



English Treasures: 19th Century Wills

Ed Storey looks at an interesting collection of Durham and Northumberland records

ORGANIZATIONS WITH DOCUMENTS OF GENEALOGICAL INTEREST are coming to realize that by scanning and making them available online, they are able to eliminate subsequent wear and damage by people wishing to examine them. I have seen several examples of this in England. The University of Leicester has done this with over 600 city directories, starting in the 19th century.

Additionally, the writer might come clean about relationships that resulted in illegitimate children. Locating paternity at this late date can be very difficult and the confession of the father can be most helpful. There were rules that prevented such offspring from benefitting from pensions, but there was no prohibition to leaving assets to the mother or child in a bequest. Clustering of DNA matches might provide clues about missing paternity, but the potential of estate documents should not be overlooked.

Here, we will look at some examples of wills and how they can provide important insight today. The majority of the writing seems to define what to do with assets. We will not focus on that; rather on how to gain insight into family relationships. Even though, we are discussing Durham wills, the insights apply to any such collection of wills.

Start with <http://familyrecords.dur.ac.uk/nei/data/simple.php> This will take you to the main page of the library, with “Special Collections” front and center. To the right are quick links to about nine destinations, our scope here will be “Probate Records”, but feel free to look at “Family and Local History” or anything else that catches your eye. Not everything in the collection is available online.

If you click on Probate Records, you will be taken to “Simple

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Durham University has gone online with documents from Durham and Northumberland Counties. These include marriage licenses and newspapers, as well as wills and related documents. Overall, they are worthy of at least a brief perusal. Here, we will limit ourselves to wills from before 1858.

At that time, the Archbishop of Durham was responsible for the wills for the northern half of England. After 1858, the state took over and the wills were stored at the National Archives. No doubt, the transition took some time and happened with varying effectiveness. It is not clear why there are still wills at Durham, but they are nicely available and can be searched by surname.

Not everyone in the area was included as folks of lesser means often did not have a will. Still, wills that are available have at least two useful features. They serve to define the relationships of families and at least parts of multiple generations. To be clear, the will writer was often careful to spell names correctly, including middle names. When the relationships of several people are available, it is often much easier to locate additional records or to compare to trees posted by others on the internet.