Tracing the History of Your House: sources at Cambridgeshire Archives

Discovering the history of a house is more difficult than people think: plans and documents relating to specific properties are rare, and those that do survive may need careful interpretation. Most records say more about the owners or occupiers of a property than its architecture. This leaflet guides you through the more obvious sources for house history but staff are always present to assist and advise if you need further help.

You can search many of the records listed below on our on-line catalogue at http://calm.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/calmview/

Listed buildings Many buildings of architectural interest have been listed. We have copies of the official architectural descriptions of listed buildings in Cambridgeshire from the 1980s but can supply more up to date information on demand. The Heritage Gateway website allows you to search across national and local records of England's historic sites and buildings: http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/

Title Deeds The best place to start is to look at any surviving title deeds for the property, and then work backwards. These may be with your solicitor, building society or bank, though earlier deeds may remain with the previous owner. They will give an idea of the changing value of the property and the names of the people who owned or occupied it. Interpreting deeds can be complex owing to the legal terms involved, and up to the mid-eighteenth century they are in Latin but there are various helpful books on understanding deeds available in the searchroom.

Note that deeds record only changes in legal status - if there were no changes, there will be no deeds. There is no obligation upon individuals to deposit old deeds at local archives so although we may have deeds going back to the 1700s for a handful of properties, for most we will have nothing at all.

For details of more recently deposited deeds, consult the accessions lists in the quarterly reports.

County Directories can be useful since they often give owners’ or occupiers’ names but be aware that omissions and errors may occur, and street names or numbers may have been changed. We have a complete run of Post Office and Kelly's Cambridgeshire directories, 1847-1937, and of Spalding’s and Kelly's directories of Cambridge, 1874-1975. Some of the larger towns, such as Wisbech, Newmarket and Littleport, also had their own street directories.

Maps Between 1876 and 1887 the Ordnance Survey (OS) made their first large-scale survey of the county published in both 6 inch and 25 inch scales. A parish may fit onto a single sheet of the six inch edition, which makes it quite easy to handle, especially if the area you are looking at is fairly large. The 25 inch scale plans of the same survey are particularly useful for detailed study of individual buildings. Both scales were revised for a second edition between 1896 and 1901. Later editions of both 6 inch and 25 inch scales are available, although not for all areas. 125 inch town plans were also produced for Cambridge, Ely, March, Newmarket and Wisbech in 1884-86,
and are extremely detailed, including external features of houses, and principal rooms of public buildings.

**Land Value Duties** The second edition 25 inch scale was used as the basis for the short-lived tax on land values of 1910-11: the maps are keyed to volumes containing details of owners, occupiers, rateable values etc. Staff will be able to produce the map and volume for your area.

**Tithe maps** for Cambridgeshire were drawn up between 1837 and 1852 (following the Tithe Commutation Act of 1836). They were accompanied by a written apportionment, detailing the owner, occupier, acreage and use of each field and property in the parish, and show the proportion of tithe to be paid on each plot (tithe being a tax paid to the Church). They therefore provide a fairly complete picture of a community and its land use. The maps are, however, not as detailed as OS maps, since they were concerned only to identify the properties for which tithe was payable. They often show only field boundaries with few place names, while buildings are usually shown only as blocks. Field names are given, where they exist, in the apportionments. You will not find a tithe map for every parish since in some cases allotments were made in lieu of tithes at the time of inclosure. A full set of tithe maps and apportionments for the ancient diocese of Ely is at Cambridge University Library, but we have a number here: a list is on the searchroom shelves.

**Inclosure maps** of Cambridgeshire parishes were drawn up between 1776 and 1889, though most date from the period 1801-57, when much common open land was inclosed to consolidate land holdings, and so improve the efficiency of agriculture. They were not compiled for all parishes, and are perhaps not as useful as tithe maps for the house historian. This is because the accompanying award does not usually name any occupiers, nor in many cases the owners of buildings in the village, even though they are marked on the map. Inclosure maps of fen parishes often do not include the fens, since they had been allotted when they were drained. This may mean in some cases that only small portions of the parish are shown. A list of inclosure maps and awards is on the searchroom shelves.

**Estate maps** were drawn up for landowners from as early as 1600 to illustrate the extent of their property which may be described in associated documents such as rentals or surveys. The property shown on these maps can vary from small plots to whole parishes. *Maps, Land and Society: A History, with a Carto-bibliography, of Cambridgeshire Estate Maps, 1600-1836* by Sarah Bendall is a useful guide to holdings here and in other repositories across the country.

**Public utility plans** If your property is near a railway or canal or other public undertaking then it may be worth looking at these. The plans were accompanied by reference books, which give owners' and occupiers' names. They are listed along with a place in the Quarter Sessions catalogue on the searchroom shelves and in our on-line catalogue.

**The Bedford Level Corporation** was the drainage authority for most of the Isle of Ely and parts of neighbouring counties. All of its records from 1663 to 1920 have survived, and they include an outstanding series of maps and deed registers which may prove useful if your property lies in the fens. Catalogues are available on the searchroom shelves, and the archivist on duty will be able to assist.

**Manorial Records** Copyhold land technically belonged to the lord of the manor. If your property was copyhold you should examine any surviving court books for the manor. These record all
conveyances, mortgages and inheritances of the property and usually include a name index. Before 1735 they are normally in Latin, and earlier court records are in roll form rather than books and without indexes. A list of manorial records is available on the searchroom shelves. Copyhold tenure was abolished in 1922.

Pictorial Sources Postcards and photographs survive from the 1870s showing houses, churches and shops in the middle of towns and larger villages, or showing stately houses, but if your property is on the edge of a town or village, or is an isolated farm building, there is much less chance of finding an image. To check whether any old photographs or prints survive, consult the illustrations card index in the searchroom. The Cambridgeshire Collection in the Central Library in the Grand Arcade, Cambridge (tel: 0345 045 5225), has a particularly extensive, indexed collection of photographs.

Sale Particulars The detail provided in these records can differ a great deal. Particulars for grander homes may include a detailed description of the property, often listing rooms and, sometimes, including plans, and (recently) photographs; for a large estate, tenants’ names and details of leases may also be noted. For more modest properties, older sales particulars especially may contain disappointingly little information.

Probate inventories Surviving mainly from the 16th and 17th centuries, inventories can sometimes provide an idea of the number of rooms within a home, its various outbuildings, their use and the way in which they were furnished. The only clue as to the actual identity of the property, however, is usually the name, occupation and parish of its former owner.

Land tax assessments survive for all Cambridgeshire parishes for 1798, and for the southern part of the Isle of Ely, 1750-1948 and for Cambridgeshire excluding the Isle, 1829-32. There were also series covering various periods for other parts of the county. They list names of owners and, later, occupiers but rarely include anything more than a summary description of the property. There is a handlist of Land Tax assessments on the searchroom shelves.

Hearth tax assessments list the names of householders parish by parish, with the number of hearths, indicating the size of the house. Three assessments cover the whole of Cambridgeshire (1662, 1666 and 1674) and are available on microfilm. 1674 is the most comprehensive since it also includes those exempted on the grounds of poverty: it has been transcribed and indexed.

Parish Rate books for poor rates, church rates etc, list owners and sometimes also occupiers, the rateable value and the rate payable. Earlier parish rate books do not usually include addresses so it is difficult to identify a particular property in older tax and rate assessments unless you already know the name of the owner or occupier.

District Council rates give details of occupiers of houses and the rateable values. Subject to certain exceptions, occupiers were subject to rates, not owners. We have rate books for many Urban District Councils and Rural District Councils in the Cambridgeshire area, mainly dating from the 20th century. There is a handlist of rate books on the searchroom shelves.

Electoral registers Twentieth century registers list the names of all voters resident in every property. Early registers, especially in smaller villages, are arranged by surname but later on, and in the larger towns, they are arranged by street.
Census Records  The census was taken every ten years, and from 1841 lists every inhabitant of a parish household by household. We have copies of all the surviving returns for Cambridgeshire from 1841 to 1901, many transcribed and indexed. You can also view census returns on Ancestry.co.uk in our searchroom. Again, it is often difficult to identify a particular property, since even in towns, street numbering was quite a late introduction.

Converted buildings  Old farmhouses, schools, vicarages, almshouses, pubs etc. may be mentioned in local histories of a town or parish, or in the relevant volume of the Victoria County History which also gives a useful overall view of the history of the area; the Cambridgeshire volumes are available for reference in the searchroom.

Former schools  
There will be references to school buildings in the County Council Education Department minutes; in the head teacher's log books or the school board managers' minutes, and there may be plans and photographs too. Check our handlist of Education Records and list of County Council Architect's plans.

Former pubs  
Pub licensing was the responsibility of Justices of the Peace and later, Petty Sessions courts, which evolved into today's magistrates' courts. Surviving Petty Sessions licensing records are held here. See the list on the searchroom shelves. Directories give the names of pubs and their landlords and 1:2500 Ordnance Survey maps sometimes include pub names. Records of breweries often include deeds of former public houses and occasionally photographs. Leases of commercial properties (e.g. a pub or a shop) may include plans showing the layout of the interior. See our handlist of business records for more information.

Former chapels, churches and vicarages  
Some houses are converted ecclesiastical buildings. There are often many records surviving for former Church of England properties, such as vicarages and rectories, as they may be mentioned on terriers of church land, or in records of Archdeacon's visitations. Parish records may include plans and specifications for proposed building work. Fewer records survive for nonconformist chapels, however; there may be photographs of the building, but little more.

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