DW RESEARCH & ARCHIVE SERVICES

Village and Property History (UK)

A basic guide to sources and tips for research

By Deborah Watson, Freelance Archivist and Researcher

This guide by no means exhaustive, but is merely designed to give some basic ideas for possible research paths and general tips on research and also how to search online catalogues. It is free for the use of private individuals or non-profit making organisations. If you wish to use all or part of this guide for any commercial purpose or to publish in any way (including social media sites) please contact dwatsonresearch@gmail.com.

More detailed guides for Turnchapel or Plymstock are available for purchase by contacting the email address above.

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VITAL TIPS

First vital tip

ALWAYS note what sources you have checked (even if they don't prove fruitful) as this can save time in the future. You and others don't want to waste valuable time going over old ground that isn't of any use.

Second vital tip

ALWAYS note down where you found the information and the reference number if there is one. There is nothing more frustrating than wanting to check a record or document at a later date, but you can't remember where you found it or what the reference number was. Just as an example, there are nearly 1 million documents and photographs at Plymouth Archives (in The Box) alone – without a reference number the staff are unlikely to find what you want. If it's in private hands, that needs noting too.

Third vital tip

If you are researching as a group, be consistent with your recording and filing. You'll need to be a little pedantic here (but no fighting). Again this can save valuable time not having to second guess what someone else meant when they named a file or put it in a particular place. It's worth spending an evening getting that right in a way that works for the majority – record your final decision in a short and concise guide for all to use.

But remember that old saying 'you can't please all the people all of the time', but you are a team so need to work together to find what's best for most of you, particularly important when people are away on holiday or people move on.

Fourth vital tip

Online catalogues take some getting used to. They can vary quite a bit and can take a while to navigate through and get to know their individual quirks – but don't give up. They are invaluable resources as a research tool and can often save you hours of travelling. Generally, keep your search terms short and use filters where possible (such as dates and phrases). Unusual property or place-names makes things a lot easier for you. Having said that, there are different spellings, so keep a list and enter each as a separate search. And don't forget, many official records were compiled for county or national purposes, so you may need to check with a different record office or archive (such as The National Archives at Kew for national records).

But beware! Not everything will necessarily be on the online catalogue. Not all repositories have the professional staff or time to ensure this is done and each has different priorities. If you find nothing or little, then email or telephone (the former is usually preferable due to staff constraints) to ask if they have anything. Good cataloguing is a skill developed over time and all record offices have their own styles.

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Fifth vital tip

Before going to an archive or other organisation, check their website for opening hours and preferably drop them an email or give them a call prior to making a visit, especially if it involves a long journey. Opening times can change, even for just a few weeks, and websites not always updated immediately.

Sixth vital tip

The administration (or decision-making) for villages, parishes and districts changes over time. In early records (approx. pre-1830's) places came under 'Hundreds' or 'Manors'.

Seventh vital tip

Visit your local library and see what published books they have about your local area. This can give you a head start and give a bit of background information – there may also be a list of sources used for their research for each book in the notes.

You will also pick up other worthwhile tips as you work through each section below.

SOME USEFUL GENERAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR RESEARCH

Maps

Ordnance Survey maps are a good place to start. Most useful for you are dated 1857-60's, 1890's, 1900's, 1910's and 1930's, 1950's, etc for 6" and 25" maps. The SX series (late 1940's onwards) go up to the 1980's in some cases. Many of these are held in local archive services, record office and libraries – contact your for details.

Many of the historic Ordnance Survey map series can be viewed for free through the National Library of Scotland website https://maps.nls.uk/os/. There are side-by-side and overlap functions which are very useful for the local historian.

The tithe map and accompanying apportionment (the written bit), dated 1830's-1840's, are really useful tools. It can tell you who owned the land/property, who the occupier was and what it was used for. If the landowner had a large estate, this can point you in the direction of estate papers. These maps are very large and often in poor condition. Three copies would have been made – parish, diocesan and national commissioners. Some archive service or Historic Environment departments of councils have digitised theirs – it's worth enquiring. Updated tithe records are worth searching out as they often have amendments, especially as the railways are built. The original diocesan copy of the tithe maps and apportionments for Devon are available for free through https://www.devon.gov.uk/historicenvironment/tithe-map/. The apportionment is available as scans or transcription.

The National Archives, British Library and Hatfield House are good sources for manuscript maps generally – I am sure there are plenty more out there. Many are gradually being added to websites, so it's worth going back and checking for search engines for online sources periodically. Again, check specific online catalogues every now and again for new material

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that may have come in, or old material that has been reworked and amended (mistakes could have been made in interpreting unlabelled maps in the past).

Plans

These could be plans of sites or buildings. Many deeds have plans on them (although as a whole it is a small percentage) and there may be some within building control collections deposited by local councils. If there are no plans but you want to know if planning was given, it is worth searching through Planning Committee minutes if they have survived. There may also be plans that have been deposited as part of private or estate collections.

The National Archives at Kew, have some fantastic plans. Search their Discovery catalogue and see what they hold https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/. You can do a basic search or an advanced search. Holdings from many other repositories are also on this catalogue (goes back to the A2A project hosted by the National Archives about 12-15 years go). Although not as up to date as those for the individual repositories, it is still a useful tool for seeing what is held elsewhere. You may know of other archive portals relating to your area, such as AIM25 for London.

Again, the British Library, Hatfield House etc, may hold relevant plans. The National Maritime Museums at Greenwich and Falmouth may be worth checking. The former certainly has some material for Turnchapel on their crew lists https://www.rmg.co.uk/research-collections. It may be worth an email enquiry if nothing comes up on the online catalogues.

Valuations and surveys

The 1910 land valuation was a national project. It was conducted by parish. Like the tithe apportionment, it is useful as a snapshot in time and gives landowners, occupiers, addresses, and use. Sometimes there are later manuscript additions. It is worth checking the end of each volume for industrial property. Maps to accompany the written records were also compiled, but these are held at The National Archives, Kew – there are gaps as I discovered.

Most record offices will also have later 20th century valuation books, so it is worth enquiring.

Many property surveys also exist within estate collections.

Auctioneers' and Surveyors' Papers

These are primarily useful for property information in the form of sale catalogues and sale particulars. They often give very detailed information about rooms within the property and any covenants or conditions of sale. Many of the larger ones, will have plans of lots with them, again a useful resource. Dating from the late 19th century to the latter half of the 20th century.

Deeds

Property deeds are invaluable resources for property and local history. They can be a bit long-winded at times – lots of legal jargon. Many early ones are in Latin (roughly pre-1500), so do beware if you find anything on their catalogue and you're tempted to travel to see any.
Deeds tend to follow formats, so once you get used to where the most useful information is, it gets easier. When catalogued by archive services, the names of the parties involved are

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usually entered, so if you are looking for specific people, it is always worth putting names in as searches. There are thousands of deeds in record offices and archive services and always more coming in. It is worth checking the online catalogues regularly for new material coming in. There are very early medieval deeds at the National Archives at Kew, although most appear to be not well catalogued.

Council Minutes, Correspondence, etc

These records may sound a bit dry, but I have found some gems within council minute books and correspondence. Medical Officer of Health reports will give some interesting background information about what is going on re health in the area. There is a huge range of records for local authorities and other formal organisations in record offices. Administrative control of areas does change, so check with your local archive service for assistance.

Estate Rentals

Rental books for estates can be valuable sources of information for local history. Check with your archive service for estate collections that they hold. Remember what I said about tithe maps and apportionments. These can give you a clue as to whether or not your property or area came under an estate.

Parish Records

Parish record coverage varies. Some parishes have more surviving records than others (fire, flood, poor handling, etc) and parish boundaries can change, especially when new parishes were formed. They are useful for baptisms, marriage and burials; churchwardens' and overseers' accounts; poor relief (bastardy claims, settlements, parish apprentices, etc); correspondence; faculties; etc.

Photographs, Postcards & Other Images

These can sometimes give you information or clues where no record exists, and they're just great to look at. Check online sources in your local area and social media networks. There are also published books of photographs within library services, and obviously to purchase online and through your local bookshops. Always worth a look-out on Ebay and attending postcard fairs.

Newspapers

Again, a great resource. You will often find information in the newspapers that you won't find in official records. Some of which can be quite amusing. The scanned images from local and national newspapers and periodicals are available through libraries and available online through either Find My Past www.findmypast.co.uk or the British Library Newspaper Archive www.britshnewspaperarchive.co.uk (the latter is cheaper if you don't want all the family history resources as well). Again beware, not all the local newspapers have been digitised yet and those that have only go up to certain dates. You can also often get free access to The Times newspaper from 1785 and other valuable online resources through your local library.

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Quarter Sessions

Anything from court records and prisons, to railway lines, bridges and licencing. Ask your local record office for guidance.

Mariners and Shipping

The National Archives is a useful place for mariners, including the Royal Navy and Merchant Navy. It's worth searching their 'Documents Online' to see what is available. The National Maritime Museum at Greenwich and other locations is also worthy of consideration. There is also a wealth of published material available through local and national library services.

Other sources in brief

Electoral rolls – done by address.

Land Tax Assessments – similar information to valuation records

Poor Law Union and Guardians records – these took over the administration and control of poor relief from the parishes from the 1830's.

Local directories – available online and through local archive service and libraries, usually late 18th to mid 20th century. Great for private residents and local businesses.

Research notes and newsletters compiled by private enthusiasts and societies – ask your local archive service or library.

Wills and probates – your local archive service may have wills and probates that have come in from local solicitors and private individuals. The National Archives have pre-1858 wills for download through their Documents Online, and gov.uk for post-1858 wills online https://www.gov.uk/search-will-probate. You will obviously need a person's name to do this.

Family/people history – as above, plus use Ancestry and Find My Past for parish records and census returns etc, both are available through subscription and often free through local library services. There are many other sites offering sources for family history. Free from your home, you can access the General Registrar Office index through https://www.freebmd.org.uk/. The Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints also have free sources through https://www.familysearch.org/en/home/.

Armed Forces and associated organisations (ie dockyards) – as above for Mariners and Navy. The National Archives is a good place to start for any records relating to the armed forces.

FINAL TIPS AND THOUGHTS

The above basic guide should give you enough to get you started, but there are many other sources to help with your research. Think laterally and don't be afraid to ask – there are often other paths to finding the information you require. A lot of heritage organisation and groups use Twitter, so worth chucking a question out there if you're struggling. But remember – the

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definitive answer just may not exist and theories not provable beyond doubt. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, many records have been destroyed or lost over the centuries.

Due to the condition of the document, there are occasions where you may not be permitted to see it. Handling it could damage it further.

Gloves are usually not required (more damage can be done by using them) but clean hands and gentle handling are. Use weights and rests where available and ask for advice on how best to use them appropriately from staff. All archive services have their own rules, so please do respect these.

Pens are not permitted in record office/archive reading rooms. Always take a pencil or laptop to take notes. Cameras/phones can usually be used to take photographs of documents for a fee, but you will usually be required to complete a copyright form.

Under copyright regulations, repositories are not allowed to copy photocopies or printed scans of originals (unless they hold the copyright). Photographs are always a problem, as most will still be within copyright (it's not one rule fits all I'm afraid). Just be aware, that you could be infringing copyright if you copy or use any document, photograph, map, plan, etc without the correct permission (even online, including Facebook). Always keep an audit trail of any permissions sought or given.

Some records may have access restrictions due to Data Protection law or imposed by the depositor, i.e. health records, workhouse records, Methodist minute books. Archive service are often the custodians and not the owners of the records they hold, so please respect restrictions they pass on to you. Often access might be permitted, but authorisation must be sought through the proper process and channels.

New online sources and information is appearing all the time. Use search engines such as 'Google' and social media sites such as 'Facebook' and 'Twitter', you might be surprised what is out there.

Finally, have fun. Discovering history for your self can be extremely rewarding and also (beware) addictive. But if you get stuck and you need some professional help, DW Research and Archive Services can offer some affordable help.

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