

A sense of place: Land records and maps

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What can they tell us?

Land & property records go hand in hand with maps to give vital additional detail about our ancestors' that can assist in genealogical discovery. By comparing records across time, we can see rising and falling fortune, understand where to look for records (e.g. where parish boundaries begin and end), and add context to the world our family lived in.

With this additional information in hand, we are better equipped to tell the whole story, and may reveal new sources of documents through a better understanding of these jurisdictions that our ancestors grew up in, and the environments in which they lived their lives.

Land Records

After their conquest of 1066 and the creation of the **Domesday Book**, the Normans brought with them a new, feudal system. In this, the Crown owned everything and granted land to the nobility. That nobility then gave land to knights for their service (or money, known as scutage).

This top layer of the pile were the 'tenants-in-chief', and they could sublet parts of their holdings to lower tenants. The people who lived below this were 'villeins', who worked, paid or gave a percentage of their produce in exchange for enough land to live on.

From 1120 to 1831, as these individuals transferred property, and tenants-in-chief were succeeded, **Pipe Rolls** were used. They show rent and Crown revenue, recorded by an official. They are held at The National Archives. Be aware, lower status individuals were not recorded, expect to see mid-level status and above.

The records of tenants-in-chief being granted their property by the crown begin from 1201 and run to 1702, on a series of **Patent Rolls** (C66 at The National Archives). During the same period, private deeds were listed on **Close Rolls** (C54 at The National Archives), which continued further but reduced considerably after 1862. Calendars and Indexes for these are both searchable through The National Archives Catalogue.

Anyone who died holding Crown lands had an **Inquisition Post Mortem**, where the next heir would be decided, with records also available from 1235 to 1660 and at The National Archives (though some counties and indexes exist elsewhere). When land was sold, **Feet of Fines** were created (running from 1182 to 1834), giving descriptions of land sold and the parties involved.

Estate Records: Records of large estates create a number of potentially useful genealogical documents during their administration. Seek out lists of tenants on larger properties, rentals, labour books (covering employees of these estates). The Manorial register can assist with this, listing manors by name and by parish. This register can point to where records are kept, and where to consult them.

Taxes & Rate Books

- **Taxes:** The first major national record collection of use after Domesday would be Hearth Tax, from 1662 and collected twice annually until 1689. It is only useful to a genealogist from 1662-6 and 1669-74 (the only years it gives names).

It provides a fair listing of occupiers of houses in England and Wales, required to pay taxes for each hearth or stove in their property (though people were exempt if their home was

worth less than 20 shillings a year or had an annual income of less than £10 – Assessments often still included even these properties).

When Hearth Tax was replaced by Land Tax in 1692, duplicate copies were sent to the Clerk of the Peace of each county to show who was able to vote during Parliamentary Elections. It was still fairly irregular until 1780 (the point at which a fine began to be given to any assessors who didn't return these documents. The Reform Act 1832 reduced the need to keep these records, and they begin to vanish from archives at this point.

Window Taxes were introduced in 1696 and ran until 1851, these returns don't survive as readily as other records, but are also useful for genealogical purposes.

- **Rate Books:** These are very valuable ways to prove residence, covering taxes raised to pay for the poor, lighting, paving, cleansing and watching. Survival varies by location and period, but indexed collections are online (Devon, Portsmouth, Manchester, Westminster & Southwark on Findmypast for example). They list owners and occupiers, addresses, and the value of the properties, together with rates paid.

Tithes: A valuable source of land record is that of payments to the Church, known as Tithes. Earlier tithes are great documents to tell the story of a parish, but the 1836 Tithe Commutation Act replaced the system with one of rent. Maps were created following this and they list the landowners and tenants of almost 80% of the parishes of England & Wales, often being some of the earliest detailed maps to be found, even giving details of field names and land use.

Land Registration

After a failed attempt to set up a voluntary register in 1862 (only around 5,000 entries were added by 1899), the Land Registry was founded, despite many earlier attempts, that have produced some documentary evidence (East Anglia from 1660 to 1920 is a good example, Middlesex and Yorkshire).

Compulsory registration of property began in 1900. This first began in London north of the Thames, then the rest of London, and later, the rest of the country.

These entries have been open to the public since 1990 and are accessible via the **Land Registry** and can be searched online (although only by address, not name). Details are not comprehensive, but can show you a few details of property boundaries and of current owners, plus if lease or freehold, together with a few other elements. Around 15 million properties across England & Wales are contained, but this is only around 68% of the total (leases of less than 21 years are not recorded).

Return of Owners of Land: In 1873 returns were created of those owning more than 1 acre of land. It covers all of the UK (aside from London) and lists all owners and addresses, plus their rental estimate. Locations however, were not included. Although at this time 270,000 people owned enough to be listed, only 7,000 people owned 4/5 of all British land. An estimated 900,000 owned less than this acre and were not included.

- **Valuation Office Records:** As part of David Lloyd George's policy to deal with property and land inequality through tax at sale increases in value created by public amenities, a survey was made of all of England & Wales from 1910-1913. Although not complete, surveyors made descriptions of homes, valuations, and listed the owners and tenants.

These can be found at the National Archives as IR58 for the books, and IR121 & IR124-45 for the accompanying maps, though some also survive in local archives and many were destroyed). The idea was abandoned in 1920.

Many records may seem to be good illustrations of holdings and can be used to guide you to other useful documents (Census records for instance will give you a residence, or newspaper articles might give you details of a sale of a property when someone dies), but be aware of their limitations.

Wills seem perfect for example, but until relatively recently, were only drawn up when death seemed a possibility, meaning that land arrangements may already have been made by this time, and an incomplete record of holdings given.

Maps & Gazetteers

Maps

Although there are still some very useful printed maps that all good genealogists should definitely seek out (Phillimore's atlas is a particularly wonderful find if you can get hold of it), many resources are online, with the added bonus of being able to take advantage of technology to get results.

- Don't forget that place names can evolve and change over time, and there may be multiple locations with the same name.
- Utilise every kind of map you can, for the same location. Topography, Historical maps, parish maps, enclosures, diocesan maps, civil districts and more, all have a unique story to tell. It's even more useful if you can see that story develop through multiple eras.
- Scale maps only really began to appear in number after the formation of the Ordnance Survey in 1791 (Kent was completed in 1801, but it took until 1887 until the whole of Britain was finished). Be prepared to have to interpret locations a little more liberally as you move back in time.
- There are useful resources to locate your ancestors if you don't have local knowledge. Consider the 1939 Map search on Findmypast, FamilySearch maps (a very good resource in particular) and others, to better understand the jurisdictions that you may need to consult to discover more records.

Gazetteers

When you know the details of a parish or town, you can use gazetteers to reveal much more about the local area, to really understand what life was like there. They can contain:

- Location information, and details of civil districts that the area may be served by
- Any churches in the area (of established and non-conformist faiths)
- Population information and the names of villages and hamlets in the same parish/town
- Key industries and occupations
- Geographical information (rivers, mountains, forests and roads)

A number of these are available online, try multiple sources, and multiple years to build a greater understanding. Even after your ancestors leave an area, by looking at gazetteers from soon afterwards, you may reveal why.

Useful websites

The National Archives Catalogue: A location and name search of the holdings of The National Archives and many regional repositories, with many land records and maps contained within.

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

The Domesday Book Online: A transcribed and translated version of the oldest set of land records with genealogical value. <http://www.domesdaybook.co.uk/contents.html>

GENUKI: A virtual reference library of genealogical information relating to particular areas of the country, take advantage of their online gazetteer for a view of the local area and records that may be available. <https://www.genuki.org.uk>

Google Maps: One of the most used map resources in the world, and with good reason. Street view is a unique tool that can allow you to walk down the streets your ancestors lived, from your own home! <https://www.google.co.uk/maps>

Welsh Tithe Maps: A searchable and browsable collection of over 300,000 tithe maps and apportionments, with original scanned images alongside. <https://places.library.wales>

HM Land Registry Property Search: A modern land record database that gives you current owners of property and the boundaries that they now extend to. <https://www.gov.uk/search-property-information-land-registry>

Hearth Tax Digital: A substantial collection of 1600s property taxes that serve as a census substitute of heads of household, searchable by name. <http://gams.uni-graz.at/context:htx>

Findmypast: Home to over 11 Billion records to assist you in your family history research, source of many of the land records used in this presentation. <https://www.findmypast.co.uk>

1939 Register Map Search: An accessible, map-based entry point into this census substitute, with a layered historical view to see changes to an area over time. <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/maps>

BritainfromAbove: A collection of almost 100,000 aerial images of Britain taken from 1919 to 1953, very useful for seeing your areas of interest in a new light. <https://www.britainfromabove.org.uk>

Wikishire: Never heard of a location at all? Can't find it on a map no matter how hard you try? This is a great way to find where it may be hiding, allowing you to then make better use of other resources. <https://wikishire.co.uk/map>

Vision of Britain: A collection of maps, gazetteers and statistical information that can also be used to gain better understanding of where your ancestors may originate. <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/index.jsp>

Internet Archive: A wide-ranging catalogue of public domain, scanned works. This can be a reliable source for a number of notable Gazetteers from around the United Kingdom. <https://archive.org>

National Library of Scotland Maps: Don't let the source location fool you, this is a huge collection of over 200,000 free maps that cover all of England & Wales also, with a great geographical interface. <https://maps.nls.uk>

FamilySearch Catalog: Many land records have not been indexed, and some are available to browse in the FamilySearch catalog. Search by parish/town, or county, for the best results. <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>

FamilySearch Maps: Unsure of where to look for records? This site helps to frame which jurisdictions may be of interest. <https://www.familysearch.org/mapp>

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