

Durham Cathedral Archive: property enquiries

Tracing the history of a property that was previously owned by the dean and chapter of Durham can be difficult and time-consuming. It requires some understanding both of the records and of the system of leasehold used for the cathedral estate. Further notes on the records described here can be found within the catalogues of the [Durham Cathedral Archive online](#). Because of the history of the cathedral's estates, property searches are easier at some dates than others:

- post-1870 many properties sold off (enfranchised) before 1870. Records relating to the remainder are mainly still with the dean and chapter.
- 1660–1870 property records are most complete for this period and tracing a property is usually possible with some degree of confidence.
- 1649–1660 no records survive in Durham – the cathedral foundation was abolished during the Commonwealth. (See [Commonwealth Records](#) held at Lambeth Palace Library.)
- 1541–1649 fewer estate records survive, though tracing a property is often still possible.
- pre-1540 tracing a property or tenants using the medieval (priory) records is much harder. The medieval records are not covered extensively in this guide.

✎ The estate records are unlikely to help trace the architectural history of a house or the detailed agricultural/industrial history of a piece of ground. Most property was leased to tenants, and the records relate primarily to the history of those leases, not to how the tenants used the land or what they built on it.

Before you begin: other sources of information

Try to consult as many of the following sources as you can, before starting to use the records of the dean and chapter of Durham.

- **Published sources**, including local/county histories and trade directories, especially concerning the ownership of land within a parish or township.
- **Deeds** or other historical information (typically from your solicitor or a local record office): always bring any deeds relating to the property with you, as they may help to locate the correct holding within the earlier estate records.
- **Printed Ordnance Survey maps**: 1" and 6" maps in searchroom (complete set). Some 25" sheets available at **DCD/E/D** (listed in [library catalogue](#)), but a more complete set is held at Palace Green Library.
- **Tithe maps and apportionments**, showing owners and occupiers for most land in County Durham, drawn up at a large scale after 1836. A partial set of tithe maps (copies) is held at **DCD/E/CB**; a more complete series of original tithe maps and apportionments is at Palace Green Library ([see key map and list online](#)).

✎ Some tithe apportionments will show the dean and chapter as "owner" and the leaseholder as "occupier." Others may list the leaseholder in the "owner" column and a sub-tenant as "occupier."

Understanding church leasehold

In order to use and interpret the cathedral estate records, you will need to understand how the dean and chapter leased its properties. Most of the cathedral's property was *leasehold*, and was held by a system of renewable leases that is typical of ecclesiastical property before about 1870, but unfamiliar today.

A property or tenement would be leased by the dean and chapter to its tenant or leaseholder, usually for a period of 21 years. However, the leaseholder would not wait until the end of the term before renewing the lease, but would renew after (typically) just seven years. Some town properties would be leased for 40 years, being renewed every 14 years. The renewals of the leases are often called *contracts*.

The leaseholder paid an annual rent for the property, as specified in the lease. However, this rent is fixed or fossilised, at least after 1660, and is known as the *reserved rent*. If a property was subdivided, the reserved rent would be divided between the new holdings accordingly. Therefore, to make up for increases in the value of land or improvements to buildings etc, the leaseholder would have to pay an additional lump sum on renewal of the lease. This lump sum is called a *fine*, and is more useful for assessing the value of the property than the reserved rent, although it is not mentioned within the leases themselves.

✎ A leaseholder would often sub-let their property (technically, by assigning it). Indeed, many leaseholders would hold a great many properties from the dean and chapter, acting something like modern property developers. The estate records generally relate only to these primary leaseholders, and include no information about whether (or to whom) a property was subsequently sub-let.

Church leasehold was gradually abolished during the 19th century, and in particular by 1872. After 1872, a national reorganisation of cathedral estates by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in London left Durham with a slightly smaller estate. The post-1872 estate records are still largely held by the dean and chapter.

Note that very little property was held as *copyhold* (from the dean and chapter's manorial courts) – none after 1577. Some properties were held as *freeholds*, for which the freeholder would pay a small (fossilised) annual payment, but not have to renew a lease: these appear in the notitia/renewals books as “free rents” (or “FR”).

The estates allotted to the dean or particular canons

Some of the cathedral's properties were not leased for the benefit of the whole dean and chapter, but were allotted to support the dean or individual canons (called *prebendaries*). These lands are known as *corps lands* (pronounced “corpse”). A list of these areas is in the 1555 statutes (chapter 18, published in [Surtees Society 143](#), p 121). Many of the corps lands were in Durham city and were used after 1840 to add to the endowment of the University.

According to the statutes, the corps lands were supposed to be farmed directly and not leased, although leases became commonplace. The leases were issued by the dean and chapter until late 18th century; thereafter they were issued by individual deans and canons, and do not appear in the central estate records. See introduction to searchroom copy of list “stall rentals and accounts” for more information.

Tracing the history of a typical dean and chapter property

If you are very lucky, you will only need to consult four classes of records to trace a property back to 1549 (2–5 below). Follow these steps carefully, working backwards.

✎ When making notes from the documents, always copy down all the details carefully, including details that you may think are not of particular interest. They may be needed when tracing the property in the earlier records.

(1) Was the property part of the main estate?

See note above on the *corps lands*. A few plans are available showing the general areas covered by these corps lands: see end of introduction to searchroom copy of list “stall rentals and accounts.” Some rentals and accounts are available in the online handlist *deanery and prebendal estates*. Relating these records to a particular building or plot of land is especially difficult. The records described at (3)–(5) below only show the *reserved rents* payable by the dean or canon to whom the land was allotted, and do not show whether it was leased or to whom. For the earlier period (16–17th centuries), leases may be found in the registers or act books.

(2) 18th & 19th century estate plans and surveys

A series of large-scale plans covers much, but by no means all, of the cathedral estates, drawn up between 1740 and 1812. These plans are accompanied by books of survey. Plots on the plans are generally numbered, relating to entries within the surveys showing leaseholders, reserved rents and acreages, sometimes with additional sketch plans and valuations. A second series of plans was drawn up from 1827. These plans and surveys are [listed online](#) (reference **DCD/E/AA**, earlier surveys and plans, and **DCD/E/AF**, later surveys and plans).

(3) Notitia books

The *notitia books* (ref **DCD/F/CB**) list every property belonging to the dean and chapter, arranged by township. City of Durham properties come first (subdivided by street or locality), followed by townships within County Durham in A–Z order excluding South Shields (vols 1–3), townships in Northumberland (vol 4), and South Shields properties (vols 5–6). There is an index to townships in each volume.

First, find the correct entry within the appropriate volume. Note that the descriptions of the properties within the volumes are very sparse (usually just ‘tenement’ or ‘T’), this makes the fixed *reserved rents* especially useful for locating a particular property. Remember also that a single leaseholder may hold many different properties and then sub-let them. The notitia books list all the leases for each property, showing the leaseholder’s name, commencement date for the lease and *fine* paid for each renewal. Using the notitia books, you should be able to trace a property from its enfranchisement or from about 1870, back to the 1790s.

Notes on the properties or on particular leases may be included on the left hand page, which is also used to record properties that are subdivided or amalgamated: complex and multiple subdivisions of larger holdings are common in the industrial centres during the 19th century. Sales (*enfranchisements*) of the whole or part of a lease are also shown, usually in red at the end of an entry, together with other notes and

numbers – make a note of all these details. Also note the “G[reat] Book” page number usually given at the top of the left hand page.

✎ The date given for each individual lease is the ‘commencement’ or ‘habendum’ date for the lease – that is, the date which the lease runs from. This is usually a few months later (or occasionally earlier) than the date of the lease itself.

(4) Renewals books

Once you have traced a property back to the 1790s in the notitia books, you can use the series of *renewals books* to follow it further back (ref **DCD/F/CA**). The renewals books record very similar information to that in the notitia books, but the townships are arranged in a different order (see warning note below). Column headings are different, and the “yearly value” column in fact includes the commencement or habendum date for each lease. Additional letters/numbers in this column relate to annual lists of lease renewals within the series of *contracts books* (ref **DCD/F/BA**).

If you noted the “Great Book” page number from the notitia book, you will be able to turn straight to the correct page in *renewals book 4*. Each property entry ends with the same lease as the first lease in the notitia book, so it should be possible to use this volume to trace the entry back to the 1740s. Again, the left hand page is used for additional notes, and a “G Book” page/item number will refer you back to the preceding volume, which (perversely) is *renewals book 2*. Using the page/item number, you should now be able to find the property and follow its history back to 1660. (The other renewals books are less useful, being mainly false starts or being incorporated into books 2 and 4, but see online guide for details.)

✎ Instead of listing the townships in an A–Z order, the renewals books and receivers’ books list townships geographically. A map showing the main townships and their order is copied on the last page of this guide. The order of properties within a township is generally the same across different records.

(5) Receivers’ books

Tracing a property back before 1660 is not always straightforward. The main (often the only) source for this period is the series of annual *receivers’ books* (ref **DCD/G/AB**), which record the annual *reserved rents* payable by leaseholders. These are arranged in the same order as the renewals books (townships geographically). This series goes back to 1541 (but with gaps, including from 1643–1660). *Receiver’s book 2* is particularly useful if you want to trace a property back to the medieval period, as it also shows the department (*obediatory*) or cell whose estate the property formerly belonged to.

(6) The medieval (priory) records

Some rentals survive for several of the obediatories (bursar, almoner, communar, hostiller and sacrist). A few of the bursar’s rentals and related records (for the main estate) are printed in Surtees Society 198, which also includes an index to persons and places, and a gazetteer of properties with notes on their acquisition and status. The [online Summary Guide](#) lists the rentals, Halmote Court (manorial) records, accounts and other classes of medieval records that may be useful.

What to do if there is no estate plan?

Many parts of the cathedral estate are not included in the 18th/19th century estate plans mentioned above. In these cases, you may find it difficult to identify a particular plot of ground against the many entries for each township within the *notitia books* or *renewals books*. The following classes of records may assist in these cases.

Other surveys and valuations

There are several series of survey books and valuations, in addition to the plans and surveys mentioned in the previous section. These generally only include valuations for properties as their leases come up for renewal (usually every 7 years), and are far from comprehensive, though many of the survey books include sketch plans, especially for tenements that are not included in the earlier estate plans. See the [online handlist](#) for details (refs **DCD/E/AB–AD**).

If you have identified the property on a tithe map or OS 25" map, the later volumes from the series **DCD/E/AG** may be most useful, as these volumes generally use numbers from the tithe map or (later) the first edition Ordnance Survey plans to identify plots. There is a survey volume in this series for most years, but note that it will contain only those properties whose leases were renewed during that year.

For **Durham city**, use the fair copy of a survey carried out in 1799 and updated in 1807, when many of the city properties were sold (*enfranchised*). This survey is in two volumes, ref **DCD/E/BD**, and includes plans of the individual tenements and references to the notitia books, as well as names of both leaseholders (“proprietors”) and sub-tenants (“occupiers”). Alternatively, look for the property on the printed plan of the city of Durham by John Wood dated 1820 (photocopy in searchroom at 5 The College, for other copies see <http://www.dur.ac.uk/picturesinprint>): this plan shows occupiers in 1820, with luck you may find the same people listed as occupiers in the 1799–1807 survey.

For **South Shields** properties, a draft copy of the 1799 survey survives in **DCD/E/BC**. The draft covers South Shields (as well as Durham city), and includes sketch plans of tenements. See also Durham University Records (**UND**) at Palace Green library, as the South Shields estate formed a large part of the university endowment, and properties are listed in a schedule to the 1832 act. See lists for details and current references, but useful items include a property register 1833-1891 (**UND/CG1/8/1**), a schedule of properties sold 1894-1939 (**UND/A5/B/148/67**) and a set of 10' OS maps.

If you can find an entry for the property in any of these records, you can use the names and (if given) reserved rents to locate the correct entry within the *notitia books*. Valuation dates should also correspond to lease renewal dates.

Copies of plans from counterpart leases

From the mid-19th century, many of the leases are endorsed with small plans showing the property being leased. The library has copied these plans and filed them by township (matching the arrangement of townships in the *notitia books*): these plans are held in the searchroom at 5 The College. By searching through the plans for a particular township, you may be able to locate the property that you are looking for: a database accompanies the plans, to match them to entries from the notitia books. (South Shields properties are excluded from these files.)

Searching the schedule of counterpart leases

Alternatively, if you know of someone who leased the property, you can search the schedule of counterpart leases (CCD, dating from 1722, [listed online](#)) for her/his name. Note that the quality of listing in the schedule is variable and it may not record all parties to a lease. Recall also that many leaseholders do not occupy their tenements themselves.

Enfranchisement (sale) registers

If the property was sold by the dean and chapter before 1870, you may be able to locate the registered copy of the sale deed in the registers of copy deeds. This may be particularly useful where details of the sale are known (for instance, from your own house deeds). There are two groups of registers concerned, depending on the date of sale, all of which are at least indexed by purchasers' names:

- 1805–1809 (mainly Durham city properties, also South Shields, Heworth, Cleatlam, Ferryhill and Croxdale): separate series of *enfranchisement registers* (reference **DCD/F/DA**). Each volume has an index of purchasers.
- 1853–1871 (most other enfranchisements): included in the main series of *dean and chapter registers*, [listed online](#), reference **DCD/B/BA**, volumes 139–141. 139A and 140B (1853–1859 and 1867–1871) are indexed by both person and place on cards in the searchroom at 5 The College, the other volumes include an index to purchasers.

Where to look for more information or details?

The above sources should enable you to trace property's tenurial history. Finding out additional information about the property is sometimes, but not always, possible.

Additional notes in the notitia and renewals books

The *notitia books* and *renewals books* often include additional information on holdings and tenements on the left hand page, opposite the main entries. For the renewals books, additional files of loose papers are also available, and these can be searched for the property in question. The other renewals books within the series may also be worth checking (especially *renewals book 1*). See online guide under ref **DCD/F/C** ("records of leasehold properties") for more information on these books.

Surveys and valuations

The survey books and valuations (see preceding section) may include notes on improvements to land or buildings, or notes on cultivation and agriculture, as well as detailed valuations of tenements.

Text of the original leases

The leases often give no more information than the entries in the other estate records mentioned above, but may give more information about a property or building (especially if it was, for instance, a shop or a public house), and may sometimes describe its location or bounds in more detail. The text of the leases can be found in several series, according to the date of the lease being searched for:

- post-1722 original leases survive in the Church Commission Durham Cathedral Estates Deposit (**CCD**), see [schedules online](#). Reference numbers for

these leases are usually written against the entries in the notitia books (in red ink or blue pencil).

1541–1825 leases copied in full into the *dean and chapter registers* (DCD/B/BA), many of which are indexed, [see handlist online](#).

1549–1599 among the priory records, class **Locellus XXIX** includes some post-Dissolution leases, for which lists are [available online](#).

Lists of contracts

If you are searching for properties leased by a particular person, a search through annual lists of lease renewals (*contracts*) may be useful. Several series include such lists (other records in the **DCD/F/B** section may also be useful, see online guide):

1660–1734 lists in back of *renewals book 1* (ref **DCD/F/CA/1**): arranged alphabetically by initial letter of leaseholders' names from 1689-90.

1734–1833 separate series of *contract books* (ref **DCD/F/BA**): also arranged alphabetically by initial letter of leaseholders' names.

1678–1870 lists of contracts appear at the start of each annual account in the *audit books* (ref [DCD/L/AA](#)), arranged in date order and slower to search.

Chapter act books

Act books record the formal business (minutes) of chapter meetings (ref [DCD/B/AA](#)). They survive from 1578–1583 and 1619–1969, and many include indexes (see handlist online). As well as references to leases, particular dealings with tenants and repairs are sometimes mentioned.

Miscellaneous estate records

A large number of loose papers, including letters, accounts and the like, are arranged in a geographical sequence and listed in detail (ref **DCD/K/LP1**). Other miscellaneous collections of loose papers relate to tithes, collieries, lead mines, quarries and salt pans. These lists can be searched online, in the *Miscellaneous post-Dissolution estate papers* handlist.

Receivers' accounting records

The receiver was generally responsible for any repairs carried out by the dean and chapter to the leasehold properties. There is no single series of accounts relating to these repairs, and most will have been carried out by tenants or leaseholders without reference to the dean and chapter, but some accounting records do survive. They are referenced **DCD/G/DC** and **DCD/G/DD** and are described very summarily in the "receivers' records" section of the online guide. They cover the periods 1634–1635, 1751–1841 and 1894–1975.

Inclosure awards

Where previously open land (common or waste) was enclosed from the 18th century, the inclosure awards will show how the parcels of land were allotted to local freeholds or leaseholds. The accompanying plans show the new allotments in detail, and these will be the earliest specific reference to the plots concerned. Some inclosure awards are held at reference [DCD/E/CA](#), but many more are held at Palace Green Library. In each searchroom, marked up 6" OS maps show the boundaries of land included in the inclosure awards.

