

Family History Challenge!

Finding if your ancestor left a will can be quite a challenge, but it's worth the effort! On the reverse of this page is an outline of the wills held at the Northamptonshire Record Office. Staff will be happy to help you navigate the catalogues and indexes, so please do ask for assistance if necessary.

Some background information

The word 'will' refers to the written document by which a person (the testator) disposes of his/her property and gives instructions about what is to happen to it after their death.

Original wills were produced before the Bishop or Archdeacon or some official appointed by one of them and 'proved'. A grant of probate was then made to the executors named in the will, and they were handed a copy of the will with the probate act attached and sealed. The probate is often in Latin. The original wills then became part of the records of the Bishop's Consistory Court or Archdeacon's Archdeaconry Court, and these are now held by the Record Office.

Wills not written and signed, but spoken before witnesses and written down later, were called 'nuncupative' wills. If a person had not made a will, then a grant of administration was made to the next of kin (the administrator) who entered into a bond to carry out the administration honestly. These documents are called administration bonds. When a will was proved or an administration granted, it was usually stipulated that an inventory of the goods of the deceased should be 'exhibited' or produced at a later date.

Before 1650 most wills were copied into registers and often the originals were not kept. Wills before 1858 were proved by ecclesiastical courts – this ceased on 10 January 1858 and new civil courts had probate jurisdiction.

Condition of the documents

Please be aware that because many of the original documents are very fragile the original documents will not be produced if it has been microfilmed. In some cases the original document, even if it has not been microfilmed, still may not be able to be produced because it is too fragile.

Documents held at the Record Office

The records fall naturally into 4 main groups:

- Records of the Archdeaconry of Northampton from 1469
- Records of the Consistory Court of Peterborough from 1541
- Records of Northampton Court of Probate and Registry from 1858
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Records of the Archdeaconry Court of Northampton

Until the creation of the diocese of Peterborough in 1541, Northamptonshire and Rutland (except for peculiars and exempt jurisdictions) were part of the diocese of Lincoln, and while a few wills were proved at Lincoln, wills were generally proved in the court of the Archdeacon of Northampton.

- Wills: 1469 - 1858. These are available on microfilm for the period 1510 - 1724
- Unproved wills: 1627 - 1857
- Nuncupative wills: 1725 - 1800
- Administrations and inventories: 1660 - 1797

Records of the Consistory Court of Peterborough

- Wills: 1541 - 1858. These are available on microfilm for the periods 1541 - 1646 and 1820 - 1858
- Administrations and Inventories: 1570 - 1858

Records of the Northampton Court of Probate and Registry

- 1858 - 1862 (2 volumes of copies of wills and also of grants of administrations)
- 1863 - 1930 (34 volumes of copies of wills)

Records of the Peterborough Court of Probate and Registry

- 1858 - 1941 (54 volumes of copies of wills)

We do not hold the wills proved in the various Peculiar Courts of the Diocese. However we do have microfilm copies (M 132 and 133) and a guide to their whereabouts.

Northamptonshire Record Office's contact details

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