



A guide to family history



Where to Start



Before you visit the Dorset History Centre, you should start by piecing together what you already know. You may well be able to draw up a draft family tree going back several generations, just from talking to your parents and grandparents. This will not be completely accurate but it will give you a good starting point.

Don't expect your family to remember every detail: people are more likely to remember names, rather than specific dates, but even if you just get an idea of roughly when people were born, it will help you when you come to do the research.

Here are a few helpful hints for your research:

- Write everything down! Make a note of everything you have looked at, including where it was, when you did the research, the range searched and the name you searched for.
- When you do find something interesting write down exactly what source it is from, including reference number, page and microfilm or fiche number.
- Before you visit the Dorset History Centre make sure that you know what you are planning to look for.
- Contact the centre before your visit if you are unsure and ask what information we hold.
- The Dorset History Centre can be contacted by email, telephone or post, or if your ancestors are not from Dorset, you can use the ARCHON directory to find the record office that covers the geographical area of the UK you are interested in.
- As you acquire more information keep a draft family tree. It is sometimes easier to establish where to go next if you have a visual aid.
- Decide on the system that you want to use for keeping notes - this could be on paper or computer-based.
- Finally, ask staff in the centre if you have any queries or if you cannot read the document or microfilm. Guessing a name incorrectly may lead to problems later on in your search.

Birth, marriage & death certificates



These documents are core records in building your family tree.

Key facts

- These documents record births, marriages and deaths, giving details of parents ages/ dates of birth and other key information.
- They were first issued in 1837 and continue to the present day - before 1837 you will need to use parish registers.
- They can not be found in local record offices - copies must be requested from local register office or the General Register Office.
- To order the certificates you will need to use the GRO index (or GROI) - this can be found on the **Ancestry** website (or for Dorset only, we have the index on microfilm for 1837-1992).
- The GROI covers the whole of England and Wales so, unlike using parish registers, you don't need to know the specific town, village or city where a birth, marriage or death took place.

What are they?

The civil registration of births, marriages and deaths, from which we get birth, marriage and death certificates, began in England and Wales on 1 July 1837 (1855 in Scotland). A certificate is simply a copy of the information registered with the General Register Office. The General Register Office was, and continues to be, informed of all births, marriages and deaths.

The GRO Index (GROI)

The General Register Office produces an index, known as the GROI, of all registered births, marriages and deaths:

- The index is created from the information sent to the General Register Office by the local superintendent Registrars
- It consists of three separate indexes for births, marriages and deaths registered since 1837
- The indexes are arranged quarterly up to 1983 and annually from 1984. The quarters run January to March, April to June, July to September and October to December
- The information contained in the indexes allows you to order a copy certificate of the relevant event.

There are several ways you can order a certificate:

- By post from the General Register Office in Merseyside
- On the internet
- From the relevant local register office

Certificates currently cost £9.25, although the price does depend upon the level of information given. The GRO and local registrars will charge more if you do not give precise details (i.e. the reference number from the GROI, or full details of individuals on the certificate).

Birth, marriage & death certificates



Using certificates as a source can be very helpful but it can also be an expensive way of tracing your relatives. Use the certificates in conjunction with other sources such as parish registers and census enumerator's returns.

You can access the indexes at the following locations:

- The Dorset History Centre has copies of the indexes for 1837-1992 on microfilm
- Other record offices and libraries across the country will also have copies
- <http://freebmd.rootsweb.com> is a website that aims to transcribe all the indexes from 1837-1902. Volunteers do most of the work so the process is not complete and is increasing all the time. You can search the indexes by name, date, registration district and county.
- The Ancestry website, which you can access for free at the Dorset History Centre.

What information do the indexes provide?

The indexes will provide you with a reference number, name, the quarter and year. With this information you can order a copy certificate from the GRO. However, these references will mean nothing to the local Register Offices so you will need to give the full name, quarter and, for marriages, the exact place e.g. church where the marriage took place. The information from the index is limited to just the name, registration district and reference number.

Births

For births the mother's maiden name was also added after September 1911. This is especially helpful if you are looking for a common name as it allows you to narrow down the list of potential entries. If you cannot find the entry in the quarter in which you think the birth took place it is worth checking the following quarter as registration could take place up to a month after the birth of a child.

Marriages

For marriages you will find an index entry for each spouse. Until September 1912 the information given only included name and district. This means that you have to search for the other party in the marriage (if known) and check that they both have the same reference number. After September 1912 the surname of the other party is included. This allows you to double-check straightaway.

Deaths

The indexes for deaths are similar to those for births and marriages. The information given is name, district in which the person died (not necessarily the same district in which they lived or were buried) and after 1866, the age of the person when they died. After 1969 the date of birth was given instead of the age at death. You must be careful when using either the date of birth or the age at death as the informant of the death may not have known the correct details. As with the birth and marriage indexes you may have to search the following quarter to find the relevant entry.

Birth, marriage & Death certificates



What information do the certificates provide?

Birth Certificates:

- Date of birth
- Full name of child
- Parent's name including maiden name
- Address of the parents
- Occupation of the father

This information can help you locate the marriage certificate of the parents. A note of caution - the parents did not have to show any evidence of their marriage before registering their child, so even if a maiden name is given it is not proof that a marriage actually took place.

It is also worth remembering that it was only in 1875 with the introduction of the Births and Deaths Act that fines were imposed for non-registration and penalties for late registration. Before that many births were not registered as people were unaware of the requirement to register or they believed that a baptism was a legal alternative. It is always worth checking the relevant baptism registers if you cannot find a birth certificate.

Marriage Certificates:

- Names of the couple
- Their ages
- Their occupations
- Their residences
- Names and occupations of their fathers

You could then work backwards to find the birth certificates for each party. A word of warning regarding ages - as with birth certificates there were no checks made. Either party could give an inaccurate age. In some cases the age is only given as 'full' or 'minor'. A 'Minor' was anyone under 21 years of age.

Death Certificates:

- Date of death
- Place of death
- Name
- Age
- Sex of deceased
- Their rank or profession
- The cause of death
- The details of the informant who registered the death

For early certificates the cause of death is often unreliable. The informant was often a family member so it may provide you with details of other branches of the family.

Parish Registers



Parish registers record baptisms (rather than births), marriages and burials (rather than deaths). For most parishes, they will start in the 1500s and continue to the present day.

Indexes to parish registers are starting to appear online, but these projects are mostly still in the early stages - the International Genealogical Index and 'FreeReg' both provide access to information from registers (but like all indexes should be used with caution)

What are they?

In 1538 Thomas Cromwell ordered that all parishes should compile registers of baptisms, marriages and burials. In 1597 an order signed by Elizabeth I required that the parishes had to use parchment registers and that previous entries going back to the start of her reign (1558) be copied into these registers.

The content of the registers is often different as it depended upon what the individual vicar wanted to record. Early registers commonly include baptism, marriages and burials in one volume, usually in Latin. In 1754 Hardwicke's Marriage Act was passed. This was designed to stop clandestine marriages and stated that marriages could only occur after the publication of banns, which were to be recorded at the back of the marriage register or in a separate volume, or the issue of a licence from the Bishop. It was at this point that volumes of specially printed forms were introduced. The Act also stated that all marriages had to be performed by a Church of England clergyman. The only exemptions were for Jews and Quakers.

The next Act to affect parish registers was the 1812 George Rose's Act. This stated that all vicars had to keep two specially printed volumes to record baptisms and burials, in addition to the standardised marriage register as stipulated in Hardwicke's Marriage Act. Before this act it was up to the individual parish to provide the registers for baptism and burial and the content of the registers varied.

In 1836 the laws relating to marriage changed again. The Superintendent Registrars were authorised to issue licences for marriage in a register office or in a non-conformist church. Prior to 1816 the only marriages not conducted by Church of England clergymen were for Jews or Quakers. After 1836 you will need to be aware that your ancestors may have married in a register office or a non-conformist church and will therefore not occur in the parish registers. Obviously there should still be an entry for them in the GRO.

Where to find them

Parish registers can usually be found in the local county record office, sometimes called the Diocesan Record Office. Dorset History Centre holds the parish registers and records Dorset parishes in the diocese of Salisbury. The History Centre also holds some microfiche copies of older parish registers for parishes in Bournemouth and Christchurch, which are in the diocese of Winchester and the original registers are held at the Hampshire Record Office. The most straightforward way to locate the correct registers is to contact the relevant county record office. They will usually be able to tell you where the registers are.

Parish Registers



Dorset History Centre has microfilmed almost all of its parish registers and you will be asked to use these surrogate copies. This is to prevent any further damage or deterioration from continuous handling. This is common practice among all record offices.

Baptisms

Children were usually baptised soon after birth, but you may find examples where children were baptised several years later. Annotations were often added if the child was illegitimate. These include 'base-born', 'bastard child' or 'spurious'. If a child died in infancy the next child to be born would often be given the same name as the deceased. This can be confusing when you are trying to work out dates. It is always worth just checking the burial registers to see if any of the children died in infancy.

Until 1754 it was common to find baptisms with marriages and burials in one volume. Initially they will probably only record the name of the child, the date of the baptism and the name of the father. Some may note the name of the mother. After 1754 and the marriage act you can expect to find the baptisms in the same volume as the burials. The situation changes after Rose's Act in 1812, when the following information is recorded:

- Date of baptism
- Child's given name
- Parents' given names and surnames
- Residence
- Trade or profession of the father
- Name of the officiating minister

You may also find the date of birth recorded. Later registers from the mid-late 20th century usually record the date of birth and the names of god-parents.

Marriages

After 1754 you should find individual marriage registers containing specially printed forms. Before a marriage could take place banns had to be called or a marriage licence had to be obtained.

Banns: These were the published intention of marriage and had to be announced on three Sundays before the intended wedding. They were issued in each of the parishes in which the couple resided. Their purpose was so that any potential objectors to the marriage had three weeks in which to comment.

Licences: Licences were obtained from the diocese in which the marriage was to take place or the Vicar General of the province. They allowed the couple to avoid the inconvenience of publishing banns. Either the bride or the groom had to swear that there was no impediment to the marriage. Marriage licence allegations are usually found in county record offices, diocesan registries or the Church of England Record Office at Lambeth Palace.

Parish Registers



Between 1542 and 1836, much of Dorset was in the Archdeaconry of Dorset and formed part of the Diocese of Bristol. The registry of the Bishop for this archdeaconry was based in Blandford and, unfortunately, early records (perhaps including marriage licences) were destroyed by fire in 1731.

Records of the Diocese of Bristol are held by Bristol Record Office. In 1836, the Archdeaconry of Dorset was transferred to the Diocese of Salisbury and marriage licences from this date are therefore held at the Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office.

Before 1754 you are likely to find only the date of the marriage and the names of the bride and groom. After 1754 you should find the following information:

- Number in register
- Names of bride and groom
- Their parish
- Licence or banns
- Date of marriage
- Name of officiating minister
- Signatures of parties and witnesses

After 1837 the information becomes more comprehensive and is the same as a civil marriage certificate:

- Date of marriage
- Place
- Names of bride and groom
- Age and condition of the bride and groom
- Their rank or profession
- Their residences at the time of marriage
- Father's name and occupation for both bride and groom
- Name of officiating minister
- Signatures of parties and witnesses

Burials

Until 1754 these were usually found with the baptisms and marriages in one volume. Until 1812 you are likely to find burials and baptisms together. After 1812 there should be individual burial registers. The early entries give the name of the deceased and the date of the burial. You may find additional information such as the name of the parent or spouse, whether the deceased was a widow or widower or if the deceased was a child. As with the other types of registers it depends upon the individual minister.

After 1812 you will find the following information:

- Name of deceased
- Number in register
- Abode
- Date of burial

Parish Registers



- Age at time of death
- Name of officiating minister

Parish registers are an extremely useful source for family historians. For many of us they are the only way in which we can trace our ancestors back to the 1600s and earlier. However, there are problems with using the registers. As you get further back you are likely to find that the quality of the registers diminishes. The handwriting may become more difficult to read. You may find that the ink seeps through from the other side and obscures the text. It may be that the registers were kept in damp conditions and the parchment has shrunk or warped in some way. Parchment is also a favourite food for rodents so you may find that the edges of volumes have been nibbled on.

On the plus side, you will find that your eyes get accustomed to the handwriting and that after a while you can pick out the names that you are interested in quite clearly. It is quite likely that you will find that transcripts have been made of the registers. At the Dorset History Centre we have transcripts for many of the registers. These have either been done by volunteers from local Family History Societies or in the case of some of the earlier transcripts, by interested vicars. You should not use these in place of looking at the registers but they are helpful in checking whether a family comes from a particular parish. Many other record offices will have transcripts of parish registers available.

Other denominations and faiths

The Church of England has been the established, or official, church since the 1500s. The denominations outside the Church of England are often referred to as non-conformists. Whilst the majority of the population has been Anglican since the 16th century, your ancestors may have belonged to another denomination (including the Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists and Quakers) or another faith (for example, Judaism).

Because these other denominations experienced varying degrees of discrimination or persecution during the last five centuries, and because there are not the same legal requirements for depositing records as there for the Church of England, records for other denominations and faiths do not have the same survival rates as Anglican records. The coverage for many non-conformist groups is usually patchy.

You should still contact the relevant local record office to check their holdings for other denominations and faiths. However, records may also be held at The National Archives, at individual churches, or other specialist repositories.

Census Enumerators Returns



The census effectively provides a snapshot of the population at 10-year intervals, covering the mid 1800s to early 20th century. These records can not only add individuals to your family tree, but also give an insight into where and how your ancestors lived.

What is the census?

The first census was taken in 1801 and has been repeated every 10 years, with the exception of 1941. The original purpose of the census was to provide the government with population statistics and until 1841 no personal information was asked.

All of the returns from 1841 onwards have an increasingly detailed set of questions. The census lists each household in England and Wales. The census can show you where your ancestors lived, who they lived with, their relationships, their jobs, their ages and places of birth and any disabilities or long-term illnesses that affected them.

Availability of the census

The returns are closed for 100 years to protect the privacy of the people involved. The most recent census to be released was the 1911 census (although sensitive information regarding medical conditions has been removed from the 1911 census returns until the full 100 years has past). In most instances you will be working backwards from the 1911 or 1901 censuses to trace your ancestors at 10-year intervals.

Where to find census returns

You will find that most county record offices or local history centres have microform copies of the returns for that particular county. Dorset History Centre has copies of all returns for Dorset and some neighbouring parishes in Wiltshire, Somerset, Devon and Hampshire.

You may find that local studies centres and larger libraries have copies of the returns.

The 1911 census is available at findmypast.co.uk and access is by pay-per-view or subscription. The 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901 census returns can found on the Ancestry website. This can be accessed from your home computer by pay-per-view or subscription, or access is free in the History Centre.

Free access to indexes and transcripts of the census is available through familysearch.org (1881) and FreeCEN.org.uk (1841, 1851, 1861, 1871 and 1891).

The 1881 census returns for England and Wales have been put onto CD-Rom and can be searched by name.

Some problems with Census Returns:

- Unfortunately they only cover the period 1841 to 1911. Any earlier or later than that and you have to use other sources

Census Enumerators Returns



- It is possible to miss a child. If someone is born in 1862 and then dies in 1868 and you are relying on the census returns you will not pick up any details about them. Therefore you must use them in conjunction with other sources
- As with the GRO and parish registers the information is not always accurate. The enumerators may have misheard or misspelt a name, or age or occupation. If your ancestors were illiterate as many were, they would not have known if the correct spelling or name was being written down
- Family relationships were less rigid than they are today. The term 'in-law' was often used where we would use the 'step' prefix. Illegitimate children of the daughter of the house may well be listed as the children of the grandparents
- Your ancestors may have moved all over the country and without indexes it is very difficult and time-consuming to locate them again