



**FAMILY HISTORY FEDERATION**  
Supporting the Family History Community for Fifty Years

# **REALLY USEFUL Bulletin**

## **No 42**

February 2024

Welcome to the latest edition of the *Really Useful Bulletin*

*inside find...*

The lead article is *Researching Publican and Brewery Ancestors*  
plus news from local FHS and from the Federation

## **#SAVE OUR WILLS**

The Federation has made a formal response to the proposal.

*It is appended to this Bulletin.*

Please urgently send your submission to the Ministry of Justice proposal.



**Do not bury your head in the sand!**  
***Make family historians heard!***  
**Do your bit before it is too late!**



Use any part of the attached submission to add to your own.

Write or email to arrive before 23 February to:

Will Storage Consultation, Ministry of Justice, Postpoint 5.25,  
102 Petty France, London SW1H 9AJ

Email: [civil\\_justice\\_poli@justice.gov.uk](mailto:civil_justice_poli@justice.gov.uk)

Ministry of Justice consultation document:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/storage-and-retention-of-original-will-documents>

We thank everyone who has signed the online petition.

Not done so? Then please sign today.

The ultimate aim is 100,000 signatures to trigger a debate.

Sign the online petition:

<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/654081>



# Really Useful Bulletin

## Researching Publican and Brewery Ancestors

by Simon Fowler

The public house as we know it today is really an invention of the eighteenth century; prior to that there were alehouses that sold beer brewed on the premises. More salubrious were the coaching inns, which were much larger establishments that provided food, stabling for horses and a variety of dining and meeting rooms. They often became the centre of local society and economic life. A census of inns and taverns taken in 1577 showed that there were just under 20,000 licensed establishments in England and Wales – or roughly one to every 187 of the population. The current ratio is in the region of 1:1500.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a massive rebuilding of pubs in reaction to changing tastes as well as the opening of new establishments to meet growing demand in industrial and suburban areas. Tobias Smollett noted in 1752 that London pubs: *were the haunts of idleness, fraud and rapine, and the seminaries of drunkenness, debauchery, extravagance, and every vice incident to human nature.*

By the end of the eighteenth century breweries began to purchase pubs with the object of selling their own products to drinkers. In the 1960s virtually all pubs were owned by breweries. There were only a few freehouses where the licensee could sell what beer they liked. The 1989 Beer Orders\* destroyed the old system. Now pubs are mostly run by large companies which sell products that they think their customers will wish to consume.

Originally, there was no bar as we know it today. Drinks were brought to the customers by the staff (generally the landlord or his wife). The first bar counter in the modern sense may have been built at the railway refreshment rooms on Swindon station by Isambard Kingdom Brunel in order to process the large number of passengers who all wanted serving at the same time.

The arrival of gas lighting in the 1820s and 1830s led to the refurbishment of many pubs and the construction of new establishments. According to Charles Dickens the fashion for these new 'gin palaces' as they were



Pub sign The Ancestor which was at the former National Brewery Museum in Burton-on-Trent

called: *rushed to every part of town, knocking down all the old public houses and depositing splendid mansions, stone balustrades, rosewood fittings, immense lamps and illustrated clocks at the corner of every street.* At the same time there was an explosion in the number of pubs as Wellington's Beerhouse Act of 1830 allowed anybody to buy a licence for two guineas. In 1831, 30,000 new beer or ale houses were opened, so called because they only sold beer. Most pubs today descend from these fairly basic establishments.

It wasn't until 1869 that licensing of pubs by magistrates was reintroduced. Local authorities and magistrates, egged on by the temperance lobby, sought to close pubs as a way of reducing drunkenness among the working classes.

In the 1870s a huge proportion of the budget of working-class families - in some cases up to a quarter - was spent on drink, causing huge misery and ruin for many. As a result, a quarter of all pubs, mainly in working-class areas were closed before the First World War. In addition, increasing restrictions were placed on pubs, particularly with regard to opening and closing hours and pub games that involved an element of gambling. In 1916, it became illegal to 'treat' or buy a round for friends.

Brewers reacted to the new challenges by building a new generation of gin palaces, full of etched glass and fine decoration to attract responsible drinkers. The *Philharmonic* in Liverpool and the *Princess Louise* near Holborn station in London are fine surviving examples of this style.

The numbers of people visiting pubs began to decline with the arrival of other leisure attractions, especially those laid on by churches, such as choirs, outings and Sunday schools. After the First World War came the cinema and the radio, followed by television after the Second World War. By the 1930s beer consumption was only forty per cent of what it had been sixty years previously.

The period following the First World War saw the building of larger establishments in new residential areas and along new arterial roads often providing a



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variety of attractions from bowling greens to restaurants; often referred to as being built in the *brewer's Tudor architectural style* which aped, however remotely, the architecture of the sixteenth century.

The movement to provide more welcoming pubs really took off after the Second World War. People now have a far greater choice of leisure activities, so the attractions of drinking sour beer in smoky pubs waned. The changes have been so great that the traditional 'back-street boozer' and country inn where our ancestors slaked their thirst have all but disappeared. Most pubs are now little more than informal restaurants. Over thirty pubs a week are currently closing as breweries, and more often giant pub-owning companies (known as 'pubcos') discover that the land on which the pubs stands is worth more than the trade generated by the pub itself.

Over the centuries hundreds of thousands of people have run pubs. Indeed it still remains an ambition for many a drinker, although few realise how hard the work is. There is no clear rule about who became publicans, alewives or innkeepers, but the following suggestions may help you in your search.

- ♦ A number of publicans were former sportsmen or servants (such as butlers and footmen) who saw a pub as a way of providing for their retirement.
- ♦ Many children followed their parents into running pubs.
- ♦ It was common for publicans to work only part-time, combining running a pub with other work, such as plumbing or carpentry.
- ♦ A number of women also ran pubs, often taking over on the death of their husbands or fathers.

Legally, pubs had to be licenced by the magistrates. The pub could lose its licence – and therefore be forced to close – if the landlord ran a 'disorderly house' where there was constant trouble, or if the magistrates wanted to close premises in slum areas.

The licence was held by the landlord, technically the 'licenced victualler'. Traditionally licensees paid the brewery that owned the premises an agreed amount

every year in rent, but kept the profits. Today most pubs are run by salaried managers employed by a pub company.

Until the arrival of tea and coffee in the second half of the seventeenth century, beer was drunk by all sections of society. Because the water used in brewing had been boiled, it was much safer to drink than pure water and the nutrients contained in the brew were a valuable supplement to an otherwise meagre diet. However, the ale drunk was much darker, stronger and sweeter than we are used to today.

Hops, which are both a preservative and add a pleasing bitterness, were only introduced from the continent in the early fifteenth century. It took many years for this new drink, called beer, to supplant the older ale. As late as 1542, Andrew Boorde in his *Dietary of Health* complained that beer: *troubles drinkers with colic, and the stone and the strangulation... yet it doth make a man fat and doth inflate the belly.*

Until the eighteenth century, brewing was a small-scale business undertaken at taverns, monasteries and farms, often by women known as alewives or brewsters.

The eighteenth century saw a rapid growth in the size of breweries. Many of the firms, which were once household names were founded then: Whitbread (1742), Worthington (1744) and Bass (1777), and the most famous of them all, Guinness, which was established in Dublin in 1759.

Brewing increasingly centred around Burton-on-Trent. The water was particularly suited for brewing the increasingly popular lighter beers, most notably India Pale Ale (IPA). It also helped that Burton was on a river which allowed the easy transport of raw material and the export of the final product by river and also canal. Even today water is 'burtonised' with the addition of gypsum salts, by brewers to make it like the water - liquor in brewing terminology - found in Burton.

The liquor in London, however, was more suited to the production of dark beers such as porter and stout. Porter was the favourite tipple of London's working classes for nearly two centuries. A French writer in 1726 described it as being: *a thick and strong beverage and the effect it produces in excess is the same as that*



*'Barmaids old and new' from Edward Ardizzone and Maurice Gorham, The Local (1939)*





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of wine.

In 1840, there were 50,000 brewers, most of whom only brewed for a particular pub. The number declined rapidly during the Victorian period: by 1900 just over 3,000 remained. Larger brewers bought up smaller breweries for the pubs that they owned. Brewers also faced a growing temperance movement which called for restrictions on the manufacture and sale of drink and often provided sober alternatives to the pub.

The decline in breweries continued in the 1950s, with the emergence of a few giant breweries with a scattering of middle-sized regional brewers, and smaller local firms who somehow escaped being swallowed up by their larger competitors.

Breweries once employed large numbers of people, particularly in work such as maintenance of equipment, bottling, coopering (make barrels) and distribution of the finished product, as well as the clerical and administrative side. The very largest, such as Bass in Burton, employed over 2,700 men who brewed well over a million barrels of beer a year.

The work could be seasonal with people being taken on at times when the brewery was busy and laid off when things were quiet. Every winter in Burton large numbers of agricultural workers, known locally as 'Norkies', came from East Anglia to work in the town's maltings. Despite the intensive nature of the work it was much sought after because it was far better paid than the subsistence wages offered by farmers.

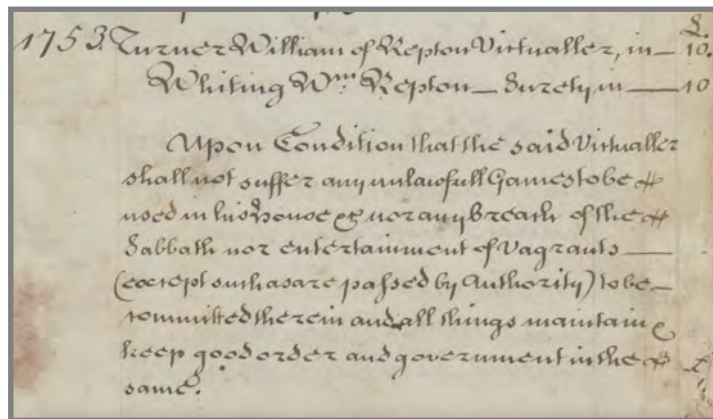
The larger firms in particular provided reasonable working conditions for their employees. Free beer was one bonus which was much appreciated, but the thoughtful worker might also take advantage of savings clubs, and inexpensive housing provided by the brewery.

## The records

There are relatively few records for pubs and breweries. The most useful by far are the licences issued to pubs, sometimes called alehouse, beer house or, in the West Country, cider house licences. From 1552 onwards, anyone who wanted to sell ale had to apply for a licence at the Quarter Sessions or the Petty Sessions. In addition, alehouse keepers had to declare that they would not keep a 'disorderly house' and would prohibit games of bowls, dice, football and tennis. These declarations were called recognizances or bonds. Although the requirements have changed over the years, landlords still have to obtain a licence which is renewed yearly.

Records of licences can generally be found in Quarter

and Petty Session records at local record offices. You should look out for registers of recognizances and licences granted to licensed victuallers. However, few records survive from the seventeenth century, but an Act of 1753 enforced the keeping of such registers, so most counties have some material from the late-eighteenth century. Again the system fell into abeyance, particularly after 1828, but detailed registers have been kept since 1871.



*A note of the issue of a licence to William Turner of Repton.  
Courtesy Derbyshire Record Office*

The most detailed registers give the name of the licensee, the parish in which he lived, the inn sign (that is the name of the pub), and the names and occupations of two guarantors who vouched for the applicant's probity. However, you are more likely to find just the name or names of individuals and possibly the parish they came from, with no indication of which pub he or she ran. Many licensing records may only refer to the pub name rather than the licensee, so it is important to know exactly which pub an ancestor ran.

The best guide to the records is Jeremy Gibson and Judith Hunter, *Victuallers' Licences* (FFHS, 1997 see *Further research—books*).

Few licensing records are yet online. Ancestry has incomplete sets for Dorset, Surrey and West Yorkshire, while Findmypast has transcripts for Cambridgeshire. A few family and local history societies have either written histories of pubs in their area or indexed the licensing records.

The most useful source for researching publicans and brewers is undoubtedly newspapers. Many local newspapers are now available through the British Newspaper Archive. You also have access if you have a premium subscription with Findmypast. You might uncover details of the sale of premises, events at the pub from annual dinners to coroners' courts and, of course, the appearance of the regulars before the



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1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1 John Roberts	Head	53	—	Married	—	—	—	—	Licensed Victualer 943	—
2 Margaret Roberts	Wife	—	53	Married	21	3	3	—	—	—
3 Ethel Roberts	Daughter	—	20	Single	—	—	—	—	assist in business 943	—
4 May Roberts	Daughter	—	19	Single	—	—	—	—	assist in business	—
5 Brook Roberts	Son	17	—	Single	—	—	—	—	assist in business	—
6 William Collins	Servant	23	—	Single	—	—	—	—	General labourer	—

Extract from a page from the 1911 census for the Three Tuns brewery and pub at Bishop's Castle, Shropshire.  
Ancestry/The National Archives

I declare that this Schedule is correctly filled up to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Signature *John Roberts*  
(Three Tuns Hotel)  
Postal Address 8 Salop Street, Bishop's Castle

magistrates for being drunk and disorderly. The retirement of long-serving landlords may also be noted. There is less about breweries, but there might have been a fire on the premises, or an obituary for a head brewer who died suddenly. Almost all brewers advertised their wares in the local rag, so if nothing else you can gain an idea of the beers sold by the brewery.

It is very difficult to research men and women who worked at breweries unless they were the head brewer or owned the firm. Most records of breweries have been destroyed, although records for some can sometimes be found at local record offices. If you know which brewery your ancestor worked for then TNA's *Discovery* catalogue will tell you what records are held where. Even a small town might have two or three breweries. They are listed in street and trade directories. The Brewery History Society has published an excellent guide *Brewers of the British Isles 1890-2021* which lists all breweries with their histories.

In general the best bets are the usual family history sources, which might provide clues as to where and when a person was employed. The 1921 census is particularly useful as it should give the full name of the pub or brewery where an individual worked.

\* "Beer Orders" is the commonly used name for the *Supply of Beer (Tied Estate) Order* and the *Supply of Beer (Loan Ties, Licensed Premises and Wholesale Prices) Order*. The Beer Orders were revoked January 2003.

## Further research—websites

Brewery History Society [www.breweryhistory.com](http://www.breweryhistory.com)  
Inn Sign Society [www.innsignsociety.com](http://www.innsignsociety.com)  
Pub History Society [www.pubhistorysociety.co.uk](http://www.pubhistorysociety.co.uk)  
Photos of old pubs  
[www.historypin.org/en/a-history-of-pubs](http://www.historypin.org/en/a-history-of-pubs)  
Closed pubs [www.closedpubs.co.uk](http://www.closedpubs.co.uk)  
Closed pubs Leicester <https://pubhistoryproject.co.uk>  
Old pubs in London <http://pubshistory.com/>  
British Newspaper Archive  
[www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)

## Further research—books

Pete Brown, *Man Walks into a Pub: a sociable history of beer* (Macmillan, 2003)

Simon Fowler, *Researching Brewing and Publican Ancestors* (Family History Partnership, 2009, available from Family History Books – see below)

Jeremy Gibson and Judith Hunter, *Victuallers' Licences* (FFHS, 1997—this and some other guides by Jeremy Gibson will shortly be available as digital downloads at [Family History Books Online](http://FamilyHistoryBooksOnline))

Paul Jennings, *The Local: a History of the English Pub* (Tempus, 2007)



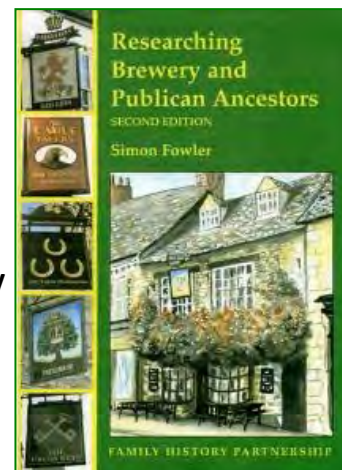
## About the author:

Simon Fowler has over thirty-five years' experience in using The National Archives and other archives and libraries in London and the south-east of England. He specialises in records of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Simon has written extensively about military and poor law records, and is a regular tutor at the Society of Genealogists and Pharos Tutors. Simon also enjoys visiting pubs to drink a glass or two of beer!

Simon's practical book *Researching Brewing and Publican Ancestors* [second edition] is available from Family History Books.

As a special offer to coincide with this article, you can buy it for just £3.95 (plus p&p). Offer ends 15 March.

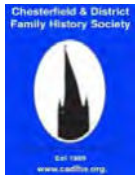
[Click here for direct link.](#)







# Family History Societies



## Chesterfield and District Family History Society

CADFHS was formed in 1989 and the society's pioneers worked hard in those pre-Internet days helping the members on the ground. In 2012, the society changed direction and fully embraced the new technology and records available via the Internet and social media.

Lockdown came and our chair, Dena Fanshawe, rose to the challenge and inaugurated Zoom meetings for our monthly meetings. Weekly member-only Zoom chats were started and continue to this day, they are so popular. They are led by our members. Discussions on brick walls, social and local history, and anything family history orientated, take place every Wednesday afternoon. All members are welcome to come and share their knowledge and ask for help. The chats are friendly and welcoming and above all enjoyable, some members saying that the online chats are the highlight of their week!

Each year we also support a local charity which is chosen by our members, through a vote. We fully embrace social media, having an open Facebook page for anyone plus a members-only forum. These are used to share information and to answer queries.

CADFHS ethos is a society for the members and guided by them. An annual survey is sent out to members to gain their views on how the society can help.

Our vision statement says it all.

*Chesterfield & District Family History Society's mission statement is for it to be one of the country's leading and forward thinking family history societies. Providing a strong base to enable our members to develop and grow as family history researchers. We aim to foster a positive experience and environment, through creative, innovative, and related services for our members.*



Our yearly event is coming up on 18 May. Each event has a theme and members are encouraged to take part by researching and producing material for the event. This year our theme is eighteenth-century entrepreneur Richard ARKWRIGHT. The event will be held at The Arkwright Centre, Arkwright near Chesterfield. As usual all aspects of family and local history will be included.

Visit our website for full details: [www.cadfhs.org/](http://www.cadfhs.org/)



## Fenland Family History Society

The society covers the fenlands including South Lincs, North Cambs and West Norfolk.

Family history stories are surrounded by family beliefs and superstitions. I saw a magpie the other day and was reminded of a saying. *One for sorrow, two for joy...* goes the ditty about magpies. Many people salute when they appear alone, believing seeing a solitary magpie brings bad luck. Some even call to the beautiful bird *good morning, Mr Magpie, how's your lady wife?* Bearing in mind these birds mate for life, it is understandable that a superstition might have sprung up around the sighting of a lonely one.

Our MONTHLY MEETINGS. Held at Wisbech Library 7 - 9 pm on the fourth Thursday, non-members welcome.

**Thursday 22nd February** our guest speaker will be Grenville GOODSON with a talk about the Littleport riots.

**Thursday 28th March** is opportunity for members to share their queries and finds. Plus a talk by one of our members.

Everyone welcome. Members free, visitors a donation of at least £2.

**COMPUTER RESEARCH SESSIONS.** Our team of researchers help visitors researching their family history, no matter where their family came from. Our session in Wisbech Library is on the FIRST TUESDAY of each month from 10-12 noon using all the wonderful resources available in the library. Our second session is on the SECOND MONDAY of each month, from 11am-2.30pm in the restaurant at Baytree Garden Centre, Hilgay near Downham Market. We offer help with family research to visitors to the garden centre. We can go to other venues if there is Wifi available.

**OUR SPEAKERS** are available to attend groups and clubs to give talks in the local area. The talks offered include - *The Fun of Family History* about a long journey by land, air and sea to find her roots.

*My Naughty Great-aunt Eliza* unravelling a story of lies and deceit.

*The Ups and Downs of Being a Magistrate* a real life experience.

*The Sad Tale of The Blacksmith's Family* the story of a great-great-grandfather.

*We're going down the pub* a "local" history talk about the many pubs in the area. .

**OUR EVENTS TEAM** can create special displays, linking various themes to how we research. If you have an event, please make contact and we will be happy to create a special display to bring added interest to your event.

For further information on any of the above please contact Bridget Hunter 01945 587723.

[bridget25hunter@btinternet.com](mailto:bridget25hunter@btinternet.com)

Please visit our website: [www.fenlandfhs.org.uk/](http://www.fenlandfhs.org.uk/)



# Family History Societies



## JGSGB Jewish Genealogical Society of GB

The society was founded in March 1992 for beginners and experienced researchers:

- ♦ To help one another to learn and discover more about genealogy
- ♦ To encourage genealogical research
- ♦ To promote the preservation of Jewish genealogical records and resources
- ♦ To share information amongst members.

We are a secular society for anyone with Jewish heritage, whatever a member's current religion. The scope of our members' interests covers all Jewish communities worldwide although, as you would expect, we are the centre of excellence for UK Jewish genealogy. Our members are particularly interested in Eastern Europe to where many of our ancestors can be traced.

We run annual conferences in London and Manchester with speakers on diverse topics covering family history and Jewish genealogy. We also hold regional meetings with speakers and workshops. Every month we run an educational webinar for members. We also have a mentoring programme to provide one-on-one assistance for less-experienced members by some of our expert members.

We host special interest groups focusing on particular topics, such as Eastern European genealogy, German genealogy, Dutch and Sephardic genealogy, and Anglo-Jewry (typically those who have been in England since well before the Eastern European Ashkenazi onslaught from the 1880s).

We produce an award-winning journal called *Shemot* with articles on Jewish genealogy. This is published three times per year. There is also a quarterly newsletter with the latest news, book reviews and event details.

In August 2023, JGSGB hosted the forty-third annual International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies conference in London. This was the first to be held in the UK since 2001 and the first in-person IAJGS conference since 2019. This informative event attracted more than 400 family history experts and amateurs to over 200 sessions from more than 100 speakers.

In November our library relocated to Kent House, Knightsbridge, London on the third floor, next to the Czech Memorial Scrolls Museum. The volunteers have worked hard to welcome visitors from March 2024. The library contains more than a thousand reference books and other items

including journals and manuscripts. It is unique in the UK in concentrating specifically on Jewish genealogy with the emphasis on resources to help those tracing Jewish ancestors. The full catalogue is on our website. The opening days are generally the first Tuesday and third Thursday monthly, from 10.30 to 4.00. Advance booking is essential, so please email to book a place or obtain further information [library@jgsgb.org.uk](mailto:library@jgsgb.org.uk).

More information about JGSSB, including how to join, a programme of events, and many other resources, can be found on our website: [www.jgsgb.org.uk/](http://www.jgsgb.org.uk/)



## The Moxon Society

The Moxon Society is a one-name family history society including all variants of the Moxon name, such as Moxham, Moxson, etc.

The society's origins date back to 1986 when three Moxons – Professor Richard Moxon of Oxford University, James Moxon OBE of Ghana and Shropshire, and Dick Moxon of Southampton – got together to look at an unpublished *History of the Moxon Family* that was researched and compiled by classical scholars Canon R.S. Moxon and Prebendary T.A. Moxon just after the First World War. These had in turn access to another manuscript, *A Simple Record of the Moxon Family*, written in 1877 by the Rev. Charles St. Denys Moxon, a Norfolk parson.

Jimmy Moxon took on the task of pulling this information together, along with other information that he had gleaned in his own research, into a book *The Moxons of Yorkshire*, which was published in 1987.

To carry forward the momentum, around one thousand Moxons worldwide were contacted in a mailshot, and the interest that this engendered resulted in the Moxon Society being formed.

The wealth of research undertaken by members of the Moxon Society over more than thirty years is available to all Moxon Society members. As well as access to more than seventy Moxon family trees comprising nearly 40,000 individuals, members can browse an archive of Moxon wills and the details of the society's DNA programme. In addition to publishing occasional booklets, the society also produces a full colour magazine newsletter twice a year and the seventy-one past issues are all indexed and available to society members. The society hosts a gathering in the UK of family historians once a year and occasional meetings of members also take place in Australia and USA.

### NEW FOR 2023/24

Our latest project is to identify all individuals with the surnames Moxon, Moxham and variant spellings in the 1881 census of England, Wales and Scotland. So far, from a list of 2,430 individuals, ninety-six per cent have been located in the Moxon society's trees.

Full details are available at <https://moxonsociety.org>

Or email: [membership@moxonsociety.org](mailto:membership@moxonsociety.org)



# Family History Societies



## Dorset Family History Society

The objectives of the Dorset Family History Society can be summarised as the promotion and encouragement of the study of family history, genealogy and local history with particular reference to the county of Dorset. To support this we offer a wide range of live and online activities supported by resources provided primarily from our society facility, the TreeTops centre in Poole..

In addition to the past constraints of lockdown during the Covid pandemic, the society like many others is dealing with the effects of the current financial crisis. With this in mind, DFHS has made an effort to deliver a programme of events and activities for the coming year that we hope will be helpful for all our members in these difficult times.

Current membership is around 510 with a growing percentage of this being located either overseas or at a substantial distance from the county and this is also a change we need to be sure to consider in all our future planning.

Knowing that socialising is an important part of events for our local members, our face-to-face monthly talks at St George's Hall have resume but these are interspersed with Zoom talks which enable us to both better reach our more geographically distant members and also to hear from speakers for whom the trip to Poole would be difficult or potentially costly.

For our monthly computer club, we have been solely using the online approach as, by definition, the content fits and attendees tend to be comfortable with this approach.

The society would welcome feedback from all our members on these new arrangements plus an suggestions of improvements we can incorporate into our plans for next year.

For our Family History Day in April 2023, we made a conscious decision to keep the event small and at the same venue, St George's Hall. Once again it was a great success with positive feedback from exhibitors and visitors. Footfall was up thirty-two per cent on the 2022 event. We welcomed

some new and many returning exhibitors and many asked to receive invitations for the future events, Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond our control, it has not been possible to secure a suitable venue



for 2024 but planning for 2025 has already started and we are looking to replace a 2024 event with a series of open weekends at our TreeTops venue.



Pre-pandemic the society attended quite a number of such fairs run either by our sister societies or by the Family History Federation but, due in large part to the current financial situation, plus a combination of a significant reduction in attendance levels and the rise in the cost of putting on such events, has led to a move away from live to online events and the society has been learning how to adapt to this "new world". This does not mean that we are not actively looking for live events that we can be part of but in our plans for 2024 we have focused on smaller venues and local events such as libraries, craft shows and similar in the BPC area.

We have also re-instated our *First Steps in Family History* courses at Tree Tops and restarted coach trips to The National Archives and similar establishments that we hope will be of interest to our membership.

In doing all of this this we have recognised that some of the skills we need to thrive are not just those of family history, but in the areas of social media, website design and document management, for example. This year, DFHS became members of Community Action Network (CAN), a local organisation that specialises in supporting and advising charities and voluntary organisations. Through their recruitment portal we have 'recruited' volunteers, who are working on short and longer term projects and tasks for the society. CAN has also given us invaluable support and resources to assist with reviewing and updating our policies - which provide guidance to all volunteers so that we operate within required regulations and in a consistent manner.

In line with many other family history societies across the UK, DFHS is increasing its presence using social media with one of our appointments managing X (Twitter) on our behalf, and we are increasing the amount of content published on Facebook. We want to grasp the opportunities social media will give us, but we fully intend to continue with all current communication channels.

Visit our website: [www.dorsetfhs.org.uk/](http://www.dorsetfhs.org.uk/)

*Pictures from Dorset FHS website.*





# Family History Societies



## Sussex Family History Group

Society publicity comes via circuitous routes at times.

In June 2021 I was approached by Carl Benson. In his mid-fifties his mother had suddenly revealed to him that the father with whom he grew up was not his real father at all. She told him that a chap named John Pritchard, who worked for a malting company at the time and had visited Brighton, was his real birth father!

So, the Sussex link meant that he approached me as chair of the SFHG for help.

I do not think Carl realised what he was asking me to do! He had never been involved with family history before. We began by trying to calculate when John Pritchard might have been born and estimated 1945-46.

Next, we needed to test what his mother said was true, so Carl and one of his brothers each did a DNA test which confirmed what his mother had told him. We then suggested that maybe a full Ancestry DNA test might be useful in tracing John Pritchard as there were just too many to choose from using traditional birth records.

Well, we could not believe our luck! A fifty-per-cent DNA match came up for someone called John Pritchard, with a picture that looked so like Carl it was unbelievable.

BUT we came across a problem almost immediately. John had done his DNA test some time back on Ancestry in order to trace his own father, who was a GI in WWII and did not check his account any longer for messages, so how might we contact John?

I will pause here just to mention a remarkable coincidence in that Carl's mother was also the result of a WWII GI relationship. But whereas John Pritchard's father had left a letter at the American Embassy if John ever came looking, the same sadly could not be said for Carl's mother.

On looking around the family of John Pritchard in America it soon became obvious that there was one key person doing all the research, so I emailed her and said I had found a connection to John and could she see if he minded passing on his email address to us?

So Carl, my wife Debra, and I spent an evening collaborating on an email we might send to John, who we felt would have no idea at all about Carl and wondered just how he would feel about suddenly gaining a son. We only remembered at the last minute to include pictures and I'm sure that helped.



*Pictured is Carl Benson, left and John Pritchard enjoying tea at Brown's Cafe, Brighton in 2022.*

We were lucky! As a result Carl got to meet up with his birth father. They discovered they had so much in common, too. Debra and I also got to meet John on a visit to Brighton and we thought that this would be the end of the story, but no.

BBC Wales just loved the story and published it last year with pictures. Soon after, I had a desperate email from a *Sunday Times Magazine* journalist asking for contact details for Carl, as they too wished to feature the story in their 31 December issue. So that is how I ended up in the *Sunday Times* last year, mentioned twice together with the Sussex Family History Group.

So next time you get an email asking for help, you never know where it might end up!

*Mick Henry*

Sussex FHG website: <https://sfhg.uk/>

BBC Wales [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-66244738](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-66244738)

*Ed: A wonderful and inspiring story rewarded with publicity for the society.*



# Really Useful Bulletin

## News from the Federation

### FamilySearch



The FamilySearch website has a mass of detail for many parts of the world, including Britain! It is a useful first place to search for leads and, being free to access, anyone can use it. You need to register, but there is no fee to pay.

FamilySearch has contacted the Federation for some ideas for future additions to their site. We want to hear from you!

***On which UK record sets should FamilySearch focus its efforts for the next three to five years?***

Please send your ideas, which we will pass on:

[admin@familyhistoryfederation.com](mailto:admin@familyhistoryfederation.com)

### DNA kits

**Buy your DNA kits from Family History Books Online!**

#### Competitive prices!

All kits are from FamilyTree DNA and there are four options:

- ◇ Family Finder (autosomal)
- ◇ Y-DNA
- ◇ Y-DNA + Family Finder
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Visit Family History Books Online, or click for direct link to DNA kits:

[www.familyhistorybooksonline.com/dna-kits-376](http://www.familyhistorybooksonline.com/dna-kits-376)

### Out and about

In March we are getting busy with outside events. Do visit the exhibit if you are at the craft shows where our volunteers will enjoy talking family history with you. It will be the bookshop at Malvern. We hope to have a books discount available for visitors that day!



7-9 March

Creative Craft Show, Glasgow

14-17 March

Creative Craft Show, Birmingham



16 March

The Family History Show, Malvern + bookshop



*Above, booth at NEC, Birmingham.*

*Left: bookshop at a family history event. Chairman Steve Manning enjoying a chat!*



**LIVE  
in 2024**

**Celebrating fifty years of the  
Family History Federation**

**Saturday 20 April—East Anglia**  
Burgess Hall, Westwood Road,  
St Ives PE27 6WE

**Saturday 15 June—Midlands**  
University of Nottingham,  
King's Meadow Campus, Lenton Lane,  
Nottingham NG7 2NR

Both have

**Free entry plus free onsite parking**

**Full details:**

[www.fhf-reallyuseful.com/2024-live](http://www.fhf-reallyuseful.com/2024-live)



# Really Useful Back Page

## Family History Research Aids from the Experts



Parish Chest, a service from the Family History Federation, has over sixty family history societies and some twenty-plus traders, at a one-stop online shop, offering a wide range of family history materials in some sixteen categories including:

- *Parish register transcriptions and more from local FHS*
- *Memorial inscriptions information from gravestones across the country, compiled by local FHS*
- *Nonconformists: Baptists, Wesleyans, Independents, Quakers and many more nonconformist lists*
- *Wills and Probate Indexes of wills and administrations*
- *Folders, printing facilities, giftware*
- *..and more!*

**Societies and suppliers regularly add new lines, so visit to see what is there to help you add to your family tree.**

[www.parishchest.com](http://www.parishchest.com)

**Societies and others interested in joining Parish Chest should initially contact:**

[admin@familyhistoryfederation.com](mailto:admin@familyhistoryfederation.com)

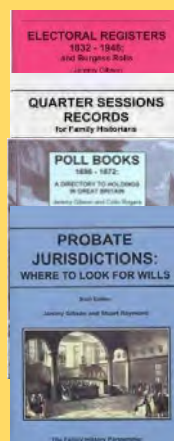


# FAMILY HISTORY BOOKS

[www.familyhistorybooksonline.com](http://www.familyhistorybooksonline.com)

Family History Books (FHB) is an online bookshop and publisher; it is owned by the Family History Federation and the aim is to provide a service to the genealogical community. Family History Books offers a range of relevant titles relating to family history research.

FHB welcomes contact from authors! Works of general and specific interest to family historians with wider social history topics are of interest. FHB does not publish individual family histories or fiction. If you have a book in the making, then do contact FHB via [admin@familyhistoryfederation.com](mailto:admin@familyhistoryfederation.com)



Take a look at the "legacy" titles, many of which list exactly what exists and, particularly relevant, where the originals are to be located enabling you to contact the appropriate archive.

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## The REALLY USEFUL Family History Show

**Live shows 20 April and 15 June**

**Online 15 and 16 November**

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**RESPONSE TO OPEN CONSULTATION DOCUMENT ('the document')**  
**ENTITLED 'STORAGE AND RETENTION OF ORIGINAL WILL DOCUMENTS'**  
**PUBLISHED ON 15 DECEMBER 2023**

In paragraph 14 of the document you state that the list of bodies to whom the document has been sent '....is not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive and responses are welcomed from anyone with an interest in or views on the subject covered by this paper.'

This is the response of The Federation of Family History Societies (Company No. 2930189 Registered Charity No. 1038721) (the 'FFHS'). FFHS is this year celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation. Its members comprise over 170 member societies based in the UK as well as overseas. Such member societies themselves are owned by persons interested in exploring their family history, by identifying, verifying and documenting their ancestral origins and descent. The total number of individuals who belong to our member societies worldwide is estimated to be at least 100,000 and could be higher. Several individuals belong to more than one society thus making it hard to determine the exact number.

We consider that we are entitled to respond in fulfilment of our charitable objects.

These are twofold as described in our Articles of Association<sup>1</sup>, namely:

- 1. to promote, encourage and foster the study of family history, genealogy and heraldry and in furthering this to co-ordinate and assist the work of member societies and bodies interested in family history, genealogy and heraldry.*
- 2. to promote the preservation, security and accessibility of archive material.*

In 2014 it was reported in a press statement ('the press statement')<sup>2</sup> that 2 million searches for wills post-1858 had been made. Many of those researchers will have been members of our member societies. There clearly is a demand for testamentary documents. Given our charitable objects we are very interested in your proposals and their likely impact.

We have drawn our member societies' attention to your consultation paper and suggested that they might wish to write to you themselves, which we believe several have done. They have also made known to us their views, which enable us to reflect the thoughts and concerns of a large number of interested persons, who are not listed in paragraph 13 of the document, whose views should be taken into account. We include extracts from our members' comments.

We believe that the number of signatories to a petition to Parliament ('the petition') started by Richard Holt against your proposals to destroy wills (more than 12,812 as we write this)<sup>3</sup> demonstrates the strength of feeling of a sizeable number of members of the public interested in

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<sup>1</sup> Copy available at Companies House

<sup>2</sup> [41 million wills available to search online for the first time - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/41-million-wills-available-to-search-online-for-the-first-time)

<sup>3</sup> <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/654081>



family, local and social history whom you neglect to consider or mention in your consultation. Their views need to be considered.

**QUESTION ONE: should the current law providing for the inspection of wills be preserved?**  
**[covering paragraphs 1-22 of the document]**

- a. Generally we believe that the current public right to inspect wills should be retained.
- b. It has existed for over 150 years. Earlier wills going back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century have been preserved and are retained by archives throughout the country, including The National Archives ('TNA'). Access to them is not limited, so why due to a historic reason (creation of the new Probate court) should post-1858 wills and documents be withdrawn?
- c. However we do not consider that it is necessary for the older wills and probate documents, the subject of the consultation, to be retained in the custody of HMCTS in perpetuity.
- d. Instead we suggest that a date for current retention by HMCTS should be agreed as you propose in paragraphs 42 -50 and when the relevant date has been reached those wills and documents should be treated as 'historic records' and transferred to TNA, who already hold the highest ecclesiastical court wills (Prerogative Court of Canterbury) dating from 1382 until 1858, including virtually all of the wills proved in the Commonwealth Period in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ecclesiastical Court documents, including wills proved prior to 1858, are also held in other record offices including the Borthwick Institute at the University of York. A complete run of original documents from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be achieved if you follow our proposals.
- e. A member society who has sent us a copy of their independent response to you, agrees with us: *'While we consider that original wills should be preserved, we do not consider it necessary that this be done indefinitely by the High (or any other) Court. The consultation paper does not refer to the possibility of passing them specifically to the National Archives, as was eventually done following some resistance by the Lord Chancellor's Department, in the case of wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (often called the "Doctors' Commons wills"). The problem that had existed with those was not a threat of destruction, but the insufficiency of search facilities at Somerset House. We recognise that the cost of storage is likely to be similar whatever body is responsible for it. It seems appropriate, though, for it to be borne by the body with general responsibility for preservation of public records rather than by the court that granted probate. As implied by the consultation paper, wills that are more than a few years old are rather more likely to be of historical, rather than current legal, interest.'*<sup>4</sup>
- f. We can understand that HMCTS will need to retain original wills and other documents recently proved or registered with the Probate Registry for a number of years, since there might be a need to revoke a grant due to the discovery of fraud or undue influence rendering the will or some of its legacies invalid .

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<sup>4</sup> Folkestone and District Family History Society



- g. Equally a later discovery that the testator was murdered by a beneficiary would result in forfeiture of the legacy to the murderer and the Estates of Deceased Persons (Forfeiture Rule and Law of Succession) Act 2011 might need to be taken into account where unlawful killing occurs, otherwise than murder.
- h. Updated forensic techniques could well prove that a testator was actually murdered or unlawfully killed or that a will was forged, several years after it was proved by the court, so HMCTS will need to retain original wills as suggested in paragraph 42 onwards and we comment upon this further below. We suggest minimum retention periods in answer to Question Eight.
- i. In our opinion there is, with respect, an omission in your statement in paragraph 20, since you do not refer to the retention of wills or documents or the procedures in the District Probate Registries which have until recently been the court registries where the majority of wills have been proved and retained in England and Wales, not the Principal Registry in Holborn. See our further comments on this in answer to Question Three.

**QUESTION TWO: Are there any reforms you would suggest to the current law enabling wills to be inspected?**

**[covering paragraphs 1-22 of the document]**

- a. In paragraphs 1-22 you ignore the valid interest of historians in wills and probate documents. They are a primary source of evidence for family historians, genealogists, local and also social historians. Continued access to them is very important.
- b. Scanned digitised copies are clearly useful to researchers working from home, but the uncertainty of how secure in the long term the digitised copies will be, plus what will happen when technology progresses, as it will, and the digitised copies are no longer capable of being read or downloaded, means that it would be folly to destroy the original wills and ancillary documents, which might need to be accessed to produce new readable copies.
- c. Concerns have been expressed as to the accuracy of present scans. We quote from two societies who have responded to us: *'...I have no objection to the digitization of wills, grants and letters of administration. My only concern, and this is from experience of the current system, [is] parts of the documents are frequently missed off the scanned copy. I have copies of wills where the last word or two have been missed from the end of each line on a page....[or]....scans where the bottom of the page has been missed and on a couple of occasions even one of the witnesses has been missed. At present I can complain and the scan is re-done for me and we're all happy but if scans are done with the same quality control as we currently have then vital information may be lost for ever.'*<sup>5</sup>
- d. *'I have often had to refer to the original documents because the digital record is unclear.'*<sup>6</sup>
- e. *'I have also previously had quality issues regarding Wills typed in the 1940s through to the 1970s where I assume, the contrast is too strong so faint words have disappeared altogether and bold words usually show*

<sup>5</sup> Chairman of member society

<sup>6</sup> Letchworth and District Family History Group





*too much ink in that letters such as o, e and a are indistinguishable - easy for common words but when the Will is referring to an address or field name, it becomes very frustrating. I don't know if they intend to use the existing scans they've already done as a start to their database but I hope not.'*<sup>7</sup>

- f. We suggest transferring 'historic wills' and other documents (as defined below) to TNA. This would mean that a body whose purpose is to preserve and allow access to records, would have the expertise required to safeguard and conserve the originals.
- g. We strongly suggest that wills proved, say over 50 years ago and relevant documents, should be treated as 'historic wills' and that they should come under the aegis of the Public Records Act 1958 ('PRA')(as amended) by the insertion in Schedule 1 of PRA, the requirement that all such wills and ancillary documents should be considered to be 'public records' and transferred from the custody of the Lord Chancellor, who is currently the responsible person, by virtue of section 8 of PRA (as amended), to the Keeper of the TNA.
- h. Court records are the responsibility of the Lord Chancellor and section 8(2) PRA (as amended) states that the power of the President of the Probate Division of the High Court to direct where wills and other documents mentioned in Section 170 of the Supreme Court of Judicature (Consolidation) Act 1925 are to be deposited and preserved shall be transferred to the Lord Chancellor. He should therefore exercise his power to designate the older wills and documents as 'public records' as defined in the PRA. As far as we are aware probate court records are not classed as 'public records' in Schedule 1 of the PRA and this causes the problem with which HMCTS is seeking to address.
- i. If our suggestion was taken up there would consequently be financial savings for the Department of Justice, which appears to be an objective of HMCTS: it would not be required to pay Iron Mountain (IM) for the continuing storage and safekeeping of over 150 years of wills and documents; probably IM would only be responsible for wills proved in the last 50 years (or whatever period might eventually be chosen) (see our comments to Question Eleven) and it would be able to transfer the older wills (those proved over 50 years ago) to TNA. The cost of conservation would be passed to another body. Indeed, it is possible that IM might still be responsible for storage and scanning of the historic wills as it has been doing this for other records under the control of TNA. Clearly a renegotiation of the present contract between HMCTS and IM would be required.
- j. Those wishing to see historic wills proved post-1858 until 1974 would be able to do so in accordance with TNA procedures or use the scanned copies. Wills proved after 1974, the 50 year period moving forward annually, should remain open to inspection through HMCTS either as a scanned copy or the original.
- k. TNA would be responsible for scanning the older wills and documents transferred to it. It would appear that IM began scanning wills stored with it seven years ago in 2017 and so maybe 7/20<sup>th</sup> of the wills and documents to be scanned have been already scanned? They state that it could take up to 20 years to complete scanning of all the documents and as 7 years have elapsed since their statement we presume 7/20<sup>th</sup> of the scanning has been completed.

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<sup>7</sup> Chairman of member society



- l. If scanned copies are available these should be coloured scans not black and white, so that marks or annotations on the wills are more easily spotted and the scanned document will more accurately reflect the original.
- m. One of our respondents also suggests that *'...every scan should show a 20mm margin outside the original page thus indicating that it is the entire page you are looking at.'*<sup>8</sup> They also query if it intended to use the existing scans that have already been done and express the hope that this is not so. Better quality scans should be prepared.

**QUESTION THREE: Are there any reasons why High Court should store original paper will documents on a permanent basis as opposed to just retaining a digitised copy of that material?**

**[paragraphs 23-33]**

- a. It is interesting that in November 2009, the government stated that<sup>9</sup> *'archives are increasingly a popular cultural and educational resource used to support the study of local and family history'*. We wholeheartedly agree with this. By destroying, as proposed, original documents you will deprive the public and future researchers of original records which have been scanned and which may become illegible or unusable as we explain further below.
- b. We are concerned that your proposals to destroy original wills are misconceived. At least twelve of our member societies are equally horrified at the suggestion and are against the suggestion. We set out extracts from some of their comments below.
- c. One says *'The subject was seriously discussed at our recent AGM, with many of our members expressing strong feelings on the matter. We are all completely against the Government's proposal, even though we do sympathise with the problems that increased storage creates. As family historians we have all encountered the need at one time or another to view ancestors' Wills and the ability to view originals has been essential in many cases. The thought that the Government is even thinking about destroying them fills us all with horror.'*<sup>10</sup>
- d. A second says: *'No objections to the wills being digitised, but the originals should not be destroyed. Destruction is short sighted and cannot be made safe from increased cyber threats or future proofed against changes in technology to make them available..... If you can digitise and make available pre 1858 PCC wills whilst still keeping the originals then the post 1858 should be kept also.'*<sup>11</sup>
- e. A third would support your suggestion but seek re-assurance *'.... These documents are important public records that should not be destroyed unless they are replaced by good quality digital images, that have been individually verified by a third party as readable and complete'*.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Chairman of Member Society

<sup>9</sup> [Archives for the 21st Century CM 7744 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/Archives-for-the-21st-Century-CM-7744)

<sup>10</sup> Lancaster & District Family History Group

<sup>11</sup> Northants Family History Society

<sup>12</sup> Northumberland and Durham Family History Society



- f. Another says: *'If it is decided that a move to electronic storage is to be the way forward then it is imperative that both the will and all associated documents must be retained in some form. Members historical experience with the Land Registry's actions regarding the destructions of historic deeds has raised this as an important issue.'*<sup>13</sup>
- g. A fifth society says in its response to you, which has been copied to us, the following: *'Our reasons for believing that the original documents should be preserved are:*

*It is probably impracticable to be sure of perfect copying. We are aware of a copy supplied under the current arrangement with a page missing.*

*It is likely that there are a few instances of wills' having unusual features rather than simply having been written on paper: eccentric use of material, attached seals and so on.*

*It is probably difficult to reproduce these adequately for all purposes, and unlikely that reproduction of the register copies will be adequate to do full justice (in the popular sense) to the original.*

*We may expect future scientific developments that will make possible examination of documents to answer questions that do not currently arise but will one day be asked by historians.'*<sup>14</sup> They continue: *'For the reasons given in the preceding answer, we do not consider it right to destroy the originals regardless of their ages. It has not been suggested that pre-modern wills held by the Public Record Office, county record offices and the Borthwick Institute should be destroyed, and these are by definition older than the modern wills.'*<sup>15</sup>

- h. Digitising wills clearly has benefits to researchers who use computers and the internet as you suggest. However, those with no access to computers or the internet will be excluded from accessing original records.
- i. To destroy original paper documents after digitisation would be foolhardy if the digital copy is defective, of which there are many present instances. The advantage of retaining the historic wills and documents is that they could always be referred to if new scanned copies are required in the future.
- j. We doubt that current digitised copies still be usable and accessible in 50 years' time. Several commentators have made similar comments.
- k. We have seen how various methods of 'copying' original documents have changed in a reasonably short period: microfilms gave way to microfiche, then 'floppy discs' of two sizes to be read on computers, followed by CD Roms and later DVDs using drives on computers which now use USB storage functions on pen drives and sticks to plug into computers instead. How soon before they will not be available on computers? If the original wills and documents are unavailable there will be a loss for future generations. It

<sup>13</sup> Dorset Family History Society

<sup>14</sup> Folkestone & District Family History Society

<sup>15</sup> Folkestone & District Family History Society





is not impossible that it will be necessary to see the original wills and documents e.g. to rescan them using new methods of capturing images but if HMCTS have destroyed the originals, as suggested, this would be impossible.

- l. One of our members says: *'Digitisation does not eliminate risk of loss (the server on which they are saved could be attacked whether intentionally or otherwise, by an enemy of the state, or by "scammers"). Neither does it mean that, in the future as technology changes, the ability to access the digitised images becomes compromised. You only have to think of floppy disks, or punched cards, for example. However unlikely these situations might be, they are the reasons we all back up our data religiously onto a secure and independent storage device. The operative word is back-up: it does not replace the original, just makes a safe copy of it. Digitisation of wills should therefore be seen as a sensible back-up for the original documents, not as a replacement for them. The only original document is just that: the original document.'*<sup>16</sup>
- n. The enormous and extremely costly problems recently experienced by The British Library demonstrate the problems that scammers can cause. The main catalogue of the Library was eventually restored months after the attack.<sup>17</sup>
- o. A retired science teacher, who is a family historian, has referred to the 'Taguchi method of quality control' which focuses on design and development to create efficient, reliable products. As a well-known engineer, his method is used worldwide and his concepts demonstrate that every human intervention in a process, produces one error in every twenty thousand items. As the digitation of wills will involve a large number of human interventions in the process, this provides evidence that all original documents must be retained for use in correction of many errors in digitised documents.<sup>18</sup>
- p. We ask why is it right to assert that documents of undoubted historic interest and educational value should be destroyed? Would it be appropriate to destroy Domesday Book or a version of Magna Carta or any other public record that has been scanned just because they have been scanned and are available online? What is suggested is moving towards the argument that all original documents should be destroyed once scanned and we would find that totally unacceptable. We would not be alone.
- q. In the Federation's opinion the set of probate documents, the subject of the consultation, taken as a whole, are of huge historic significance and should not be destroyed even if they are scanned. The vast majority of our members who have contacted us have expressed similar views.
- r. As the press statement we refer to above says<sup>19</sup> : *"....Every will among the 41 million is a precious historical document that can provide remarkable insight into generations of lives*

<sup>16</sup> Norfolk Family History Society

<sup>17</sup> [British Library starts restoring services online after hack - BBC News](#)

<sup>18</sup> Nuneaton and North Warwickshire Family History Society

<sup>19</sup> [41 million wills available to search online for the first time - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)



*lived and lost. The wills offer us a unique glimpse of individuals in their roles as father or mother, friend or colleague.....It gives the general public, here and overseas, the chance to get closer to their ancestors. The ease of access enabled by technology is matched by careful preservation of the original paper records. These are and will remain in trust for future generations in a secure, temperature-controlled environment....”* Your proposals will break the ‘trust for future generations’. It is only ten years ago that the so called reassurance was given.

s. We find the terms of your consultation paper to be ambiguous and unclear in several respects. You refer to original wills stored with HMCTS and refer to the Principal Probate Registry (‘PPR’). We assume you include in your document the original wills retained by the District Probate Registries (‘DPRs’) prior to the changes introduced in 2021. You do not explain the processes which were involved. Not all original wills were held at the PPR, many were retained by DPRs. DPRs now appear to be closed.

t. The procedures at DPRs meant that original wills together with the Executors Oaths, sworn by executors who wished to prove the wills, were retained by the DPRs and copies of the will and ensuing grant were sent to PPR to enable them to prepare the annual calendar of wills proved by the probate court. What will happen to these copies (initially transcriptions but as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed invariably photocopies and now we assume scanned versions)? Are these copies held by PPR now stored with IM and are they included in the storage and scanning cost figure you quote of £4.5 million? This figure ought to be adjusted as a result of a Freedom of Information request by Richard Holt, a member of AGRA, who started the SaveOurWills petition referred to by us above. The request and response can be found at the WhatDoTheyKnow website.<sup>20</sup>

u. Several DPRs have handed over the wills (or copies of their wills) proved from 1858 onwards, in their possession, to local archives. For example Sussex DPR. One of our member societies confirms this. They say *‘We note that the pre-modern wills held at district probate registries were (with the exception of those destroyed by enemy bombing) passed to county record offices without any threat of destruction.’*<sup>21</sup>

The older historic DPR wills (from 1858 up to about 1940) are no longer retained by HMCTS in many instances. Nevertheless, do your plans envisage that DPR wills, wherever stored, will be digitised and then destroyed? Indeed have DPR wills and documents already been transferred to IM and the Probate Records Centre in Birmingham? If not, is it intended that they should be?

v. You do not specifically refer to intestacy documents. What about applications for Grants of Letters of Administration (‘Admon’) where an intestacy is involved? What are your plans for retaining, digitising and destroying the original documents leading to and the actual grant of an Admon?

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/information\\_on\\_consultation\\_stor#incoming-2523183](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/information_on_consultation_stor#incoming-2523183).

<sup>21</sup> Folkestone & District Family History Society



- w. We assume that grants involving Admons, with the will annexed, will be digitised with the original wills the subject of the application?
- x. Do you intend to permit postal requests for searches and the obtaining of wills and Grants of Probate or Admons or must all requests for copies be done online?

**QUESTION FOUR: Do you agree that after a certain time original paper documents (from 1858 onwards) may be destroyed (other than for famous individuals)? Are there any alternatives, involving the public or private sector you can suggest to their being destroyed?**

**[paragraphs 23 -33]**

- a. No, we disagree with destruction. See the reasons set out in answer to Question Three.
- b. Likewise see our suggestions that the older wills and documents be treated as 'public records' and that they should be protected as public records under PRA after transfer to TNA.

**QUESTION FIVE: Do you agree that there is equivalence between paper and digital copies of wills so that the ECA 2000 can be used?**

**[paragraphs 34-40]**

- a. No, we disagree that ECA 2000 should be used. As explained in our replies above, the older wills should be treated as 'public records' and removed from the custody of HMCTS.
- b. In cases where the copies of wills and documents are indistinct or defective or if researchers seek to view the original in person, they must be able to access the original wills or documents.
- c. The Advisory Council for National Records and Archives ('ACNRA') is not included in your list of persons to whom copies of the consultation have been sent and this seems to us to a most surprising and bad omission.
- d. By way of a reminder of the effect of PRA 1958 (as amended), we refer you to the comments about the public records system on the TNA website.<sup>22</sup>

*"Who agrees what should be retained?"*

*The Secretary of State can grant approval to retain records that have reached 20 years. Departmental Records Officers ('DROs') within government departments are ordinarily responsible for making applications to retain records, which are assessed in the first instance by The National Archives. The requests are then considered by the Advisory Council on National Records and Archives, which is chaired by the Master of the Rolls, and composed of academics, researchers, archivists, former officials and MPs. The Advisory Council scrutinises the applications, and those it agrees are passed to the Secretary of State to request final approval."*

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<sup>22</sup> [The public records system - The National Archives](#)





- e. The above begs the question of when and what discussions regarding the transfer of the old wills and other documents to TNA have taken place between HMCTS, the TNA and the Lord Chancellor and if the ACNRA has been involved in discussions?
- f. Given the fact that TNA is a party listed in paragraph 13 of the document what comments have they made on the proposals?
- g. The wills under the charge of HMCTS if subject to the PRA would clearly be 'public records' as the majority of them would be more than 20 years old. We consider that they ought to be subject to the procedures required by the PRA as amended albeit that the period should be 50 years not 20 years.

**QUESTION SIX: are there any other matters directly related to the retention of digital and paper wills that are not covered by the proposed exercise of the powers in the ECA 2000 that you consider are necessary?**

**[paragraphs 34-40]**

- a. We do not feel that ECA 2000 ought to apply. You should follow the PRA in respect of 'historic' records as we suggest above in response to Question Two paragraphs g and h. Your failure to do that would in our opinion be an error and you would not address the problem in the appropriate manner.
- b. In fact the Court service states that it currently follows PRA systems in the 'Records Retention and Disposition Schedule' ('RRD schedule')<sup>23</sup> although as we see it, the provisions of PRA do not currently apply to wills and documents as they are not included in Schedule 1 to PRA.
- c. This should be corrected as suggested above by us by inserting a reference to wills and documents held by DPRs or PPR proved a certain time ago. It would resolve your difficulty.
- d. We observe that the RRD schedule does not appear to have been the subject of any consultation similar to the present one. Why not, given that it deals with destruction of original documents?
- e. A member society suggests the following: *'Another problem I've had (and still am!) is the denial that a particular Will exists yet it can clearly be seen in the indexes. It took six applications for the same Will before I eventually got a copy once (and the only reason why I persisted was that I got the grant on my third application!). Now, will the digitization lead to new indexes or will we still be applying for them using scanned images of the annual indexes? Perhaps a new index will hopefully rectify this problem.'*<sup>24</sup>
- f. Another society states the following: *'... as public records, digital images should be freely available at suitable locations or by on-line purchase. They should not be sold exclusively to commercial companies.'*<sup>25</sup>
- g. A third says: *'As a final point, we believe that it goes without saying that if such a process goes ahead it must ensure that digital copies of these documents*

<sup>23</sup> [probate-registries-rrds.docx \(live.com\)](https://www.live.com/probate-registries-rrds.docx)

<sup>24</sup> Chairman of a member society

<sup>25</sup> Northumberland and Durham Family History Society



*must bear the same legal authority as the originals.*<sup>26</sup>

**QUESTION SEVEN** If the government pursues preserving permanently only a digital copy of a will document, should it seek to reform the primary legislation by introducing a Bill or do so under the ECA 2000?

**[paragraphs 34-40]**

- a. We do not agree it should do either.
- b. See our response to Question Two. It is we believe open to the Lord Chancellor to add records which are not covered in the First Schedule to the PRA and he could add wills and documents now held by the DPRs or PPR to the list of records which will be classed as ‘public records’ thereby physically removing them from HMCTS (or IM) and depositing them with TNA.
- c. We do not consider that ECA 2000 should be used if you decided to proceed despite our objections as stated above. One of our society respondents says: *‘We should prefer that any legislative change be made by a parliamentary bill, noting as we do that the [ECA 2000] Act requires only the negative-vote procedure for statutory instruments made under its authority. An earlier initiative by the government concerning General Register Office certificates, that would have impeded genealogical research, was prevented only by a parliamentary committee, and no committee would have an opportunity to consider an order made under this Act.’*<sup>27</sup>

**QUESTION EIGHT:** If the government moves to digital only copies of original will documents what do you think the retention period for the original paper wills should be? Please give reasons and state what you believe the minimum period should be and whether you consider the government’s suggestion of 25 years to be reasonable.

**[paragraphs 41-50]**

- a. We do not accept the premise but despite this if you did still proceed, we suggest 50 years rather than 25 years, since it seems most unlikely that applications to overturn grants will be successful if made beyond that period. Most beneficiaries are likely to have died by the end of this period. Witnesses’ memories may be unreliable beyond that period even if the individuals are still alive.
- b. One of our members says:<sup>28</sup> *‘Retention period for original documents is a difficult question but it is felt that 25 years seems too short bearing in mind the increasing average age demographic. Perhaps 50 years might be a better target’.*

**QUESTION NINE:** Do you agree with the principle that wills of famous people should be preserved in the original paper form for historic interest?

**[paragraphs 51-52]**

<sup>26</sup> Dorset Family History Society

<sup>27</sup> Folkestone & District Family History Society

<sup>28</sup> Dorset Family History Society



- a. Yes because we believe that all original wills and documents should be retained. In any event, how do you determine who is 'famous'? One of our members says<sup>29</sup>: *'How will such people be identified? Will the time and effort involved in such a process result in an erosion of any financial savings made?'*
- b. Another says<sup>30</sup>: *'All documents should be treated in the same way, and no distinction made between those considered to be from important persons. Wills are extremely important to family history but are also used in many other areas of historical research. It is not possible to predict those that could be invaluable in the future.'*
- c. A third says<sup>31</sup>: *'Whatever method is used to judge whether a person is sufficiently 'famous' for their original will to be preserved is necessarily subjective. A person who may be well known in one part of the country may be completely unheard of elsewhere. An example that comes first to mind: Jeremiah Colman, 'famous' locally as the founder of Colman's mustard, but is anyone in (say) Cumbria likely to have heard of him? I suspect not.'*
- d. Your example of the wills of William Shakespeare and Jane Austen being famous persons, whose wills pre 1858 are preserved by TNA, is not a particularly good example since the Ecclesiastical Courts' wills have been preserved as a whole, not just those of famous persons, so their wills are preserved irrespective of their fame.
- e. Someone might be considered 'famous' today but be forgotten in 50 years' time or vice versa. Artists whose works of art now realise large sums of money when sold were often ignored at their death but would now be treated by some as 'famous'. If they left a will and it was destroyed because they were unknown at death but became famous a hundred years later you would not be able to preserve their will as it would have been destroyed.
- f. Our suggestion that wills proved over 50 years ago should be classified as public records and handed over to TNA would preserve the will and it would not be necessary to decide if a testator was famous or not. HMCTS would not need to be involved in determining if someone was 'famous' and therefore that their will should be retained.
- g. If you did proceed as you suggest would you not have to follow a complicated structure of reviewing those eligible on an annual basis? Would you accept that their wills will be preserved for posterity? Can we accept an undertaking to this effect will be kept? In our response to Question Three paragraph r, we have drawn your attention to the press statement <sup>32</sup> when it was said that all wills would be retained for posterity and that they would be held in trust. Yet this consultation demonstrates that previous assurances are worthless and not going to last for ever.

**QUESTION TEN: Do you have any initial suggestions on the criteria which should be adopted for identifying famous /historic figures whose original paper will document should be preserved permanently?**

**[paragraphs 51-52]**

<sup>29</sup> ibid

<sup>30</sup> Northumberland and Durham Family History Society

<sup>31</sup> Norfolk Family History Society

<sup>32</sup> [41 million wills available to search online for the first time - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/41-million-wills-available-to-search-online-for-the-first-time)





- a. We do not agree with your suggestion. If you follow our suggestions above to make older wills and other documents 'public records' it would be unnecessary.

**QUESTION ELEVEN: Do you agree that the Probate Registries should only permanently retain wills and codicils from the documents submitted in support of a probate application? Please explain, if setting out the case for retention of any other documents?**

**[Paragraphs 53 -54]**

- a. No. There are many other documents which should be preserved in order to make sense of the applications for a grant of representation to the PPR and DPRs.
- b. You list several ancillary papers held by HMCTS but do not mention caveats, which until recently were submitted to Leeds DPR. We see from RRD Schedule<sup>33</sup> that caveats are retained for 3 years from use. Will they be digitised and then destroyed? Whilst the caveats can be effective in delaying the issue of a grant of probate for a relatively short time, nevertheless they are an important part of the probate process and should be dealt with accordingly and added to the list in paragraph 53 of the document.
- c. We would also suggest that the following be added too:
  - Admin bonds given by administrators
  - Grants of Admons
  - Grants of Admons with the will annexed
  - Grants de bonis non
  - Second grants
  - Cessate grants
  - Affidavits of plight
  - Affidavits of script
  - Settled oaths issued by registrars prior to the application for a grant, which will have been returned to the DPR or PPR with the actual application
  - Rectification of the will under the Non-Contentious Probate Rules
  - All the above documents relate to grants issued in Common Form –not in Solemn Form. Documents generated during cases and proof in Solemn Form should similarly be retained and made available as public records.
- d. The RRD schedule sets out a long list of documents and their intended present destruction dates.<sup>34</sup> It was published on 1 March 2021 and it suggests that the following should never be destroyed:
  - Wills and grants of representation (including video recordings of witnessed signatures)
  - Statement of Truths (the old Executors' oaths)
  - Codicils
  - Renunciations (revocations)

<sup>33</sup> [probate-registries-rrds.docx \(live.com\)](https://www.live.com/probate-registries-rrds.docx)

<sup>34</sup> [probate-registries-rrds.docx \(live.com\)](https://www.live.com/probate-registries-rrds.docx)



- Probate engrossment
  - Powers of attorney (or power of consent)
  - Reason for delay
  - Alteration of grant
  - All birth, death and marriage court cases (divorce, adoption, etc.)
  - Deed poll
  - Ancillary affidavits and witness statements
  - Inventory and account of estates
  - Order of domicile
  - Forged wills and related paperwork
  - Notarial or official copies of foreign wills
  - Official copies of entrusting documents
  - Notarial or official copies of certificates of inheritance
- e. It then provides that most other documents should be destroyed after 50 years (not 25 years as you propose).
- f. We see no reason to alter the present system of retention of the documents itemised in the RRD schedule but when they are 50 years old, they should be transferred from HMCTS to TNA.

Response approved by Executive Committee of the FFHS on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2024

Signed on its behalf by its authorised signatory David S Lambert its Company Secretary

David S Lambert