

## **BIRTH TO DEATH: ARCHIVING THE NATION**

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**I**n Modern Britain, there are few experiences that escape registration. We are used to filling out forms, presenting legal documents, evidencing our age, marital status, and nationality. From birth to death, our life course is recorded by the state, kept by archivists, and examined as data. Each of these activities can be traced back to Somerset House. Today, Somerset House is a cultural institution bringing creativity and art to wider society. In 1836, it was the birthplace of modern bureaucracy in Britain.

As the Victorian era of invention entered the horizon, the General Register Office (GRO) was established at Somerset House as the central headquarters for civil registration. The GRO was responsible for archiving the state's documentation of the life course. To manage this complex web of administration, the GRO was divided into departments for correspondence, accounts, and indexing certified copies of the registers. The GRO also opened a room which could be used by the public to search the records. The GRO was keen to engage the public in its activities. Journalists on several publications were invited to explore the building between the mid-to-late nineteenth century. One such account describes Somerset House as "the most lasting record of the three great epochs in the existence of our great family of twenty odd millions of English people – the births, the marriages, and deaths – of the nation" (Hunt 1850: 235).

Why did the GRO begin in 1836? The reasons for developing a civil registration are complex, multifaceted, and contested. We can identify, however, three broad concerns for the shift from parish to civil registration. Firstly, civil records of birth and marriage were deemed essential in securing property rights for the wealthy, as they could be used as evidence in court. Secondly, civil registration would provide a remedy for non-Anglicans and non-Christians facing exclusion from



*“The Strand Front of Somerset House and St Mary-le-Strand Church”:  
print published by Ackermann & Co in 1836, artist unknown, public  
domain. Source: Wikipedia.*

the legal system, given that parish registration was controlled by the Church of England. And, finally, there was a growing desire for statistical knowledge which could be used to measure the health of the population. The parish registers were designed to record the passage of the Christian soul, rather than the physical body, and so tended to include only the name(s) of those involved in the ceremony and the date of the ritual.

Today, there is much debate about what should be recorded by the state. Should birth certificates have more narrative options to describe parenthood? Is it necessary to designate a legal sex at birth? Could physical records be replaced with digital archives? Can a political anarchist reject the state’s documentation of their child altogether?

## Whilst at Somerset House ...

... visit an [exhibition](#), listen to an [audio history of the building](#), or if it’s winter, have a go on the skating rink.

**About the author**

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**References**

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