

# The Kresen Kernow Guide to Researching your Family History

Researching your family history can be an exciting adventure, taking you on a journey you may never have imagined. It can also be a long and involved process, so here are some tips to help you get started.

- First, organise what you know already and decide what you want to find out. This will prevent you getting side-tracked by irrelevant information.
- Remember, other members of your family often know lots of useful information. Starting with yourself and working backwards write down all that you and your relatives know about your family. Using letters, photographs, newspaper cuttings and family bibles can help with this.
- Make sure you record where your information has come from. Include notes when a search has been unsuccessful to prevent you looking in the same place twice.
- Start to draw a family tree or chart, leaving space to add more information when you find it.
- Read a book or magazine on genealogy (family history). There is also lots of information available online.

Once you have done all this you are ready to get started on archive research and can plan your visit to Kresen Kernow. **Please note**, all our records have Cornish connections so if your ancestors are from elsewhere we might not be of much use to you. However, we do provide access to online sources that could still be helpful.

When researching your ancestors, it is helpful to first find out their basic details – such as name, dates of birth and death, family members, places where they lived - and there are a few vital sources that can help you do this.

## 1) Parish Registers

The parish was a unit of church and civil government. Boundaries were drawn up in the Middle Ages and remained fairly unchanged until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Baptisms, marriages and burials had to be recorded in parish churches from 1538 (although not many in Cornwall survive from this early date). The registers containing this information are a key source for early family history, and can tell you your ancestor's name, their parents' names, in which church or churchyard they were baptised/married/buried and when. The quality of the registers and the information they can contain can be quite variable. Over time, standard printed books were introduced which are much more consistent. All 257 parishes in Cornwall have deposited most of their parish registers at Kresen Kernow, and they are available to access on microfiche in our reading room or via printed transcripts for some parishes. Bishop's Transcripts of many of the registers are also available (these are

contemporary copies) and are useful for cross-referencing your finds. Please note that current registers remain at the parish churches.

Cornwall Online Parish Clerks ([www.opc-cornwall.org](http://www.opc-cornwall.org)) is free to use and has a searchable database of parish register transcriptions, and a wealth of information from other parish sources.

[www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk) and [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk) are subscription-based websites and have some transcriptions and images from parish and Non-Conformist (e.g. Methodist, Baptist) records. Find My Past can be accessed for free at Kresen Kernow and public libraries throughout Cornwall.

[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) has transcriptions and some images from parish registers and other sources – it is free to access but you need to create an online account to view records.

**Helpful Hint!** Baptisms often took place days, weeks or even years after the date of birth, and burials usually several days after the date of death.

## 2) Other registers

In the 19th century most of the population of Cornwall attended Methodist chapels. Kresen Kernow holds over 500 registers for various Methodist denominations and circuits and also looks after Society of Friends (Quaker) records, and holds certain Baptist and Congregational registers. Fowey Library holds transcriptions of the Fowey Congregational Church Baptisms and Marriages, 1950-1970. We also have a photocopy of a marriage register for the Jewish community in Penzance covering the dates 1838-1892. We also hold several 20<sup>th</sup> century marriage registers for Roman Catholic churches in Cornwall (collection reference RCRG) although usually these are held by the individual churches. We also hold some registers for civil cemeteries and monumental inscriptions.

## 3) Birth, marriage and death certificates

Civil registration was introduced in 1837 and made it compulsory to register a birth, marriage or death. It still continues today. These records are brilliant for confirming dates, names and places. However, these records are held by the Registration Service and public access to them is not permitted but you can get copies through the Registration Service for a fee. The indexes can be searched for free online and these can help you to narrow down when and if an event took place, and where. Websites such as [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk), [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk) and [www.freebmd.org.uk](http://www.freebmd.org.uk) are useful, although FreeBMD provides information from the civil registrations indexes only (i.e. it does not give the full information from an entry) but is a useful resource if you wish to order copies of certificates.

#### 4) The Census

The census was introduced in Britain in 1841, and still takes place every ten years. It is a vital source for family historians as, through it, you can look at individual households and find out who lived there, their names, ages, jobs, where they were born and much more information. Kresen Kernow does not hold original census records, they are kept at The National Archives in Kew, although microfilm copies of the census up to 1891 are held at Kresen Kernow and the census up to 1911 (data is closed for 100 years) is widely available online through a number of subscription sites. You can also search the 1939 Register online. This was carried out in September 1939 after the outbreak of war in order to help coordinate the war effort at home. You can access [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk) for free at Kresen Kernow and Cornwall's libraries.

Once you have this basic information about your ancestors, you might want to find out a little more about their lives. One very useful source for doing this is wills.

#### Wills (probate records)

Wills are a fascinating source for family historians as they can provide extra detail about your ancestor's lives, and can include detail of the items they owned and their family relationships. Kresen Kernow holds more than 65 000 original wills dating from 1600-1857 and register copies of wills from 1858-1941. For wills after that date, you will need to either download or fill in a form online from [www.gov.uk/search-will-probate](http://www.gov.uk/search-will-probate) and pay a fee to obtain a copy.

The history of wills before 1857 is quite complex, and whether we have your ancestor's will or not will depend on where they lived, and when. Wills had to be proved in a church court, and the court chosen depended on which parish they lived in, how much land they owned and where it was.

Over 180 Cornish parishes proved their wills in the Archdeacon's court in the Bodmin area. Kresen Kernow holds the original wills from this court dating from 1600-1857 (collection reference: AP). Three parishes, known as the Royal Peculiar Deanery of St Buryan, were only under the jurisdiction of the Deanery of St Buryan, the records of these parishes (St Buryan, St Levan and Sennen) are now also at Kresen Kernow.

However, some parishes were subject directly to the Bishop of Exeter and proved their wills at his courts in Exeter. These parishes are known as either bishop's or dean and chapter 'peculiar' and the original wills from those courts were kept in the city. Unfortunately they were destroyed during a bombing raid in 1942, although it is always worth checking with Devon Record Office to see if they

have a copy or transcript (an index is held at Kresen Kernow). The bishop's peculiars were St Antony in Roseland, St Breock, Budock, Egloshayle, St Ervan, St Erney, St Eval, Falmouth, St Germans, St Gluvias, Gerrans, St Issey, Landrake, Lawhitton, Lezant, Mabe, St Merryn, Mylor, Padstow (outside the town), Little Petherick, South Petherwin and Trewen. The dean and chapter peculiars were St Agnes, Boconnoc, Bradock, Perranzabuloe and St Winnow.

From 1812 full copies of all wills had to be deposited with the legacy duty department of the Stamp Office in London. When the Stamp Office closed some Cornish Estate Duty wills from 1811-1857 were transferred from the National Archives to partially replace those wills lost to enemy action in World War II. These are held at Kresen Kernow (collection reference: SO).

We also hold a small number of unproved wills.

#### *Wills held elsewhere*

If your ancestor was very wealthy, held a lot of land in different parishes or even in different dioceses (areas under control of a bishop) then the wills were proved in the Archbishop of Canterbury's court. Registered copy wills (copies of the original probates) are held at the National Archives. Indexes to wills held elsewhere are available to check at Kresen Kernow.

#### *Earlier wills*

Between 1568 and 1600 an index of wills for the Archdeaconry courts survives, listing wills with names and dates. However, only 38 of the original wills survive, possibly because they were misfiled so were missed when the rest of these records were destroyed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Earlier wills also survive from large landowning family collections. Helpfully, these have been transcribed by Nicholas Orme in his book *Cornish Wills, 1342-1540*.

#### *Later wills*

In 1857 the Court of Probate Act abolished the rights of church courts to prove wills. The District Probate Registry in Bodmin took over the functions and records of the church courts. Kresen Kernow holds no original wills later than 1857, although copies of all wills proved at Bodmin are available from Kresen Kernow up to 1941. For wills after that date, contact the District Probate Registry in Bodmin. The wills of some Cornish residents were also proved in London.

Trying to track down your ancestor's will can be a complex business, and Kresen Kernow staff are always happy to help with any enquiry.

**Helpful Hint!** No Cornish wills were proved during the period after the Civil War when Oliver Cromwell and his son Richard were in power (1649-1660).

**Helpful Hint!** Wills and administrations are identified by the date on which probate was granted, not by the date on which the will was made. This could be several years after the testator's death.

### Other useful documents

Once you've got the basic details of your family tree and an insight into their lives through their wills (if they survive), there are a wealth of other records you can search to understand them better. These include:

- Deeds, leases and other property records, such as tithe maps, which can show you where your ancestor lived and even how much rent they paid!
- Local newspapers, which are an invaluable source for obituaries, reports and trivia.
- Poor Law records, which can be rich in details if your ancestor was in receipt of poor relief or went into the workhouse.
- School records, which might tell you how they behaved at school and give an insight into their education
- Bodmin Gaol records, if your ancestor was on the wrong side of the law, you may be able to find out more about them from the pen portraits in these registers, such as how tall they were and even what scars and tattoos they had
- Registers of Electors can be useful in helping to track down where your ancestors lived during the twentieth century, though remember they will only list those who were eligible to vote

And much, much more. Visit the Kresen Kernow collections pages ([www.kresenkernow.org/our-collections](http://www.kresenkernow.org/our-collections)) for more inspiration.