



Village Life: One-Place Genealogical Studies

Kirsty Gray explores how the history of rural communities – the people, the streets, the churches, the workplaces, the shops and the public buildings – helps the genealogists of today to build a more comprehensive picture of their ancestors' lives and break down brick walls in their family history research

There are several things that can spark off an interest in tracing a family's history. Sorting out possessions after a relative's death or selling a family home will often reveal certificates, photographs and other mementos that give clues to the past. In today's increasingly technological world there is a desire to know more about ourselves as individuals and where we came from. As a result, family history is one of the fastest-growing hobbies.

From the outset, it is advisable to give much consideration to the branch of your family with which you decide to begin your research, with the two major factors being the name and the location. With a common name such as Jones, Williams, Brown or Smith, you may find that your task is too challenging to start with. An unusual name is often much easier to extract from the records. With regard to location, tracing ancestors in a smaller city, town or village can be far less problematic than trying to trace someone in London, for example. Each county usually has one main record office, although there may be

other small, local archives. This means that if your ancestors moved a distance of around 25 miles, as long as they did not cross a county boundary, the records will generally be in the same place.

Every day of our lives is affected by where we live. The people, places and events that entwine to make the story of communities have built up layer upon layer of history over the centuries. If, like me, you find that your ancestors lived in small, rural communities, a visit to the local reference library or County Record Office is the start of an extremely rewarding journey. Whilst researching the Sillifant surname, my investigations took me to two small villages on the Devon/Cornwall border – Tetcott and Luffincott. Just off the A388 Launceston to Holsworthy road, you could be forgiven if you missed the signs directing you to these villages.

Census books

The census books for 1801 to 1911 provide a decade-by-decade view of Britain in a century of unprecedented change. The first census was taken

1	7 Flat Roof	1	Richard Sillifant	Head	40	John Stenlake	Son-in-law	39
			John Stenlake	Son	13	Richard Sillifant	Son	9
			Richard Sillifant	Son	7	John Stenlake	Son	5
			John Stenlake	Son	3	Richard Sillifant	Son	1
			Richard Sillifant	Son	1	John Stenlake	Son	0

1881 census, TNA.
IN THE 1881 CENSUS, the population of Tetcott is 268 with Luffincott's just 63. The enumerators' return for the Sillifant family at Flat Roof, Tetcott shows various relations residing in the one property – Josiah's son-in-law, John Stenlake, as well as grandchildren, with Richard and Susannah Sillifant living next door. The information given in the census is incredibly valuable in building up a picture of the wider family.

in 1801 but the enumerators' returns, which give personal details, do not survive before the 1841 census. With each census, the returns give more information, recording age, gender, birthplace and occupation.

As relationships to the head of household are given, wives, children and other kinsfolk, servants, lodgers and apprentices can be picked out. Although not stated as such, some of these servants, lodgers and apprentices might be more remote kinsfolk or related by marriage. Often servants in rural households are the children of other families in the area. In 1901, Samuel John Mitchell of Clawton is noted in the Luffincott census as a servant for the Pooley family at East Peek Farm. As a family historian, you could be forgiven for overlooking servants and focusing on the family you are interested in. However, FreeBMD.org.uk highlights a marriage between Blanche Pooley and Samuel John Mitchell in September quarter 1906 in the Holsworthy Registration District, so Samuel John Mitchell soon becomes a member of the family!

Looking at the parish church

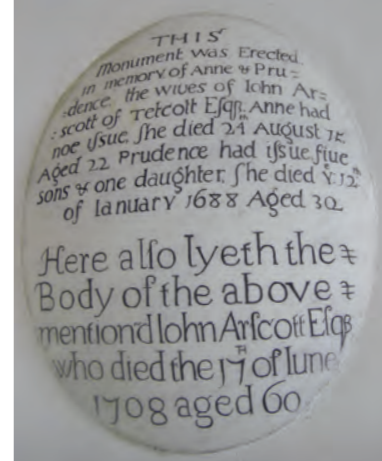
The parish church is possibly the oldest building in the village and for centuries will have been the focal point of local life. A close look at it, beginning with the churchyard and exterior of the building, will reveal not only its history but also much more about the community, its time of



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feast and famine and the identity of important local families. Rich and poor alike will have taken pride in maintaining, enlarging and embellishing the church and it is not difficult to unearth the evidence from what you see and from the parish records.

Returning to Tetcott – unspoiled by modern development, it only has a small post office in the village. At its hub is a splendid manor house with stables, a farm, the church and a few outbuildings clustered around it. The attractively situated church dates from the 13th century, although the tower was not completed until early in the 16th century. Inside are memorials to John Arscott who died in 1708 and to his wives Anne and Prudence.



ARSCOTT FAMILY memorial.

There is also an ornate Arscott pew, befitting the prominence of the family.

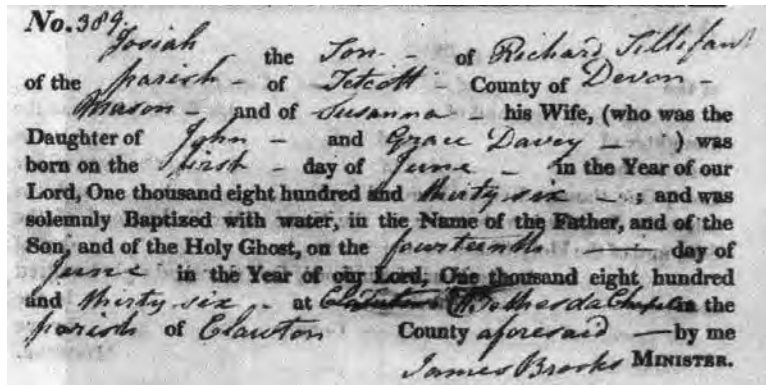
Parish records are held at the County Record Offices (CROs) although there is often a considerable amount of information available from a distance, for example:

- **Family History Societies** – it's well worth checking out individual FHSs to look into their volunteer transcription projects. To find a FHS for a certain area visit the Federation of Family History Societies' website at www.ffhs.org.uk

- **Online Parish Clerks** – volunteers who collect genealogical information about a specific parish and answer e-mail enquiries without charge. Details can be located at www.onlineparishclerks.org.uk
- **News groups, mailing lists and message boards** – for example www.rootsweb.com
- **Genuki** – website containing links to all the CROs in the UK, FHSs and one-name groups at www.genuki.org.uk

FIND OUT MORE

- www.achurchnearyou.com – database of Church of England parish churches
- www.genuki.org.uk/big/parloc/search.html – database giving locations of parish churches
- www.visitchurches.org.uk – website of The Churches Conservation Trust



JOSIAH SILLIFANT of Richard and Susanna, baptized in 1836 in the Bethesda Chapel, Clawton.

Other places of worship

Many towns and villages have alternative places of worship such as Baptist or Presbyterian chapels, a Catholic church, a Quaker meeting house or perhaps a mosque, synagogue or Hindu temple. Small villages tend to have Methodist chapels. Tetcott did not have its Bible Christian chapel until 1899, hence many of its nonconformist residents baptized their children in the Bethesda Chapel in the next village of Clawton.



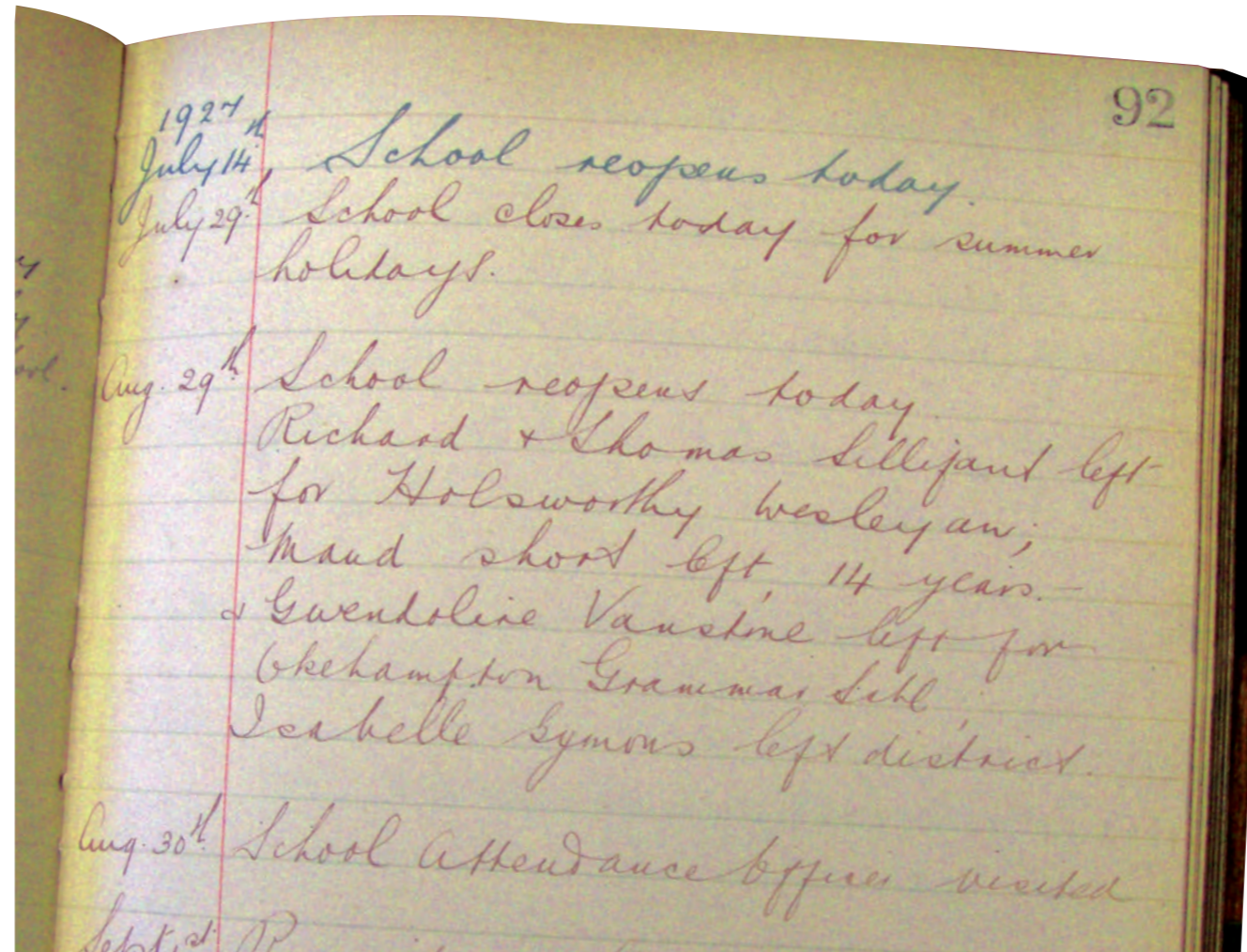
AN INSCRIPTION at the entrance to chapels provides the name and denomination of the chapel as well as the date of the building.

Schooldays

Schools lie in the heart of any community. A close look at the school buildings will provide clues about the school's history, and those who have filled classrooms come alive through photographic archives and log books in the local library and record offices.

The Victorians were the major builders of schools in Britain, with the state providing primary schools from 1870, and in 1880 attendance was made compulsory. Sadly, many village school buildings are no longer in use and are frequently in a state of disrepair, as is the case with the building at Lana, Pancrasweek, Devon, built in 1834 alongside the Methodist church.

The log books are often highly detailed and make for very entertaining reading for the family



RICHARD AND THOMAS SILLIFANT of Chilsworthy C of E School left for Holsworthy Wesleyan in 1927.

historian – for example, an entry in the Holsworthy Wesleyan School logbook gives an indication of some of the reasons why children stayed away from their desks:

The following are those who, for various reasons, have not attended school regularly during the year 1889/90 –

- F Badcock – delicate health*
- W Rees – sickness*
- J Ford – employed*
- T Wicks – sickness of sister*
- W Sillifant – liking for wildlife*

Hearth tax returns

To build up a picture of the people who lived in the community before the 19th century, the 17th-century hearth tax returns should be consulted. These list the households who are liable to pay tax on chimneys and provide information on their occupations. The tax was collected twice yearly between 1662 and 1688 in England and Wales, and returns survive for the years 1662–1666 and 1669–1674. Hearths in Scotland were taxed between 1691 and 1695.

The number of hearths on which tax was paid

reflects the size and comfort of the house and gives a good indication of the owner's social standing within the community. They also show the surnames in the village with many distinctive names still confined to the places where they originated.

The original hearth tax returns are stored at The National Archives in Kew and the National Archives of Scotland.



EXAMPLE OF a hearth tax return for Titchfeild [sic]. TNA, E 179/176/565

Monuments and memorials

Memorials are placed in prominent positions at crossroads, beside churchyards, or in parks, market places and public gardens. They are often plaques and boards in churches, chapels and community halls. The names of those who died in the Second World War are normally

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inscribed on a memorial and this is generally the same memorial as for those who fell in the First World War.

Larger villages, towns and cities sometimes have statues, as the Victorians were particularly fond of them. These often note the person's achievements and enable you to see why he or she was held in such high esteem by contemporaries. It may also tell you who was responsible for putting up the statue.

Newspapers and directories

Local newspapers can give you all sorts of details about a community and its former inhabitants. They are packed full of information about births, marriages and deaths; lengthy obituaries of prominent local people; advertisements for local business; court cases and bankruptcies; and local events. Glancing through trade directories (e.g. *White's Directory*, *Pigot's Directory*) will fill in many gaps, answer questions raised in family history research and assist in developing a vivid impression of a community's past. An online library of English and Welsh trade directories dating from 1750 to 1919 is available at

www.historicaldirectories.org. Far more directories will be found in the local studies centre or County Record Office.

Newspapers are generally located at local reference libraries and sometimes at record offices too. Although your search is likely to require a long session at a microfilm reader, your efforts will be well rewarded. You may also find that the newspapers you want to look at have been indexed.



KIRSTY GRAY is Chairman of the Guild of One-Name Studies, has her own professional research service, Family Business, and undertakes a one-name study. She is also part of the team of Pharos tutors with online courses Discover Your Devon Ancestors and One-Place Studies. To book a place on a course visit www.pharostutors.com.

Learn more about one-place studies

There are many more documents that will come in useful in a one-place genealogical study, including maps, street directories, old photographs, wills and inheritance documents, poor law and apprentice records to name just a few. If this has whetted your appetite, Pharos Teaching and Tutoring Ltd are running an online course in August/September on this topic, with further information available on their website, www.pharostutors.com.