

Discover: Your Family History in Essex

Advice from the Essex Record Office

Tracing your family history can be an absorbing and rewarding pursuit. If you have ancestors who lived in the area of historic Essex, we will most likely hold material which will help you trace them and find out about their lives.

Getting started

There are a number of books and websites which will provide an introduction to how to trace your family history. Many of these books are available in the Essex Record Office reference library or through a local library. To begin tracing your family history it is helpful to ask older members of your family for information. You should make a note of information such as names and dates of your grandparents and other family members. It is also helpful if you have some idea as to where they lived.

Civil registration records (1837 onwards)

From 1837 the Government began keeping records of births, marriages and deaths. These records are held at local registration offices and (for the whole of England and Wales) at the General Register Office (see www.direct.gov.uk/gro).

Indexes to these records are available online and copies of the original certificates can be ordered from the registration service using the references given in the indexes. Some, but not all, indexes can be searched free of charge using www.freebmd.org.uk. Indexes can be searched for a fee online on the subscription sites www.ancestry.co.uk and www.findmypast.co.uk. Both of these sites are available free of charge in the Essex Record Office and Essex Libraries.

Parish registers (1538 onwards)

Parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials are the main source for family history before civil registration. They record baptisms, marriages and burials in the Church of England, and some dates of birth and death are also recorded. The vast majority of parish registers from churches in Essex have been deposited with ERO, although some recent registers may still be held by the relevant parish church.

The registers of ancient parishes may begin between 1538 and 1598, although some of 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.

Details of registers held in the Essex Record Office can be found on our catalogue, Essex Archives Online (www.essexarchivesonline.co.uk). Digital images of all parish registers in the Essex Record Office, with the exception of marriages after 1957, are available through the Essex Record Office's online subscription service Essex Ancestors (www.essexancestors.co.uk). Essex Ancestors is available free of charge in the Essex Record Office and at the Saffron Walden and Harlow Archive Access Points.

Bishops' transcripts (1779-1878)

These are annual returns of baptisms, marriages and burials made by parishes and sent to the diocese. They can be used alongside 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. They can be found by searching our electronic catalogue, Essex Archives Online. A few bishops' transcripts for the 17th and 18th centuries are held at the London Metropolitan Archives, and an indexed transcript of these can be seen in the Record Office (T/R 83).

Nonconformist and Roman Catholic registers

Church of England parish registers can include nonconformists and Roman Catholics. Unless there was a separate burial ground, they may be buried in the churchyard and between 1754 and 1837. Everybody, with the exception of Quakers and Jews, had to marry in the Church of England until 1837. From the 17th century nonconformist churches started to keep their own records. Pre-1837 registers are deposited at the National Archives and are available on Ancestry. Records have been deposited at ERO by many Baptist (D/NB), Congregational and United Reformed (D/NC), Methodist (D/NM) and some Free churches (D/NZ), and by the Society of Friends (Quakers) (D/NF). Only a few Roman Catholic churches (D/K) have deposited their registers. Additionally, microfilm copies of Quaker records held outside the Essex Record Office are available in the Searchroom.

Census returns (1841-1911)

The first national census was taken in 1801 and one has been taken every 10 years since, except in 1941. The census was taken by parish. From 1801 to 1831 the returns were purely numerical, although a small number of returns for some parishes survive and can be found on Essex Archives Online. From 1841 the census records personal details including name, age, occupation and (except 1841) place of birth, marital status and relationship to the head of the household. The returns are indexed and available on a number of sites including www.ancestry.co.uk and www.findmypast.co.uk which are both available free of charge in the Essex Record Office and Essex Libraries. The returns for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901 for Essex are also available on microfilm in the Searchroom.

Probate records (c.1400-1858)

Wills proved in the ecclesiastical courts held in the county of Essex for the period c.1400 to 1858 are held in the Essex Record Office. The original wills (D/A[]W) are all catalogued on Essex Archives Online, and digital images are available to view through the subscription service Essex Ancestors (www.essexancestors.co.uk). There is free access to this in the Essex Record Office and at the Saffron Walden and Harlow Archive Access Points. Not all original wills survive and there are also 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 ERO library (Dewey reference 929.3).

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, the Commissary Court of the Bishop of London and the Peculiar of the Dean and Chapter of St. Paul's (all now at the London Metropolitan Archives), (both now at the Guildhall Library). PCC wills can be viewed on the website of the National Archives (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk).

After 1858 wills were no longer proved in ecclesiastical courts. Wills after 1858 can be searched for online and copies ordered at www.gov.uk/search-will-probate. The indexes to the National Probate Calendars are also available on Ancestry and a microfiche copy for the years, 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 Essex Archives Online.

Other records

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 and provide a wider picture of the lives of your ancestors.

Marriage licences and indexes

Original marriage licences, bonds and allegations are held for 1665-1851 (D/A[]L). There is an index in the Searchroom arranged by male and female surnames.

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). All poll books are listed on Essex Archives Online.

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.

Rate books list owners or householders liable to pay a rate. These can be found in parish records (D/P), and from the 19th century in the records of the appropriate local authority. They can be found by searching Essex Archives Online for rate book and the name of a parish or the name of a local authority area. Hearth tax returns for 1662-1673 (Q/RTh) and 1662-1675 (T/A 169) are arranged by parish and list owners or occupiers of property. Land tax assessments, c.1780-1832 (Q/RPl) also list owners or occupiers in a particular parish, and are available on microfiche in the Searchroom. Indexes are available in the Searchroom for the 1662 Hearth Tax and the 1782 Land Tax assessments.

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 nineteenth century, but the minutes of Guardians' meetings date from 1834 to 1930 and occasionally mention individuals.

School records

Admission registers list pupils attending a school, with dates of pupils joining and leaving the school. Other information recorded can include dates of birth and names and addresses of a parent or guardian, notes on where the pupil came from or where they went on leaving the school. Admission registers are closed for 100 years. They can be found by searching Essex Archives Online. There are other school records, including log and punishment books, which might mention individual pupils. These are also closed for 100 years.

Hospital records

Hospital records are also closed for 100 years. Among the records deposited in the Essex Record Office are records of Essex County Hospital in Colchester (A/HN 1) and the reception orders and case books for patients at Warley Hospital (A/H 10), the county's main psychiatric hospital.

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).

Searchroom hours

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| Monday | Closed |
| Tuesday | 10.00am-8.00pm |
| Wednesday & Thursday | 10.00am-5.00pm |
| Friday | 9.00am-4.00pm |
| Alternate Saturdays (with some exceptions, e.g. Easter; a list of which Saturdays we are open is available on our website or from Reception) | 9.00am-4.00pm |

Contact us

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