

## Background information on Closed Adoption Records, 1951–1969

Each Child Welfare district (later the Department of Social Welfare) kept its own records of each adoption placement, as did private organisations – though in some cases these were eventually destroyed. Solicitors also kept their own adoption records. There were two types of permanent official records: the original and new birth registration entries, and the court records of adoption proceedings, containing the names of the birth mother and in some cases the birth father, the adopters, and the original and new names of the adopted person.

Earlier there had been few restrictions on access to the official records by those concerned, but between 1951 and 1969 access became more and more limited. In 1951 an amendment to the Births and Deaths Registration Act prevented anyone from inspecting the original birth entry unless the applicant signed a declaration that it was essential to do so (for example, in connection with a will) and the registrar was satisfied that this was in fact the case.

Section 23 of the Adoption Act 1955 closed inspection of the court records as well. A court order to inspect could be obtained, but only on limited grounds, for example in connection with wills, or to check on degrees of relationship so that close birth relatives would not unwittingly marry. But adoptive parents received their own copy of the court record, and large numbers of people whose official employment brought them into contact with the original birth entries and adoption records all had access to the information.

In 1961 another amendment allowed complete re-registration of an adopted person's birth, giving the adoptive parents' ages as at the adopted person's date of birth, effectively creating a legal fiction that they were the original parents. This meant that 'birth' certificates could be issued that looked exactly the same as those for the non-adopted.

The final move came in 1969. From then on, only the registrar-general could deal with applications to see original birth entries, which could be granted only on very limited grounds. This brought restrictions on access to birth entries formally into line with those on court records.

Nine years later, in 1978, Jonathan Hunt introduced the first version of a Bill to let adopted adults and their birth parents have official access to each other's identity, subject to a range of conditions. This was later sponsored by Fran Wilde. MPs were so divided that it took another seven years to pass, as the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985.

Based on information from  
Anne Else with Maria Haenga-Collins,  
*A Question of Adoption: Closed Stranger Adoption in New Zealand 1944–1974 and  
Adoption, State Care, Donor Conception and Surrogacy 1975–2022*, 2023, BWB, p130  
<https://www.bwb.co.nz/books/a-question-of-adoption-ebook/>

