

The Devon Wills Project (Progress Report – 1 January 2010)

The Aim of the Project

The aim of the Devon Wills Project (DWP), a co-operation involving the Devon Family History Society, the Devon Record Office, GENUKI/Devon, and the Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, is to provide a finding aid for Devon wills, administrations and inventories, covering (and distinguishing between) original documents, probate copies, transcripts and abstracts.

The project originated with an offer in January 2009 from Richard Grylls to help co-ordinate a wills project for GENUKI/Devon, building on the transcription and indexing efforts already being undertaken by Diana Stevens and Jean Harris. After some further email correspondence a meeting was set up at the Devon Record Office with John Draisey and Jan Wood of DRO, Maureen Selley and Terry Leaman of DFHS, and Richard Grylls and (by telephone) Brian Randell of GENUKI. A very productive meeting took place on March 3rd, at which the general scope and plan of the project were formulated, and many details agreed. Over the next two months a detailed set of transcription guidelines were formulated and tested, and an initial set of web pages constructed. A message announcing DWP and calling for volunteers was posted to the joint DFHS/GENUKI mailing list DEVON-L on May 11th. By this time there were already enough entries transcribed, and indexes constructed and placed online in GENUKI/Devon, to constitute an interesting new resource for Devon genealogists. These pages were also sufficient to give potential volunteers a good idea of what was involved and how valuable the results of the project were likely to become, given enough people stepped forward. (There is a **call for volunteers** at the end of this article.)

DWP involves systematically transcribing information obtained from various "sources", i.e. indexes, calendars, catalogues, books, journal articles, websites, etc., from a large number of locations both within and beyond Devon in order to produce a single large consolidated index. The approach we have taken is to deal with each source separately, and use the computer to bring together related items obtained from different sources, e.g. an entry from a record office catalogue for a given will, a published abstract of this will, and perhaps a transcript on some personal web page. For convenience separate indexes are constructed and provided for each different major source, and at intervals the contents of all these indexes are merged in order to produce a consolidated index.

The ultimate aim of DWP is to include information taken from all existing published or publicly available sources of information about pre-1858 Devon wills, etc., in fact of *all* extant Devon testamentary material. Of particular interest are original documents, transcripts and abstracts. To this end we, together with a growing number of volunteers, are systematically searching record office catalogues, early genealogical journals, published genealogies, the Internet, etc. However we also plan on including the information (mainly just name and date) that is provided in published calendars of nearly all the estimated 90,000 wills that were being held at Exeter prior to the destruction of the Exeter Probate

Office during World War II, even though there is little hope of finding out any further information about most of these wills. (Unfortunately no calendars are available covering wills from the Archdeaconry Court of Totnes, or the Peculiar Court of the Dean & Chapter of Exeter.)

This disaster is one of the principal motivations for the Devon Wills Project. Another is the fact that many of the relevant record offices do not have readily accessible fully comprehensive listings of their own will holdings, either in their own catalogues, or in the A2A online union catalogue of UK record offices and archives. Hence it has been very difficult for Devon genealogists to find what does still exist.

Progress so far

The set of sources that were already available to us at the outset of DWP have been greatly augmented by a massive amount of photography undertaken at the DRO for the DWP by Ken Ozanne, the LDS loaning us DVD versions of a number of their microfilmed resources, and the National Archives creating a spreadsheet for us containing all the Devon-related wills listed in their DocumentsOnline Catalogue. Thanks to their assistance and that received from a number of other record offices and archives, and the efforts of an active group of volunteers that now numbers over twenty, in less than nine months since its official launch DWP has gathered and made available online just over 80,000 catalogue entries, obtained from over 250 different sources. Some of the notable sources already incorporated into its consolidated index include:

- Calendars of Wills in Devon Peculiar courts – 1899 items
- Cornwall Record Office Catalogue – 925 items
- Devon Record Office copies of Inland Revenue Wills retained by the Estate Duty Office – 18053 items
- Devon Record Office Wills Card Index – 6735 items to date
- Exeter Cathedral Archives – 118 items
- Fothergill Collection of Wills – 250 items
- Index Society Calendars of PCC wills – 11296 items
- North Devon Record Office (wills found via A2A) – 654 items
- Plymouth and West Devon Record Office – 2479 items
- Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills in The National Archives' Documents Online service – 26,466 items
- Somerset Record Office Online Catalogue – 108 items
- Uffculme Wills and Inventories – 619 items
- Will transcripts and abstracts discovered in personal web pages – 634 items to date
- Wills in miscellaneous sources, mainly books and journals – 1854 items to date
- Wiltshire and Swindon Archives – 1443 items
- Worthy's Devon Wills – 851 items

In addition sample sets of entries have been transcribed from several other large sources, which we hope to complete in due course, as more volunteer labour becomes available.

Needless to say, with such a disparate set of sources, a variety of transcribing problems have had to be addressed. To give just one example, though many of the record office catalogues explicitly identify documents as being wills, administrations, etc., the A2A union catalogue does not. Instead with A2A it is in general necessary to search whatever is provided in the way of document descriptions, assuming that these actually contain the word "will", and allowing for the fact that these four characters can also be used as a forename, a verb, or as part of a longer word. On the other hand, we have been greatly helped by the great number of 19th century books and journals that are now available online, e.g. in the Internet Archive and Google Books. However we have found that these systems' search facilities for finding and examining the contents of books and journals cannot be fully relied upon, due to the limitations of the optical character recognition employed.

The differing sources also vary with respect to their coverage, the amount of detail provided, the collecting and coding conventions used, etc. So, for each item in the consolidated index, in addition to showing what may prove useful details about the item, we indicate the original source from which this item came. By referring back to the page containing the index for this particular source, in the introduction to this page information will be found about the conventions used by this source. In addition information will be found in this introduction as to the whereabouts of any surviving copies, abstracts or transcripts of wills, and whether photocopies of items can be obtained from the owner of this source.

A principal merit of the consolidated index is to alert genealogists to the existence of testamentary material of possible relevance to their researches, in sources that they may not have been aware of. However, as already mentioned it also in many cases brings together hitherto scattered information pertaining to individual wills, administrations, etc. The little example below from the consolidated index shows two consecutive entries for presumably the same will. One is from *DRO Copies of Inland Revenue Wills*. The second is a transcript from a personal website which reveals that the will was proved at the Episcopal Principal Registry of Exeter. Clearly, vagaries of spelling, cataloguing and transcription can introduce uncertainties and some difficulties in identifying items that pertain to the same will, but we predict that the consolidated index will nevertheless prove very useful in helping genealogists to locate and assemble together available information about wills of potential interest to them.

Baker	James	Calverleigh	DEV	1833	W	co		IRW	B 102
Baker	James	Calverleigh	DEV	1833	W	tr	EPRE	WWW	http://www3.telus.net/ggassofamily_tree/were/pafg84.htm#6960

As we have mentioned, one of the principal motivations for DWP was the wartime destruction of the Exeter Probate Office. Unfortunately many of our

sources do not provide enough information for us to be able to identify where a given will or administration was proved. Nevertheless it is evident that our index already lists the locations of transcripts or abstracts of almost 2500 Exeter Probate Office wills and administrations.

Volunteers

Volunteers involved in DWP are undertaking such tasks as photographing documents at archives, locating obscure published books and journals containing will transcripts, performing searches of various archive catalogues (both card catalogues and online catalogues), transcribing from microfilm or scanned images, checking transcriptions, etc. But, as the Project has been able to negotiate access to more and more sources, so more and more volunteers are needed – either for tasks that can be performed at home, or ones requiring visits to particular archives and libraries.

The Devon Wills Project website is at:

<http://genuki.cs.ncl.ac.uk/DEV/DevonWillsProject>

Brian Randell and Richard Grylls

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