

Prisoners of the First World War in the ICRC archives: FAQ

grandeguerre.icrc.org

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What is in the archives?

The archives contain approximately five million index cards and 400,000 lists, with information on some two million people.

The documents mainly come from the Western Front, Romania and Serbia. Lists from the Russian front were not sent to Geneva. Instead, those lists were collected by the Danish Red Cross in Copenhagen, as Denmark was also neutral during the war.

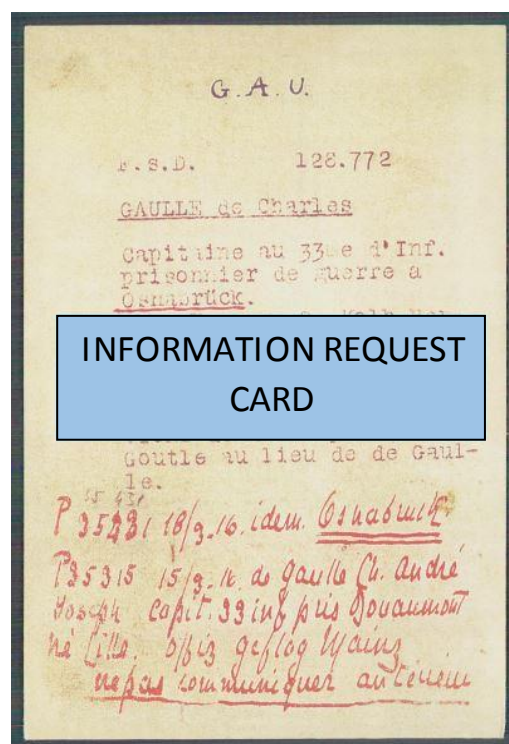
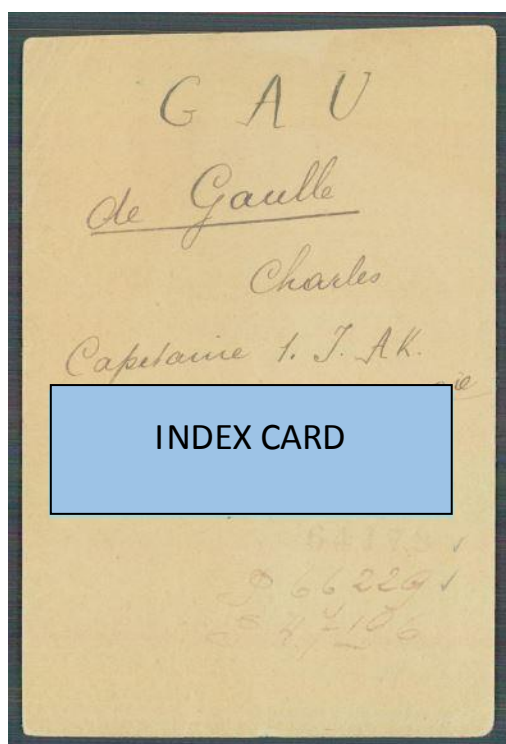
What kind of information will I find?

On 21 August 1914, the Central Prisoners of War Agency was created to collect information on prisoners held by the warring parties. Countries holding prisoners of war sent lists of their prisoners' names – albeit not consistently – to the agency in Geneva. In this way, the agency collected around 400,000 pages of names.

The lists include information on:

- prisoners who had been captured
- prisoners who had been transferred from one camp to another
- prisoners who had died in captivity.

A system of index cards was created to locate information about individual prisoners: for each name that appeared on a given list, the agency created a card for that person with the list's reference number. The cards were then filed in catalogues.



The catalogues also contain cards logging the thousands of written requests that the agency received from families seeking information about their imprisoned loved ones. The letters themselves were not saved.

How many catalogues are there?

There is no single, alphabetical catalogue. Instead, index cards were filed by country and type of prisoner: military or civilian. In total, there are 29 separate catalogues.

What do I need to know to find a prisoner in the database?

You will need the following information:

1. given name and family name
2. nationality
3. type of prisoner (military or civilian).

In addition, we highly recommend that you have the person's service number to hand, especially if they had a common name. There are many people with the same given and family names listed in the archives. (For example, there are over 600 Jean Martins in the French catalogue.)

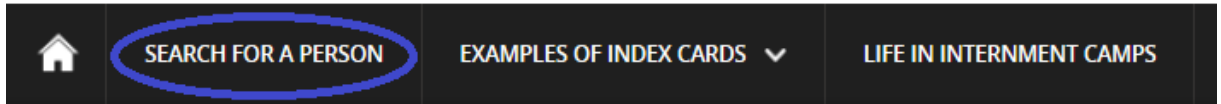
What criteria can I use to search?

You can only search by name.

It is not possible to search by regiment, date or place of capture, place of detention, date or place of death, etc.

How do I search for a prisoner?

1. Click on “search for a person” in the menu bar.



2. Fill out the following fields:

A search form titled '1 Specify your search criteria'. It contains three input fields: 'Name: Walker', 'Nationality: British and Commonwealth', and 'Status: Military'. Below these is an 'Available files:' dropdown menu with 'Main file of the British Army and the Commonwealth' selected. A red 'VALIDATE >' button is on the right.

- **Name** → Start by entering the spelling you know. If you are unable to find the person that way, try searching with a phonetic spelling.
- **Nationality** → Select the person’s nationality at the time they were taken prisoner. Remember that some countries had different names and borders at the time, and that some servicemen fought for different countries than the ones they were born in.
Example: select “British and Commonwealth” for British, Irish, Canadian, New Zealander, Australian, South African, Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi, etc. prisoners.
- **Status** → Select “Military” or “Civilians”.
- **Available files** → If you do not know which catalogue the person is likely to be in, you will have to search in each one separately.



3. Click on
4. A list of names will appear on the left-hand side of the page.

Cards are organized into groups by family name. Each group is listed using the family name as it appears on the first card in the group.

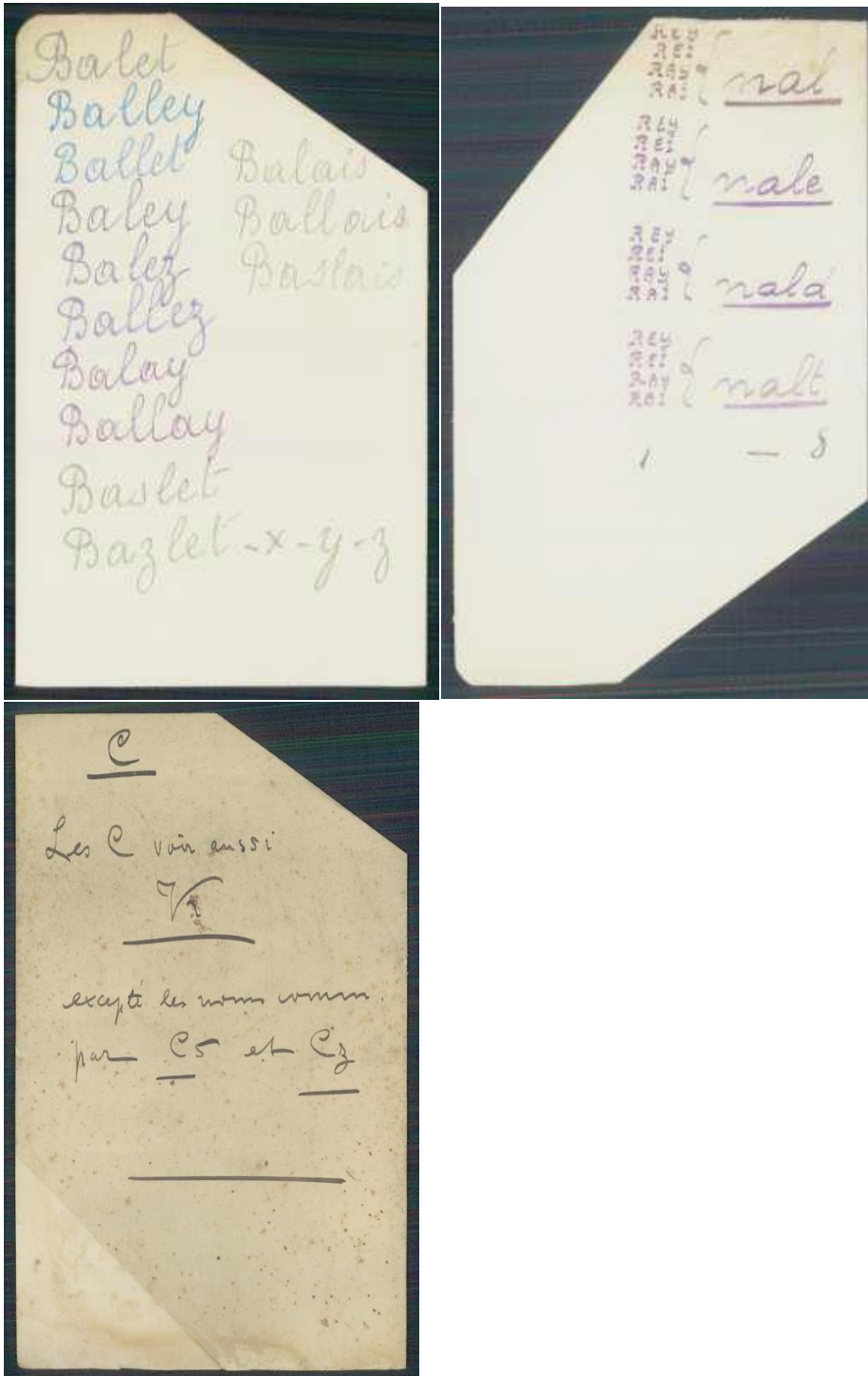
There are two scroll bars:

- one to the right of the list of names, for scrolling through groups
 - one on the far right-hand side of the webpage, for scrolling through the cards within a group.
5. In most catalogues, cards are organized by alphabetical order (by family name, then given name) and then by service number.

Please note that the alphabetical order is not strict. Some names are grouped together:

- by pronunciation – silent letters and double consonants are not taken into account, and homophones are filed together (for example, “au” and “o” are filed together because they sound the same in French).
- by appearance – easily confused letters, such as “b” and “p” or “u” and “n”, are filed together (for example, the names “Dubreuil” and “Duprenil” are filed together).

Pay attention to cards like this one, which indicate grouped and cross-referenced names.



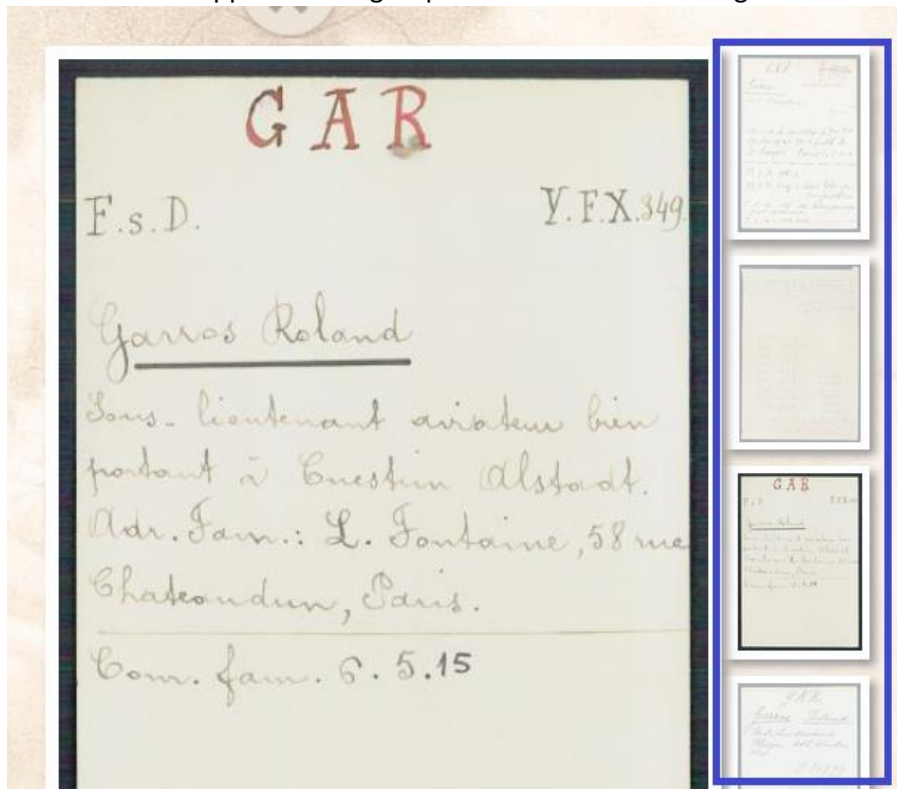
Within a group of cards for the same family name, people are listed in alphabetical order by given name.

Within a group of cards for the same family and given names, people are listed in order of service number from low to high.

Please note:

- Cards for servicemen whose given names were unknown to the agency are filed at the beginning of the group, even if their service number was known.
- For very common names in the British/Commonwealth catalogue, cards are ordered by family name, then service number.

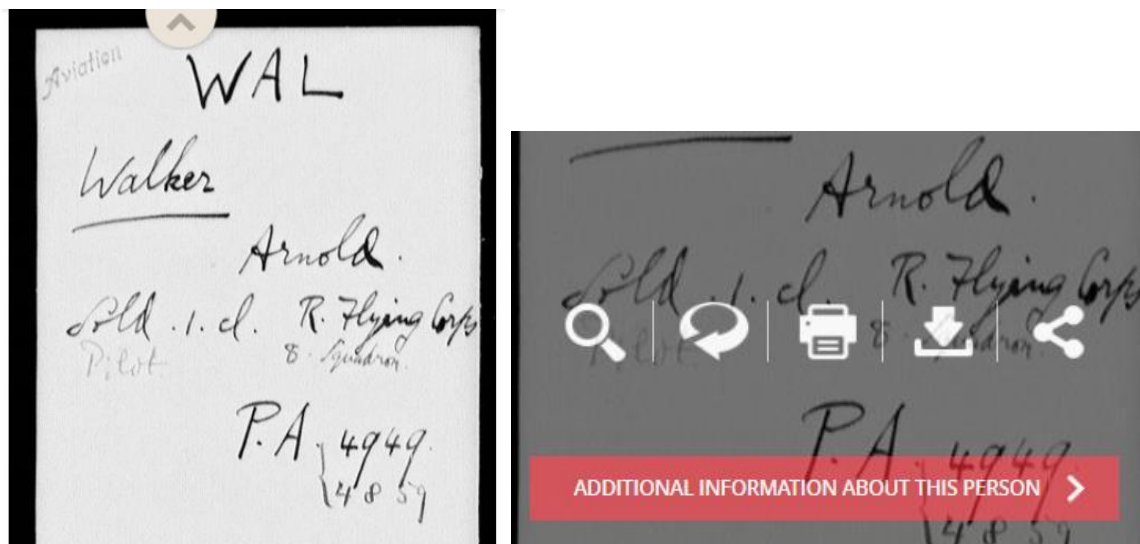
6. Some cards appear with a group of thumbnails to their right.




This means that the cards were attached together with a paper clip because they all concern the same person.

However, this was not done systematically. It is relatively common to find that cards for the same person were not grouped together. We therefore recommend that you look through all the cards for a particular name.

7. One you have found the card you are looking for, hover your mouse over the image.



Click on 

8. This will take you to a new webpage: “Details about the person”.
9. Look for the reference number(s) listed on the card. All reference numbers consist of one or more letters followed by numbers.

Some cards list several reference numbers. (The prisoner might have been transferred from one camp to another and therefore appears on several documents.) You can find more information by searching each of the reference numbers in turn.

In the example above, the reference numbers are PA 4949 and PA4859

10. Enter the reference number into the appropriate fields and click “Search”.

Reference number

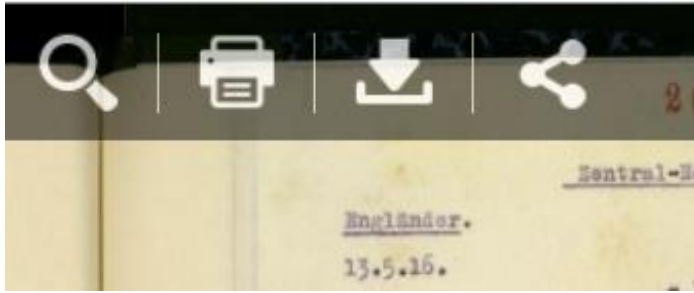
Letter Number between 1 and 43134

PA
▼

4949

SEARCH
▶

11. This will take you to a scanned image of the document on which the prisoner’s name appears. To zoom in, hover your mouse over the image, then click on the magnifying glass at the top left.



12. For some lists, it may be useful to use the scroll bar to the right of the image to scroll to the first page. There, you will find information such as the date and the name of the camp.

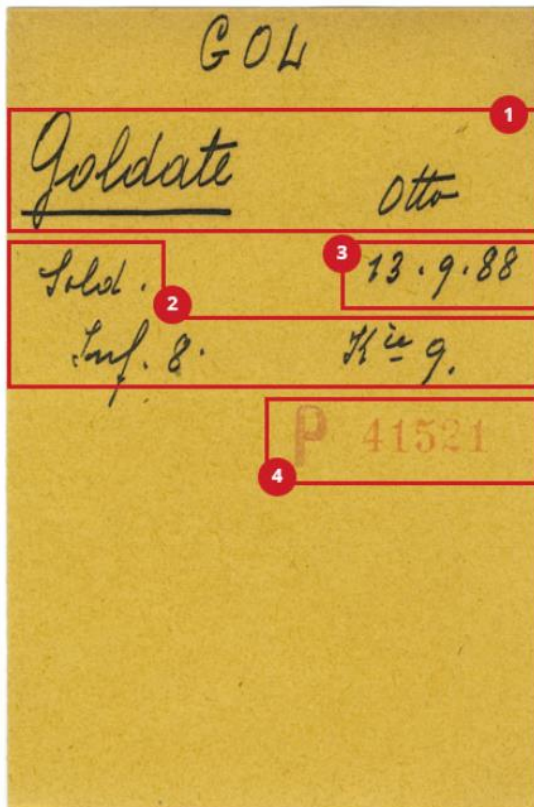
1	2	3	4	5	6
Off. Nr.	a) Familienname b) Vorname (nur der Rufname) c) nur bei Russen Vorname des Vaters	Dienstgrad	a) Truppen- b) teil c) Komp.	a) Gefangenname (Ort und Tag) b) vorhergehender Auf- enthaltort	a) Geburtstag u. -Ort b) Adresse des nächsten Verwandten c)
a)	7 Boebe	gen	117	7 Boebe	in a. 11. 11. 11. 11.
b)	7 Boebe				7 Boebe
c)				Stambulager	Dachau Colasannazog

13. On the right-hand side of the webpage is a link to our [glossary](#) to help you understand the abbreviations in the document. Please note that the glossary is not exhaustive: it only includes the abbreviations that have been deciphered by our staff. We cannot answer questions about other abbreviations.

What are the cards for, and what do they mean?

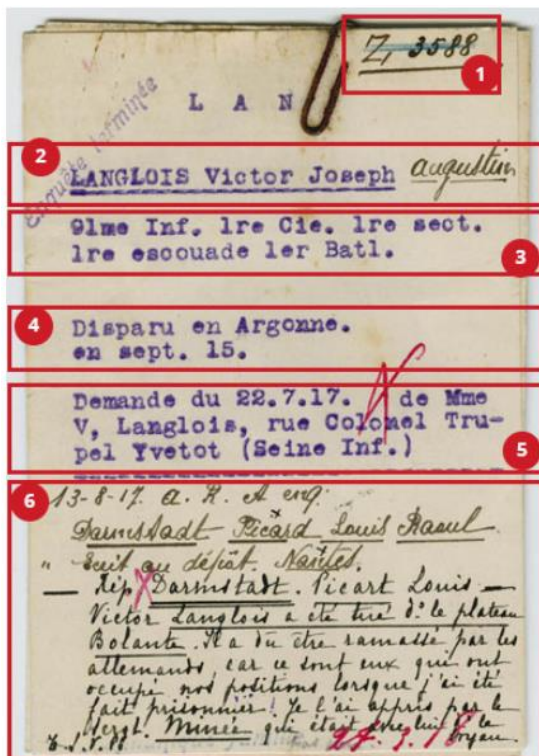
There are two types of cards:

1. **Index cards** were created for each person whose name appeared on the lists sent to the agency by warring parties.



- 1 Last name and First name
 - 2 Service number
 - 3 Date of birth
 - 4 Reference number of the list containing the prisoner's name
- This reference number leads to the register*

2. **Information request cards** were created for each person whose family wrote to request information about their loved ones. These cards are often pale green (though the ir format and colour may vary depending on the country of origin).



- 1 Reference number of the original letter sent by the family
(directs to no other document, because during the war the original letters were discarded once the card being set up)
- 2 Last name and First name
- 3 Service number
- 4 Missing circumstances as indicated by the family
- 5 Address of the family
- 6 ICRC inquiry summary

What if I cannot find the person I'm looking for?

There are several reasons why you may not be able to find someone.

1. **The information was never received:** We do not have exhaustive information about all prisoners held during the war. Our archives are composed of documents sent to Geneva during the conflict by the warring parties, ICRC delegations and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. In some cases, lists were never made or never sent to us.

Over seven million people were taken prisoner at some point during the First World War, but our archives contain information about only around two million of them. So, it is entirely possible that the person you are looking for does not appear in any of our documents.

Our archives mainly contain information from the Western Front. We have little information about Russian and Ottoman prisoners. The Danish Red Cross ran a separate agency for prisoners captured on the Eastern Front – first for Germans held in Russia and Russians held in Germany, and then in 1917 for Austro-Hungarian and Romanian prisoners. The Ottoman Empire exchanged prisoner lists with Russia directly and with Great Britain via the Central Prisoners of War Agency, but it did not keep copies.

2. **The documents do not exist in electronic format:** The following files have not been scanned and are therefore not available on the website:
 - German servicemen – BAUMANN Lambert, and from BELT to BOSRODOWSKI
 - French and Belgian servicemen – from BLOQUET to BLUSSON.

If you are looking for someone in one of those sections, please contact us [here](#). Please remember to include the following information in your email: the prisoner's given and family names, nationality, status (civilian or military), service number and unit. You should receive a reply within six months.

3. **The documents are no longer in the archives:** Many documents were not kept. If you do not find the document you are looking for as you scroll through the scanned list, we no longer have it. Sadly, that means no more information is available about that prisoner.
4. **Human error:** Please remember that the people who created the cards and assembled the catalogues did so by hand and had to process large volumes of data every day. Errors may have been made in the process.

Where can I find photos of prisoners?

We do not have any photos of individual prisoners identified by name. Nor are prisoners identified by name in the group photos we hold in our archives.

During the war, ICRC delegates travelled to countries where military and civilian prisoners were being held. The photos they took were published by the ICRC as postcards and can be found [here](#).

You can also consult the [ICRC audiovisual archives](#).

Where can I find information about the living conditions in a given camp?

In addition to reuniting families separated by the war, the ICRC also sent delegates to inspect the camps where military and civilian prisoners were being held. ICRC delegates visited a total of 524 camps throughout Europe, France's North African colonies, India and even Japan. They met with prisoners and the camp authorities to determine what the food, hygiene and work conditions were like in the camps, and whether prisoners were able to stay in contact with their families.

You can find their reports [here](#), along with [photographs](#) taken by delegates, which the ICRC published as postcards at the time.

If you are unable to find a report on the camp you are searching for, it probably means that the ICRC did not visit that particular camp and/or no report was written.

What are the terms of use?

The ICRC allows visitors to the site to download files for personal use. Commercial use is allowed only with written permission from the ICRC. Feel free to contact us [here](#).

Regardless of how you use the material, you must:

- refrain from using it in a way that could jeopardize the ICRC's impartial, neutral and independent humanitarian work
- refrain from altering it in any way, including any reference details pertaining thereto
- cite the source as "ICRC Archives [ACICRC G1]".

The maximum resolution allowed when reproducing images from the site is 1200 x 1200.

It is strictly forbidden to:

- sell anything originating from this site
- include our content in any other database, commercial or not.

Can I report an error I found on the site?

We are happy to respond to reports of potential errors.

Please note that we cannot correct errors that were made when the index cards and catalogues were created during the First World War. The documents are archival sources, and to maintain the integrity of the archives they cannot be modified.

If you wish to report an error, please do so [here](#).

Can I give feedback about the site?

We welcome feedback from our users.

Feel free to write to us [here](#).