

## Capturing the Data

Many guides have been published to assist would-be house-historians. In practice, the historian can only use whatever evidence is available, however. So these web pages do not claim to be an authoritative version of How to Do It; it is merely a reflection of what information was available to the small team investigating house histories in west Northamptonshire.

### Basic Methodology

The method adopted involves three main stages of investigation

- Examining the deeds to the property
- Physical examination of the property
- Gathering data from other sources

### Property Deed Transcripts

Property deeds should first be photographed carefully, using a digital camera with at least 5Mpix resolution. If a separate file-folder is used for each property, and each of the photographs is given a meaningful filename commencing with the date-year of the document (eg: "1754 Crick, mortgage, A Jones to B Smith.jpg", etc), the images will automatically arrange themselves in date order, making it much easier to unravel the evolving story that is told by the documents.

The most useful documents tend to be Abstracts of Title, Conveyances, and Mortgages, because they generally include significant background facts about the owners and occupants.

Understanding the legal terms can sometimes be a challenge (for example, 'lease and release', 'common recovery', 'copyhold or customary tenancy', 'surrender and admission', the various different types of mortgaging and arrangements for borrowing, and so on). A good legal reference book can be a great help in explaining such terms in plain English - for instance, "A Concise Law Dictionary" by P.G. Osborn. The Oxford English Dictionary is also a mine of useful information regarding archaic legal and other terms.

When the deeds have been transcribed and analysed, the results can usually be condensed for ease of understanding, into one or two summary sheets; another useful tool is the spreadsheet - especially when combined with family-history data culled from parish registers and other documents, see below under 'Supplementary data sources'.

### **Physical examination of the property**

A physical examination should aim to establish the layout and dimensions of the main building, and any associated outbuildings. A walk around the property with the owner is generally the best method.

Keep an eye open for any special features that might give clues to dating, such as date plates, doorways/lintels, windows/fittings, chimneys (both regarding their form and their position within the house), staircases, ceiling and wall beams, roof timbers, specific period features (such as locks and bars, re-used timbers, decorative features etc), any signs of rebuilding (eg replacing cob with brick, timber framing with stone, raising the height of the roof, etc).

Take plenty of photographs, including close-ups of features of interest. But remember to obtain the owner's permission beforehand - and do not make any of this material public without specific permission from the owner.

Finally, old photographs, sketches, maps and paintings of the property can all be of great assistance in checking the previous history of the building - for instance, helping to establish dates for the blocking of a window or doorway, the addition or replacement of a feature, repair of a roof, etc.

### **Supplementary data sources**

There are so many other potential sources of information that it is impossible to describe them all here in sufficient detail; a list will suffice to indicate the possibilities. Most of the documents can be found in the local county records office, and others (such as old newspaper reports) are now available via online database archives:

- Word of mouth reports
- Parish registers
- Census returns
- Wills and inventories
- Village school records
- Apprenticeship records
- Settlement exams and removal orders
- Enclosure awards
- Militia List returns
- Hearth Tax returns
- Land Tax returns
- Insurance-plate records
- Newspaper reports
- Manorial records

When all the relevant sources have been explored, it will be best to summarise the evidence in a text document or a spreadsheet, or a combination of the two. Typical examples of such summaries can be found among the specific house histories included in the "Village Maps" section.