

Rate Books for Family History

Church Rates

Parishioners were responsible for maintaining their own parish church and paid rates to the churchwardens for this purpose. It was decided in the vestry meetings how much the rate should be. Any disputes about the rate were heard in the church courts. Many non-conformists objected to paying church rates when they did not attend church and these objections grew as the number of non-conformist chapels increased. Church of England clerics countered this by writing pamphlets and giving sermons in defence of church rates. However church rates were abolished in 1868, when Gladstone's Compulsory Church Rates Abolition Bill was passed.

The earliest church rate assessments were written into churchwardens' account books, though sometimes they survive in parish collections on loose sheets. They usually list the householder's name and the amount payable for his/her property, which is often named.

Poor Rates

Following the 1601 Poor Law Act, the payment of rates to maintain the poor became compulsory. Poor rates were approved by the justices, and any complaints about unfair rating were heard at Quarter Sessions.

The poor rate payments were written into an overseers of the poor account book. Sometimes the same account book was used for recording both poor rates paid into the parish, and for disbursements (payments out) directly to the poor, or costs incurred by the parish in the administration of the poor law. Sometimes separate account books recording poor rates only were kept.

Poor rate records usually list the householder's name and the amount payable for his/her property.

Highway Rates

From the mid-17th century, parishes were also able to impose a rate for repairs to the parish roads.

County Rates

Ratepayers had to pay county rates, which were decided on by the justices at Quarter Sessions, and collected locally by the constable. These included payments for the hospitals and the gaols (from 1700). An Act of Parliament of 1744 gave residents the right to inspect rate books.

Any other rates needed for "improvements" such as building a road or a canal, or enclosing land, could be levied once a local Act of Parliament had been passed. In the 19th century, various Acts of Parliament were passed to enable rates to be imposed for works which would benefit the community, without first taking the matter through Parliament; for example the Museum Act of 1845, the Baths and Wash-houses Act of 1846/7, the Public Libraries Acts of 1850 & 1855, and the Recreation Grounds Act of 1859.

District Council Rates

Urban and Rural District Councils were formed in 1894, and were given the authority to collect rates from householders in their district.

Later, printed rate books were used, mainly in the parishes of cities and towns, and in Devon these may date from the 1830's. They list the houses street by street, the value of the property, the householder's name and the amount assessed. Rate books often include properties which were not subject to land tax, and if they happen to survive, a run of rate books can be very useful for researching house history. It is best to start with the most recent book and work backwards.

They can also be useful for family history, to give an idea of when someone lived in a parish, or when family property changed hands.

Rate records held by the Devon Heritage Centre and at North Devon Record Office can be found in the following types of collections:

- parish collections (church, poor and highway rates)
- diocesan archives (this mainly applies to early 17th century rates)
- Urban and Rural District Council records (late 19th and 20th century rates).

Useful reading: selected references held in the Devon Heritage Centre's local studies collection

W.E. Tate. *The Parish Chest: a study of the records of parochial administration in England*, Cambridge University Press, 1969

Cecil Torr, *Bovey Tracey church-rates and poor-rates 1596-1729*, Plymouth: William Brendon, 1928 (DHC shelf ref: 336.22/BOV/TOR)

Plymtree poor's rate, Devon, 1843, transcribed by Tony Eames (DHC shelf ref: sx362.58/PLY/PLY)

Other references

Ida Darlington. "Short Guides to Records: Rate Books", *History*, vol. XLVII, 1962.

E. Cannan. *The History of Local Rates in England*, 1927.

Devon Heritage Centre
Great Moor House
Bittern Road
Exeter
EX2 7NL

01392 888700
devonarchives@swheritage.org.uk
Website: www.swheritage.org.uk/devon-archives

South West Heritage Trust is a charity and a company limited by guarantee registered in England.
Registered office: Somerset Heritage Centre, Brunel Way, Norton Fitzwarren, Taunton, Somerset TA2 6SF
Company number: 09053532 Charity Number: 1158791 VAT Registration Number: 197221592