

Village History

Introduction

There are many written sources that contain useful information about a village's history. This guide describes a selection of such records and their uses with the aim of covering as many aspects of village history as possible, though the researcher may expect to come across some documents that are not mentioned here. Parish records, for example, often contain much miscellaneous material that may be of interest.

Before beginning research into an aspect of a village's history, it would be worthwhile visiting the local museum or talking to some inhabitants whose families have lived there for several generations. Some background information may also be discovered by visiting the parish church. The following books can be useful for those researching the history of villages and rural areas:

- *Village Records*, J West (1966)
- *The Making of the English Landscape*, W G Hoskins (1988)
- *Church and Parish*, W H Betty (1987)
- *The Village Labourer 1760- 1832*, J L and B Hammond (1987)
- *English Field Names*, J Field (1972)
- *The Changing English Countryside 1400 - 1700*, L Cantor (1987)
- *Devon Villages*, W H Burton (1973)

Parish Records

One of the most informative records of a parish is often the vestry minutes. These record the business carried out by the vestry, the forerunner of the parish council, one of whose most onerous responsibilities was the supervision of relief of the poor. Minutes may contain many references to poor relief, as well as to matters such as highway maintenance, the local militia and other parish affairs.

The chief officers of the parish were the churchwardens and overseers of the poor. Overseers' records include detailed accounts of money spent on poor relief and various documents such as apprenticeship indentures, removal orders and settlement examinations. Churchwardens' accounts provide details of expenditure on the church fabric and money spent on the numerous civil duties assigned to them, such as public health and road maintenance. Less common are the records of minor parish officials, such as the surveyor of the highways and parish constable.

Information on poor relief after 1834 will usually be found in the records of poor law unions, which include union workhouse records.

The North Devon Record Office holds microfiche copies of parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials for the county of Devon, dating back to 1538 for some parishes. Original registers for most north Devon parishes are also kept by the Office, as are records of some nonconformist churches in the area. Many parish registers are also available online via the Find My Past Website.

Often found in parish and diocesan collections are glebe terriers, which are surveys describing the land belonging to a rectory or a vicarage. They may provide descriptions of fields before

the introduction of enclosure and sometimes have accompanying maps. Parish records can also include militia lists, muster rolls, records of clubs and societies and a wide range of other miscellaneous material.

Useful books:

- *The Parish Chest*, W E Tate (1983)
- *Guide to the Parish and Non-parochial Registers for Devon and Cornwall 1538-1837*, H Peskett (1979)

Manorial and Estate Records

Villages were often part of the lands of a large estate or a medieval manor. The North Devon Record Office holds the records of several north Devon manors and many family and estate archives. Manor court rolls record leases and surrenders of land, the regulation of agriculture and cases involving rights and trespass associated with the administration of the manor properties. Early manorial records are almost invariably written in heavily abbreviated Latin and can be difficult to interpret.

Estate surveys and rentals list the names of tenants, while surveys also provide names and acreage of fields. Estate maps often show field boundaries, lanes, paths and buildings and may cover an entire parish. Estate collections also contain title deeds, accounts and leases.

See also the North Devon Record Office source guide to the records of manors and estates.

Useful books:

- *Manorial Records*, D Stuart (1992)
- *Manorial Records*, P D A Harvey (1984)
- *The Manor and Manorial Records*, N J Hone (1906)
- *Latin for Local History*, E A Gooder (1970)
- *Old Title Deeds*, N W Alcock (1986)
- *Title Deeds 13th - 19th Centuries*, A A Dibben (1971)

Maps (partly non-Record Office material)

Tithe maps with their apportionments date from the 1830s and 1840s and cover whole parishes. The maps show the land in the parish divided into numbered plots, while the apportionments give details of the owner, occupier, field, state of cultivation, acreage and tithe payable for each plot. The maps are available on microfiche in the North Devon Record Office for the county of Devon and the Office also holds some original tithe maps and apportionments for parishes in north Devon. Most tithe maps and apportionments are also available online at www.devon.gov.uk/tithemaps.htm.

Also on microfiche are the Ordnance Survey first edition (c.1890) and second edition (c.1905) 25-inch to the mile maps (some originals are held by the North Devon Record Office) as well as the first edition 6-inch to the mile maps for north Devon (c.1890). The Local Studies Centre also has current Ordnance Survey maps of scales 1: 2500 and 1: 10560 for north Devon. The North Devon Athenaeum holds a number of other maps and plans of the area (particularly for Barnstaple), including a set of the first edition of 6-inch maps. Details of miscellaneous maps can be found in the North Devon Record Office place and subject indexes.

Useful books:

- *Devon Maps and Map-makers*, M Ravenhill & M Rowe (2002)
- *Maps for Local History*, P Hindle (1988)

Enclosure Awards

Most enclosure awards date from between 1760 and 1870 and the majority have accompanying maps. Later enclosure awards often have very detailed maps showing field strips. The size of the areas covered by enclosure awards varies greatly.

The information they give includes boundaries, ownership, acreage and use of each plot of land, while the maps show boundaries, roads and paths. The North Devon Record Office holds a selection of enclosure material, indexed under ENCLOSURE in the subject card index. A more complete set of records is held at the Devon Heritage Centre, Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter 01392 384253, although there were relatively few enclosure awards made in Devon, as most agricultural areas in the county had already been enclosed during the Middle Ages.

Land Tax Assessments

These are held by the North Devon Record Office for all Devon parishes, 1780-1832, and are on microfilm. They contain the names of the owners and the occupiers of each listed property, and the amount of tax assessed; they are particularly useful for the history of farms and larger properties.

Transport Records

Turnpike trusts were set up during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to take over the responsibility for certain roads or to build new ones, on which tolls were charged. Records of individual trusts include minute books, maps and plans, poll deeds (investment certificates), details of toll charges and, occasionally, tollhouse keepers' day books. The records of the turnpike trusts are an invaluable source for methods of road maintenance and the effect of traffic on rural communities.

Also useful are the records of nineteenth century public projects for the development of roads, railways and canals. These records may often consist of large-scale plans showing properties along the intended line of development. The accompanying books of reference describe the land affected by the proposal and give the names of owners. The North Devon Record Office holds a small number of such plans, but a more comprehensive set of these 'deposited plans' is held by the Devon Heritage Centre, Great Moor House, Bittern Road, Sowton, Exeter 01392 384253.

The Local Studies Centre holds published 'Trade Directories'

The Local Studies Centre holds published trade directories for Devon, 1830-1939. These provide details of the main trades and occupations in a village, information on the village school and lists of local gentry and other inhabitants.

Photographs (partly non-Record Office material)

The North Devon Athenaeum holds a microfiche set of the Francis Frith collection of Devon photographs, dating from c.1860. There is a place index available.

Other photographs of particular villages will be found scattered among archive collections and published works. Images held among North Devon Record Office holdings may be identified

from the place section of the card index system. Aerial photographs of the area are held by the Local Studies Library.

The Beaford Archive – not located in the Local Studies Centre – holds an extensive collection of photographs relating to North Devon, an index and selection of images is available online at www.beaford-arts.org.uk.

Local Authority Records

The North Devon Record Office holds records from many former urban and rural district councils, 1894-1974, as well as the records of local borough, later town, councils, such as Barnstaple, Bideford, Torrington and South Molton. These records include minutes, accounts, correspondence, legal papers and rating records. Parish council records are also held for many places in north Devon.

Other Sources (partly non-Record Office material)

Local newspapers, available on microfilm in the Local Studies Centre, are a mine of information on village history. Parish files, containing a selection of newspaper cuttings and other miscellaneous information, are often a useful starting point for research. The North Devon Record Office holds sale catalogues, business and club records, as well as a number of large collections of records from local solicitors. Census returns for the north Devon area are available at the Local Studies Centre on microfilm from 1841 to 1901. Census records are also available online via the Find My Past and Ancestry.com websites.

Other sources that may be of interest to the village historian include privately deposited records, for example, notes on the history of Winkleigh (ref. B199), sketches of north Devon by S E Huxtable (ref. B183), the Stevenson Balfour Bequest of sources relating to Georgeham (ref. B246), and the Helen Naomi Richardson Collection of photographs and papers relating to Abbotsham (ref. B497).

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