



# Somerset House Solved Fictional – and Genealogical – Mysteries for 133 Years

by David A. Norris

**I**N MANY A BRITISH WHODUNIT, A SCOTLAND YARD INSPECTOR or an amateur detective dispatches a trusted associate to Somerset House in London. There would lie the vital birth certificate or marriage record needed to solve the mystery. From 1837 to 1970, Somerset House held all of England's birth, marriage, and death records. Certainly, that place was a detective's dream as well as a treasure house for genealogists.



The grand buildings of Somerset House, arranged around a great courtyard, resembled a palace. Indeed, it occupied the site of a palace by the Thames that belonged to the Tudor-era Dukes of Somerset. The early palace buildings were demolished in 1775 to make way for a purpose-built complex to hold government offices. Over the years, the new Somerset House housed several of the Royal Navy's administrative branches, as well as the Tax Office and the Stamp Office, the Royal Academy, and the Royal Society (the latter two concerned with art and science, respectively).

In 1837, a year after Parliament passed the Births and Deaths Registration Act, the newly formed General Register Office moved into part of Somerset House. The GRO was responsible for the first consistent nationwide recording of births, deaths, and marriages in England and Wales. It replaced an older and often haphazard system based on record-keeping by parish churches, which left out growing numbers of non-Anglicans.

Somerset House received regular district reports, which clerks compiled into quarterly indexes. Besides the national births, deaths, and marriages for England and Wales (Scottish and Irish records were kept separate), the office later also received reports from Quaker meetings, some non-conformist churches, and synagogues.

Whether you were unmasking a villain or digging into your

family's past, consulting Somerset House in the early 1900s was time-consuming. The public was not allowed to browse. To find a record, one would visit the office or inquire by mail, and pay a shilling for a search of up to five years of indexes for a particular district. If a relevant entry was found, the customer paid another two shillings and sevenpence for a copy. Back when photocopies were unknown or costly, relevant information was written by hand onto printed forms.

In 1970, the GRO moved its records a short distance away to Television House, the former home of ITV (Britain's first independent television network). That building was renamed Saint Catherine House when the GRO moved in. The office moved again in 1997, and today the GRO occupies the Smedley Hydro building (a former Victorian hotel and spa) in Southport, north of Liverpool. Should you wish to order a document, see their information page online at: [www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/](http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/).

Of course, in these days of the Internet, detectives need not wait for their trusty sidekicks to return from a train trip to Somerset House before solving a country house mystery. But, Somerset House often appears as a filming location for television or movie mysteries and dramas. The site's 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century buildings also serve as a center for the creative and performing arts.

British BMD records were kept at Somerset House in London from 1837 to 1970. Today, Somerset House is often used as a film location. (Wikipedia.) ©

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