Kent Archives Service

Researching
Your Family History

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Libraries & Archives
Introduction

This help leaflet gives advice on starting to research the history of your family and relates particularly to the sources available to do this within Kent Archives Service.

One of the most important things to remember about historical research is that it isn’t easy and may take years! Often the best way to start doing your family history is to read a book or visit a website (see website section) to find out what is involved. Alternatively, you may well have a local family history society near you which you can join or from whom you may get specialist advice.

As more and more material is put onto the internet many people are able to put together a reasonable family tree without ever having to visit an archive or local studies centre. You may also be lucky enough to find someone who has already traced all or some of your family history as part of other research.

However, it is usually advisable to visit an archive or local studies centre to confirm what other people have discovered and also because part of the attraction of doing your family history is the contact with historical documents and the thrill of finding new information.

First Steps

- Note all the dates and events you are certain of concerning your immediate family. Ask other members of your family what they know, but remember it is always best to check any such information by consulting official records, so that you have concrete proof to back up vague memories!

- Family photos are a great way of getting people talking, so do ask relatives to see these.

- It is best to start with yourself and work backwards.

Once you have got enough material from relatives and the internet it is time to visit an archive centre to start filling in the details of your family history research. Records are held in several places in Kent - you may need to visit more than one office - and there are also collections in some public libraries across Kent. (hyperlink to libraries page)

It is important to plan your visit well and this usually means contacting the archive you are going to visit well in advance. Visiting an archive centre for the first time can be a bewildering experience but there are ways in which you can make the trip easier and more productive. These include:

- Contacting the archive in advance as you will need to book a place. Offices can get very busy, the office may be closed for stocktaking or the particular records you want to see may not be available immediately (there may be special conditions attached to accessing a particular collection). Whilst most archives hold the same sort of material some may not hold the records which might be useful to you.

- When you visit you will have to take some form of ID (showing your name, address and signature) and two passport-sized photographs of yourself to obtain a County Archives Research Network card which will allow you access to the collections all over the country.

- Check the website of the archive centre for a list of holdings or the online catalogue. The web address for the Kent Archives Service is www.kent.gov.uk/archives and for the online catalogues it is www.kentarchives.org.uk. Often much of the time you spend in an archive is actually taken up looking through catalogues and indexes so if you can do this online before your visit you may save a lot of time. Remember to write down accurately the references to any documents you find that might be relevant.

- When you get to the archive centre it is a very good idea to talk to the staff so that they are aware of what you are trying to find out and to ask them for advice. Staff at archives and local studies centres are specially trained and have a wealth of experience in judging what sort of records are relevant for each different enquiry.
What sort of records are useful for family history?

Parish Records
The parish registers consist of baptisms, marriages and burials. Within the parish collections you may also find records such as overseers’ accounts (which include poor law records, accounts and settlements) and school records useful for family history.

The parish records covering Kent are held at several different offices. As a general rule Canterbury hold East Kent parishes and the Centre for Kentish Studies hold West Kent. Click here for a guide to the parish registers held at CKS and CCA. However there are also records held at Medway Archives and Bexley and Bromley local studies and archive centres. Microform or transcript copies can also be found in public libraries.

In England and Wales from 1837 births, marriages and deaths were civilly registered and can be found at the local register office or at the Family Records Centre in London. Some archive offices also hold registers of burials that have taken place in municipal cemeteries.

The International Genealogical Index is a very good source for obtaining information from parish registers; it is found at www.familysearch.org or on microform at some offices. But remember to check information for yourself in original documents.

Census Returns
Censuses started in 1801, but the earliest census for which substantial records survive and which is of use to the family historian is 1841. Full census entries are available from 1841-1901. The 1901 census for the whole country can be found at www.1901census.nationalarchives.gov.uk The Centre for Kentish Studies holds the census for the whole of Kent; Canterbury and East Kent Archives hold their local areas. Census records are also held in the local studies sections at some public libraries and indexes are becoming increasingly available on the internet (please see list at the end of this guide).

Wills and Probate
Before 1858, wills were proved in the church courts. The records for local church courts are held at Canterbury and Maidstone. Some Kentish wills were also proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, the records at Canterbury and Maidstone are held on microfilm. Please check with the relevant office to make sure that they have the dates you require.

From 1858, probate was a civil matter. You can search for wills proved after 1858 in person at the Probate Department of the Principal Registry Family Division, Probate Search Room, First Avenue House, 42-49 High Holborn, London WC1V 6NP (tel: 020 7947 7000).

Taxation
All offices hold material regarding taxation, for example, window, hearth and land taxes. Please enquire at each office as to what they can provide.

Copies of tithe maps and apportionments (c1840) are also available for the whole county at Canterbury, CKS and EKAC offices. Local studies sections of public libraries will often hold copies for their area. These records can help in tracing properties or land that your ancestors may have owned or occupied.

Electoral Registers
These are closed for the last 10 years, but you are able to access earlier ones, at CKS, which cover the whole county, while CCA, EKAC, and local libraries, cover their immediate areas. These can also be used in conjunction with local trade directories.

The Internet
The internet is of course a fantastic and accessible source for family historians but please remember that the information is only as good as the people who have produced it. In other words, you should not rely on the accuracy of the information you get from a website and it is always advisable to check at a record office or a library.

These are just a few of the records which may be useful in tracing your family history and there are of course many more, too many to mention in this guide. Please contact us if you want to find out more.
Useful sites:

General Family History Sites

www.bbc.co.uk/history/family - gives a good basic introduction to starting your family research, recommending collections to look at and putting them in an historical context.

www.familyrecords.gov.uk - The Family Records Centre, this gives links to other useful sites and you can request copies of certificates from here.

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk
www.1901census.nationalarchives.gov.uk
www.documentsonline.nationalarchives.gov.uk
- The National Archives. As well as giving advice this website allows you to download records including military, census records, Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills and much more. (You may be charged for some services.)

www.ancestry.co.uk - census, probate records and civil registration records can be accessed for a fee.

www.familysearch.org - this not only includes material taken from parish registers (IGI) but also the 1881 census and much more. Please note many parishes are not covered by the index and some are only partially covered.

www.freebmd.org.uk - this contains transcribed indexes of births, marriages and deaths.

www.1837online.com - records of the 1861 census, birth, marriages and deaths, WW1 & 2 records and overseas births, marriages and deaths.

www.sog.org.uk - useful information about indexes available and recommended reading.

www.genesreunited.co.uk - useful for contacting others who may be researching the same family name as you.

www.freecen.rootsweb.com - allows census searches for free.

www.one-name.org - The Register of One Name Studies which may help in putting you in touch with others researching your family name.

www.historicaldirectories.com - national directories available on line.


www.a2a.org.uk - searchable database of catalogues describing archives held by various organisations across England together with contact details for archive offices and repositories.

www.kfhs.org.uk - by joining the Kent Family History Society, participating in meetings and accessing the mail list, you can obtain background information on Kent history, make contacts with other researchers and find out about the Society's many indexes and publications.


www.folkfhs.org.uk - Folkestone District Family History Society.

www.kentarchaeology.org.uk - this useful site has information on wills, tithe apportionments and monumental inscriptions.

www.kent.gov.uk/living/marriages/certificates - on this Kent County Council website you can search for entries held at the Kent register offices.