



A guide to researching your house history

Where to begin

Most house historians dream of being able to precisely pinpoint the date of construction of their house. However this can be difficult as records specifically relating to construction are few and far between.



First things first, house history is not a precise art. The records you will use depend entirely on what has survived for your house. A listed building, for example, may be much easier to trace than an ordinary town house. But don't lose hope.

This guide will introduce you to some of the most useful sources, and explain how you can use them in your research. The records of construction are scarce; so it is often best to focus on past owners and occupiers.

It is also worth looking at the house in its wider context – finding out how people lived at the time, what the community was like and how events or local industries shaped life and influenced building construction. It may give you some clues as to why the house was built or why changes were made.

Above all don't be disheartened if you appear to come to a dead-end. Be imaginative and try other documents.

And of course if you get really stuck don't hesitate to ask a member of staff at the Dorset History Centre for help.

Background work...

Some initial background research will make your visit to the Dorset History Centre easier and more productive. The most important thing is to be able to identify precisely where your house is situated in the local community, bearing in mind that many roads and landmarks may not have existed at the time your house was built.

You will need to understand the administrative district that your house falls in to, as many documents are grouped by districts. Primarily this involves knowing the parish your house is in, but you should also be aware of any past changes to parish and county boundaries: Bournemouth and Christchurch were part of Hampshire until 1974.

You should also check if your house was at any stage part of a larger estate or manor; this can open up a wealth of additional material.

Other areas to consider include urban, rural and district councils. Local directories, topographical gazetteers and local history society publications. There is a wealth of different resources available at the Dorset History Centre.

Please do not be discouraged, house history, although challenging, is hugely rewarding.

Maps & surveys

Maps and Surveys can offer vital clues for tracing the history of a property, from when it was built to who has lived there over the years.



Ordnance Survey Maps

The first survey began in 1801 at a 1 inch scale; later a 6 inch scale and a 25 inch scale were also developed. The 25 inch survey is the most useful as it provides details of the layouts of buildings, fields and other features landscape. A number of editions of these maps were produced during the late 19th century and early 20th century meaning developments can be quite easily traced.

For Dorset the 1st Edition 25 inch survey was made between 1862 and 1888, the 2nd Edition 1900- 1902 and the 3rd partial revision of the county was between 1925-1930.

Tithe Maps

The tithe was the tax of one-tenth of the annual produce of land or labour that was collected to support the clergy and the Church. Often the produce raised was stored in 'Tithe Barns'. However, by the beginning of the nineteenth century such a tax 'in kind' was becoming less appropriate and so under the Tithe Commutation Act of 1836 the tithes were converted into a monetary payment or rent charge.

Commissioners were appointed to assess land values in parishes across the country. Large-scale maps were drawn up with numbered plots of land, which referred to the Apportionment - a list of the names of the owners and occupiers of the land. The Apportionment also contains the name of the premises or land and a description.

Enclosure Maps

Medieval farming in England was based on the open field system. Large common fields were divided into strips and each tenant and freeholder of the manor held the strips from the lord of the manor.

After 1792 Commissioners appointed a Surveyor to draw up a map of the parish, the land was then allotted to the land holders in the parish and a written survey or award was drawn up. These maps and awards list the landowners and occupiers and give a description of the land in each parish.

Estate Maps, Surveys and Rentals

Estate maps can be a useful source in locating properties and identifying whether or not a building existed before a certain date.

If the map is accompanied by a survey much more can be found out about the property and who occupied it. Surveys were often drawn up by the steward of the estate prior to an important event such as a change of ownership of land, or change in agricultural use. There is usually a list of tenant's names, some indication of the type of land, the type of tenure, and the rent paid.

Often estate surveys and maps are very beautiful documents, particularly where the survey was designed to impress. Rentals are the rather more workaday versions of the surveys reciting the tenants, payments and land held, but still hold all of the relevant information.



Buying & Selling

The buying and selling of properties over the centuries has created a range of records of great value to the house historian, telling us not just who bought a property but also the type of property they were buying.



Title Deeds

Title deeds record the buying and selling of property. Types of deeds that can be found include fines, common recoveries, bargains and sales, leases and releases, trusts, marriage settlements and conveyances with each deed conveying property in a different way.

Title deeds record the parties involved in the transaction, and describe the property and the terms under which it is conveyed. They are usually on parchment, and can range greatly in size and detail.

The names of the parties involved are usually at the start of the deed after the word BETWEEN. As well as the names of the parties, their occupation and where they are from will often be included. In many cases a summary of this information is also 'endorsed' on the outside of the deed.

Sections starting Doth or DO HEREBY, or another similar term, will show what sort of transaction is taking place e.g. a sale, lease or mortgage.

The section starting WHEREAS lists past sales, while the section starting ALL THAT lists the property that was being conveyed. The detail of this part will vary enormously, however a list of recent occupiers may be included as well as a description of the bordering properties.

The date of the document tends to be written either at the start or the end of the deed.

Sale Particulars

Sale Particulars, or sale catalogues, are the documents in which a solicitor, and nowadays an estate agent, advertises a property for sale. Modern Sale Particulars usually relate to one property at a time but earlier Sale Particulars may relate to several properties, particularly if they are to be sold by auction.

Sale Particulars can offer important details about the number of rooms and land adjoining the house, and sometimes include drawings, or even photographs of the property.

In the 19th and early 20th century, sale particulars often included relatively humble homes, as some of the larger estates were split up and the estate cottages, farms and agricultural buildings were sold off.

Occasionally interesting additional information may have been pencilled in on the catalogue, such as the name of the eventual purchaser, eventual sale price, or a note that a particular 'lot' was not sold.

Buying & Selling



Trade Directories

Trade Directories are a cross between a guide book, the Yellow Pages and a telephone directory and were commercially produced by both local and national firms.

They list people who wanted to advertise themselves in their local area; usually those who owned or ran a business, the local gentry, professionals and people of independent means.

Usually there was one volume per county but areas with a high population often had their own volume. They were printed roughly every 5 years from the mid 18th century to the mid 19th century. The most commonly available are those which date between 1840 and 1939.

The contents can be arranged in a number of ways but they usually include:

- Short history of the village or town
- Local information e.g. when the post is collected
- A list of the streets
- Alphabetical list of business people
- Alphabetical court list
- Lists of businesses by type

Death & Taxes

They say death and taxes are the only things certain in life. The records of these can also give vital information to the house historian. The most important records are census returns and land tax records.



Census Returns

The census is a tool by which the government gathers information about the population. The census in England and Wales has been taken every ten years since 1801. The detailed returns remain closed for 100 years because they contain personal information.

The country was divided into districts with each district being allocated an enumerator. The enumerator gave out forms, known as schedules, to the head of each household. The householder then had to complete this and wait for the enumerator to collect it.

The schedules were copied up in the order in which the enumerator collected them and are arranged by street and address not by name. The original enumerator's books are held in the National Archives, however microfiche copies are available at the Dorset History Centre.

Land Tax

Originally Land Tax was a tax on personal estate, public offices and land. Introduced in the late 17th century and then abolished in 1963.

From 1745, it was used as a voting qualification - a land owner who paid land tax on freehold property worth £2 or more per annum had the right to vote. As a result the returns had to be lodged with the Clerk of the Peace.

The Land Tax records consist of an annual list of the names of owners and occupiers of land in each parish and the amount of tax to be levied. Since the assessment was written out in the same order each year it is sometimes possible to work backwards using the information of the owner or occupier, from the Tithe or Enclosure map, and the amount of tax levied to identify the property.

The Dorset History Centre holds returns for all divisions (except Poole) 1780 - 1832.

Wills and Inventories

If a person left property in a will then the will became part of the title deed for the property and as a result wills can often be found with bundles of deeds.

Inventories were usually made because a person died without making a will, and they can be invaluable sources for house historians as they give a list and valuation of all the goods and chattels of the deceased.

Rate books

Local Government gathered taxes on properties and controlled what could be built and what it could be used for, these records can provide vital clues into the history of a house.



Rate Books

Rate Book is an umbrella term relating to a number of different types of record. Generally when we use the term 'Rate Book' we mean modern, local government rates, but it is important to bear in mind also that the church played a role in local government from the 16th to the mid 19th century.

Church Rate Books range from the maintenance of roads to the maintenance of the poor. They collected a number of rates based on property and income. You may find Overseers of the Poor or Surveyors of the Highways rate books surviving in the church archive, which may help you dig further back into your house's history. These will generally list names, but are not likely to indicate house numbers. You can cross reference the names with other documents such as the Census or the Tithe Map.

The more modern Rate Books and Rateable Value Books originate from the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 in which the Poor Law Unions replaced the parochial system for poor relief.

Responsibility was passed to borough, rural, municipal or urban councils. Most rate books will list the owner/occupier of a specific address. This is where Rateable Value books are particularly useful for 'recent' house historians, as they specifically record the use of the building and when/if the use changed. So if a large property is a hotel for a time and then gets divided into flats and then is bought up for restoration back into one property again, each of those changes should have been recorded within the Values.

Planning Records

Planning records, building regulations records and planning applications refer to different parts of the building process. Essentially however for our purposes they usually provide the same information, with plans and elevations of property, the address, and the name of the client.

If the information is not recorded on the actual plan it will usually be listed on the envelope. Planning records are usually held with the local authority records. They usually date from the late 19th century or later.

The Dorset History Centre does hold some plans dating from the 1870s, however the vast bulk of the material held at the History Centre dates from around the 1920s.

Rate books

Alehouse Recognisances

The licensing of the sale of intoxicating liquor was introduced in 1552 with an Act that made the Courts of Quarter Sessions responsible for the supervision of Inns and Alehouses.



Alehouse Keepers had to enter into a recognisance or bond with the magistrates to guarantee orderly behaviour on their premises. A royal proclamation of 1619 stipulated that the licences should be issued annually at a special licensing session. By 1729 there was a statutory requirement to hold annual Special Licensing Sessions.

The Recognisances record the name and parish of the licensee and usually the names of the two people who stood for his good behaviour. Only in the later eighteenth century is the sign of the house recorded - in Dorset from 1753.

The Licensing Act of 1753 laid down that the Clerk of the Peace was required to keep a register of alehouses which record the licensee, the parish, inn sign, the 'occupation of the victualler' and the names and occupations of those standing surety. These are arranged by licensing districts.