

I Want To Find Out About My Family

How to trace your family history

The sources of information are numerous and this guide can only cover the types of document which will give information to the largest number of people: but for this reason the indexes at the Record Office are worth checking as sometimes information about ancestors can be found in small miscellaneous collections of documents in the Record Office.

One of the problems and pitfalls of family history in Wales is the difficulty caused by the common surnames and Christian names, so that it is often impossible to know which of the many William Joneses, for example, is the correct one. Problems are also caused by the Welsh patronymic system whereby the children took the father's Christian name as a surname, which changes from generation to generation, and thus causes problems of identification. In Gwynedd, the patronymic system continued in most families (other than those of professional, landed or commercial classes) until the early to mid nineteenth century. It is important to note that occupations and addresses frequently change particularly in the nineteenth century.

Relatives

The first stage for anyone interested in family history is to contact as many relatives as possible (particularly older members of the family), to collect names, places, occupations and dates and look at any family documents e.g. family bibles. Of course not all memories are entirely reliable but the checking of details makes a good starting point.

Family History Society

It is a good idea to contact the *Gwynedd Family History Society* to meet other people who are engaged in the same sort of research and exchange ideas. The address of the Chairman of the Gwynedd Family History Society is Mr Myfyr W Hughes, 3 Cae Croes, Y Bala, Gwynedd LL23 7RQ.

Printed Sources

For families who have been associated with the landed gentry, books of printed pedigrees or books such as Debretts or Burkes may be of help. One book which contains local pedigrees is 'Pedigrees of Anglesey and Carnarvonshire Families' by John Edward Griffith which is available in the Record Offices in Gwynedd.

However, for most people, after having found as many details as possible within the family circle and written all the details down, the next step is to begin to look at outside sources. This is a time-consuming and often frustrating search, but the increasing number of people engaged in this shows that the effort and patience is worthwhile.

Civil Registration

Registration of births, marriages and deaths was introduced on 1 July 1837 but as there was no penalty for failure to register until 1875, there may be omissions (particularly of births) from the early registers. Superintendent Registrars, who are in charge of the various registration

districts throughout the country, keep all the registers from 1837 and send copies of new registrations quarterly to the General Register Office, where national indexes are compiled. Events are recorded separately and not in any family order and each entry has to be sought in the quarterly alphabetical indexes of births, marriages or deaths. It costs nothing to search the indexes but the registers themselves are not open to inspection and full information is available only in the form of a copy certificate which has to be purchased. The information in these certificates is of great value to family historians.

Birth Certificates give date and place of birth, the child's forename(s), normally the name and occupation of the father, the name and maiden surname of the mother - with her usual residence if the birth took place elsewhere, and the name and address of the informant for registration.

Marriage Certificates give the names and usually the ages of the contracting parties, their marital status and addresses, the names and occupations of their fathers, the date and place of the marriage and the names of witnesses.

Death Certificates record name(s), date, place, age, cause of death and occupation of the deceased, residence if different from the place of death, and the name and address of the informant for registration. They do not show place of birth or parentage.

Birth Certificates give sufficient information to seek the marriage of the parents and from details of Marriage Certificates it is possible to search for the birth of the two parties.

Certificates are obtainable from the General Register Office, St. Catherine's House, 10 Kingsway, London, WC2B 23P or from the Superintendent Registrar for the district where the event occurred. For Superintendent Registrars in Gwynedd see under Gwynedd County Council in the telephone directory. If the district where the event occurred is not known it will be necessary to search the indexes in the search room in the General Register Office. If, however, the district and approximate date of the event are known, certificates can be obtained, usually more quickly and cheaply, from the appropriate Superintendent Registrar.

The following sources are those available in the Record Offices themselves.

Census Returns

These are a fruitful source of information for family historians. The Census was taken every ten years from 1801 onwards except for 1941 and they become available to the public after a hundred years. Thus the latest returns which can be consulted are those for 1881. The first returns to be useful to the family historian are those for 1841, (the earlier ones give only statistics). The originals are in the Public Record office but microfilm copies are available there, or in the appropriate Record Office for the area. The returns are arranged by districts within parishes so approximate knowledge of the place of residence is necessary. In 1841 within each household the information given is: name, age, occupation and whether the person was born in the county (Y for yes, N for no); the ages given are approximate to within five years. After 1841 the returns also include relationships within households, exact age and the parish of birth. This is useful because it tells you approximately when and where a person was born and earlier Censuses or Parish Registers can be consulted. For direct descendants or persons acting on their behalf the General Register Office, St. Catherine's House, Kingsway, London, will, for a fee, search the returns for 1891 and 1901 to establish the age and place of birth of named persons provided they are given the exact address.

It is important to remember that the details given on the Census are not always accurate.

Parish Registers

The major sources of information on births, marriages and deaths before 1837 are the Parish Registers of baptisms, marriages and burials. In England and Wales these began to be kept from 1538, although few such early examples survive. The amount of detail in the registers varies from parish to parish and clerk to clerk but the date of the baptism is always given with the names of the child and parents; the places of residence and the father's occupation may

also be given. Marriage entries up to 1753 may just record names and date but from 1754 the signatures or marks of the parties were added, with places of abode and marital status, and sometimes occupations. Many burial records before 1813 only give name and date.

If you find your ancestor's baptism and those of older siblings, look for the parent's marriage in the ten years around the date before the first christening. If you cannot find it and the marriage was after 1754 look for Banns Registers. These will record when banns were read and the parish of the other party. These, if they survive, may help as marriages were usually in the wife's parish. Parish Registers may be found in the appropriate Record Office or in the National Library of Wales. A guide to the location of Parish Registers in Wales is available.

Bishop's Transcripts

From 1598 to about 1860 transcripts of the entries in Parish Registers were sent by incumbents annually to the diocesan registrar. Few of the early transcripts survive in Wales before 1660 but for most parishes they are available from the second half of the seventeenth century. These are valuable as they frequently fill gaps caused by missing registers. Even where a register survives they can be useful as they sometimes include information not in the Parish Register, or can help clarify details when the handwriting in the register is difficult to read. Bishop's Transcripts are among the diocesan records in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, but the local Record Office has a list of those available for the particular county.

Marriage Licences

From the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century people (particularly the wealthy) were often married by licence which is obtained from the bishop, archbishop or other ecclesiastical authority. The allegations which preceded the granting of the licences often give valuable information, such as names, dates, places, ages and the groom's occupation. They sometimes name the father of one or both parties. marriage Licence Allegations for Welsh dioceses are in the National Library of Wales. If the marriage parties were from more than one diocese the licence was issued by the Archbishop of Canterbury and these are at the Lambeth Palace Library, London, SE1 73U.

Chapel Records

If you do not find your ancestors in Parish Records they may have been nonconformists. From 1754 everyone except Quakers were obliged to marry in the parish church but there was no compulsion about baptism. In general the records of non-conformist denominations have not been kept as consistently as those of the established church. It is unusual to find records earlier than the nineteenth century and where they do exist they often cover wide areas. There are many pre civil registration records of baptism in the P.R.O. (called 'Non-parochial Registers') and the Record Offices have microfilm copies of these but they only cover causes founded before 1837, and not all of those. A few registers may survive with the collections of the chapels themselves. Post-1837 chapel registers are rare.

Roman Catholic Records

Most registers (which generally date only from the mid nineteenth century) are still held by the Roman Catholic Church. If tracing Catholic ancestors the Catholic Record Society do 114 Mount Street, London, W17 4BT or the appropriate diocesan archivist should be consulted.

Mormons' International Genealogical Index

This index has been produced by the Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormons). In Welsh dioceses there were religious objects from bishops and clergy and, therefore, they have been unable to microfilm many registers. It is nevertheless a valuable finding aid particularly if the names are not too common. The majority of entries are for baptisms, with some marriages but no burials. Entries for Wales are arranged as a single unit. The index can be consulted at Record Offices and Mormon Branch Libraries.

Records of Graveyards

These are an important source of information but the search is often time consuming. Unfortunately graveyards are often overgrown and graveyard clearance is an increasing hazard. Many organisations such as Family History Societies and Women's Institutes are, however, listing graveyard inscriptions; some of these surveys are available in the Record Offices. For some graveyards in parishes or towns lists may be kept by the body controlling the graveyard. If gravestones are found there are usually names and dates of more than one member of a family and family burials often occurred in the same part of the cemetery. The Record Offices hold the Burial Registers for many public graveyards among their local government records; and Burial Registers for a few chapel graveyards are also available.

Wills and other probate records

Wills can be very helpful in family history, as bequests were often made to many members of a family, explaining relationships and giving addresses, but it must be remembered that not everyone made a will. Probate Registries were set up in 1858 but before that time probate was a matter for the established church. Wills proved in Welsh dioceses are in the National Library of Wales. The indexes to these wills are available on microfilm in the Caernarfon Area Record Office with copies of the wills themselves for 1576-1733. Wills of persons holding land in more than one diocese in Wales were proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and these are in the Public Record Office, Chancery Lane, London. After 1858 wills are held by the Principal Registry of the Family Division, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 1LA. Wills proved in the District Probate Registry, now at Bron Castell, High Street, Bangor, can be inspected there. Annual printed Calendars of Grants of Probate for England and Wales 1858-1935 are held by the Caernarfon Area Record Office. They show dates of death, addresses, names of administrator/executor, and values of estates, as well annotating the office granting probate. A search of ten years including the year of death is recommended as probate was not always applied for immediately. Wills may also be found in solicitors' collections; consult the indexes in the Record Offices.

Other Records Directories

Generally from the 1820s until the Second World War these are excellent contemporary guides to towns and large parishes which list the principal inhabitants, trades people, etc. with their addresses.

Electoral Registers

These were printed from 1832 onwards. Unfortunately the franchise was limited in that period but was gradually extended; the vote was restricted to men (except for female ratepayers in local elections) until 1918 and not fully extended to women until 1928. From 1868 onwards the addresses of voters are also given.

Newspapers

These often contain information which is valuable to the family historian such as obituaries and announcements of births, marriages and deaths. Unfortunately such announcements were not as common as they are today but it is always worth checking if you know the approximate date: without a date the search would be very time consuming. Large collections of local newspapers are available at all three Gwynedd Record Offices including *The North Wales Gazette*, later *North Wales Chronicle* (which begins in 1808), the *Caernarvon and Denbigh Herald* (from 1831), and the *Herald Cymraeg* (from 1855); all available at the Caernarfon Area Record Office.

Tithe Records

The Tithe Commutation Act 1836, provided for the valuation of land subject to payment of tithe in order to substitute a monetary payment. The apportionments which accompany the maps name the owners and occupiers (heads of household only).

Estate Records

If an ancestor lived on a large estate there will often be references in rentals, leases, etc.. It is always worth establishing on which estate the family lived. Staff in the Record Office can usually say whether and where estate records are preserved.

Land Tax

These records usually cover the period 1780-1831, (1746-1812) for the Aberconwy area) for Caernarfonshire; and list the names of owners and occupiers of houses by parish - heads of households only. There are none for Merioneth.

Poor Law

From Elizabethan times to the nineteenth century the relief of the poor was the responsibility of the parish. The survival of records is haphazard but there may be Poor Rate Books, Overseers' Accounts, Settlement Certificates and Removal Orders. From 1834 parishes were amalgamated into Unions and workhouses were established; their records may include Admission and Discharge Registers, Births and Deaths Registers, Outdoor Relief Lists etc.. Quarter Sessions oversaw the administration of the Poor Law, and there are records among the Court papers re the settlement and removal of paupers.

School Records

Unfortunately not many Admission Registers of schools are in the Record Offices and Log Books only occasionally mention individual pupils but it is worth checking.

Indexes

As records which may help the family historian could be contained in most collections in the Record Office it is always a good idea to check the indexes in the Record Office. If your ancestor had a very common name it is best to check the place name index as well, if you know the parish.

Despite the increasing amount of material available in Record Offices it is still possible to draw a blank when tracing your family history and researchers must realise before embarking on the search that the records were not designed by their originators to assist this search. A detailed comprehensive study can involve days or even weeks of research and the searcher must be prepared to do most of the work, although Record Office staff will be able to offer advice.

Books

There are many useful books on this subject and you are strongly advised to read one before visiting the Record Office. Two useful ones which are available in the Record Offices and in many Public Libraries are:

Don Steel 'Discovering your Family History', BBC 1980.

David Iredale 'Discovering your Family Tree', Shire Publications 1976.

