

An untapped source of historical data

(The following text is something of a 'crusade', to awaken interest in a topic that should be of prime interest to all students of local history, whatever their level of skill and experience.)

Although millions of old wills lie stored in archives all over the country, only a tiny fraction of these - probably far less than 1% - have been transcribed. Transcription work in the 1800s and early 1900s tended to focus on the wills of the wealthy (which were duly published in ornate Victorian volumes by the Records Societies in several counties, such as the Surtees Society of Yorkshire), and it was only in the later 1900s that the vast potential for the historical researcher in the wills of 'common' folk was recognised. Since then, much effort has been expended in transcription by historical societies and lone workers all over the country, with the result that volumes of transcripts are now increasingly available - some in printed form, some as Internet-based electronic archives. But there is still a very long way to go ...

To give some idea of the task: there are about 250 villages and settlements in Northamptonshire, and wills are held in the archives for most of these. A good proportion of communities have a few wills going back to 1500 or even earlier. In a typical sample of 5 villages in west Northants, 556 surviving wills were found for the period 1500-1700 alone, to say nothing of the much greater numbers of wills for those villages over the period from 1700 onward. Assuming, then, an estimate of at least 400 surviving wills per village community up to the 1900s (and many more for our towns) and roughly 250 communities, we can see that in Northants alone there are probably at least 100,000 wills available for examination (and this is almost certainly an underestimate). As a detailed source of social data, this is a huge untapped resource ... and only when it is made available in full-text transcript and searchable electronic form does it begin to be really usable for historical research.

Some counties have given top priority to this task; shining examples include Kent, Somerset, Suffolk and the City of London (see the reference lists of published data on the next page of this section). Many other counties, however, have yet to recognise the importance of the task, or to give any significant attention or effort to it - and sadly, Northamptonshire falls into this latter category. Apart from a relatively small sample of 145 early wills for Northampton town published recently by the Northamptonshire Record Society, and some solid work by one or two lone individuals, no significant stocks of full-text transcripts are available in any format - and what is worse, there is no formal programme of work in hand to remedy this lack.

Transcribing 100,000 wills is, of course, an enormous task - with a typical 'average' will running to perhaps 500 words, it represents 50 million words of text - and this too is probably an underestimate. However, reducing the task to covering the years 1500-1700 would cut the task significantly; the logic for choosing this cutoff point is, that where the early parish registers for a village have not survived, Bishop's Transcripts are generally available from 1706 onward - so there is a special value in having transcripts of the wills before this period, to make up for the lack of early parish registers.

Moreover, the load could be spread - this is a task that could be undertaken by any number of local history societies, or by family history groups who have already finished transcribing their local parish registers and census returns etc., and are looking for fresh fields to conquer. It needs organisation, guidance and coordination from above - and perhaps that guidance, coordination and encouragement might be a fitting role for the Northamptonshire Record Society to undertake, as part of its future mission?