



**I**s it possible to trace your family back before the mid-sixteenth century? Even parish registers do not pre-date 1538 (and many survive only from later dates).

**T**here are several types of records which can help. A few of them cover years before 1500, such as deeds of title to land. Other early records are to be found at the Public Record Office in London although copies of some of its records relevant to Cheshire (in print or on film) may be available here.

**T**here are, initially, some problems in using early records. The handwriting can appear difficult to decipher, but, with practice, it becomes easier once you are acquainted with letter-shapes. (See reference works listed below). Most writers used a standard hand at any one time and "early" handwriting tends to be of a higher quality than "modern" hands.

**S**econdly, Latin can discourage people from using documents. It was widely employed until 1733 for legal purposes. However, many records, such as title deeds and court rolls, follow common forms and, once a student is familiar with these, it is not too difficult to pick out names of people and places, sums of money, etc.

**Y**ou should not hope for too much. Gaps in series or lack of surviving records can mean that it may simply be impossible to trace back your family to the medieval period.

This leaflet will give you some idea of the records, mainly at the Cheshire Record Office, but also elsewhere, which might help you. From it you can go to the lists and indexes mentioned.

**See also** Archives & Local Studies leaflet '*Finding out about Family History.*'

## PRINTED SOURCES

### **G Ormerod:**

*History of the County Palatine and City of Chester (1819/1882).* General history of Cheshire by hundred and township/parish with discussion of manorial descents, main families, pedigrees, etc.

### **Oxbridge Alumni:**

Oxford and Cambridge graduates (many of whom became churchmen) have been listed from about 1500 with brief biographical details in Foster's *Alumni Oxonienses* and Venn's *Alumni Cantabrigienses*.

### **Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society and Chetham Society:**

These societies have transcribed and printed many medieval records relating to Cheshire and its residents.

Some records held at the Public Record Office which include details relating to Cheshire are available in printed form. For example, the Cheshire Record Office searchroom library includes a copy of the *Calendar of Recognizance Rolls* (14th century - 15th century) and of *The Black Prince's Register 1351-1365*.

## SOME USEFUL BACKGROUND READING

J A Cole & M Armstrong  
*Tracing Your Family Tree* (1988)

D Iredale and J Barrett  
*Discovering Your Family Tree* (1985)

## USEFUL INTRODUCTIONS TO HANDWRITING

L C Hector  
*The Handwriting of English Documents* (1980)

E McLaughlin  
*Reading Old Handwriting* (1987)

H E P Grieve  
*Examples of English Handwriting 1150-1750* (1954)

## LATIN:

E Gooder  
*Latin for Local History* (1961)



## DIOCESAN RECORDS

Prior to 1541, Cheshire lay in the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield whose earliest records (bishop's registers) survive from 1296 and are held at the Lichfield Joint Record Office. Much information is contained in records of the bishop's administration. The records of the diocese of Chester (formed in 1541) include, for the late medieval period, the following:

- act books: ordinations and appointments of clergy (whole diocese): from 1502 (ref EDA 1)
- parish bundles: papers relating to clergy, schools, etc (Cheshire): from 16th century (ref EDP)
- consistory court books: matrimonial, testamentary and tithe matters (archdeaconry of Chester only, pre-1541): from 1502 (ref EDC 1)
- consistory court papers: supporting information to EDC1, listed by case: from 1525 (ref EDC 5)
- deposition books: witnesses' evidence: from 1529 (ref EDC 2)
- clergy call books: visitation details of clergy, schoolmasters, surgeons and midwives: from about 1532 (ref EDV 2)

Details may be found, not only of church ministers, but of parish officers and the laity. Some of the above records relate to the whole diocese (which covered Cheshire, Lancashire and parts of Cumberland, Westmorland, Yorkshire, Flintshire and Denbighshire), some to the archdeaconry of Chester (Cheshire and South Lancashire), some just to Cheshire.

**See: Cheshire Record Office Guide:**  
*Ecclesiastical Records: Diocese of Chester;*  
*summary lists for above records.*

## PROBATE RECORDS

Before 1541, wills for Cheshire back to 1472 are held at the Lichfield Joint Record Office (with register copies from 1516). From 1541 to 1858, wills of residents of Cheshire (pre-1974 boundaries) are held at the Cheshire Record Office. Some Cheshire residents' wills were proved at the Prerogative Courts of Canterbury or York (in which case the Public Record Office or the Borthwick Institute holds the records).

A few wills were transcribed into the bishop's registers (ref EDA 2).

Cheshire and south Lancashire wills have been indexed by the Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society, 1545-1620 (supras, over £40), 1590-1665 (infras, under £40) and 1487-1620 (consistory court series). The Cheshire wills are gradually being added to a Cheshire Record Office database which will be searchable by name, place, occupation and date, or a combination of these.

*See: Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society, vols 2, 33, 52; summary index to WC and EDA 2 wills (in maroon binder); Calendars of wills, etc at Lichfield, 1516-1652 (Searchroom library).*

## MANORIAL RECORDS

The manorial court was central to medieval life at grass roots level. It supervised much local economic and social activity. Records of such courts survive for Cheshire from the fourteenth century. They are usually in Latin. However, they follow set procedures (and therefore lay-outs) and include many names of local people.

Manorial records include court rolls (minutes, with changes of land occupancy), accounts and extents (land valuations).

Some manorial documents for this area are held at the Public Record Office and the proportion of such records for Cheshire held here is relatively small.

*See: subject index under "Manorial"; summary list of manorial records held here (available on index card cabinet or from searchroom desk).*

## INQUISITIONS (INQUESTS)

Inquisitions post mortem (or IPMs) may be found for the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries. Medieval inquisitions were enquiries into the possessions, obligations and succession for a deceased person who held land of the Crown. (It was not an enquiry into cause of death). IPMs can be useful for names of relatives, landholders, occupations etc.

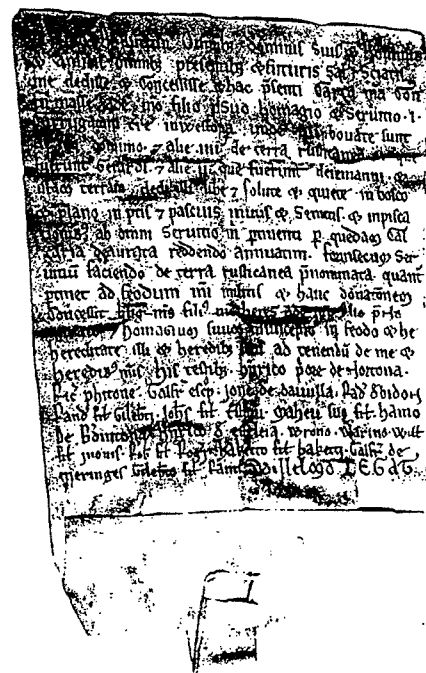
*See: Personal name index and subject index under Government Central: Inquisitions Post Mortem.*

## TAX RECORDS

Various taxes were applied at various times in England such as the lay subsidy, a tax on movable property from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and the poll tax, a per capita tax on households. These were centrally-levied and the records are at the Public Record Office. Local copies of returns were made occasionally and may survive in private collections.

The mise (or mize) was a payment levied on inhabitants of the county palatine of Chester on the accession of a new earl. The records usually comprise a list of payers' names, by township.

*See: subject index under Finance, Public: Taxation*



## TITLE DEEDS

These form the oldest group of records in the Cheshire Record Office. Surviving in some private estate collections from about 1100, they include grants, fines (final concords), leases, common recoveries, mortgages and marriage settlements.

Many early deeds were in Latin and the handwriting (often abbreviated) takes a little practice to master. However, title deeds tend to follow a set lay-out and it is not difficult to identify the names of the parties, their status and place of residence, the property and its value. Deeds often have witnesses' names appended.

Some Cheshire estate papers are held at John Rylands Library, Manchester.

**See:** *Cheshire Record Office Guide* under *Private Deposits: Estate and Family; Solicitors etc; Businesses; Antiquarian. Personal name index and topographical index.*

## RENTALS & ACCOUNTS

Lists of rents due or received, often including tenants' names. They are to be found largely in private estate collections. Accounts refer to tenants and payments for work done, etc.

**See:** *subject index under Estate Papers: Rentals and under Estate Papers: Accounts.*

## PEDIGREES

These are family trees in written or diagram form. They relate mostly to better-off people and may include biographical details and coats of arms.

**See:** *subject index under Family History and personal name index.*

## ANTIQUARIAN COLLECTIONS

Over a dozen of these are held at the Cheshire Record Office. They include pedigrees, monumental inscriptions, correspondence, genealogical notes and other items.

**See:** *Cheshire Record Office Guide, pp 129-130 for individual collection reference codes.*

**If you want to visit the Archives and  
Local Studies Service we are at:**

*The Cheshire Record Office,*

*Duke Street,*

*Chester,*

*Cheshire CH1 1RL*

*Tel: 01244 602574 Fax: 01244 603812*

*E-mail: recordoffice@cheshire.gov.uk*

*Web pages: <http://www.cheshire.gov.uk>*

