



Somerset Archive and Record Service

Information Leaflet

Wills in Somerset

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 Heritage Centre 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 searchroom. The following paragraphs provide a simplified description of sources.

Locally proved wills in existence before 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 (also held on microfiche at the Somerset Record Office). The lists for the period 1529-1600 have been published by the *Somerset Record Society*, volume 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, volumes 45 and 45a, and is available in the searchroom. **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 wills card index in the searchroom. We have 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 1813-1857. For details, please see our 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 wealthy, had their wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC), the records of which are now held at The National Archives. These can be downloaded from [The National Archives website](#), for a small fee. Somerset wills proved there in the period 1383-1558 have been published by the Somerset Record Society (volumes 16, 19 and 21). Printed lists of PCC wills, 1383-1700 and 1750-1800, are available in the searchroom. Six volumes of *Somerset Wills*, mainly but not all from the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, up to c. 1730, were published by F. A. Crisp from the manuscript collections of the Revd F. Brown, and are also available: there is a separate typescript index to testators.

After 1858, wills were proved nationally. For details of how to find these, please see the [Ministry of Justice website](#). We have 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 here. There is a separate card index. A published index by A. J. Webb covers probate inventories surviving both in the Somerset Archives and Local Studies collections and at The National Archives.