

A short guide to medieval family history

Tracing your family history before the mid 16th century is a challenge. There are no parish registers before 1538 (and many do not even go back that far). However, there are other sources which can help you. With a bit of lateral thinking and some luck, you may be able to find earlier generations.

There are some barriers to using original documents, but many are not as problematic as they seem at first.

- * Many documents are in **Latin**. This was the official legal language until 1733. However, most follow a standard form. Once you are familiar with this, it is relatively easy to pick out the important names, dates and places.
- * **Early hand writing** can seem difficult to read. Most people wrote in a fairly standard hand. Once you are familiar with the standard letter forms, it does become slightly easier.
- * Some early documents are very **fragile**. It may be impossible for you to look at some items as this would cause irreparable damage to them. However, the descriptions of documents in catalogues are usually quite lengthy. They can give you some information without the need for seeing the document itself.
- * You may find that many useful sources are not here at Shropshire Archives. Your ancestors may appear in some of the national sources which are held at **The National Archives**. The National Archives does have a very useful web-site at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk with lots of information about the types of records they hold. We have printed copies of some sources (see later).

PRINTED SOURCES

- It is always worth checking the online catalogue at www.shropshirearchives.org.uk which incorporates our **local studies library** to see if anyone has already done work on your family or on the area they came from. *The Victoria County History* is useful for gaining a historical overview of the area and can point to the existence of manorial or other original records. Many early records have been transcribed and/or translated. The *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society* contain many extracts from Medieval documents.
- There are some **indexes and biographies** to people holding professional positions. For example J Harvey, *Medieval Architects*. Those attending Oxford or Cambridge University (often Anglican clergymen) can be found in Emden, *Biographical Register of the University of Oxford/Cambridge*. These are in the family history corner in the Reading Room. Information about local MPs is given in Weyman, *The Members of Parliament for Shropshire* (ref: C33.1).
- **Pedigrees** for the nobility and gentry can be found in the *Burke's Peerage* and *Burke's Landed Gentry*. Again these are in the family history corner. For many local landed families, there are hand-written pedigrees and an index to these is in the Search Room.
- If your ancestors owned a **substantial amount of land**, then it might be worth checking the *Charter Rolls* for grants of land by the Crown. The *Inquisitions Post Mortem* might also be useful as they are local enquiries into lands held by people of status to see if any income or rights were due to the Crown. The *Letters Patent* can also be useful. They concern grants of land, licences for widows to marry, pardons, appointments etc. The original documents are at The National Archives but transcripts can be found in the volumes at the back of the Search Room.
- Other useful sources at The National Archives are national taxes and subsidies. Again there are printed versions of the parts relating to Shropshire - for example the poll tax for Shrewsbury has been reprinted in the *Transactions of the Historical and Archaeological Society* (vol.1890 pp 17-28). Details of other printed extracts can be found in the library catalogue.
- Detailed biographies of **officials** in Shrewsbury Borough are given in Morris, *The Provosts and Bailiffs of Shrewsbury* (ref: Reading Room D46.2). Much of the information in this book is taken from documents here at Shropshire Archives.

ARCHIVES

To see any archives you will need to have one of our **Readers' Tickets**. **Please note we may not be able to issue items if they are fragile.**

- **Manorial records** are very useful as the manor was one of the most important units in Medieval times. There is a high chance that your ancestors would have lived on land owned by the lord of the manor and administered through manorial courts. The most useful records are the manorial *court rolls* and *court books*, which record transfers of land in the manor. They sometimes state relationships between family members and note deaths of tenants. You may also find *rentals* which give names of tenants.

To find out what manorial records exist, check the **Manorial Documents Register** at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk Guidance on using manorial documents, with glossaries and background information is linked from our website www.shropshirearchives.org.uk in the 'what we hold section'.

- **Borough records** are a vital source of information:
 - * **Shrewsbury Borough** records (ref: 3365) contain appointments of officials, lists of taxes and tolls due, accounts and town court rolls. All of these are useful sources if you had ancestors in Shrewsbury. The Shrewsbury Book (ref: 3365/67) is a fascinating early minute book containing many names. It has been transcribed and so is easy to use.
 - * **Ludlow Borough** records (ref: LB) again include taxation records, town court records, early charity records, a fabulous series of leases of town property and extensive guild and church records.
 - * **Bridgnorth Borough** records (ref: BB) are slightly less extensive as many were lost in a fire during the civil war. However, some accounts and early court records survive.
 - * **Newport** records (ref NB): few records have survived.
 - * **Wenlock Borough** records (ref WB): have been recently catalogued.

- The **6000 and 6001** collections contain a wealth of other material, including antiquarian manuscripts, miscellaneous documents relating to Shrewsbury and other towns.
- For many areas, large series of **title deeds** have survived. These may help you find out what land belonged to your ancestors. Marriage settlements often help with sorting out family relationships. Many deeds are now in estate or solicitors' collections and many of these are listed in detail on our online catalogue linked from www.shropshirearchives.org.uk

Useful general books and web-sites:

- E Gooder, *Latin for local history* (1978) 477.82 Reading Room
- D Stuart, Latin, *Latin for local and family historians* (1995) 477.82 Reading Room
- A Isar, *A secretary hand book* (1982) sold in Reception 411
- L C Hector, *The handwriting of Medieval England* (1980) 421.7 Reading Room
- N. Alcock, *Old title deeds; a guide for local and family historians* (1986) 346 Search Room
- www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk
- www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Shropshire Archives has a programme of courses. These have included Latin and Palaeography. Please check the notice board or our web-site for forthcoming courses.

Shropshire Archives
 Castle Gates, Shrewsbury SY1 2AQ
 tel: 0345 678 9096
 e-mail: archives@shropshire.gov.uk
 web site: www.shropshirearchives.org.uk