

# Researching the history of a house: Step by step guide

## Introduction

Tracing the history of a house is an increasingly popular and enjoyable research activity but it is not usually as easy as some television programmes would suggest. Frequently asked questions tend to be:

1. When was the house built or altered?
2. Who built or altered it?
3. Who owned it?
4. Who actually lived in it?
5. Are there any events of interest associated with the house?

Different sources of information will help to answer different questions. It is, however, most unlikely that an enquirer would be able to find answers to them all. Usually it is easier to find out information about owners and occupiers than on the construction and development of a building. Even so there may be gaps in the surviving sources.

## First steps: How to begin

1. The deeds to the house are of great importance. If the property is mortgaged, the relevant bank or building society may be able to give access to the deeds for a fee. The deeds will give names of former owners and if they go back far enough perhaps even a date of construction.
2. The physical evidence of the building should provide a lot of clues. Its style and the materials used in its construction should give some idea of its age or if there have been obvious alterations. There are a number of general books on vernacular architecture which should help.
3. Establish in which ancient parish the house is situated as this will help when looking for documentary sources. The boundaries are shown on the first edition of the six inch Ordnance Survey maps, held by the Archive Service and many larger libraries.
4. Locate the house on all available large scale 25" to the mile Ordnance Survey maps. The archive set for Staffordshire is held by the Archive Service and many larger libraries have OS maps for their immediate area. These can also be accessed online at [www.staffspasttrack.org.uk](http://www.staffspasttrack.org.uk)
5. For old or large houses check to see if there is a volume of the *Victoria County History of Staffordshire* for the area. This might include a reference to

the house. Also check *The Buildings of Staffordshire* by Nikolaus Pevsner and *Mansions and Country Seats of Staffordshire and Warwickshire* by A. Williams and H. Mallett.

6. Check any available printed trade directories. These should provide information on building use and occupation for at least the principal inhabitants. Some directories are held by main libraries, including specific town directories e.g. Lomax Red Books for Lichfield. There is also a very comprehensive series at the William Salt Library, Stafford and the Local Studies Library at Stoke on Trent City Archives.

7. If the building is listed, there should be detailed architectural description available in the published lists. These should be available through local councils and some are also available at the William Salt Library, Stafford.

8. Did the building have a specialised use in the past or was it part of a large estate? If so this might mean that there are a greater range of archive sources available.

### **Basic guidelines to further research**

1. Tracing the history of a house can take a long time. The steps described already will help the enquirer to find out as much preliminary information as possible. For Staffordshire, it is very likely that a visit to the Archive Service may well be necessary to carry out further research.

2. Records earlier than the 19th century may be difficult to read because of earlier styles of handwriting. Some publications on how to read old documents are available in the Archive Service reading rooms. Latin occurs regularly in 16th and 17th century documents and this sometimes continues into the 18th century.

3. The survival of documentary evidence can be patchy and it is often difficult to identify a particular property within a document. There is no guarantee that documents will survive which will help with the history of a particular property. House names changed and house numbers tend not to be found everywhere until the beginning of the 20th century.

4. It is important to record accurately and fully any information which is discovered and to note the reference numbers of any documents consulted. This will save time if the documents have to be consulted again at a later date.

5. Always check unproven traditions however romantic or attractive e.g “Queen Elizabeth slept here”!

6. The Archive Service staff will answer postal enquiries about the contents of collections and the availability of source material free of charge. Research services are also available for a fee.

7. It is important to telephone to make an appointment before visiting any of the Archive Service offices in Staffordshire, as seats cannot be guaranteed without prior booking.

## **Other research resources**

### **1. Maps and Plans**

The Archive Service holds a range of maps, which were produced for different purposes over the centuries and which can help with house history. These include: tithe maps, enclosure maps and awards, estate maps, plans of public undertakings, such as canals and railways and building control plans. Many larger libraries also hold ranges of maps, including Goad Plans or Surveys of Tenure and Use.

### **2. Title Deeds**

Title deeds of properties survive in many collections held by the Archive Service, particularly solicitors collections. However there is often more chance of relevant deeds surviving if the property was part of a large estate or was owned by a corporate body e.g. the Church Commissioners. Deeds can be difficult to interpret and they are often large and wordy documents. However they will record the descent of the property and will provide a description.

### **3. Sale catalogues and sale notices**

These are particularly useful if they survive. 19th and early 20th century catalogues can be very detailed in their descriptions of properties and often include photographs. The most comprehensive set of sale catalogues for the county is held at the William Salt Library, Stafford. Sale/auction notices can be found in local newspapers some of which may be indexed. Newspapers will also contain details of planning applications and developments. Researching the history of a house: A local history resource from Staffordshire Library and Information Service

### **4. Electoral Registers**

These list persons eligible to vote according to the franchise in force at the time. The Archive Service holds electoral register for most parts of the county from 1832- 1908, 1918-1939 and 1945-1974. Main libraries hold some past copies of electoral registers for the local area. The arrangement of electoral registers varies at different times, and for the period 1832-1918 voters are listed alphabetically which makes the identification of individual properties difficult.

### **5. Rating and Valuation Records**

Rate valuations and assessments survive in a wide range of collections in the Archive Service. The quality and extent of these records is very variable. Detailed descriptions of properties are rarely recorded.

## **6. Census Returns**

These records will provide interesting background about the people who lived in particular properties during the 19th century but need to be used with care. The interpretation of the address may be difficult particularly in towns where street numbering was not necessarily formalised or stable.

## **7. Wills and inventories**

These can be particularly helpful for older properties. Wills can provide vital evidence of the inheritance of houses. The accompanying inventories can provide detailed descriptions of the arrangement and content of rooms. For the diocese of Lichfield wills are held at Lichfield Record Office.

## **8. Photographs and Other Illustrations**

[www.staffspastrack.org.uk](http://www.staffspastrack.org.uk) includes many archive photographs for the county. They can provide important visual information about properties in the past. In addition the William Salt Library's series of Staffordshire Views contains illustrations of some of the larger houses in the county. Some libraries also hold collections of photographs for their local area.

## **9. "Specialist" houses**

If the property has a specific use in the past such as a vicarage, nonconformist meeting house, school, public house or tollhouse, then there may be additional archive sources which can help the enquirer.

### **Further information**

#### **Staffordshire Library and Arts Service**

[www.staffordshire.gov.uk/leisure/librariesnew](http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/leisure/librariesnew)

#### **Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Archive Service**

[www.staffordshire.gov.uk/leisure/archives](http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/leisure/archives)

Staffordshire Record Office, Eastgate Street, Stafford, ST16 2LZ

Staffordshire Record Office is situated in Eastgate Street, behind the William Salt Library, and can be accessed through the archway opposite the end of Tipping Street.

#### **By telephone:**

(+44) 01785-278379 Archive enquiries

(+44) 01785-278373 Appointments

(+44) 01785-278380 Admin enquiries

**By minicom:** (+44) 01785-278376

**By fax:** (+44) 01785-278384

**By email:** [staffordshire.record.office@staffordshire.gov.uk](mailto:staffordshire.record.office@staffordshire.gov.uk)

Stoke on Trent City Archives, Hanley Library, Bethesda Street, Hanley, ST1 3RS.

Tel. 01782 238420 Email: [stoke.archives@stoke.gov.uk](mailto:stoke.archives@stoke.gov.uk)

William Salt Library, Eastgate Street, Stafford ST16 2LZ

Tel: 01785 278372 Email: [william.salt.library@staffordshire.gov.uk](mailto:william.salt.library@staffordshire.gov.uk)



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