House history in Essex

If you live in an old house and want to discover something about its history, there are many sources of information in the Essex Record Office to help you.

Tracing the property's history, and learning about some of the people who have lived in it in the past, can be fascinating. The house does not have to be large or important; the history of small cottages can sometimes be traced through old maps and written records. But the task is not an easy one, and it can take some time. It is a good idea to read books such as N. Barratt *Tracing the History of Your House: a Guide to Sources*, 2001 and N.W. Alcock, *Documenting the History of Houses*, 2003.

Getting started

It is important to start with the known facts about your house and to work backwards in time, step by step. It is not usually possible to find out exactly when your house was built. You are more likely to find out who the owners or occupiers were, and this will help you to establish if the property was used for anything other than just a private residence. It is important to focus on who lived in the house, because only by doing this, step by step, can you be sure that you are finding out about the right house. Precise addresses are a modern development and even the names of houses sometimes changed over the years.

Architectural evidence

Your first step must be to look closely at the building for clues about its age. Remember that many old houses have been re-fronted or extended, so that the interior may provide more clues than the outside appearance.

Title deeds

The deeds to your house are a very important source of information, so try to locate them. They may be with your solicitor or building society. If you are lucky, they may include documents from the time that the land was first purchased, and they will give you the names of successive owners. Sadly, you are more likely to find that only the more recent deeds survive, as once property has been registered with the Land Registry, pre-registration deeds do not need to be kept.

Once you have a rough idea of how old your house may be, and you have discovered all that you can from the title deeds, it is time to start your research in the Record Office.

Ordnance Survey maps

For properties built after the mid-19th century begin by looking at the large-scale Ordnance Survey maps. Three editions were published from the 1870s to the 1930s at a scale of 6 in. and 25 in. to the mile; the earliest edition was also produced at a scale of 120 in. to the mile



covering the areas of large towns. Ask searchroom staff to show you the key sheet so that you can select the precise area you want to see. The maps will be produced for you by the staff.

Even if your house dates from a much earlier period, you may learn something from these maps, which show an accurate outline of the property. For example, wings or outhouses may be shown which have since been demolished.

Tithe maps

In 1836 an Act of Parliament led to the surveying and mapping of all titheable lands and the conversion of all tithes to a rent. These tithe maps were often the first detailed plan to show all, or most of, a parish. The written document that accompanied the maps, the tithe awards, listed the owners and occupiers of every plot of land or dwelling shown on the map, giving a brief description of the property and the rent that was fixed by the Tithe Commissioners. Today, these are a prime source for historians, and for anyone studying house history they are a vital piece of evidence. If your house appears on the tithe map, the award will show you who owned it and who lived in it at the time of the award. These mostly date from 1837 to 1850. For the north west of Essex, if no tithe map exists, an enclosure map provides comparable information.

The Essex Record Office has photographic copies of most of the tithe maps, which you can ask to see. They are stored in map drawers in the map research area of the Searchroom. Many of the awards have been transcribed and arranged into plot number order for each parish, making it very easy to find the details of your property, once you have found it on the map. The tithe award transcripts are stored in binders on the library shelves close to the map tables.

Earlier maps

A useful printed map to take you one stage back from the tithe map is Chapman and Andre's map of Essex of 1777. This covers the County on a scale of 2½ in. to the mile, and it shows all the principal buildings.

The Essex Record Office also holds a large number of manuscript estate maps, many of them commissioned by private owners of estates in the County. They date from the late 16th to the 19th centuries. You can search for these through Seax and either order the original map for study, or look at a photographic copy in the black 'Estate Map Binders' near the map tables. Not all maps have been photographed, but where there is a photographic copy you should look at this first, to save unnecessary wear and tear on the original.

Other records

Other series of maps which may show your house are enclosure maps and plans of public schemes such as railways, canals or turnpike roads. Parliamentary enclosures began in the 18th century and the associated maps and awards provide information about land ownership, cultivation and some buildings; some constitute a complete survey of the parish, but others give the barest minimum and only cover a small proportion of the area of the parish. Enclosure maps can be located by a free text search on Seax (ie enclosure map and parish name). Photographic prints of the enclosure maps are available in the searchroom.

If your house was near a railway, turnpike road or canal it may be shown on the relevant plan which had to be deposited with the Clerk of the Peace and should be found among the Quarter Sessions records. These plans can be located by a free text search on Seax (ie deposited plan and parish name). See also Q/Rum catalogue (for plans 1792-1888) and C/PP catalogue (for plans 1888 onwards).

Printed sources

If a detailed history of your locality has been published check this for any references to your house or the land on which it was built. Old farmhouses, cottages or town houses may be mentioned in parish histories, in a relevant volume of the *Victoria County History of Essex* (work on these volumes is still in progress), or in the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments' *Inventory of Historical Monuments in Essex*.

Printed trade directories may also be helpful, although they are of limited use in tracing a property because they do not include all inhabitants in a place and only give brief details (if any) of their addresses. The series of county directories in the Searchroom begins in 1823. Another set can be found in Colchester Library, Trinity Square, Colchester CO1 1JB, tel: 01206 245917. Detailed street directories for towns such as Chelmsford, Colchester, Southend and West Ham are useful for urban properties from the beginning of the twentieth century.

Manorial records

If there are no early deeds for your property it may be because it was formerly 'copyhold', that is, held from the lord of the manor by a copy of court roll. This form of land tenure was abolished in 1925. The records of manor courts contain details of the 'surrenders' and 'admissions' by which copyhold property was transferred from one party to another and if a good run of these court rolls survives, a succession of 'owners' can be traced. In addition, manorial surveys will list the copyholders of the manor and rentals will give their names and the rent paid. Manor court records were kept in Latin until 1733, but owners' names may be recognisable even if you know no Latin. You can search for manorial records on Seax.

Estate records

Another reason for the absence of early title deeds may be that the house was formerly part of a large estate. The tithe map, printed parish histories or trade directories will help you to find out who the major landowners in the area were and you can then search Seax to see whether this family has deposited any estate records. Estate records often include rentals, surveys, maps and leases which can all be useful in tracing ownership. In larger collections there may also be estate accounts recording expenditure on buildings, alterations and repairs.

Rates and taxes

Lists of owners or householders can be found in rate books compiled for the purposes of a poor rate, a church rate or a highway rate, which sometimes survive amongst collections of parish records, so check Seax and the parish records catalogues (D/P). Land tax assessments were kept for electoral registration purposes c.1780-1832 and these also list owners or occupiers with a brief description of the property and the tax payable on it. A detailed list of the land tax assessments in the Quarter Sessions records (Q/RPI) can be seen in the searchroom; there is also a name index to the 1782 assessments. Earlier land tax assessments do not often survive locally, but check Seax for these. Similarly the records of the hearth taxes of 1662-1673 are to be found amongst the Quarter Sessions records (Q/RTh): these list the name of each owner or occupier and the number of hearths in the house. A name index and transcript for the 1662 returns available microfiche. is on

Census returns

Census returns for 1841-1901 will show you who was living in your house at the time of each census. Although the house names and numbers will probably not be included on the early census returns, you can check the 1841 and 1851 returns for the names of the owners or

occupiers found on the tithe award. The census returns are available on microfilm, and there are name indexes on microfiche to the returns of 1851, 1861 and 1881. Census returns 1841-1901 can also be searched on the internet at www.ancestry.co.uk, to which there is free access in the Record Office Searchroom and in Essex libraries.

Electoral registers

After 1832 lists of electors were compiled annually, giving the elector's name and a brief description of the property which qualified him to vote. From 1867 the right to vote was extended further and the lists became fuller and more detailed: women were not fully franchised until 1928. The registers for the county elections 1832-1888 are to be found in the Essex Quarter Sessions records (Q/RPr); later registers 1889-2001 are amongst county council records (C/E). Electoral registers can be located by making a free text search on Seax. 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 held by the library for the appropriate area. No registers were printed for 1916, 1917 or 1940-1944.

Building plans

If your house is situated in an urban area and was built or altered in the late nineteenth century or more recently it is possible that a building plan for the property may survive. These were submitted by the builder or architect to the local authority for approval under local bye-laws. Only the pre-1915 plans have so far been catalogued and an appointment is always necessary to view them.

Sale catalogues

These can be helpful for their description of property, particularly if a plan is included and the rooms in the house listed. The sale particulars for an estate or large farm will often list individual cottages belonging to the property. The Essex Record Office has a large collection of sale catalogues and a detailed index, arranged by place, can be seen in the Searchroom. This index is gradually being transferred to Seax.

Probate records

When you have discovered the names of some of the previous owners of the house, you can check to see if any of them left a will. Some 70,000 original Essex wills dated before 1858 are deposited in the Essex Record Office and a printed index is available. Details are gradually being added to Seax, and digital images of some wills are already available. A will may briefly describe a property and show to whom it was bequeathed.

Special categories and pictorial collections

Houses which were formerly used for special purposes (for example, rectories, inns and schoolhouses) may be documented in other types of record. The sources detailed above are intended as a general guide only and you can ask in the Record Office for more information.

It is also worth checking to see if there is a print, engraving, photograph or postcard among the Record Office's pictorial collections. These can be located by a free text search on Seax (ie photograph and parish or property name).