

The Kresen Kernow Guide to Property History

Researching the history of your home and/or land can be a complex but fascinating process. Success can only depend on the survival of records, and this is not consistent. It might also depend on how much you already know about the property, and will almost certainly depend on when it was built and where in Cornwall it is.

Before you begin, it can be helpful to:

- Consult your title deeds as these can help enormously with dates and details. They are essential to proving ownership and can help with basic information.
- Read a property history book or magazine, or browse a relevant website just to give you some idea of what might be involved.
- Contact the Land Registry to see if they have any information.

Helpful Hint! It is important to note that several buildings may have been erected on the same site over the years. That means references to a property of the same name might demonstrate continuity of settlement, rather than proving that the same building has always existed on the same site. It is usually impossible to find out exactly when a building was constructed, although this is sometimes mentioned in a deed or lease.

Helpful Hint! Detailed addresses are a nineteenth-century creation. Before this, houses and small tenements were often known by the name of the tenant. It is also not always possible to identify a modern location.

A wide range of sources can be useful for your research.

Ordnance Survey (OS) maps

Ordnance Survey (OS) plans covering Cornwall began in 1813 at the scale of 1 inch to 1 mile, but there are no large scale editions until circa 1880. A range of maps are available at different scales.

The most detailed plans (25 inches to 1 mile) identify public buildings (schools, churches, public houses), show the outline of individual buildings and indicate footpaths, tracks and old mine workings. The 6 inch maps (with a scale of 6 inches to 1 mile) also show individual buildings and landscape features. Dates for large scale OS plans for Cornwall are circa 1880, 1907, 1930 (large towns only), 1960, 1970 and 1980.

At Kresen Kernow, we are able to use our intranet mapping tool to overlay digital reproductions of OS and tithe maps onto current maps, which is very helpful in identifying the location of properties.

The National Library of Scotland is a great online source of OS maps (www.maps.nls.uk/geo). You can overlay historical maps on a modern map or view them side by side with a modern satellite image.

Helpful hint! OS maps are generally catalogued by sheet number, rather than by place names, though you will find some catalogue entries listed by parish. Staff can assist in you in finding the correct sheet number.

Tithe maps and apportionments, c1840

A tithe map was produced for each parish in Cornwall after the 1836 Tithe Act. These large scale maps show individual buildings and fields, each numbered separately. The accompanying reference book, or 'apportionment', lists the owner, occupier, size, value and description for each numbered plot.

These maps are useful for establishing whether a property or other feature had been built by the mid-19th century. The information in the apportionment can help provide links to earlier evidence.

As many of them are very large and/or in poor condition, our tithe maps are available to search digitally.

Other maps

Most pre-1840 maps are private estate maps, commissioned by an individual landowner for their own use. They can be very detailed and may come with a written survey containing information on tenants and land use. Estate maps for after 1840 are also available. However, the fact that they were commissioned by individual landowners means that coverage of the whole of Cornwall is not very consistent, and they only show the chunks of land owned by that landowner (so surrounding areas are unmapped). They can be very useful for finding field-boundaries, archaeological remains and early roads though, and they can also be very beautiful to look at.

Private estate records

Before the early 20th century a large amount of the land in Cornwall was held by a few wealthy individuals. This means that pre-20th century title deeds, leases, surveys, sale particulars, rentals and manorial records can contain a wealth of information about properties, land use and tenants. Please note that Kresen Kernow does not hold many 20th century deeds and leases.

Title deeds, which show ownership of a property, will tell you the names of the parties in the transaction, an amount to be paid, a description of the property and they might also tell you about covenants and more detailed information. There are several types of deeds, including the grant, bargain and sale and the final concord and release. The language and structure of title deeds is very formal and most very early deeds are in Latin.

Leases show the conveyance of property from one party to another for a set period. A lease will always give the names and status of the parties, a description of the property, the number of years for which it was to be held, and the sums of money to be paid from the tenant (the lessee) to the landlord (the lessor). Like title deeds, early examples are written in Latin. Until the 19th century, most leases in Cornwall lasted 99 years, or three lives. A small rent was paid annually together with other services, such as a day's work at harvest time or a chicken at Christmas. Kresen Kernow is home to over 45 000 leases! They can be a valuable source for agricultural history as details of farming practice are sometimes specified too.

Rentals, lease books and surveys can also give details about the property of a family. For large estates these are generally arranged by manors and give tenants' names, tenements, rents and terms of leases. They might also give information about land use, e.g. wood. They can be used with estate maps to build up a picture of the land in the past.

Many of the large estates were sold off during the 20th century and sale catalogues for these can also be very useful.

District Valuation records, 1910

These records were created as a result of the 1910 Finance Act to create a baseline for land and property prices. The records consist of 'domesday' books (listing the owner, occupier, property description and value), 'Forms 37' (listing all holdings for an individual) and marked-up 25 inch

Ordnance Survey plans showing individual numbered plots. The reference numbers for these all start with DV.

Taxation records

Taxation records can also be a useful source of information, such as land tax assessments, c1805-1948 (although coverage varies for each parish), poor rates and 20th century rating records (such as District Council records). Formats vary but they generally give the property name, owner and occupier.

Buildings used for a specific purpose

Information relating to buildings such as parsonages, school houses, public houses, chapels, mills and toll houses may be found among the records of the organisations which owned or managed them e.g. the parish church or education authority. Buildings that were formerly part of mining or railway premises may be indicated on relevant plans.

Local government records

Council records relating to planning, land use and fire safety may also contain information on individual properties. These include but are not limited to:

- Fire regulation plans for public buildings, 1915-1955 (CC/FBP)
- Village maps, coastal surveys, land use and age of buildings surveys (CC/PLU)
- West Penwith area buildings plans, 1898-1938 (DC/WP/295)
- Planning decision books, 1950-1974 (CC/PDR)
- Restormel building plans, 1886-c1925 (DC/RES/1249)
- Building control plans and minutes for council meetings

Please note that plans and planning records do not exist for every property built during the time spans covered in these records, so even if you can pinpoint the approximate age of your building from other sources you may not find any planning records relating to it. Planning applications since 1948 are accessible through Cornwall Council's Planning department.

Once you have found out as much factual information as you can about your property, you might want to continue your research into the inhabitants who lived there. The types of records mentioned below can help you, and you can also visit our collections and family history webpages.

Census

From 1841 the census lists all the people in a household every ten years, as well as their ages and occupations. It is a brilliant source for populating your property history, and understanding who might have lived in your home. Censuses are available online up to 1911 and can be consulted for free at Kresen Kernow and in Cornwall libraries. Subscription-based websites include www.findmypast.co.uk and www.ancestry.co.uk.

Register of Electors

These list all residents in a property who were eligible to vote, although before 1939 exact addresses were often not given in rural areas. Kresen Kernow holds registers for each year from 1922-2002 (except 1939-1945).

Trade directories and gazetteers

Usually arranged alphabetically by parish, trade directory entries (1783-1939) include basic details of private residents and trades, shops and businesses, but do not provide complete lists of all inhabitants. If you know who was living in your home then this might give you more information about their work and what the area was like at the time. Gazetteers such as Symons' 'Gazetteer of the County of Cornwall' and Lake's 'Parochial History of the County of Cornwall', give an overview of the parish at the time and list notable inhabitants.

For research and enquiries into land use and rights away, the records below might be of use.

Definitive statements, footpaths and rights of way, 1953-1957 and 1968

These two series of maps show footpaths, bridleways and other rights of way. The paths are marked on 6 inch Ordnance Survey plans and are described in the statements. However, these records have since been superseded and we do not hold the current definitive map, for this visit www.cornwall.gov.uk and search 'rights of way'.

Other sources

Local history books and pamphlets may contain useful information about particular properties or sites in a location. Kresen Kernow has a Cornwall-wide collection of books and pamphlets that can help you.

We hold architectural plans for several architects, including Silvanus Trevail. Some plans can also be found in other collections.

The Historic Environment Record is also an excellent source for material on Cornwall's built environment.