

## Wills as a source of data

Wills contain all sorts of useful social data - names and dates for family trees, information on wealth and specific bequests, property and land ownership, bonds of friendship, data on fertility and mortality, details of vernacular buildings and their contents, comments on clothing and fashion, food and cooking, lists of household utensils, agriculture and crops, aspects of animal husbandry, information about disease and epidemic, weather and harvest, fiscal inflation and the changing value of money, trade tools and tackle, luxury goods and necessities, the changing role of the church in the community, the effects of new inventions and discoveries, the advance of science, the effects of printing and literacy ... the list is virtually endless.

Moreover, wills are (and were) made by a large section of the population, especially in the pre-Reformation period when will-making was associated with 'making a good end with God' so that even poor folk were encouraged to make their will; they therefore form a very good and consistent source of data for studying the whole of the community, unlike tax returns which tend to be highly selective and also to vary in very inconsistent ways.

This section of the site looks in detail at some early wills for west-Northamptonshire villages - considering firstly such basic issues as how many of them have survived, where they can be found, and how to transcribe and interpret them - and then looking at the data that can be extracted from them by analysing a substantial number of wills. Comparisons are given with similar exercises carried out for other English counties.

This section also contains downloadable resources such as glossaries of terms, and parliamentary acts relating to the making of wills and the laws of property; and links are provided to useful aids such as tutorials in reading early handwriting scripts.