

How to Discover the History of your House

Begin from what is known about the house. If you can consult the title deeds to the property these will give some details of the more recent changes in ownership; it may have been part of a large estate or converted from another use, such as a school or railway station house.

For older houses it is worth checking if there are any books written about local area which might mention the house. Check the appropriate 'Inventory of the Ancient Monuments' published by the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments in Wales and Monmouthshire, and such books as the 'Old Cottages of Snowdonia' by Harold Hughes and Herbert L. North. There may also be articles in the publications of your County History Society.

The next stage is to begin to trace the existence of the house through various sources in the Record Offices.

Ordinance Surveys

These are the best place to start even if the house is known to predate the map as they enable the searcher to pinpoint the position of the house in relation to other properties and geographical features which will help when looking at older maps such as the Tithe Maps. This is particularly useful if the name of the house has changed. The large scale Ordnance Survey maps in 25 inch and 6 inch scales are available in three editions, the first editions for Merioneth c. 1888, for Anglesey c. 1900 and for Caernarfonshire c. 1885-1890. The second edition is dated around 1900 and the third edition around 1910-1923 although Merionethshire was never fully covered. While all three editions of any map are often not available it is usually possible to consult at least one edition. Twenty five inch maps were not printed for the more sparsely populated areas. Comparison of the available editions of the maps will show any additions etc. to the house.

Tithe Maps

If the house is on the earliest available edition of the Ordnance survey maps then Tithe Maps and Apportionment should be consulted. Tithe Maps of every parish were drawn up following the Tithe Commutation Act of 1836. These vary in scale, size and detail but are usually large scale showing individual buildings and fields, each with a reference number to the accompanying Apportionment which give the names of owners, occupiers, acreage and often field names. The properties are arranged by owners names and so may involve a long search for a particular property. It may be possible to identify the house on the map and then look for the reference number on the Apportionment or it may be easier to identify the property on the Apportionment and then to find it on the Map.

Estate Papers

If the property concerned is, or has at one time been part of a large estate there may be references to it in the records of the administration of the estate. For example there are good series of Rentals, Surveys and Maps for the Vaynol estate (at Caernarfon). However, there are papers relating to many other estates in the Record Offices. Consult the index cards in the Record Office under the name of the parish, town or village in which the house is situated. Other estates have deposited their records elsewhere (e.g. at the National Library of Wales or the University College, Bangor) and the search room staff may be able to locate them for you.

Other Maps

Particularly for properties in towns there may be other maps available of the area. Consult the index of maps and plans. In some parishes the area of common land was enclosed and for some of these an Enclosure Award and Map may be available. There could also be incidental evidence in the plans of some public undertakings such as railways and bridges which usually include adjacent properties.

Land Tax

If the property was on the Tithe Map and Apportionment then the Land Tax records should be consulted. These date from 1780-1832 (1746-1812 for the Aberconwy area) for Caernarfonshire; 1712-1868/9 for Anglesey; and there are none for Merionethshire. These name the property and usually the owner and occupier. It is best to work backwards through these as the house may have been built during this period. Not all property was, however, covered by the Land Tax Assessments. There are also more recent records of the taxation of land available in the Gwynedd and Mon Record Offices.

Window Tax

Window Taxation records are available in the Record Office in Llangefni for parishes in Anglesey for the period 1719-1786.

Title Deeds

A series of deeds for a property will record changes in ownership, probably the property's name and size, and occasionally the date of its erection. Deeds, however, are often not sufficiently explicit, particularly about property in towns, to enable identification. Also additional property could be built in spaces between houses or in their gardens or yards. Abstracts of Title refer to earlier transactions. Series of deeds such as this are a rarity, but it is always worth checking the place name index in the Record Office. Deeds most usually occur in estate or solicitors' papers.

Sale Catalogues

These are a neglected source of information about properties but for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these, if they exist, can be very helpful and they often include maps and plans and sometimes photographs. There should be a separate index in each Record Office for these, but it will probably be necessary to check all Sale Catalogues for the parish in which the property is situated. A computerised index is, however, being prepared of the holdings at the Caernarfon Area Record Office. If the date of sale or transfer of a property is known the local newspaper could also be consulted.

One aspect of the history of a property is the history of those who lived in it. Sometimes the paucity of material can make this the only approach.

Census Returns

A Census has been taken every decade since 1801 with the exception of 1941.

However, these records are not available for a hundred years and those from 1801-1831 give statistics only. The Record Offices have microfilm copies of the enumerators' returns for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871 and 1881. The 1891 census records are on fiche. These list the members of every household giving their age, occupation and (from 1851) relationship to head of household and place of birth. The returns are helpful in pinpointing the age of a nineteenth century building but the lack of identification of individual buildings, or of a systematic survey and the problem of renumbering of streets can make this impossible. The occupations of people in the surrounding area will indicate the type of community in which the house was situated at that date.

Trade and Street Directories list the principal private residents and trades people particularly of larger towns and parishes.

Rate Books, or Parochial Rate Assessments of various kinds, where available, can provide the searcher with a list of occupiers of the property. The property can be traced backwards through a series of Rate Books. There may, however, be a problem with access to the later Rate Books.

Electoral Registers These were introduced in 1832 and from 1868 give the name and address of electors in each parish. The number of names increases considerably with the extensions of the franchise of 1867 and 1884 but women were not included until this century.

Wills and Inventories If a Christian name change occurs in the ownership of property then it may be worth looking for a will. The indexes to wills from 1858 to 1966 are held in the Caernarfon area Record Office. A search of the indexes for 10 years after the death is recommended as probate is not always applied for immediately. Earlier wills are in the National Library of Wales but microfilm indexes are available in the Caernarfon Area Record Office.

Other Sources

Useful but often neglected sources are photographs and prints.

Deposits of records from firms of architects and builders, while if not recording the original building, may have dates of alterations or repairs.

There are various other sources of information on buildings which were, or are, built for a purpose such as almshouses, schools, toll houses, stations, church and chapel buildings etc.

There may be items relating to the property in other collections of documents and, therefore, it is most important to check the place name indexes in the office.

Despite the increasing amount of material available in Record Offices it is still possible to draw a blank when tracing the history of a house and researchers must realise before embarking on the search that the records were not designed by their originators to assist this search. A detailed comprehensive study can involve days or even weeks of research and the searcher must be prepared to do most of the work, although Record Office staff will be able to offer advice.

Books

There are many books on this subject. Two useful ones which are available in the Record Offices and many Public Libraries are:

D. Iredale 'Discovering Your Old House', Shire Publication

J.W. Harvey 'Sources for the History of Houses', British Records Association 1974.