

Family History Research

Introduction

Welcome to the Devon Archives and Local Studies Services' research guide for family historians. This guide is designed to assist you whether you are just beginning your family history, or are already an experienced researcher, but wish to know about the sources available for family history in Devon.

If you are new to family history and want to know how and where to start, the following will help you:

Your Family Tree: Where and how to start

This brief guide was extracted from notes given out at family history courses which were held at the former Devon Record Office (now Devon Heritage Centre).

Draw up a pedigree chart

It is wise to begin by make a basic family tree from the facts and information you already have. The simplest form is a drop-line pedigree or family tree chart. Begin with the birth of the oldest child in each generation on the left hand side of the tree, and along the line through to the youngest on the right hand side. Fill in additional names, dates, places and facts as you go along. Work backwards from the known to the unknown, a generation at a time, starting with yourself.

Ask the family

Your oldest relatives are a first priority. Don't forget second and third cousins! Be prepared to discover distant cousins you have previously been unaware of. Visit in person if you possibly can. Prepare a list of questions. Ask about any documents or photos, no matter how trivial they may seem. Ask about naming patterns and past religious affiliations. Ask about anyone who may have emigrated. Ask about anyone else in the family who has been, or is, researching the family tree. Record any family legends or anecdotes but never assume they are correct. Check all family stories against known facts.

Examples of useful family documents

- Pages from family bibles and record books
- Diaries, reminiscences, journals, scrapbooks, old address books and even notebooks
- Letters
- Apprenticeship indentures, employment records, paybooks, union membership cards, ration books
- War service records, discharge documents, flying logs, medals
- Certificates, confirmation cards, bookplates, school reports, awards and prizes
- Obituaries, memorial cards, funeral and tombstone receipts
- Business letterheads, billheads

Check online family trees

- On commercial subscription websites such as Genes Reunited, Ancestry and Find My Past
- On personal websites created by family historians

Check genealogical guides to surnames and family trees

- Family History Society Members' Interests Lists – online and published in CD-Rom/microfiche/booklet formats

- Guild of One Name Societies (GOONS) and its member societies – contact details on website <http://one-name.org/>
- Family History magazines

Recording information

Transcribe exactly what has been written and not what you think it should be. Record all references – include source name and catalogue or reference number. Record what sources you have searched, and any negative findings as well.

A warning about surnames

Stability in the spelling of surnames only came about in the later 19th century, with the advent of compulsory schooling and an emphasis on consistent spelling. Think about WHO was recording the name; also be aware of the effect of illiteracy, inconsistent spelling, local dialects and accents. Take a flexible attitude to the form and spelling of a surname.

Starting off on original documents

When you have gathered the above information, there are four main sources you can begin to use:

1. **Civil registration records of births, marriages and deaths:** Civil registration began in England and Wales in July 1837. You must purchase a birth, marriage or death certificate to obtain the information held in the registration records. General Register Office indexes to birth, marriage and death for England and Wales are available on-line. Those who prefer to search the same indexes on microfiche can still find these at a number of Devon locations, and at main libraries, genealogical research centres and record offices in other counties of England and Wales, and in overseas countries. Certificates relating to Devon births, deaths and marriages can be ordered from the General Register Office, at Southport, Merseyside, or from the three existing local Register Offices in Devon.

More information about these records is found in the Guide titled **Civil Registration**, available on the Research Guides page of the Devon Archives and Local Studies website.

2. **Census returns:** The first official census of the population was taken on 10th March 1801. Although censuses have been taken every ten years since then up to 2011, the earliest censuses recorded statistics only, and it was only from 1841 onwards, that details about individuals were kept. Censuses are closed to the public for one hundred years from the date they were taken. This means that the 1911 census has been the latest to become available for family history research.

Census returns for the whole of England and Wales, including Devon, for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 are all digitised and are accessible on-line through several commercial genealogical websites. The 1901 census was the first to be made available in this format, as well as on film or fiche. There are also online transcripts of several censuses on free-to-use websites.

Censuses for Devon for 1841 to 1901 are still available on microfiche or film in the Devon Heritage Centre searchroom, and several local libraries in Devon hold census returns on microfiche or film for their own areas. Indexes to some of these census years are available.

More information about census records is found in the guide titled **General Information on the Census**, available on the Research Guides page of the Devon Archives and Local Studies website.

- 3. Parish registers of baptism, marriage and burial:** Parish registers are simply records of baptisms, marriages and burials as recorded by the minister of a Church of England parish church. They can date from 1538 to the present day. Prior to the introduction of civil registration of births, marriages and deaths in July 1837, they were usually the only record of a person coming into the world, marrying or leaving this life – though in the case of baptism and burial, the events recorded of course occur after birth or death. Baptism registers are vital sources for family history prior to 1837, as they record the names of the child’s parents; marriage registers from 1754 onwards give the signatures of witnesses, who may be relatives of the married couple. These kinds of connections make parish registers especially useful.

Older parish registers must be deposited by law in a local archive repository designated for that purpose. Parish registers which are no longer in use are therefore now generally deposited in local record offices in England and Wales. In Devon, parish registers are deposited in the archive repository which holds records for their area – either Devon Heritage Centre, North Devon Record Office or Plymouth and West Devon Record Office.

Most older Devon parish registers have been filmed and are available on microfiche or microfilm, although some registers were deposited only recently and filming is no longer carried out – in the future, these will be digitised rather than filmed. Microfiche and film of filmed Devon registers have been purchased by some family history research centres outside Devon, including those overseas, and can also be purchased by individuals for their own private research from the Devon Heritage Centre. In the past few years, the Devon parish registers have been digitised, and most (dating up to about 1915) are available online through the Find My Past subscription website, found at <http://www.findmypast.co.uk>.

More information about parish registers can be found in the Guide titled **Parish Registers**, available on the Research Guides page of the Devon Archives and Local Studies website.

- 4. International Genealogical Index (IGI):** This index was compiled by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church) and for Devon includes mainly baptisms and marriages from about 1538 to about 1837. It can therefore be used as a finding aid for entries in original parish registers. However, the IGI only covers about 60% of parishes in Devon, so this means that about 150 of the over 500 parishes in Devon are not included in this index. It is available on-line on the FamilySearch website and is also held locally on microfiche at Devon Heritage centre and other places in Devon, other parts of Britain and overseas.

More information about the IGI is found in the guide titled **International Genealogical Index**, available on the Research Guides page of the Devon Archives and Local Studies website.

5. Other original documents used for family history research

See our Research Guides for information on more sources commonly used by family historians. It provides links to pages with more detailed information on Devon sources and where to find them.

Family History Societies: Links

Devon Family History Society <http://www.devonfhs.org.uk>

The society undertakes joint projects with the record offices in Devon, to produce indexes, transcripts and digital images of documents useful to family historians.

Other Family History and Genealogy Societies <http://www.genuki.org.uk/Societies>

The above Genuki webpage allows you to find other societies whose interests relate to the UK & Ireland as a whole

Federation of Family History Societies <http://www.ffhs.org.uk/members2/contacting.php>

This website includes a list of its member family history societies, with contact details

Society of Genealogists, London <http://www.sog.org.uk>

Includes a list of library holdings, including parish register transcripts, and a link to their on-line genealogy bookstore

Accessing Commercial Family History Sites

Find My Past – found at <http://www.findmypast.co.uk/> - the website can be accessed free of charge at the following places in Devon:

- Devon Archives and Local Studies Service at Devon Heritage Centre, Exeter
- Devon Archives and Local Studies Service at North Devon Record Office, Barnstaple
- Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, Plymouth
- Plymouth Council libraries
- Devon Family History Society's Tree House Research Centre in Exeter also offers access free of charge, for members visiting the centre.

Some other record offices, archives, local libraries and history centres in other counties, and overseas, may also offer free access to Find My Past.

Find My Past is available to subscribers at home, but you must pay to access databases and digital images on the site.

Digitized images of most (but not all) original Devon parish registers of baptism, marriage and burial (up to 1912) which are held at Plymouth and West Devon Record Office are available online through the Find My Past website.

Most (but not all) of the parish registers dating up to 1914, and held at Devon Heritage Centre and North Devon Record Office have also been digitised and are available online through the Find My Past website. Devon Family History Society's indexes and transcripts to baptisms (1813 - circa 1839), marriages (1754 – 1837) and burials (1813 - 1837) covering all Devon parishes have been available on Find My Past for some time, and have been incorporated into the Devon parish registers record sets to provide typed transcriptions of entries for the listed dates. For parishes where digital images of registers have not yet been uploaded, these indexes/transcripts are the only entries available on the Find My Past site.

Devon Family History Society's indexes of social and institutional records, created through the Small Projects scheme – a joint project between the society and Devon's three archives – have been included on Find My Past, as has the Genuki Devon Wills Project Index.

Most of the school admission registers containing entries more than 100 years old held at the Devon Heritage Centre and North Devon Record Office have also been digitised and were launched online on Find My Past on 22 September 2014.

Find My Past and the British Library have worked together to digitise historic electoral registers for the period 1832-1932 held in the British Library's collections. Access is available free of charge in the British Library's reading rooms and through the Find My Past. U.K. electoral registers dating from 2002 to 2014 are also searchable on Find My Past. Coverage will change each year as more current registers are added.

Ancestry – found at <http://www.ancestry.com> - can be accessed free of charge at the following places in Devon:

- Devon Archives and Local Studies Service at Devon Heritage Centre, Exeter
- Devon Archives and Local Studies Service at North Devon Record Office, Barnstaple
- Devon public libraries managed by Libraries Unlimited, which has public Internet access
- Libraries operated by Torbay Council
- Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, Plymouth
- Plymouth Council libraries
- Devon Family History Society's Tree House Research Centre in Exeter also offers access free of charge, for members visiting the centre.

Many libraries, archives, history centres and Mormon Family History Research centres in other counties, and particularly overseas, also offer free access to Ancestry.

National Archives Online Documents – see the website <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk> and click on the link to Online Documents.

Downloads of an increasing number of digitised records held in the National Archives are now available via this link and via the National Archives' updated catalogue, the Discovery Catalogue.

Digitised records include P.C.C. wills, country court death duty registers, 1796-1811, registers of Royal Naval and Merchant Naval seamen, World War I British Army nurses' service records, war diaries, 1914-1922, and war medal index cards.

These can be accessed **free of charge** at:

- Devon Archives and Local Studies Service at Devon Heritage Centre, Exeter
- Devon Archives and Local Studies Service at North Devon Record Office, Barnstaple
- You can access these at home as well. Searching the indexes is free of charge. However you must pay £3.36 per document, using a credit or debit card, to download documents from this website if you use it at home.

Genes Reunited – see the website at <http://www.genesreunited.co.uk> This is a family tree site useful for building your own family tree online, and tracing relatives, with links to British genealogical records (censuses, civil registration indexes etc.) which can be used for research. The site is now owned by Brightsolid, which also owns Find My Past and Origins.net. However, Genes Reunited is available to subscribers for a small basic annual subscription fee, with additional payments only necessary if you wish to access genealogical records of the type found on Find My Past.

The Genealogist - see the website at <https://www.thegenealogist.co.uk>. This is another British genealogical website, available through subscription. It includes searchable tithe maps and schedules (apportionments) for England and Wales.

Geni – see the website at <https://www.geni.com> - is a North American-based family tree site useful for building your own family tree online. It enables you to share family photos, videos and historical records. You are also able to invite your family to help grow your tree or collaborate with other genealogists online. It is publicly accessible through various libraries in Canada and the United States. Many of the profiles or trees that Geni users have created are connected together in Geni's World Family Tree, also referred to as the 'Big Tree' by many users. Many new Geni users aspire to build their family tree and find their connection to the 'Big Tree'.

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