

## Tracing Midwives in Your Family



Royal College of  
Obstetricians &  
Gynaecologists



This leaflet aims to answer some of those questions you may have when you first set out to learn more about the members of your family who were midwives. You will also find below some historical information about the midwifery profession: a basic understanding of this history will guide you in the right direction when it comes to looking for evidence in archives and libraries.

### Midwives pre-1902

Midwifery ranks among the oldest professions of the world, and traditionally self-appointed midwives in almost all cultures and races were the prime carers for women during pregnancy and their confinements. From the pre-sixteenth century times when midwives were regarded as witches, to the centuries leading to their formal recognition and regulation, midwives were normally self-appointed, self-taught, and often illiterate. While they may have been skilled at normal delivery of healthy women, they had no training for dealing alone with obstetric and paediatric complications. Women in general had no access to education of any kind, and so it is not surprising that midwives lacked theoretical knowledge of even basic reproductive anatomy, physiology and pathology.

The rise of an organised and male medical profession at the turn of the nineteenth century saw an attempt to take over midwifery, which in turn saw the organisation of women to defend their natural position as female midwives. Women were not admitted to Medical Schools until 1869, and although an increasing number of educated women had found ways of obtaining training, there was no formal recognition of the training of



female midwives, or any form of examination or regulation. The 1886 Medical Act required, for the first time, a qualification in medicine, surgery and midwifery before a medical student could be registered as a doctor, thus extending the regulation of male doctors which had been introduced by the 1858 Medical Act.

In 1872 the General Medical Council took an interest in the position of the midwife and the possibility of her examination and regulation – this interest was however restricted by caution not to confuse the respective roles of doctor and midwife. In the meantime, the London Obstetrical Society opened up its diploma to midwives after examination in a determined move to upgrade the practice of midwives. By 1880, 108 midwives held this diploma, which granted them the status of skilled midwife competent to attend natural labour. From among these diploma-holding midwives, the Matrons' Aid Society (or Trained Midwives Registration Society) was established in 1881, soon becoming known as the Midwives Institute. The prime objective of the Society was to obtain legislation to regulate the training and practice of midwives, in order to fulfil their ideal that all mothers, rich and poor alike, should be able to have the services of a trained midwife.

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### Pre-1902 Sources

There are very few sources available for tracing midwives prior to 1902.

**Nursing Notes and Midwives' Chronicles from 1887** – the monthly journal includes the names of holders of the midwifery diploma issued by the obstetrical societies.

**Parish Registers** – may hold details of midwives called to bear witness on births or deaths. These can be found at local or county record offices.

**UK Census Records, 1841-1911** - these will give the occupation of women who were recognised as midwives, although this was not recognition of formal training. A census of the population of England and Wales has been taken every ten years since 1801 with the exception of 1941. The 1841 census was the first to list the names of every individual. Earlier censuses covering 1801 to 1831 only recorded the number of people in each area. From 1851 onwards, every person's relationship to the head of household was recorded. Due to rounding down, mistranscription and human error or invention, some details, such as age, may vary between censuses. Censuses started in Ireland in 1821 and in Scotland in 1801. The census from 1841 to 1911 are now available digitally online and full details may be found at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/census-records.htm>

**Royal Maternity Charity:** the published annual reports included lists of midwives from 1807.

For a **broad history of midwifery** during these years, the library of the Royal College of Midwives, held at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, is rich in texts and sources, including the following:

*Midwives in History and Society*, Jean Towler and Joan Bramall, London, 1986

Midwifery lecture notes, eighteenth and nineteenth century



### Midwives 1902-1948

The first Midwives Act of 1902 came into force in 1903, and the most important feature of the Act was the setting up of the Central Midwives Board for England and Wales. The Central Midwives Board was responsible for the regulation of the certification and examination of midwives, admission to the Roll of Midwives and annual publication of the Roll, regulation of the practice of midwives, and appointment of examiners. The approved period of training was three months, and midwives were encouraged to keep a case book of all deliveries.

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Midwives Acts for Scotland and Ireland were not passed until 1915 and 1918 (respectively); many who trained in Scotland came to England to take the CMB examination prior to 1916.

Women who already possessed a recognised qualification in midwifery (such as from the London Obstetrical Society) were automatically admitted to the Roll of qualified midwives under the Act. Women of good character who had been in practice for at least one year could also apply for admission to the Roll as 'bona fide' midwives. All other women intending to become midwives were required to present themselves for an examination in competence before a certificate could be issued allowing them to commence practice.

From April 1905, no person could assume the title of midwife unless she held a certificate issued by the Central Midwives Board. From April 1910 no person could habitually and for gain attend women in childbirth, except under the direction of a doctor, unless she was certified under the Act.

1918 Second Midwives Act placed responsibility for payment of the doctor's fee and mileage expenses on the local authority in the first instance, prior to being recovered from the patient. It also looked at the midwife's finances and expenses, and compensation for loss of earnings if suspended from practice.

1926 Third Midwives Act addressed the problem of uncertified women continuing to flout the law and act as midwives on the pretext that they were acting in an emergency

by requiring to present their case to a law court. It also divided the Midwives Roll into two parts, differentiating between practising and non-practising midwives, and also introduced the registration of maternity homes.

The 1936 Midwives Act introduced a departure from the system of private midwives to a provision for local authorities in England and Wales to establish an adequate salaried domiciliary midwifery service, revolutionising the position and standard of practice of midwives. The Act also improved basic training and the post-basic training of midwives, empowering the Central Midwives Board to grant a Midwife Teachers Diploma after examination.

The National Health Service came into being in July 1948, and new maternity medical regulations provided for the services of both a doctor and a midwife without cost to the patient, and without any obligation being placed on the doctor to be present at the confinement. A consequence of this was the gradual move of new mothers away from local authority antenatal clinics to GP surgeries, as doctors revived their interest in midwifery, although 45% of babies were still delivered at home by midwives.

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### Sources 1902-1948

**Central Midwives Board Roll of Midwives for England and Wales, 1902-1983** – these are held at the National Archives, Kew, reference DV7

(<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>). Published copies of the Roll are also available in large libraries, such as the Wellcome Library; copies for 1937 and 1946 are held in the library of the Royal College of Midwives.

**Central Midwives Board of Scotland Roll of Midwives, 1917-1968** – copies of this roll are held by the National Archives of Scotland (1917-1940) and by the Royal College of Nursing (1917-1968).

**The Joint Nursing and Midwifery Council of Northern Ireland, 1959** – a copy of this year only is held by the Royal College of Nursing.

**Central Midwives Board of Ireland Roll of Midwives, 1919-1985** – copies are held at University College Dublin, together with registers of pupil and first certified midwives, 1938-1983.

**RCM Midwives' Roll, 1902-1908** – notebook containing the names of the first 124 midwives to hold the certificate of the Central Midwives Board, entitled 'Roll of those who hold the certificate of the Midwives' Institute', including some dates but no details other than name (reference RCM/E1/1).

**Midwives' Institute Benevolent Fund Committee, 1914-1932** – registers of cases and minutes of the committee, relating to the provision of financial aid to members in times of hardship. These are held in the archive of

the Royal College of Midwives at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, (reference RCM/C3).

**Royal College of Midwives Branches and Associations, 1909-1995** – minutes of the affiliated societies of the Royal College of Midwives include the names of members who worked locally for the advancement of the midwifery profession. The archive of the Royal College of Midwives holds some of the records of these societies (reference RCM/G); other records are held locally or in private hands.

**Case registers, notebooks and certificates** can be found among the personal papers of midwives who practised across the country, providing an insight into childbirth and how the role of midwives has changed. The case registers include details of deliveries and in many cases are subject to access restrictions due to patient data. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists holds a regional index of case registers held in the Royal College of Midwives archive, as well as details of personal papers donated to the RCM. Other case registers may be held in local and county record offices as well as in private hands.

**Nursing Notes and Midwives' Chronicles from 1887** – this journal of the Midwives Institute, later the Royal College of Midwives, was the first known form of published communication which reached all sectors of the midwifery profession in the UK, and was begun in 1887 as part of the Midwives Institute mission to improve the education and professionalism of midwives. The monthly

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journal consists of articles and professional guidance relating to midwifery, news from the Central Midwives Board and its successors, relating to registration and regulations, adverts, names added to and deleted from the Midwives Roll, and other news relating to midwifery. A complete series of this journal is held in the library of the Royal College of Midwives, at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

**Central Midwives Board rules and regulations, 1902-1926** – these are held in the Royal College of Midwives library at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, together with copies of the Midwives Acts for England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland between 1902 and 1960.

**Hospital records** – many hospital records relating to nursing have not survived to the present day, but those that do can include training and employment records. Existing records can be traced using the online National Archives Hospital Records Database ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/hospitalrecords](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/hospitalrecords)) providing information on UK hospitals and the current location of their records. If the records are not held at the local record office, they may still be with the hospital.

For further details about the published and unpublished records held in the collections of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and in the Royal College of Midwives, please contact us:

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