

Wills

The story of Somerset's wills is a sad one. Having been centralised at Exeter, most of the county's original probate records dated before 1858 were destroyed by German bombing in 1942, as were those for Devon. In spite of the losses, many wills and will copies *have* survived and are available at the Somerset Heritage Centre and elsewhere.

There are two indispensable books giving information on surviving locally-proved wills and will copies:

- Sir Mervyn Medlycott, *Somerset Wills Index: Printed & Manuscript Copies* (1993)
- David T. Hawkings, *Index of Somerset Estate Duty Office Wills and Letters of Administration 1805-1811 & 1812-1857* (1995)

Sir Mervyn Medlycott's book alone contains more than 17,000 entries, and together the three books provide a largely comprehensive list of locally-proved wills and will copies which are presently known to survive. Further wills are being discovered all the time, and it is always wise to also look at the Heritage Centre card indexes of Office Wills and the online catalogue.

(www.swheritage.org.uk/catalogues)

Locally-Proved Wills in Existence until 1942

Microfiche copies of alphabetical lists of testators (stating names, places and dates of probate) whose wills were proved in the Consistory and Peculiar Courts at Wells up to 1857 are held in the Record Office and by the Society of Genealogists. The lists for the period 1529-1600 have been published by the Somerset Record Society, vol. 62 (continued up to 1648 in typescript, DD/X/SR 8). Similar lists of both wills and administrations for the Archdeaconry of Taunton, 1537-1799, and of wills proved in the court of the Royal Peculiar of Ilminster, 1690-1857, were published by the British Record Society, vols 45 and 45a, and are available at the Record Office.

Originals of all these wills were destroyed in 1942, although copies survive in some cases.

Surviving Wills not Proved Locally

Those who held property in more than one diocese or who were particularly well off had their wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC). These wills can be consulted on film at The National Archives at Kew, and can be downloaded for £3.50 from their website at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline.

PCC wills for Somerset in the period 1383-1558 have been published by the *Somerset Record Society* (vols 16, 19 and 21). Printed lists of PCC wills, 1383-1700 and 1750-1800, are available in the Somerset Heritage Centre. Six volumes of *Somerset Wills*, mainly but not exclusively from the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, up to c. 1730, were published by F.A. Crisp from the manuscript collections of the Rev F. Brown, and are also available: there is a separate typescript index to testators.

From 1858, the probate of wills and granting of letters of administration ceased to be a matter for local ecclesiastical courts. The Heritage Centre has microfiche copies of the index of grants of probate for England and Wales, 1858-1943.

The wills themselves can be consulted at:

Probate Search Room
First Avenue House
42-49 High Holborn
London
WC1V 6NP
Tel. 020 7947 6000

Postal applications for will copies from 1858 should be addressed to:

The Postal Searches and Copies Department
Leeds District Probate Registry
York House
York Place
Leeds LS1 2BA
Tel: 0113 389 6133

Online application form available at www.justice.gov.uk (search for PA1S).

There are charges for both these services.

Surviving Probate Inventories

A large collection of probate inventories for the Archdeaconry of Taunton (c. 1630-1730) survives in the Sheppard Collection (DD/SP), and some further inventories can be found in other collections also held by the Record Office. There is a separate card index. Adrian Webb's *Index of Somerset Probate Inventories* (1995) gives details of more than 6,000 inventories surviving both in the Somerset Record Office and elsewhere.

Other probate sources in the Diocesan Collection

Probate and Administration Acts are recorded in the Diocesan Licence Books (D/D/OI), 1558-c.1850. Administrator's Accounts (D/D/Cta), recording the expenses of administering a deceased person's estate, exist from the late 16th to the early 18th century, and a list by names and places is available.

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