

An Officer and a Gentleman?

Listing First World War officers' records in WO 339

The National Archives is currently engaged in a project to more fully catalogue the First World War officers' records in WO 339 and we need your help. The series has 139,908 files, but currently the catalogue only shows the surname, initials and rank for the first 45,382. After that point it indicates surname and initials only – with no rank – and as the series progresses it is often just a surname and one initial.

The problem is illustrated below. The first two entries are reasonably clear, but who are the other four H Bowdens? Apart from getting the long numbers from WO 338 which can be browsed on documents online, a researcher would also need to order all four files to determine whether they have the correct man. Imagine trying to find the ubiquitous officer J Smith for whom a catalogue search produces 192 hits.

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying search results from The National Archives. The search term is 'bowden+AND+h' and the results are sorted by 'Catalogue reference'. The table below shows the search results:

Catalogue Reference	Title/Scope and Content	Covering Dates
WO 339/15321	BOWDEN A H, Major	1914-1919
WO 339/24293	BOWDEN G R H, Lieut Col	1907-1915; 1935
WO 339/61955	BOWDEN H	[1914-1922]
WO 339/78012	BOWDEN H	[1914-1922]
WO 339/88790	BOWDEN H	[1914-1922]
WO 339/105851	BOWDEN H	[1914-1922]

At the bottom of the results, there is a 'Download results' button and a 'Refine search' link.

The project now records surname, full forenames, rank and unit. While this will occasionally necessitate ordering several files, for example where there are two Lieutenant John Albert Smiths' who both served with the Dorsetshire Regiment, in the overwhelming number of cases the catalogue will indicate just one file.

The project has currently re-listed some 8,801 files (this represents 6.3%) but we desperately need your help to do more, especially in light of the forthcoming centenary of the outbreak of the war in August 2014.