

Regional House History Studies

Introduction

A large house partitioned to allow part to be let to lodgers, two adjacent houses knocked together to accommodate a growing family, an extension added, a barn converted into living space, some land sold off or acquired, and so on - all these are reflections of the situation of their owners at the time. Therefore, careful study and analysis of the deeds of an old property and the circumstances of the owners can reveal just as much about the history of a house as a careful examination of the physical fabric of the building. These two types of work - documentary analysis and physical inspection - are complementary, and when carried out together they can result in a detailed and accurate record of the history and evolution of an old property.

Sadly, however, the deeds to an old property are often impossible to locate. They may have been taken away by a former owner as a souvenir or memento, or damaged by damp or rodents, or lent to someone and subsequently lost - in some cases they have even been thrown on to a bonfire because their owners did not understand their enormous heritage value. It is therefore essential to recognise the historical value of these old documents, and to conserve and analyse them carefully.

Even this is not the worst of the situation - recent changes in English property law have abolished the need for mortgage lenders to hold a copy of the property deeds as security for their loan - and further legal changes have meant that even the Land Registry does not now hold copies of old property deeds. The result of these legal changes is that, since about 2003, increasing numbers of solicitors, building societies and banks have been steadily destroying hundreds of thousands of old parchment and paper property deeds dating back to the 1800s, the 1700s, and in some cases back to the 1600s.