

Illegitimacy

So, you are happily tracing back your ancestors using birth, marriage and death certificates when a birth certificate pops up with no father listed. Where do you go from here?

Below are some ways that you can investigate further:

The child's name

Sometimes, a mother will register the birth of a child with the father's surname included as a middle name. This happened with Mary Ann Dean Cross, the daughter of Sarah Cross, and through further investigation it was discovered that she was the daughter of William Dean.

Baptismal registers

More often than not, a child will be recorded just with the mother's name. In the case of Mary Ann above, the record just said, "Daughter of Sarah Cross, a Single Woman." However, sometimes the parish clerk may have known the family – and the goings on within the village or parish – and will make some very helpful comments in the margin, such as, "Purported father being John Smith" or "Bastard child of George Andrews." Therefore, it is always useful to see the actual parish registers – or microfilm of them – and not just transcriptions, which may have omitted such gems.

Poor Law Books

If the father of the illegitimate babe decided to devolve himself of all responsibility and leave the mother to raise the child on her own, then support may have been applied for from the parish. The mother would need to name the father in order to apply and there could be a record of why he had not contributed.

Marriage Certificates

Now, this is not always very reliable as Ministers recorded only what they were told – no proof was ever required. You may find that your illegitimate babe grew up to marry and named a father on their marriage certificate. This might be a complete fabrication so as to show respectability, but sometimes there is an element of truth. Use it as a starting point until you find something to back it up, *not* as absolute truth.

The Marriage of the Parents

If the unmarried Mum married very soon after the birth of her child, there is a very good chance that she has married the father. Use this as a springboard to delve deeper.

Wills

You may have a suspicion that, because Mum was working for a wealthy family, then a member of that family was the father. A check to see if any child was named in a will would point you in the right direction. Similarly, if the child was sent to a private boarding school that seems out of kilter with their background, who paid for it? School records may help.

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These are just some pointers for how you might explore further, but if you would like to discuss your findings with like-minded people, ask the members of Genealogy Specialists. Register for FREE at <http://www.genealogy-specialists.com/> and post details of your ancestor. The members will happily offer suggestions!

If you would like to find out more about how to trace illegitimate ancestors, listed below are some products that will certainly help you along your way and all of them are available from [www.parishchest.com](http://www.parishchest.com). Just pop the reference number in the website search box to see the details.

- Illegitimacy Ref: BFHS-SH005
- My Ancestor Was a Bastard Ref: SOG-1183xx
- The Justice of the Peace and Parish Officer 1800 Ref: ARB-100
- Poor Law Records for Family Historians Ref: FHP-184