
Beginning Your Family History at the Suffolk Record Office

Welcome to the Suffolk Record Office, the county archives, run by Suffolk County Council. If you are new to family history research, please read this leaflet. It will show you the first steps to take, and hopefully will help you to avoid time-wasting mistakes.

HOW DO I BEGIN?

Begin by getting as much information as possible from family members. The key things to ask for are:

- names of ancestors and relatives
- relationships (names of children, parents etc)
- dates of birth, marriage and death
- where they lived
- what jobs they did

Family members can often supply a lot of information from memory but there may also be written information, such as family bibles, birth certificates and letters along with photographs which can also be a useful source.

Contact all your relatives, not just close family members, as many of them will be interested in your research and some may already have done some work on your family history.

YOUR FIRST FAMILY TREE

Write down the information you have received from family members and if possible, draw up a family tree. Even if it does not go back very far, it will help you to organise your research.

USING THE SUFFOLK RECORD OFFICE

Please bring any notes and family trees you have on your first visit to the Suffolk Record Office as this will enable our staff to advise you as to which records to use to commence your research. If your ancestors originated from Suffolk we will have a number of sources for you to use, but please note that we have fewer sources for non-Suffolk ancestors, but can advise you how and where to continue your research.

HOW TO APPROACH YOUR RESEARCH

These basic principles will help you make the best use of your time. If you ignore them, you can find yourself going off on false trails!

1. Family History research is time-consuming. So it is best to look on it as a hobby rather than a short-term project as you are unlikely to find your family history 'ready-made'. It will require patient searching through different types of records, many of which are not indexed.

2. Most important of all, you should always work from the known to the unknown. This means starting from the present day, and working methodically towards the past researching one generation at a time. Always find the names and dates of one generation before going on to the previous generation. It is tempting to collect unconnected pieces of information from different years, and then try to link them up - but this is almost always a waste of time.
3. Always note the source of your information. All sources (whether original documents, or copies, or printed works) have a title, date and reference number, and you should note these for every piece of information you find.
4. Keep careful notes of your research, and write them up as soon as possible, while they are still fresh in your mind. Also keep a record of unsuccessful searches as well as successful ones – note the names you searched for, and the sources in which you searched as this will save you having to do the same work again later on. (You may find it helpful to use one of our Family Data Packs to record your results.)

USING THE RECORDS

The census returns and parish registers are the usual starting point for family history research at the Suffolk Record Office.

Censuses were held every ten years from 1801, but for most places, the earliest surviving returns which include names are those of 1841. The census returns 1841-1901 are available free in the searchroom for the whole of England, Scotland and Wales via the Ancestry website, along with microform copies of the Suffolk census returns 1841-1901. The latest census available is that of 1911 and this is currently available from <http://www.findmypast.com>.

The parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials are the main source from the 19th century back to the 16th century. The originals are too fragile to use, but these are generally available on microfiche for the whole of Suffolk up to c1900. A selection of printed and microfilm transcripts are also available for use in the searchroom, but it is always advisable to check your findings against the original register.

OTHER SOURCES

There are many other sources you can use when you have exhausted the census returns and parish registers and a few of them are described below.

Birth, Marriage and Death Certificates:

Civil registration of births, marriages and deaths began on 1 July 1837. These registers are not held by the Suffolk Record Office. You can only obtain a copy of a birth, marriage or death certificate by contacting the relevant local register office or by post, telephone, fax or e-mail from the General Register Office (see the end of this leaflet for addresses). There are charges for the provision of certificates.

The General Register Office indexes to births, marriages and deaths are however available for free at the Suffolk Record Office via <http://ancestrylibrary.com>.

Wills:

These were dealt with by Ecclesiastical Courts up to 1857 and from 1858 onwards by Probate Registries. There were 3 levels in the Ecclesiastical Court – Archdeaconry Court, Consistory Court and the Prerogative Court of Canterbury – and we have indices to these various courts as well as original wills and registered copies. Remember many people left wills, not just the well-off.

Poor Law:

From 1601 to 1929, the poor; who formed the great majority of the population; were closely regulated by law and many of the records survive and are kept by the Suffolk Record Office. So if your ancestors were not among the wealthy elite, they may well appear in the poor law records.

International Genealogical Index (IGI):

This is the nearest thing there is to an index of parish records. It is however far from complete, and contains some mistakes, but can be useful if you need to make a general search for a personal name. It is based mainly on baptism and marriage records, and is useful for pre-1900 baptisms and marriages than for later events. The most up to date version is available via <http://www.familysearch.org>.

Cemetery Registers:

From the middle of the 19th century many places had civil cemeteries, the need often arising as a result of full churchyards. Cemeteries were, and still are, administered by the local authority and these records will be found within the records of the local Boroughs, Urban District Councils etc.

Nonconformist Records:

From the 17th century there were many places of worship which were not part of the established Church of England. These 'Nonconformist' chapels sometimes kept registers, though the coverage of these is very patchy, along with other documents such as membership lists and many of the surviving records are kept by the Suffolk Record Office. A large number of nonconformist registers are also available on line at <http://www.bmdregisters.co.uk>.

Directories:

County directories were published from the early 1800s to 1937 and these can help you find where your ancestors lived, especially if your ancestor was in business, trade or was of some standing in the community, as well as providing some details on the individual towns and parishes. Some of the larger towns also had individual directories which were published until the early 1970s and these are usually divided into alphabetical lists by street, personal name or business. They can therefore be of great help in pinpointing individual addresses.

THE SUFFOLK RECORD OFFICE – HERE TO HELP YOU

The three branches of the Suffolk Record Office are open to everyone and are free to use. The only charges we make are for some of our services such as photocopying, photography (whether undertaken on your behalf by a member of staff or conducted by yourself) and Internet printouts and our staff can explain the various costs.

The only formality is the County Archives Research Network (CARN) readers' ticket system. If you do not hold a current CARN ticket issued by one of the participating counties please bring some official identification which gives your current address (such as a driving licence, medical card or Suffolk County Council library ticket) and we can then issue a CARN ticket, which is valid for four years. If you wish to reserve a microfiche or microfilm machine please just contact us before visiting and we will arrange for a machine to be reserved for either the morning, afternoon or all day.

If you do not have time to visit the Suffolk Record Office to undertake your research in person we also offer a professional in-house research service which is undertaken by our expert staff. There is a fee for this service and please ask a member of staff for details or see our Website for details:

<http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/LeisureAndCulture/LocalHistoryAndHeritage/SuffolkRecordOffice/FamilyHistory/>

We also offer a wide range of books on different aspects of family history and there are copies available for both reference and sale.

USEFUL ADDRESSES:

FAMILY HISTORY CENTRES

Run by Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)

670 Cherry Hinton Road, CAMBRIDGE, Cambridgeshire, CB1 4DR
Tel 01223 247010

42 Sidegate Lane West, IPSWICH, Suffolk, IP4 3BD
Tel: 01473 727063

165 Yarmouth Road, LOWESTOFT, Suffolk, NR32 4AB
Tel: 01502 573851

For further information on the local centres see https://www.lds.org.uk/family_history.php

GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

To obtain copy birth, marriage and death certificates for England and Wales
Certificate Services Section, General Register Office, PO Box 2, SOUTHPORT, Merseyside, PR8 2JD
Tel: 0845 6037788
Email: certificate.services@ips.gsi.gov.uk

Alternatively if you know the Suffolk parish and the date of the birth, marriage and death you can contact the local registrar for a copy certificate

Bury St Edmunds Register Office, St Margaret's, Shire Hall, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, IP33 1RX
Tel: 01284 741221

Deben Register Office, The Lindos Centre, Saddlemakers Lane, Melton, Woodbridge, Suffolk, IP12 1PP
Tel: 01394 387876

Gipping and Hartismere Register Office, Milton House, 5 Milton Road South, Stowmarket, Suffolk, IP14 1EZ
Tel: 01449 612054

Ipswich Register Office, St Peter House, 16 Grimwade Street, Ipswich, Suffolk, IP4 1LP
Tel: 01473 583050

Sudbury Register Office, The Town Hall, Old Market Place, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 1TL
Tel: 01787 314050

Waveney Register Office, St Margaret's House, Gordon Road, Lowestoft, Suffolk, NR32 1HH
Tel: 01502 405096

For information on the General Register Office see Website:
<https://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/certificates/default.asp>

For information on the local offices see
<http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/BirthsMarriagesAndDeaths/>

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

You will not need to use the National Archives at an early stage in your research (unless your ancestors were in the armed forces, or were immigrants), but there are many useful information leaflets on their Website.

National Archives, Ruskin Ave, Kew, RICHMOND, Surrey, TW9 4DU

Tel: 020 8876 3444

Website: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

SUFFOLK FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY

The local family history society holds various meetings across the county as well as publishing a quarterly journal *Suffolk Roots*. Members have access to Suffolk Burial Index and other indexes undertaken by the society and it may be able to put you in touch with others who have done similar research. For membership details and general information on the society see

<http://www.suffolkfhs.co.uk>

We wish you success with your Family History research!

Bury Record Office, 77 Raingate Street, Bury St Edmunds, IP33 2AR

Telephone: 01284 741212

Email: bury.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Ipswich Record Office, Gatacre Road, Ipswich, IP1 2LQ

Telephone: 01473 584541

Fax: 01473 584533

Email: ipswich.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Lowestoft Record Office, Clapham Road, Lowestoft, NR32 1DR

Telephone: 01502 405357

Fax: 01502 405350

Email: lowestoft.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Suffolk Record Office web site: <http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/sro>

Suffolk Heritage Direct website: <http://www.suffolkheritagedirect.org.uk>