

# Family history in Essex

## Getting started

It is a good idea to do some background reading before you begin. Books on how to trace your family history, such as David Hey's *Journeys in Family History: exploring your past, finding your ancestors* (National Archives, 2004) and Stella Colwell's *Tracing Your Family History* (Teach Yourself, 2007), should be available through your local library.

To begin tracing your family history in Essex you should ask older members of your family for information. It will help if you know the full names, the dates of birth, marriage and death of your grandparents and great-grandparents, and also where they lived. It would help to know which church they attended, and the names of other family members.

## Civil registration records (1837 onwards)

With this information you can check the civil registration records of births, marriages and deaths. These records began in 1837 and are not held at local record offices, but at local registration offices and (for the whole of England and Wales) at the General Register Office. The registers are not available for public inspection, but indexes to the registers can be searched on microfiche in the Essex Society for Family History Research Centre on the ground floor of the Record Office (telephone: 01245 244670), in some larger libraries, and at the National Archives, Kew. Some indexes can be searched free of charge using

[www.freebmd.org.uk](http://www.freebmd.org.uk). Indexes 1837-2005 can be searched for a fee on the internet at [www.findingmypast.com](http://www.findingmypast.com) & [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk). There is free access to the latter site in the Record Office's Searchroom.

## Parish registers (1538 onwards)

Alternatively you can check the parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials for Essex.

Parish registers record baptisms, marriages and burials in the Church of England, and sometimes dates of birth and death are also recorded. The registers of ancient parishes may begin between 1538 and 1598, although sometimes the early registers have not survived. During the Civil War and Commonwealth periods, c.1640-1660, entries are often sporadic. From 1754 separate marriage registers were kept and registers of banns began. Standard printed formats were introduced after 1812. Registers continue to the present day, but recent registers are usually still in the parish church. Details can be found on Seax, which includes a 'Quick Find Registers' facility, and in *Essex Family History: a genealogist's guide to Essex sources*.

Many parish registers have been filmed in order to preserve the original documents. They are now available in microfiche format. If microfiche copies of registers are available in the Searchroom, the original registers will not be produced unless, in the opinion of the archivist, some frames on the fiche are illegible. If a recent deposit of registers has not yet been filmed, the originals will be produced.

**Searchroom hours:**  
**Monday 9.00 - 20.30**  
**Tuesday to Thursday 9.00 - 17.00**  
**Friday and Saturday 9.00 - 16.00**

## **Bishops' transcripts (1779-1878)**

These are annual returns of baptisms, marriages and burials made by the parishes and sent to the diocese. They can be used alongside the parish registers, to fill gaps or to check readings. Unfortunately, the series for Essex is very imperfect; few survive before 1800 and no parish has a complete set. These can be found by searching our electronic catalogue, Seax. A few bishops' transcripts for the 17th and 18th centuries are held at the Guildhall Library, London, and an indexed transcript can be seen at Chelmsford (T/R 83).

## **Nonconformist and Roman Catholic registers**

Between 1754 and 1837 marriages of Roman Catholics and Nonconformists should be found in Anglican parish registers. Separate series of baptismal or birth records were sometimes kept by individual churches. After 1837 marriages in Nonconformist and Roman Catholic churches became legally valid and separate registers began to be kept. Records have been deposited by many Baptist (D/NB), Congregational and United Reformed (D/NC), Methodist (D/NM) and some Free churches (D/NZ), by the Society of Friends (Quakers) (D/NF) and Roman Catholic churches (D/K). Additionally, microfilm copies of pre-1837 registers deposited in the National Archives in London and of Quaker records held outside the Essex Record Office are available in the Chelmsford searchroom. Details can be found on Seax and in *Essex Family History*.

Many denominations have central archives: for example, many Quaker records are at Friends' House, Euston Road, London NW1 and staff can advise you about this.

## **Census returns (1841-1901)**

The first national census was taken in 1801 and one has been taken every 10 years since, except in 1941. From 1801 to 1831 the returns were purely numerical, but from 1841 they record personal details including name, age, occupation and (except 1841) place of

marital status and relationship to the head of the household. The returns for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901 for Essex are available on microfilm in the Chelmsford searchroom.

The census returns are arranged by parish. There are few indexes to streets or names, but microfiche name indexes of the 1851 and 1861 returns (for Essex) and the 1881 returns (for Essex and adjacent counties) are available in the searchroom. The national index to the 1881 census is available on CD-ROM. All the census returns can be searched at [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk) in the Record Office searchroom and in Essex libraries.

Copies of the census returns for the whole county can also be seen at Colchester Library (1841 - 1901) and Chelmsford Central Library (1851 and 1901), The central libraries at Clacton, Southend and Grays hold copies for their local areas only.

The Essex Record Office also holds a few unofficial parish census lists, some pre-1841, and these are listed in *Essex Family History: a genealogist's guide to Essex sources*. There is also a name index to the parish census lists in the microfiche publication No. 2, *Parish Census Listings, 1797-1831*, on sale at the Record Office.

## **Marriage licences and indexes**

Original marriage licences, bonds and allegations are held for 1665 -1851 (D/A[ ]L). They can be consulted via Browne's index (arranged by male and female surname), or Crisp's index (arranged by male and female surnames, and on microfilm, T/Z 464). *Boyd's Marriage Index* (incomplete for Essex) is an index to marriage registers 1538-1837, arranged by male and female surnames. The Essex Marriage Index (in progress) is a series of transcripts of marriage registers 1754-1851, arranged by parish and date (T/R 203).

## Probate records (1400-1858)

Wills for the period 1400 to 1858 held in the Essex Record Office at Chelmsford are in two formats: original wills (D/A[ ]W) and registers of wills (D/A[ ]R). Registered wills are available only on microfiche. An index arranged by surname of testator has been published (F.G. Emmison, *Wills at Chelmsford*, vols. I-III) and this can be found in the Essex Record Office library (Dewey reference 929.3). Details of wills are being transferred to Seax, and digital images of some wills are also available.

Probate and administration acts (D/A[ ]Ac and D/A[ ]Wa), administration bonds (D/A[ ]Wb) and warrants (D/A[ ]Ww) are also held.

Wills of some Essex residents were proved in other courts, such as the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC) (now at the National Archives), the Consistory Court of the Bishop of London (now at London Metropolitan Archives), the Commissary Court of the Bishop of London and the Peculiar of the Dean and Chapter of St. Paul's (both now at the Guildhall Library). Published indexes to PCC wills, 1383-1800, are in the Essex Record Office library (Dewey reference 929.3), and the indexes may be searched online at:

[www.documentsonline.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.documentsonline.nationalarchives.gov.uk)

Wills after 1858 are mainly held at First Avenue House, 42-49 High Holborn, London, but a microfiche index to the National Probate Calendars, 1858-1943, can be seen in the ERO Searchroom. Personal copies of wills are often found among collections of family and estate papers; these can be found by a name search on Seax.

*The records outlined above are the main sources for family history, but there are many others which record names of individuals and which may help you to build up your family tree. These other sources, as well as confirming or filling in gaps about names and dates of family members, will help you to build up a wider picture of the lives of your ancestors.*

## Records of electors and tax payers

Poll books for the county are available in the Record Office library for 1679-1763, and some have been indexed by name. There are separate poll books for Colchester and Maldon. Manuscript poll books for 1810-1841 can be found in the Essex Quarter Sessions records (Q/RPe).

After 1832 lists of electors were compiled annually, giving the elector's name and the qualifying property. From 1867 the right to vote was extended and the lists became more comprehensive. Women were not fully franchised until 1928. No electoral registers were printed for 1916, 1917 or 1940-1944. The Record Office does not hold complete sets of all electoral registers, particularly for those areas formerly in Essex and now within the London Boroughs; in such cases they may be found in the appropriate local reference library.

Lists of owners or householders can be found in parish rate books compiled for the purposes of a poor rate, a church rate or a highway rate and these sometimes survive among parish records. For the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries they will be found among the records of the appropriate local authority.

Hearth tax returns for 1662-1673 (Q/RTh) and 1662-1675 (T/A 169) are arranged by parish and they list owners or occupiers of property. A name index and a transcript for 1662 are available on microfiche and an index of the 1665 returns is also in pre-paration. Land tax assessments c.1780-1832 (Q/RPI) also list owners or occupiers in a particular parish, and are available on microfiche in the searchroom. A name index for 1782 is available on request.

## Poor Law records

The parish overseers of the poor were responsible for the upkeep of poor families before the establishment of Poor Law Unions in 1834. Parish overseers could send poor children as apprentices or order families to

be removed back to their home parish for relief. Records of these activities, including apprenticeship indentures, settlement examinations and removal orders are among parish records (D/P). A name index to all these settlement papers, c.1574-1865, is available on microfiche in the searchroom. Disputed removals were referred to the Quarter Sessions and appear in Quarter Sessions bundles (Q/SBb) but these are not indexed and only a few (for 1827-1835) have been calendared.

After 1834 the Boards of Guardians (G/) were responsible for poor relief and they administered the Poor Law Unions which were groupings of several parishes. Their records sometimes include workhouse registers of births and deaths, admission and discharge registers for the workhouse and medical registers. Unfortunately, few workhouse records survive in Essex before the late 19th century, but the minutes of Guardians' meetings usually date from 1834.

## Family and estate records

The archives of land-owning families in Essex (D/D ) may contain genealogical notes and charts, other family papers and copies of family wills. Sometimes they include manorial records, which give details of transfers of copyhold property (a form of land tenure abolished in 1925). Court rolls or court books record admissions of new tenants, surveys list the tenants on the lord's estate and rentals give the names of copyholders and the rent paid.

## Militia lists

Muster rolls and lists giving names and other details of officers and men in the Essex militia corps and volunteer units c. 1775 -1865 are found among the Lord Lieutenant's records (L/L), borough records (D/B) and parish records (D/P).

## Printed sources and indexes

The Essex Record Office library holds a number of useful printed sources for family history, including histories and biographies of prominent local families and individuals. Aristocratic and landowning families can be found in Burke's *Peerage* and *Landed Gentry*. Clergymen are listed in *Crockford's Clerical Directory* and other clergy lists (1822 -1991). Clergymen and other graduates of Oxford and Cambridge universities are listed in J.A. Venn's *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (up to 1900) and J. Foster's *Alumni Oxonienses* (1500-1886). Some pedigrees are printed in *Visitations of Essex*, 1552-1668. Printed trade and street *Directories* of Essex are available for c.1793 - 1937, and there are separate series for large towns such as Chelmsford and Southend in the 20th century.

Some early Essex names can be found in printed *Feet of Fines for Essex 1182-1603* (6 vols.) and in *The Medieval Essex Community: The Lay Subsidy of 1327* ed. Jennifer C. Ward, both of which are indexed.

The International Genealogical Index (IGI) is an index to parish registers and other records up to c.1875, compiled by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and available on microfiche in the searchroom. There is a listing by surname for each county. The index is useful, but not definitive for Essex, since many parishes are not yet included. The IGI can be searched online at [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org).