



Somerset Archive and Record Service

Information Leaflet

Your Family in Somerset

YOUR SOMERSET FAMILY

1. INTRODUCTION

Most searchers visiting the Somerset Record Office are looking for their family roots. With increasing pressures on staff time, there is a limit to the individual attention which can be given and this booklet is designed to help searchers help themselves.

Before visiting the Record Office the searcher should read one of many available text books on the subject, a list of which, by no means comprehensive, will be found in the bibliography at the end of this guide (see Appendix II). Much precious research time will also be saved if the enquirer collects all possible information relating to the family from surviving relatives, family bibles and other family papers, placing particular emphasis on the dates (however approximate) of births, marriages and deaths and the places where these occurred. Historically, Somerset contained 567 ancient parishes and the more accurately a family can be located the more straightforward the search will be. Always work backwards in time from the known to the unknown. Always record the reference letters and numbers of documents consulted, so that you can order them out again if necessary. Never assume that all persons of the same surname are necessarily related to each other or have the right to bear a specific coat of arms.

Bear in mind that before the mid 18th century the handwriting in which documents are written can be difficult to decipher for those unused to it, and that before 1733 many legal records were written in a form of Latin, often heavily abbreviated. Again, textbooks helpful in these areas are listed at the end of this guide.

Finally, the services of the Record Office are designed to help those who visit the office in person to study records held here. We are happy to answer questions by telephone or post concerning the availability of documents, but we cannot carry out unpaid research on behalf of family historians. For those who cannot visit the office in person we operate a [research service](#).

2. RECORDS OF CIVIL REGISTRATION Records of civil registration, often the starting-point for a family history, are *not* held at the Somerset Record Office. The systematic registration of births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales began on 1 July 1837, although birth registration only became compulsory in 1875. Postal applications for certificates (currently charged at 15.50 each) should be addressed to the Postal Application Section, General Register Office, PO Box 2, Southport, Merseyside, PR8 2JD (Tel 0870 2437788. Pre-1974 Somerset is divided into seven registration districts. Superintendent Registrars hold duplicate volumes for events which have taken place in their areas since 1837 and are willing to supply certificates for 5.50. The costs involved mean that most enquirers will only use civil records for solving particularly difficult problems. The place-names given in the civil indexes of births, marriages and deaths are *not* those of parishes but of registration sub-districts, each of which may contain between 25 and 30 parishes. Copies of the indexes, 1837-1983, can be consulted at Bristol Central Reference Library.

3. PARISH REGISTERS

Anglican registers of baptism, marriage and burial were ordered to be kept in 1538, although only 21 parishes in Somerset have registers preserved from so early a date. The Record Office holds registers for nearly all of Somerset's ancient parishes, as well as for some 60 Anglican churches founded in the 19th and 20th centuries. Churches which have deposited earlier registers retain those still in use, which can date from as far back as 1813 (baptisms or burials) and 1837 (marriages), particularly in the case of small parishes. Where registers still in parish custody need to be consulted the incumbent's name, address and telephone number can be found in the current edition of the *Diocesan Directory*, available at the Record Office. The marriage registers of 103 Somerset parishes, usually up to 1812, have been published in *Phillimore's Somerset Marriages* (15 vols) and a slip index to these by surname is available in the office. We also hold register transcripts in whole or part for many parishes. These and other original and copy holdings are listed in the *Summary List*, available for purchase. Dr Campbell's Index to baptisms and marriages (before 1900 and excluding marriage registers published by Phillimore) is available for parishes to the west of the Quantocks and in the south of the county. It can be consulted on microfiche in the microform searchroom, as can virtually all parish registers prior to 1885 and in most cases prior to 1900.

In order to save wear and tear, original registers are only produced where the legibility of fiche is poor. Transcripts of variable accuracy are held for some parishes and are noted in the *Summary List*.

The Mormon Computer File Index/International Genealogical Index is available at the office for Somerset, Devon, Cornwall, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Hampshire. The coverage for Somerset is poor, amounting to only about 3% of entries for the years 1754-1812. Coverage should improve considerably in future editions once the recent filming of about 70% of Somerset registers finds its way on to the index. The national indexes can be consulted at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 721 Wells Road, Bristol, BS14 9HU.

4. NON-PAROCHIAL REGISTERS Surviving registers of nonconformist sects up to 1837 were deposited with the Registrar General and are now at the Public Record Office, London. Microfilm copies of all those for Somerset are available in the searchroom. Most (but not all) entries will be found on the Mormon International Genealogical Index. Some later nonconformist registers have been deposited in Somerset Record Office and catalogues of these are available; many registers, however, are still retained by their congregations. Some Somerset nonconformist registers have found their way to the Bath, Bristol and Wiltshire record offices, notably the Bath and North Somerset Methodist Circuit registers. Detailed microfilm indexes to Quaker births, marriages and deaths up to 1837 are available. Roman Catholic registers have only been deposited for Taunton, although transcripts are available for Cannington and Bath for limited periods. Remember that before 1837 all marriages (apart from those of Quakers and Jews) had to be performed in Anglican churches.

5. BISHOPS' TRANSCRIPTS From 1598 transcripts of each year's parish register entries were sent annually to the bishop. These transcripts are clearly of particular value for periods where the original registers do not survive. Unfortunately they were poorly housed at Wells. Many have perished and others are in a mutilated state. Generally speaking for each parish there will be a few years available from about 1600 to 1630 after which there will be an occasional return before a fairly complete series for the years 1800-37. Some parishes in the west of the county have good returns for the 18th century. For about 300 parishes the series continues, with greatly varying degrees of completeness, for the period 1838-c.1890. Usually these later returns cover only baptisms and burials. There is a full catalogue showing which years survive for which parishes, and again all those prior to 1837 can be consulted on microfiche in the searchroom. A slip index to about a third of the pre-1813 bishops' transcripts, compiled by Edward Dwelly, is available.

6. MARRIAGE LICENCES Marriage licences were issued to couples not wishing the publicity or delay involved in marrying by banns and until the 19th century generally concerned persons of the artisan class and upwards. Among the diocesan records will be found the records completed before a licence was issued, mainly allegations and bonds (ref. D/D/Cm). These documents will often supply not only the names and residences of the parties but also occupations, details of bondsmen (sometimes relations) and indicate whether minors were involved. Parchment bonds survive from 1574 to 1717 and are unindexed (apart from 1627-30). Paper bonds from 1645 to 1755 have been published and indexed in A.J. Jewers, *Marriage Allegation Bonds of the Bishops of Bath and Wells* (1909). Subsequent paper bonds from 1756 are being indexed by volunteers and at the time of writing the index has reached 1811. Bonds have generally been deposited up to 1899. Bonds issued for 'Peculiar' parishes will be found among the records of those Peculiars (D/D/P--) and have also been indexed. Diocesan licence books (D/D/OI) contain references to the granting of licences from c. 1570 and allegations from 1664. Typescript calendars and indexes to these for the years 1583-1676, compiled by Col. H.R. Phipps, are available in three volumes in the Orchard Wyndham Room. No licences were granted during the Civil War and Commonwealth (1642-61). Further details are given in the catalogues of the diocesan records. If parties lived in different dioceses, licences had to be obtained from the Archbishop or his Vicar-General. Calendars of many of these are among the volumes published by the Harleian Society, also available at the Record Office.

7. CENSUS RETURNS

Although censuses were taken every 10 years from 1801, names were not recorded until 1841. Some draft census compilations for individual parishes, usually naming only heads of households, survive and are

listed under 'Census' in the Record Office's Subject Index. The Record Office holds microfiche of census returns for the whole pre-1974 county for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891 (censuses are only made generally available after 100 years). The 1901 census will be available from The returns for 1841 are less informative: relationships between those living in each house are not stated, ages over 15 are rounded down to the nearest multiple of 5 (10 for ages over 70) and detailed birthplaces are not supplied. From 1851 relationships, ages and birthplaces are all supplied, and make the census returns key sources for family historians. Surname indexes by parish to the 1851 returns exist for almost the whole historic county and can be consulted in the searchroom. There is a comprehensive index on fiche to the 1881 returns, and a surname index to the 1891 returns exists for a large part of north-west Somerset. There are also surname indexes to the census returns for Bridgwater, 1841, and to Weston-super-Mare and area, 1841-81 (DD/X/AUS 8). Street indexes to most urban areas throughout the old county have been compiled and are available. Census microfilms for particular areas of the county are also held at the following libraries:

Bath Reference Library: *censuses for Bath City and adjacent areas, 1841-91*

Bristol Central Reference Library: *censuses for about 80 parishes in the north of the old county of Somerset, 1841-91*

Chard Library: *census for Chard, 1851*

Frome Museum: *censuses for Frome and district 1841-51, 1881-91, and Frome town 1871*

North Somerset Studies Library, Weston super Mare: *Weston and 5-mile radius, 1841-91*

West Country Studies Library, Exeter: *West Somerset and Blackdown parishes, 1851-91*

County Reference Library, Dorchester: *border parishes, 1851-91*

8. Other Parish Records The law of Settlement and Removal, 1662, required that when members of the poorer classes moved into a parish they should bring with them a *settlement certificate* (or indemnity certificate) from the parish in which they were settled. If they failed to do this or became a financial burden on the parish in which they had arrived they could be moved back again by means of a *removal order*. To determine which was their parish of settlement such paupers were questioned and a detailed statement of their life history to date, a *settlement examination*, was written down. These three classes of document survive from the late 17th century and are of great help when tracing movements of individuals before the census returns, as well as including details of great human interest. It must be added, however, that many Somerset parishes, particularly the small ones, have no surviving settlement papers: others, such as Wells St Cuthbert and Shepton Mallet, have them in profusion. For the illegitimate children of paupers there are also *bastardy examinations*, *bastardy bonds* (executed by the putative father), and *bastardy orders*. These documents are of particular value when the identity of the natural father is not indicated in other sources such as the parish registers. A name index to settlement and bastardy papers is available, and a selection of such documents is printed *in extenso* in Thelma Munckton's *Somerset Paupers: Unremembered Lives* (1994). Apprenticeship indentures for pauper children apprenticed by parish officers also survive from the 17th century up to 1836. An index is in progress. These are the principal parish sources likely to interest family historians, but details of other types of parish documents will be found in W. E. Tate's *The Parish Chest*.

9. WILLS The story of Somerset's wills is a sad one. Having been centralised at Exeter, most of the county's original probate records before 1858 were destroyed by German bombing in 1942, as were those for Devon. In spite of the losses, many wills and will copies *have* survived and are available at the Record Office and elsewhere. The complex subject of Somerset's surviving wills and will copies is discussed in the introduction to Sir Mervyn Medlycott's *Somerset Wills Index: Printed & Manuscript Copies* (1993). This volume is an indispensable guide to the availability of locally-proved wills and contains more than 17,000 entries. It partly reproduces and partly complements the will indexes available in the Record Office searchroom. The following paragraphs provide a simplified description of sources.

Locally-Proved Wills in Existence until 1942 Alphabetical lists of testators (stating names, places and dates of probate) whose wills were proved in the Consistory and Peculiar Courts at Wells up to 1857 are

held by the Society of Genealogists, 14 Charterhouse Buildings, Goswell Road, London, EC1M 7BA. The lists for the period 1529-1600 have been published by the Somerset Record Society, vol. 62 (continued up to 1648 in typescript, DD/X/SR 8). A similar list of both wills and administrations for the Archdeaconry of Taunton, 1537-1799, and of wills proved in the court of the Royal Peculiar of Ilminster, 1690-1857, was published by the British Record Society, vols 45 and 45a, and is available at the Record Office. *Originals of all these wills were destroyed in 1942, although copies survive in some cases.*

Surviving Locally-Proved Will Copies Wills and will copies survive in a wide variety of printed sources and manuscript collections. Researchers should consult Medlycott's *Index* (*see above*) and the Record Office's card indexes of wills. The Record Office holds microfilms of the Estate Duty registers of wills (abstracts) and letters of administration, 1805-12, and Estate Duty copy wills (*not* administrations or 'Peculiar' wills) for the period 1813-57. For details consult the Record Office index to Estate Duty wills or the fiche index to the same material compiled by D.T. Hawkings (Medlycott does *not* include Estate Duty copy wills).

Surviving Wills not Proved Locally Those who held property in more than one diocese or who were particularly well off had their wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC), the records of which are now held at the Public Record Office. Somerset wills proved there in the period 1383-1558 have been published by the Somerset Record Society (vols 16, 19 and 21). Printed lists of PCC wills, 1383-1700 and 1750-1800, are available in the Somerset Record Office. Six volumes of *Somerset Wills*, mainly but not exclusively from the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, up to *c.* 1730, were published by F.A. Crisp from the manuscript collections of the Rev F. Brown, and are also available: there is a separate typescript index to testators. From 1858, the probate of wills and granting of letters of administration ceased to be a matter for local ecclesiastical courts; thereafter, wills must be sought at the Principal Registry of the Family Division, Somerset House, Strand, London. The Record Office has microfiche copies of the index of grants of probate for England and Wales, 1858-1935.

Surviving Probate Inventories A large collection of probate inventories for the Archdeaconry of Taunton (*c.* 1630-1730) survives in the Sheppard Collection (DD/SP), and some further inventories can be found in other collections also held by the Record Office. There is a separate card index. A published index by A.J. Webb (forthcoming) covers probate inventories surviving both in the Somerset Record Office and the Public Record Office.

10. QUARTER SESSIONS RECORDS The Quarter Sessions records include Order Books and Sessions Rolls from 1607 supplying details of criminal cases and civil concerns of the county. The Order Books have been published (civil business only) by the Somerset Record Society for the period 1607-76 (vols 23, 24, 28 and 34) and the Sessions Rolls are indexed for the years 1607-16, 1660-1730. Both include cases concerning settlement, bastardy and apprenticeship disputes (*see* 'Other Parish Records' *above*). Gaol records are available but are principally restricted to the 19th century (Ilchester, Taunton (Wilton) and Shepton Mallet) and include gaol registers and description books (the latter particularly useful for tracing the origins of those transported to Australia). Assize records are generally held at the Public Record Office but prisoners sentenced at Assizes will appear in the Somerset gaol records. For full details see the catalogues for Q/AG. For ancestors owning or occupying property, the annual Land Tax assessments (1766-67, 1780-1833) can be used. These are catalogued by hundred and tithing (Q/REI) and are available on microfiche, as are their successor records, the Electoral Registers, 1832-1900. Original Electoral Registers are also available from 1900 to date.

11. EDUCATION RECORDS Records of individual schools have generally been transferred to the Record Office only when those schools closed. They date mainly from *c.* 1870 and include admission and attendance registers, managers' minutes and log books. Records less than 50 years old will not be produced. Consult the Subject Index under 'Education', where school records will be found listed alphabetically by parish. Some earlier records of endowed schools are also held (e.g. Crewkerne, Martock and Taunton) and these can be located in the same index.

12. ESTATE AND MANORIAL RECORDS Estate and manorial records are held in great profusion, having been deposited by the owners of major estates, solicitors and private individuals. Those of most value are deeds, manor court rolls, surveys, rentals and leases. Particularly popular in Somerset from the early 16th century were leases for 99 years or three lives. As these lives were often members of the lessee's family (relationships being stated and, from the early 18th century, ages often being given) such documents can establish a descent even when the parish registers are deficient or missing. Sequences of deeds and manor court rolls, the latter usually in Latin before 1733, can also serve the same purpose. The Place Name and Manorial indexes in the searchroom provide details of surviving estate and manorial records. When trying to trace an ancestor's house or property, estate, enclosure and tithe maps will be of use. Comprehensive map catalogues are available. For many parishes, however, there will be no detailed map earlier than the tithe map (c. 1840). For other classes of document consult the general Place Name Index and then find fuller details from the office catalogues. The index is in no way comprehensive.

13. OTHER DIOCESAN RECORDS Cases concerning slander, immorality, non-payment of tithe, ownership of church pews, breach of promise, irregular administration of estates, and a number of other minor ecclesiastical offences were heard at the bishop's Consistory Court. Basic records of cases appear in the Act Books, 1458-1917 (D/D/Ca), and the evidence of witnesses in the Deposition Books, 1536-1744 (D/D/Cd). The latter are of particular value to family historians as the witness usually gave his age, occupation, place of birth and details of other parishes in which he had lived. An index to deposition books has been started and at the time of writing covers the period c. 1675-1744. Unfortunately, many of these volumes were stored in damp conditions at Wells and are unfit for production. This is also true of licence books, 1558-1857 (D/D/Ol), which include not only marriage licences, as mentioned above, but probate acts and licences to assistant curates, schoolmasters, surgeons and midwives. For further details of these classes of record and others of less relevance to family historians the searcher is referred to the catalogues of the diocesan collection.

14. PRINTED SOURCES The Record Office is not primarily a collector of printed books and pamphlets, for which the searcher is referred to the Somerset Studies Library, Paul Street, Taunton, TA1 3XZ Tel: (01823) 340300 E-mail: somstud@somerset.gov.uk. The Local History Librarian can also call on the very considerable library of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. Nevertheless, the Record Office does hold an extensive library containing material of great value to the family historian:

Pedigrees National indexes to printed pedigrees are collected in three sources: G.W. Marshall, *The Genealogist's Guide* (4th edition 1903, reprinted 1973); J.B. Whitmore, *A Genealogical Guide* (published in 5 vols by the Harleian Society, 1953); G.B. Barrow, *The Genealogist's Guide* (1977). Good runs of *Burke's Peerage* and *Burke's Landed Gentry* are also held, together with copies of the *Complete Peerage* and *Complete Baronetage*. By their nature these publications concern the upper classes of society. There are three volumes of pedigrees specifically concerning Somerset resulting from Heralds' Visitations in the 16th century, in 1623, and in 1672. The Record Office also collects individual family histories and pedigrees and is happy to receive further items, particularly those compiled from records held by the office. The office library index provides a key to those publications already held.

Biographical Publications The upper classes are again more generously catered for in publications such as the *Dictionary of National Biography*, *Who Was Who*, *Walford's County Families*, *Kelly's Handbook* and *Knights of England*, while students at Oxford and Cambridge are treated in *Alumni Oxonienses* and *Alumni Cantabrigienses* and in Emden's *Biographical Register of the University of Oxford* (to 1540).

Directories A collection of directories of Somerset towns (in most cases excluding Bath) is held in photocopy form for the period 1784-1850. Thereafter, there are directories which cover all Somerset parishes, principally issued by Kelly's, for the years 1859-1939. The office holds only a small collection of directories for individual towns, although there is a fair run for Taunton 1935-72. Better sequences are held at the Local History Library and at the reference libraries of individual towns, particularly Bath.

Parish Histories Only four topographical volumes of the *Victoria County History of Somerset*, of over 20 that are planned, have so far appeared. The office library index (places) supplies details of town and parish histories available in print. Copies of the parish information files compiled by the Local History Library are held on microfiche.

Local Newspapers The office holds substantial newspaper files dating from 1740, although early papers contain little local material apart from advertisements. The early journalist was generally concerned with sensation: crime, executions, suicides and accidents (the more horrific the better) were his main topics. Notices of births, marriages and deaths occur from the beginning but detailed obituaries of the leaders of local communities only occur from the mid 19th century onwards. Holdings are strongest for the Taunton area and for the *Western Gazette* (1863-1970) which eventually produced editions covering most parts of Somerset. Microfilms of these and other Somerset newspapers, including the Bath area, are held at the Local History Library, and for this reason searchers will usually be asked to consult the microfilm copies.

Protestation Returns, 1642, and Hearth Tax Returns, c. 1664-70 Surviving returns for both sources have been published and can be consulted. The former purported to list all males of 15 or over but the returns for both are far from complete. They do, however, provide an opportunity to assess the distribution of particular surnames across the county at the relevant dates.

Printed Record Series Local series which should always be checked include the *Somerset Record Society* (mainly pre 1700), *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*, *Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*.

15. SOMERSET AND DORSET FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY The Somerset and Dorset Family History Society was formed in 1975 to help family historians resident in both counties and expatriates trying to trace Somerset and Dorset ancestry. Regular meetings are held at Frome, Highbridge, Street, Taunton and Yeovil, and a magazine, *The Greenwood Tree*, is issued four times a year. Further details are available from the [Somerset and Dorset Family History Society website](#) (new window).

16. BRISTOL AND AVON FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY The Bristol and Avon Family History Society covers the area formerly part of Avon, including North Somerset. Further details are available from the [Bristol and Avon Family History Society website](#) (new window).



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