young Anglo-Saxons, the charities argued that the children would have a better chance in the colonies rather than on the streets of London. Even so it was a cruel system, siblings were split up, the children endured homesickness and many were abused mentally and physically in their new homes.

Charity records are notoriously hard to find, because so many were short-lived and any paperwork was thrown away after they closed. But where they do exist they may tell you a lot about the applicant and how they were helped. You should be able to find details via TNA's Discovery catalogue ([discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)).

There is no central register of these children, although Library and Archives Canada ([www.bac-lac.gc.ca](http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca)) has an online index to children who arrived in the country between 1869 and the early 1930s. If you know which ship they were on you should be able to pick up their names, and those of the rest of the party they travelled with, which might include any siblings, in the passenger lists.

Several charities have records for the boys and girls they sent overseas, including Barnardo's ([www.barnardos.org.uk](http://www.barnardos.org.uk)) and the Waifs and Strays Society, now the Children's



Miss Rye's Home for Emigrant Children at Niagara, Ontario. Maria Rye took some of the first parties of orphaned children to Canada in the early 1870s.

JANUARY 22, 1870.] HARPER'S WEEKLY.



LEAVING OLD ENGLAND FOR AMERICA.

An illustration of optimistic emigrants 'leaving old England for America', published in *Harper's Weekly*, 22 January 1870.

a last look around Norwich, with a fringe of wistful and sad-eyed women in the background.' A few weeks later the newspaper began to include letters from men who had arrived in Ontario. James Starling, writing from Newtonville, said: 'Me and my mate Robert Burton have gone in for farming, and that is the only work offered us. My mate is only two miles from me, but Butler is some 200 miles west, but I must say if they all have got places like me and Robert they are all very lucky, as the people treat us like one of the family.' Find many British Library newspaper archives online at [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) and at Findmypast.

● **Passenger lists** – Many people begin their research with the outward-bound passenger lists. They begin in 1890 and end in 1960 and will tell you where the ship is sailing to and where it went from, the last address of the individual in the UK and show family members travelling together. Findmypast and Ancestry have sets, although not all passenger lists survive. Collections of passenger lists may also be available on other websites. They are almost always copies of passenger lists that were presented at the destination by the ship's captain. See [www.genealogylinks.net/genealogy/vitalrec/passengerlists.htm](http://www.genealogylinks.net/genealogy/vitalrec/passengerlists.htm).

● **Certificates** – British citizens living in countries outside the Empire might register births, marriages and deaths at local consulates. The information found on these registers is much the same as on English birth, marriage and death certificates, although there may be a scribbled note about where an individual lived or their employment. Some registers can be searched online at FamilyRelatives, Findmypast and TheGenealogist, but they are by no means complete.

● **Passports** – An obvious source should be passport records. However, they are some of the most disappointing records you will come across, as they are just a list of names and a date when the passport was issued. It does not help that before the First World War very few

Society ([www.hiddenlives.org.uk](http://www.hiddenlives.org.uk)). There is also a useful Canadian society devoted to Home Children at [canadianbritishhomechildren.weebly.com](http://canadianbritishhomechildren.weebly.com). In Scotland many children were sent overseas by Quarriers ([quarriers.org.uk](http://quarriers.org.uk)); and see pp68-69 this issue).

A local landowner or clergyman might help half a dozen or so deserving tenants or parishioners to leave England. In Ham, Surrey Algernon Tollemache, for example, paid for seven labourers and their families to go to Wellington, New Zealand in 1841 where he had land.

Perhaps the most famous of these landlords was the Earl of Egremont who, through the Petworth

Emigration Committee, helped 10,000 men and their families from the Sussex village and neighbouring parishes to start new lives in Ontario during the 1830s. The West Sussex Record Office has material about the Committee and there is a website at [www.petworthemigrations.com](http://www.petworthemigrations.com).

**Miscellaneous sources**

● **Newspapers** – Newspapers may also have details of the people who were going overseas and on occasion include letters about emigrants' experiences. The *Eastern Daily Press* reported the departure of a party of unemployed from Norwich in March 1906: 'A smart and useful lot... taking

Records to help you trace ancestors abroad



A report of an emigrant's experience 'living in Australia', which appeared in the *Burnley Express*, 28 September 1912, online at Findmypast.co.uk.



An advertisement in the *Gloucestershire Echo* of 18 March 1903 aimed at recruiting emigrants to Canada.

countries required passports. You did not need a passport to visit the United States, India or other parts of the British Empire. Findmypast has a register of passport applications, 1851-1903.

It might also be worth checking Foreign Office records at Kew for material about British residents overseas. For example, there is a lot of information about the fate of individual Brits in Russia who had to flee, leaving most of their possessions behind, after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

Undoubtedly most migrants prospered in their new homes. Wages were generally higher for a start and there were plenty of opportunities for advancement. However, many families must have found it difficult to adapt to new conditions, and missed their family dearly. And some must have resented that they had to go at all.

*About the author*

Simon Fowler is a professional researcher, writer and tutor specialising in the records of the 19th and 20th centuries.



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