

# Tracing the History of Your House

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THE increasing interest in local history has led to a sharp rise in those who obtain enormous enjoyment from tracing the history of their house and its previous occupants.

One does not need to own a medieval hall house or a Georgian mansion to be able to enjoy the thrill of detective work involved in this most absorbing of pursuits. The most ordinary dwelling – urban, suburban or rural – has a past, and with luck and perseverance, the story of the most mundane building can be pieced together, as can the comings and goings of those who owned and or occupied the dwelling through the years. In order to be able to understand one's findings and place them in their appropriate historical and social context some wide reading will also bring benefits, as with all historical research.

My wife and I live in the outermost reaches of the Dover District Council area; indeed, our house is the second most northerly building in Staple parish. And herein lies an early lesson – it is as well to find out in which parish your house stands, both now and in the past, as many of our local archives were compiled and administered at parish level.

However, regarding the previous owners and occupants, a sift through the title deeds should enable you to draw up a list of your predecessors in chronological order. Our own deeds only survive as far back as the 1920's, but a stroke of luck revealed that we already knew a relative of the owner who died in 1977. Not only were we able to map out the family and learn of the alterations completed in recent decades, but our friend, a member of the Kent Family History Society, kindly provided photographs of two generations of the Hills family, who farmed from our cottage for nearly 50 years. Exhibits like this will embellish any scrapbook and researchers should make every possible attempt to trace previous occupants, hopefully obtaining photographs of the house and its owners. This is usually possible with



the use of deeds, correspondence, telephone directories and street directories. And don't forget to ask the neighbours – they may know more than you think! 171

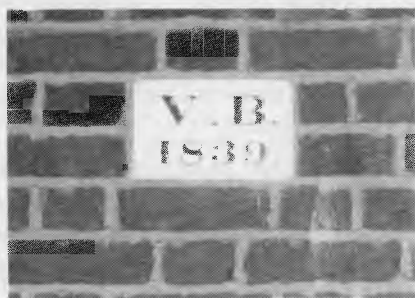
Although we were not sure who occupied our house at the turn of the century, street directories were extremely useful. These volumes – Kelly's, Post Office, etc. – are no longer published, but once listed every resident by address in a given district. The further one goes back, the more these directories only list the gentry or commercial entries, but most public libraries (including Dover) have a good collection.

Dover Library is the repository for the chief source used to trace the whereabouts of local residents during the 19th century – the 10-yearly census. An approximate (and later an exact) address is given between 1841 and 1891, enabling you to pin down the head of the household, his age, occupation and place of birth, as well as his family and any servants living there on census night. The family historians among you will already know these records, which, when used in conjunction with the parish registers, provide a vivid picture of a district in Victorian times. In order to be positive about the exact address, careful comparison with other records is necessary – street directories, parish registers and, if available, detailed maps.

Branch libraries hold good collections of census material and ordnance survey maps and a visit to Canterbury Cathedral Archives will generally produce the parish register or a copy. But was your house there in those days? Or was it, perhaps, a different building altogether? The large scale ordnance maps of c1907 and c1872 may answer these questions (Dover Library again). For the most revealing details of all, the Tithe Map of c1840 will show not only the building but the owner, occupant and the use to which any land or garden was put.

In our case the census shows that Richard Port, a farm labourer, and his wife, Charlotte, were in residence from 1861 to 1891. Evidence of the place of birth of their children and comparison with the parish register and rate books (Canterbury Cathedral Archives) pins down the arrival of Richard Port to 1858. This is also confirmed by the Staple churchwardens' accounts. We do not know when they moved to Sandwich, but they died there in 1904. Their children, some born in this house and some a year or two earlier, grew up and worked locally, mostly marrying into very local families. We have also identified the cottage where the Ports lived before they came to this house and we are in touch with a descendant who lives in Kent.

Richard Port had succeeded William Appleton, another labourer with a small holding, and his wife, Sarah, and children. In ascertaining how long this couple had occupied the cottage, we became involved in trying to establish the identity of the owner and also the accuracy of the date stone above the front door, which contained the inscription, "V.B. 1839".



172 Datestones often indicate the year the house was built – but not always. Extensions, renovations or dates of purchase were also commemorated thus. However, the tithe map for the Shatterling division of Staple, although dated 1839, was surveyed in 1837, and showed a house on the exact site – owned by a Valentine Bushell and occupied by a William Appleton! Another map of 1797 (on which the Kent Ordnance Survey map of 1802 was based) clearly shows a building on the same spot and it therefore seems likely - because the existing brickwork and doorway are contemporary with the stone - that the present house was erected in 1839 on the site of another which was pulled down. The owner evidently re-installed the existing tenant, who, according to the churchwardens' accounts (Cathedral Archives) and Land Tax returns (County Archives, Maidstone) had already lived on the site for about ten years.

Any earlier tracing of the building's past must be done chiefly through its occupants. This is possible by referring to the wealth of parochial archives for the 18th and early 19th centuries, such as the churchwardens and overseers' accounts, Land Tax and Window tax. However, great care must be taken, when trying to establish a chain of occupancy, that errors are not made by hasty assumptions. Much can be discovered by the order in which the names are recorded each year, rendering sudden changes more noticeable, but alphabetical lists can make a mess of your calculations! As with all research, it is important to compare your findings with other sources, thereby building a strong hypothesis which appears more feasible than any others. By this method we have painstakingly traced the occupancy of the previous building to the Elvery family, a poor man and his wife in regular receipt of parish relief. Not until the 1760's do we have an owner-occupier.

But what of Valentine Bushell? Detailed genealogical work on him in parish registers of Ash and Deal, as well as family wills and electoral poll books, revealed that he was born, married and buried in Ash, but never lived there after his childhood. From the 1820's he ran a saddlery business in Lower Street (later High Street) Deal, until his death in 1859, when the business passed to his son. He bequeathed the cottage (which had been acquired for investment purposes only) to his son, Thomas, but with a life interest for his widow, who derived a quarterly income from the rents until she died ten years later. Valentine had originally acquired the property through a brother-in-law and we can trace the ownership of the house before his time, through the Adkins and Baker families of Ash and Staple. An astonishing stroke of luck revealed that Deal library holds a photograph of Valentine's shop in Deal in c1859, with two men posing outside – Valentine and his son, Thomas?

Much has been done but much remains to be done - the search never ends. But by making a start you will soon discover the thrill of reconstructing the story of the home in which you live, and perhaps identify with the men and women, boys and girls, who lived, worked, prayed and slept in the same rooms you inhabit today. .