

West Sussex Record Office



Searchroom Leaflet No 6:

Sources for Family History at the Record Office

This leaflet lists the main sources available for researching your family tree, the sort of information they contain, and how to use them. More detailed help is given in *Who Are You?*

General Register Office (GRO) indexes

The records relating to births, marriages and deaths registered in England and Wales since 1st July 1837 are kept by the Registrar General at the General Register Office (GRO). The registers themselves are not open to inspection, but information from them is supplied in the form of certificates. Individual entries are traced by searching the indexes. These are held by the General Register Office (no public access) but they are also available in the Searchroom on the *Ancestry* and *Findmypast* websites or in the form of microfiche. See *Searchroom Leaflet no 7* for further details.

Census returns

The census has been compiled every ten years since 1801. Since 1841 it has listed virtually every person in the country, giving information on their age, occupation and place of birth.

Returns up to 1901 are available on microfiche and many have been indexed by name and street. They can also be accessed up to 1921 through the *Ancestry* and *Findmypast* websites on the public access computers.

Original returns of 1811, 1821 and 1831 for a few Sussex parishes are available on microfilm.

Indexes— www.ancestry.com and www.findmypast.co.uk offer access through their indexes.

Parish registers

Registers of baptisms, marriages and burials have been kept by parish churches from as early as 1538, although very few survive from this date. Some gaps exist, especially during the period of the Civil War and Commonwealth 1642-1660. However, almost a full series is available for most parishes for the period 1700-1850.

The Record Office holds original registers for all the ancient parishes of West Sussex, and many of the more recently formed ones.

Most registers (for both East and West Sussex) are available to view on Ancestry.co.uk, which is free to use on the public access computers in the Searchroom.

Indexes - Many parishes are transcribed and indexed separately. You can help yourself to the volumes on the searchroom shelves. For the county as a whole, there are various indexes, on fiche and on the public access computers, including the IGI (see below). You can also find indexes on freereg.org.uk.

Bishops' Transcripts (BTs)

These annual copies of parish register entries were kept from the late 16th century. Most contain gaps before 1700, and there are none for the period 1642-1660. Many don't include marriages after 1837.

We hold the original BTs for the parishes of West and East Sussex. Most West Sussex and a few East Sussex parishes are on microfilm. If not, you can use the original documents.

Indexes - The IGI (see over) and most parish register indexes include BT entries to fill in gaps and omissions.

Marriage Licences

History - Marriage by licence has always been an alternative to having banns read out. It was especially popular, for those who could afford it, between 1650 and 1850. Registers only give the names of the bride and groom, and where they were to be married. Bonds and affidavits give more information, including the occupation of the groom.

What we've got - Original registers, bonds and affidavits for the Diocese of Chichester (most of West Sussex) and some of the Diocese of Lewes (East Sussex and parts of mid-Sussex) and the peculiar jurisdictions within them.

How do you see them? - All surviving records up to 1900 are on microfilm.

Are there any indexes? - All records on microfilm have been indexed - see the *Genealogists Guide* for details.

International Genealogical Index (IGI)

What is it? - The IGI is an index of baptisms and marriages in each parish from the beginning of the earliest registers to the mid-19th century. It is compiled by the Mormon Church, and there is a separate index for each county.

What we've got - A set of microfiche of the 1992 edition for all the English counties. The Sussex IGI includes about five-sixths of parishes in the county - details in the *Genealogists Guide*.

You can also access the website equivalent, www.familysearch.org on the public access computers. This covers the main index for the British Isles.

Nonconformist registers: baptisms, births, marriages and burials

History - Earliest are the Quakers' registers, beginning in the mid-17th century. All except Quakers and Jews had to marry in Anglican churches 1754-1837. From 1840 most nonconformist registers were held centrally, and are now at The National Archives (TNA) in London.

What we've got - Microfilm copies of the pre-1840 registers at TNA, and later original registers of many individual churches and chapels, some of which are available on microfilm. We don't have any original Roman Catholic registers, though we do have transcripts of volumes from Catholic households on the great estates in the county.

Are there any indexes? - We have transcripts and indexes of the West Sussex registers at TNA, and entries from some registers are included in the IGI.

Wills - giving details of spouses, children and other relatives

History - Became popular in the 16th century, though extremely rare among the poor. Until 1858 all wills were proved in the church courts, either locally or, in the case of the wealthy, at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC). In 1858 the civil authorities took over, and wills could be proved either centrally, or locally at a District Probate Registry.

What we've got - Original wills for the Archdeaconry of Chichester, and the peculiar jurisdictions within it, up to 1858, and for Chichester District Probate Registry (which covered most of West Sussex) 1858-1928. Microfilm copies of wills for the Archdeaconry of Lewes up to 1858.

How do you see them? - All are on microfiche up to 1858, and microfilm 1858-1900. PCC wills can be accessed through *Ancestry* and the TNA website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Note: Pre-1858 wills for East and West Sussex will be published on *Ancestry* in 2023.

For Chichester District Probate Registry wills 1900-1928, you can use the original will registers. We have a set of National Probate Calendars on microfiche, which give basic details of all wills proved in England and Wales between 1858 and 1943, but they are also available on *Ancestry* 1858-1966, 1973-1995.

Are there any indexes? - The catalogues are in alphabetical order of surname, and there are printed and card indexes of all our wills - details are in *Who Are You?*

For post-1858 wills, you can use the search facility on the Government's website at <https://www.gov.uk/search-will-probate> which will also enable you to order copies.

Directories

History - County Directories, which first appeared in the 18th century, listed a small selection of heads of household and most tradesmen in each parish. Street directories were produced for most large towns and cities. They listed heads of household in order of street and house number and most tradesmen.

What we've got - Directories for Sussex from 1792, and a few for other counties. Street directories for larger West Sussex towns.

How do you see them? - The Sussex county directories and most of the street directories are on microfiche. If there is no microfiche available, you can use the original volume, which should be on the shelves in the Searchroom.

Poll books and electoral registers

History - Poll books were lists of voters compiled to show how each person had voted. They were outlawed by the Ballot Act of 1872. Electoral registers are lists of voters which have been compiled most years since 1832. From 1918 women over 30 and all men could vote in parliamentary elections.

What we've got - Sussex poll books dating back to 1705, and most West Sussex electoral registers from 1832 (some mid-Sussex ones will be found at East Sussex Record Office).

How do you see them? - Electoral registers for East and West Sussex from 1832 to 1963 are available on *Ancestry*. We therefore no longer produce the

original volumes in the Searchroom, for these years, so that we can better preserve them.

Electoral registers 1832-1903 are also on microfilm.

The poor

History - Up to c.1834, the sick, the elderly and the unemployed received poor relief from their parish. There are accounts of payments and settlement papers, which determined in which parish a person could claim relief, among the records of many parishes. After 1834, parishes were organised into Unions which kept their own records, including registers of workhouse inmates.

What we've got - Records of West Sussex parishes, although not all include records of poor relief. Records of West Sussex Poor Law Unions and the Public Assistance Committees which replaced them in 1930.

How do you see them? - Many of the parish records and workhouse registers are on microfilm. Otherwise, you can use the original records.

Are there any indexes? - A database of our parish poor relief records and settlement papers is available on the Sussex Record Society website: www.sussexrecordsociety.org and can be viewed on the public access computers.

Other sources

These are just the main sources held here. See the publication *Who Are You?* for further information, and Searchroom leaflet No 9 for other online databases.

Notes

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A large-print version of this leaflet is available