

What you are looking for	Best first choice	Second choice	Why
UK censuses 1841–1911	Findmypast	Ancestry	Findmypast has an especially useful address search across the censuses , invaluable when you know a house/street but not who was there.
1921 Census	Findmypast	FamilySearch/Ancestry if indexed material appears	Findmypast has a dedicated 1921 Census collection and search.
1939 Register	Findmypast	Ancestry	Findmypast has both the searchable register and original forms.
English parish registers	Findmypast + FamilySearch	Ancestry	Coverage varies enormously by county. FamilySearch is particularly valuable because its Catalog can reveal digitised parish registers that aren't obvious in a general name search.
London parish registers	Ancestry	Findmypast	Ancestry has major London Church of England register collections, including images.
Nonconformist records	Findmypast	FamilySearch	Worth searching separately rather than relying on a general search.
British military records	Findmypast	Ancestry	Findmypast has a substantial dedicated British armed forces collection, including army, pension and colonial-service material.
Newspapers	Findmypast	Ancestry	Findmypast incorporates the British Newspaper Archive and currently describes a collection of about 40 million pages, with extensive UK coverage since 1800.
Electoral registers	Findmypast	Ancestry	Findmypast's England & Wales electoral-register collection alone contains about 220 million voter entries for 1832–1932; Ancestry is particularly useful for London.
Passenger lists / emigration from Britain	Findmypast	Ancestry	Findmypast has fully indexed passenger-list collections; Ancestry becomes particularly useful when following the person at the destination.
US, Canadian, Australian etc. records	Ancestry	FamilySearch	I would normally start with Ancestry for an international search, then use FamilySearch to look for additional local collections and images. Ancestry's catalogue spans a very large range of record categories and countries.
England & Wales probate after 1858	Ancestry	Findmypast	Ancestry has the National Probate Calendar covering the vast majority of probate cases from 1858–1995.
Probate before 1858	Findmypast + FamilySearch	Ancestry	Findmypast has many county and ecclesiastical probate indexes extending back centuries; FamilySearch's Catalog can locate obscure local probate collections.
Obscure local records	FamilySearch Catalog	Findmypast	This is one of FamilySearch's greatest strengths: search by place , not merely by personal name. It includes digitised material, microfilms, books and collections that may never appear in an ordinary name search.
Unindexed registers	FamilySearch	—	FamilySearch lets you browse digitised images even when nobody has indexed the names.
Very difficult names/transcription errors	Findmypast + FamilySearch	Ancestry	Both support * and ? wildcards, which can be extremely effective with spelling variants and bad transcription.
Other people's family trees	Ancestry	FamilySearch	Useful for leads, photographs and identifying possible relatives—but I would treat user-entered trees as clues rather than evidence. FamilySearch has a single collaborative worldwide tree.

The search sequence I would actually use

For an **unknown British ancestor**, I would normally use:

1. Findmypast first

Search censuses, BMD/parish records, military records and newspapers. Its wildcard searching is particularly useful when spelling is uncertain. Findmypast itself recommends * and ? when transcription errors or changing surname spellings may be involved.

2. Ancestry second

Run the same individual through Ancestry. Don't assume a failure on Findmypast means there is no record. The two services have different collections and independently created indexes/transcriptions. Ancestry is particularly valuable for probate, London material, electoral registers and following emigrants abroad.

3. FamilySearch third — but search differently.

Don't merely type the person's name into the main FamilySearch search box. Go to **Search → Catalog → Place** and investigate what records FamilySearch actually has for the parish/town/county concerned. Some collections are image-only and therefore **cannot be found by an ordinary name search**.

There is another increasingly interesting FamilySearch tool: its **Full-Text Search** can search names, places and other wording within some records that have not been conventionally indexed.

One particularly useful distinction

Suppose you are looking for **John Nicholson, born about 1815 in England**.

On **Ancestry**, I would tend to search for the *person*: John Nicholson, ±5 years, England, gradually adding relatives and places.

On **Findmypast**, I would search both the *person* and individual **record sets**—census, parish, military, newspapers—and use wildcards such as Nichol* if necessary. Its dedicated record-set searching is useful for preventing irrelevant databases from swamping the results.

On **FamilySearch**, once I knew he came from, say, **Orwell, Cambridgeshire**, I would search the **place** and inspect the actual parish registers available. FamilySearch's Orwell catalogue entry, for example, identifies the original parish-register microfilms and digital collection rather than simply returning indexed individuals.

For a one-name study

I would alter the priority again:

Findmypast → Ancestry → FamilySearch Catalog.

Findmypast is particularly good for systematically searching variant surnames through British censuses, newspapers, directories, electoral registers, military records and passenger lists. Ancestry is then excellent for identifying overseas branches and connections through member trees and international collections. FamilySearch is the place I would use to hunt for the **records the first two searches have missed altogether**, especially unindexed parish and archival material.

The most important rule is therefore:

Never regard "no results" on Ancestry, Findmypast or FamilySearch as evidence that the record doesn't exist. Search the other databases—and on FamilySearch, always check the Catalog as well as the name index.

If you want, I can also produce a **much more specific "Ancestry vs Findmypast vs FamilySearch" search strategy for 1750–1900 British genealogy**, including exactly which site I would use for military men, clergy, Methodists, Gibraltar, passenger movements, newspapers and obscure parish records.

