

Finding out about Family History

Family history - or genealogy, is now a very popular hobby for a growing number of people. Not only is it interesting to find out more about your own family, but it can also bring history to life in a new and exciting way.

This leaflet suggests where to start your own research, and how to set about it. It is written primarily for those people whose families come from Cheshire, but most of the books and documents mentioned are either standard reference books, or local examples of records available in most parts of England and Wales.

How To Start

Tracing your ancestry can be a very long, time-consuming process, so before launching into the project it is important to take some preliminary steps:

1. Decide which line of your family you wish to trace: it is often easy to be sidetracked by coming across records of other branches of the family, or indeed unrelated families of the same name, and thereby wasting considerable time and effort.
2. Get ALL the information which you can from members of your own family - names, dates and places. Even when some of this information proves to be not entirely accurate, it can often provide useful clues or pointers in the right direction.
3. Read one of the many guides to family history research which are now available: a brief list of some of the titles available in Cheshire Libraries is given in the section *Published Guides* below.
4. Find out whether anyone else has done work on your particular family. Often the best way to do this is to contact the Local Family History Society in the area concerned; most of these societies keep a register of their members' interests and some have good collections of printed and microfilm sources, together with study facilities. A list of such societies in Cheshire is given on the next page.

Published Guides

Iredale, D	<i>Discovering Your Family Tree</i>
Todd, A	<i>Basic Sources For Family History</i>
Steel, D	<i>Discovering Your Family History</i>
Herber, MD	<i>Ancestral Trails</i>
Currer-Briggs, N	<i>Debrett's Guide to Tracing Your Ancestry</i>
Colwell, S	<i>Family Roots</i>

Also Gibson Genealogical Guides and McLaughlin Genealogical Guides, both series published by The Federation of Family History Societies.

Family History Societies

North Cheshire Family History Society

Secretary: Mrs Rhoda Clarke,
2 Denham Drive, Bramhall, Stockport,
SK7 2AT (Tel. 0161 439 9270)

Family History Society of Cheshire

Secretary: Mrs H. Massey,
101 Irby Road, Heswall, Wirral
Merseyside L61 6UZ (Tel. 0151 342 2441)

South Cheshire Family History Society

PO Box 1990, Crewe, Cheshire CW2 6FF

The Federation of Family History Societies

The Benson Room,
The Birmingham and Midland Institute,
Margaret Street, Birmingham B3 3BS

Family Records Centre

Nationally, the Family Records Centre, operated by the Office of National Statistics and the Public Record Office, provides access to a wide range of sources on microfilm, including indexes of births, deaths and marriages since 1837 and Census Returns, as well as non-conformist registers up to 1837:

Family Records Centre

1 Myddleton Street, London EC1R 1UW
Tel. 0181 3925300

Sources to Consult: after 1837

1. Civil registration

Since 1st July 1837, all births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales have been recorded - at least in theory - by local Registrars. These records have been kept in the local offices, but every quarter the local registrars had to send copies to the Registrar-General in London, where a full set of records for the whole country is now held. If you are not sure where a particular person was born, married or died, you will need to use the national indexes which are available in the Family Records Centre.

Microfilm copies of the indexes are available in a number of libraries in the North West, including Liverpool, Manchester, Mold and St. Helens, and in the church of Latter Day Saints Library in Chester. Further details are available in the Local Studies Manual in Cheshire Libraries.

On the other hand, if you know that a birth, marriage or death took place in a particular part of Cheshire,

you can apply directly to the local Registration Office, which will be able to issue a certificate.

Fees are payable for certificates and for searches if not carried out personally. Leaflets giving details of the services offered by the General Register Office are available in the Local Studies Manual in all Cheshire Libraries.

Registration Districts and Register Offices in Cheshire, Halton and Warrington

Cheshire West

Register Office, Goldsmith House, Goss Street, Chester, CH1 2BG
(Tel. 01244 602938)

Cheshire Central

Register Office, Delamere House, Chester Street, Crewe, CW1 2LL
(Tel. 01270 505106)

Halton Borough

Register Office, Heath Road, Runcorn, WA7 5TN
(Tel. 019285 76797)

Cheshire East

Register Office, Park Green, Macclesfield SK11 6TW
(Tel. 01625 423463)

Warrington Borough

Register Office, Museum Street, Warrington, WA1 1JX.
(Tel. 01925 444212)

2. Census

Censuses of the population have been conducted every 10 years since 1801, but names of individuals are only given from 1841 onwards. The records are central government records and are held in London, but copies are available locally on microfilm. They are very useful records since they describe each household, listing personal details of name, age, occupation, place of birth and relationship to each other. A full set of microfilms of census returns for Cheshire - both pre-1974 and post-1974 boundaries - is available in the Cheshire Record Office; copies relating to particular areas are available in a number of Cheshire Libraries.

The 1881 Census Returns for England and Wales have been indexed in a project organised by the Genealogical Society of Utah and supported by local family history societies. Copies of the indexes for Cheshire and Lancashire are available in the Record Office and in larger Cheshire libraries.

An essential introduction to understanding and finding the particular section which you want is *Cheshire Censuses of 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871 and 1881* by Derek H. Way, available through your local library.

Census returns are not accessible to the public for 100 years, so the 1891 census is now (1999) the latest available.

Sources To Use: before 1837

Before 1837 there were no nation-wide schemes of registration so it is important to know the place in which a person lived. If you do not know this the International Genealogical Index ("IGI" or "Mormon Index") prepared by the Genealogical Society of Utah can be useful: it is an alphabetical index of names extracted from records which the Society has filmed, which indicates the parish and county in which each one occurs. The Cheshire section is relatively less helpful, since, until recently, the Society had filmed very few records relating to the county. Full sets of the IGI covering the whole of England and Wales are available, on microfiche, in Ellesmere Port and Macclesfield Libraries. The Record Office has a set for Cheshire and neighbouring counties.

A new and more comprehensive edition on CD-ROM will be available shortly in the Record Office and principal libraries.

1. Parish Registers of baptisms, marriages and burials generally begin between 1538 and 1598 and should continue to the present unbroken except for the period 1640-1660. The earlier registers combine baptisms, marriages and burials in sections of the same volume and are sometimes written in simple Latin. The amount of information varies, ranging from full details of parents, place of residence and occupations to merely the name and date. Separate registers of printed forms were introduced for marriages in 1754 and for baptisms and burials in 1813.

Most Cheshire parish registers over a hundred years old (and many more recent ones) have been deposited in the Record Office and the rest remain at the churches. Registers are generally produced for research on microfilm to save wear and tear on the originals. Some libraries have microfilm copies of registers of local churches. Some Cheshire parish registers have been transcribed and published. *Details of such transcripts - whether typescript or published - can be found in all major Cheshire Libraries which are linked to CHIPS.*

2. Bishop's transcripts are copies of all entries made in parish registers, and sent in annually to the bishop. They survive from the 17th century onwards and are particularly useful in cases where the original registers are lost or difficult to read. They are held in the Record Office, and are available on microfilm.

3. Non-conformist registers should not be overlooked. Most were sent to London in 1837 and copies on microfilm are available in the Record Office. Some later registers have been deposited, mainly from Methodist chapels. Catholic registers, mainly dating

from the mid 19th century, are now also deposited at the Record Office.

It is worth remembering that between 1754 and 1837 everyone (apart from Quakers and Jews) was obliged to marry in the local Anglican parish church. Copies of all non-conformist registers are available at the Family Records Centre.

4. Marriage licence bonds and allegations: a minority of marriages were by licence rather than by the more usual banns. The bonds and allegations (which are part of the licence process) can provide extra information on the two parties to a marriage and on their relatives acting as sureties. Those for the Archdeaconry of Chester (Cheshire, South Lancashire, and parts of Clwyd) survive from 1661 and are held in the Record Office, available on microfilm.

5. Monumental Inscriptions: gravestones are also useful in giving some detail on a person's family relationships. Many churchyards have been surveyed in this way, often in connection with schemes for churchyard tidying.

Details of printed and typescript copies of many of these surveys are available through all Cheshire libraries linked to CHIPS.

6. Wills and probate records are another very important source of information for genealogists. Wills can provide valuable detail about a person's social status and family relationships. Letters of administration or "admons" were granted usually to a person's next of kin when he or she died without leaving a will and are rather less informative. Up to c.1760 inventories listing the testator's goods and chattels were often attached to the will and they can provide a wealth of detail about household goods and the tools of his or her trade.

Cheshire wills dating from 1487 to 1858 and proved in the Archdeaconry of Chester are kept in the Record Office; indexes are available in the Record Office, in larger libraries and on the Internet, via the Record Office's home page at: <http://www.cheshire.gov.uk> Wills of some Cheshire residents were proved in York and others in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury. A new civil organisation of district probate registries was established in 1858. The Record Office has registered copies of wills proved in Chester up to 1940 available on microfilm, and microfiche copies of calendars of grants of probate throughout England and Wales to 1947.

Other Sources

Directories of all types are valuable in the early stages of family research. Local trade directories, which begin in the 18th century, list private residents and self-employed tradesmen for each town and village in the county, as well as giving an interesting description of the area. *Crockford's Clerical Directories*, *Burke's Peerages*, the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the lists of

graduates in the *Alumni Oxonienses* and *Alumni Cantabrigienses* can also be helpful.

Most of the larger Cheshire libraries have some trade directories, together with any more local ones; some are available for sale on microfiche.

LOCAL NEWSPAPERS in Cheshire begin in the early 18th century but are not very useful for information on local families until the early part of this century. The extensive notes of local births, marriages and deaths, and the obituaries which are a prominent feature today are not common until after the 1st world war. **NEWSPLAN NORTHWEST** published in September 1990, provides information on where to find copies of local papers. More up to date information is available on the Newsplan web pages at: <http://www.nwrls.org.uk/newsplan.htm>

There are many other records in the Record Office which can fill in the details of a family's history. Any dated list of names can help, but the following categories have often proved especially useful.

The records of **CHESTER DIOCESE** include details of ordinations of clergymen, lists of clergy and schoolmasters subscribing to church doctrines and records of clergy, schoolmasters, surgeons and midwives presenting their qualifications at the bishop's visitation. The Church was closely involved in regulating moral and social behaviour and the various church court papers can include colourful detail on members of the local community. A close eye was kept on nonconformists and Catholics - records in the diocesan series include registers of dissenting places of worship, returns of papists and replies to visitation enquiries. **Tithe maps** can indicate where an ancestor lived, what kind of farming he was engaged in and how much land he owned or occupied. Some copies of local tithe maps are available in larger Cheshire libraries.

NON-CONFORMISTS also kept copious records of their own. The Record Office holds minutes and membership records of many Methodist and some Baptist, Congregational, Presbyterian and Unitarian chapels. The papers from the Society of Friends (Quakers) are particularly full, comprising registers, minutes of devotional meetings and records of 'sufferings' at the hands of the authorities.

The great variety of **LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE** records can also be informative. Borough records include lists of burgesses and rate books. For less prosperous forebears, the records of poor relief at township level can be very detailed. They include overseers' accounts of poor relief payments, constables' accounts for removing families to their original parish of settlement and apprenticeship records. The development of the Poor Law and the welfare system in the 19th and 20th centuries result in records such as admission registers for workhouses and hospitals.

As **EDUCATION** became increasingly available to the whole population, so school records become more interesting to family historians. School log books, admission registers, punishment books and managers' minutes have been deposited in the Record Office from elementary, secondary and grammar schools and technical institutes, mainly from the 1870s onwards.

The **COURT OF QUARTER SESSIONS** was historically much involved in the administration of the county as well as in local law and order. The records contain copious detail on the prosecution of offenders (some sentenced to transportation overseas), petitions for relief of paupers and maimed soldiers, examinations of poor families as to their parish of settlement, the licensing of alesellers, gamekeepers and bargeowners and the regulation of Catholic and nonconformists meeting houses. Other useful lists in this series are lists of jurors, poll books, electoral registers and land tax assessments.

Finally, where an ancestor lived and who he worked for can sometimes be discovered from the **estate** and **business** collections in the Record Office. **ESTATE RECORDS** from major Cheshire landowners and solicitors may contain leases and rentals of farms and cottages, maps, plans of buildings and wage books for estate workers and household servants. **MANORIAL RECORDS**, which rarely survive for Cheshire, are useful in describing the transfer of copyhold land through families and the settling of minor land disputes in a local community.

BUSINESS COLLECTIONS can include records of employees and labour relations, and trade unions are also beginning to deposit their records here. Some employers, for example the railway companies and the County Police Force, kept particularly full staff records.

Fuller details of these and other records in the Record Office, are available in the *Cheshire Record Office Guide*, which can be found in all Cheshire Libraries, and is available for a cost of £8.50 (£9.60 inc. postage in UK).

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>

Please phone or write for details of opening hours and the CARN Readers' ticket scheme.