

# Cheshire Archives & Local Studies

## Quick guide to Family History

The aim of this leaflet is to offer some useful advice on records that provide the evidence you need to explore your family history. The information refers to Cheshire, but the general principles will often apply to records kept throughout England and Wales.

### Where to begin?

Tracing your ancestors can be a very long, time-consuming process, so before launching into the project:

- Decide which line of your family you wish to trace; it is often easy to be sidetracked by coming across records on other branches of the family, or unrelated families of the same name.
- Get all the information you can from members of your own family, such as names, dates and places. Even if some of this information proves to be not entirely accurate, it can often provide useful clues or pointers in the right direction.
- Start with yourself and work backwards. It can be tempting to skip the recent generations that are most familiar, but there is always a chance that you will miss vital clues, or be taken in the wrong direction.
- Plan how you are going to collect and record information. Note where you found it from the start.
- Aim to avoid guesswork and test your assumptions and when possible check the original records.
- Prepare to be challenged and frustrated. Our ancestors did not always share the truth with official record keepers, and records were never created for the benefit of family historians!

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### Key to Website information



Access online



Subscription site: you may search for free but will need to subscribe or pay to view images of original records. **Free Access at the Cheshire Record Office and libraries across Cheshire.**

### *Births, Marriages and Deaths* Civil Registration 1837 to present

Since 1 July 1837 all births, marriages and deaths in England and Wales should have been recorded by local registrars. The original records are kept in local register offices, and copies are sent to the General Register Office (GRO).

Family Historians are not permitted to look at these records themselves, but can purchase copies of birth, marriage and death certificates.

Certificates can be obtained from the local register office where the event took place, or from the GRO at Southport.



**Cheshire BMD** [www.cheshirebmd.org.uk](http://www.cheshirebmd.org.uk) contains indexes to most of the records held by the Cheshire registrars, and includes application forms or online payment options for ordering certificates. Details of similar sites for other areas can be found at **UK BMD** [www.ukbmd.org.uk](http://www.ukbmd.org.uk)



**Free BMD** [www.freebmd.org.uk](http://www.freebmd.org.uk) contains indexes to the copies of the records held by the GRO (currently only partial coverage past 1940).

£ **Ancestry** [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk) and

£ **Find My Past** [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk) both have the GRO indexes from 1837 up to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



The **General Register Office**

[www.gro.gov.uk](http://www.gro.gov.uk) website contains application forms and online payment options for ordering certificates from Southport.

**Tip** - Index references with a volume reference and page number that look like '8a 493' are GRO references. You cannot use these when you contact local register offices.

£ **C The Cheshire Collection with Find My Past:** full free access to our digitised collections at the Cheshire Record Office and libraries across Cheshire. Also available in Warrington libraries.

## **Population & Household Surveys Census records 1841 to 1911**

National censuses have been taken every ten years from since 1801. The 1841 census was the first to include addresses, names, occupations, birthplaces and ages (often rounded down to the nearest five years for people over 15).

From 1851 onwards a person's exact age and parish of birth were supposed to be recorded (although in practice these were not always given accurately). The 1851 census was also the first to indicate the relationship of each person listed to the head of the household. Census information was collected geographically by address, and everyone who slept in a house on the census night should be listed – it may not have been their usual home.

Census surveys took place on Sundays on:

6 June 1841  
30 March 1851  
7 April 1861  
2 April 1871  
3 April 1881  
5 April 1891  
31 March 1901  
2 April 1911

These records allow you to place individuals in family groups and observe the progress of the family over time.

Census records remain confidential for up to 100 years. The 1911 census is the most recent to be made available and also the only census where the original forms completed by the heads of household have survived.

All of the censuses can be searched and viewed online, and all, except the 1911, can also be viewed on microfilm or microfiche.

£  **Find My Past** ([www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk))

£  **Ancestry** ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)) both have searchable transcripts and images for all the censuses from 1841 to 1911.

**Tip** – Use the age and place of birth details on census forms to help find individuals in birth registration indexes and parish registers.

## **Voters Annual Electoral Registers 1832 to present**

Electoral registers record the names and addresses of people entitled to vote at elections. They were introduced in **1832**, when only around 1 in 7 men were eligible to vote, depending upon the value of the property they owned. This qualification was gradually extended so that by **1884** around two-thirds of men over 21 appear in the electoral registers. Most women over the age of 30 gained the right to vote in **1918**, and only in **1928** did all adults over 21 gain the right to vote. The qualifying age was reduced to 18 in **1969**.

The electoral registers were arranged by constituency and polling district, with households in towns and cities usually listed by street and house numbers, while voters in rural areas appeared in alphabetical order by surname. The qualifying date for appearing in the electoral register was several months before the published date of the register.

No registers were compiled during the wartime years of 1916-1917 and 1940-1944. Registers compiled immediately after both wars included 'absent voters' lists to allow serving military personnel to vote in their home constituencies. In 1918 and 1919 these included military service numbers, rank and regiments.

Some of our constituency collections are incomplete, including Birkenhead, Stockport and Wallasey but may be held elsewhere. Check what we hold using CCRg as Reference in our online catalogue advanced search.

£  **Find My Past** [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)

**The Cheshire Collection 1842-1900**

 **Cheshire Towns and Parishes**

<http://www.ukbmd.org.uk/genuki/chs/parishes.html>

**Tip** – To find out when a person or family arrived at or left an address, start by checking at five-yearly intervals, and then narrow it down.

## **Baptisms, Marriages and Burials Parish Registers 1538 to present**

Parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials generally between 1538 and 1598, and continue to the present. Each church kept its own set of registers, so there can sometimes be gaps in the records, where volumes have been lost, damaged, or due to the disruption caused by the civil war and its aftermath (1640-1660).

The earliest registers combine baptisms, marriages and burials in sections of the same volume, and are sometimes written in simple Latin. The amount of information is limited to names and dates and varies considerably between different parishes. Separate registers of pre-printed forms were introduced for marriages in 1754, and for baptisms and burials in 1813.

Most Cheshire parish registers over hundred years old (and many recent ones) have been transferred from parish churches to the Record Office, where they can usually be seen on microfilm. You can check what we hold on the Cheshire Parishes map on our website. Some Cheshire Parish registers have been transcribed and some indexed and this can help with deciphering entries that are difficult to read.

Also on microfilm are the abbreviated copies of baptism, marriage and burial records for most parishes sent annually to the Bishop of Chester until the late nineteenth century. These are known as 'BTs' (bishop's transcripts) and can be useful when the original register is lost or difficult to read.

£  **Find My Past** [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)

**The Cheshire Collection 1538-1910**

 **Cheshire Parish Register project**

[www.csc.liv.ac.uk/~cprdb](http://www.csc.liv.ac.uk/~cprdb)

 **Cheshire Towns and Parishes**

<http://www.ukbmd.org.uk/genuki/chs/parishes.html>

 **Cheshire Churches**

<http://www.ukbmd.org.uk/genuki/chs/churches/index.html>

 **Family Search** [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

**Tip** – In our experience the Family Search index that forms the basis for searches of the Cheshire Collection has errors and omissions. The Cheshire Parish Register Project is very accurate, but more limited in areas covered. Try all indexes, and check the records yourself if possible.

## **Non-Anglican Registers 1689 to present**

Non-conformists such as Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Unitarians did not follow the established Church of England. They had freedom to worship after 1689 but many still continued to be baptised, married and buried in their local Church of England parish. Between 1754 and 1837 legislation made it unlawful to marry anywhere but in a Church of England parish church, with exceptions made only for Quakers and Jews.

Surviving registers for non-conformist baptisms, marriages and deaths before 1837 are held at the National Archives. The Record Office has microfilm copies of these registers for Cheshire, and holds some original non-conformist registers from after 1837. However, the survival of records is patchy, the whereabouts of many remain unknown, and those records that have survived contain varying amounts of information.

The registers of over 30 Roman Catholic churches have been deposited at the Record Office, dating mostly from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even modern entries in these registers use Latin and Latin versions of first names. You can check our holdings for Catholic churches using Reference ERC in our online catalogue advanced search.

Records of Quaker births, marriages and burials are also held at the Record Office in the Society of Friends collections (Reference EFC for an online catalogue search).

£  **Find My Past** [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)

**The Cheshire Collection 1671-1910**

 **Cheshire Towns and Parishes**

<http://www.ukbmd.org.uk/genuki/chs/parishes.html>

 **Cheshire Churches**

<http://ukbmd.org.uk/genuki/chs/churches/index.html>

[ml](#) use link for Roman Catholic Churches

 **Family Search** [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

## **Marriage Licences 1606 to present**

Couples usually marry after the reading of banns in their home parishes – a licence would be needed if either party were under 21 or if they needed a quick or private marriage. Since 1754 a parish marriage record should state whether it was authorised by banns or licence.

Bonds and allegations (part of the licensing process) can provide extra information on the parties to a marriage, such as ages, occupations, places of residence and sometimes parents' names. Licences for the Archdeaconry of Chester (Cheshire and South Lancashire) survive from 1663 and are held at the Cheshire Record Office.

£  **Find My Past** [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)

**The Cheshire Collection 1663-1905**

 **Family Search** [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

### **Other Sources to consider**

**Trade directories:** begin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century listing private residents and local tradesmen

**Local newspapers:** begin in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and are particularly useful for reports of crime and inquests, but only begin to feature family announcements in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**School admission registers:** mainly from the 1870s

**Monumental inscriptions:** from churchyard surveys of gravestones

**Tithe maps:** owners and occupiers of land in the 1840s

### **Where to go to find out more**

#### **Cheshire Archives & Local Studies website**

 <http://archives.cheshire.gov.uk>

To check our catalogue, search our databases including railway staff and Cheshire military records, view digitised trade directories, compare modern and historic tithe maps online, or to plan a visit!

Visit your **local library** for family history books and magazines for all levels of expertise. A **Local Studies** section will have maps and microfilm of church records and newspapers for their area.

#### **Local Family History Societies**

 [www.fhsc.org.uk](http://www.fhsc.org.uk)

**Family History Society of Cheshire**

 [www.ncfhs.org.uk/](http://www.ncfhs.org.uk/)

**North Cheshire Family History Society**

## **Wills and Probate Records 1487 to present**

Although only a minority of our ancestors left wills, they can provide valuable details about a person's social status and family relationships. Wills vary considerably in both size and content, from virtually no detail to the extremely detailed (sometimes enabling you to construct a family tree of several generations). Up until the 1750s inventories listing the deceased's property were often attached to the will, giving details of household goods and the tools of his or her trade.

When someone died without leaving a valid will, letters of administration (or 'admons') could be granted to the person's next of kin. These are usually less informative, but may still include an inventory.

Until 1857 the church authorities were responsible for accepting the validity of a will (proving or granting probate), but in 1858 a new system of civil probate registries was established.

The Record Office holds over 70,000 original Cheshire wills and probate records proved in the Archdeaconry of Chester between 1487 and 1857, as well as 60,000 microfilm copies of wills proved at the Chester Probate Registry between 1858 and 1940.

 Indexes to all these wills can be found on the Cheshire Archives and Local Studies website, use 'Search and Shop' to search databases.

£  **Find My Past** [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)

**The Cheshire Collection 1492-1910**

£  **Ancestry** ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)) has an index to the vast majority of wills proved in England and Wales between 1858 and 1940.

**Cheshire Archives & Local Studies  
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Duke Street  
Chester  
CH1 1RL**

**Tel: 01244 972574**

**Email:** [recordoffice@cheshiresharedservices.gov.uk](mailto:recordoffice@cheshiresharedservices.gov.uk)

**Website:** <http://archives.cheshire.gov.uk>