



A Beginner's Guide to Researching House Histories in Merioneth

Produced by the Merioneth Branch of Discovering Old Welsh Houses Group:
www.discoveringoldwelshhouses.co.uk



The purpose of this leaflet is to help you start researching a house in Merioneth.

TIPS:

- a. Remember you are researching three things: the house, the owners and the occupiers
- b. Record what you find: depending on how you work you may want to photocopy the information, print it, or take a full written copy. However you do this, make sure you include the name of the location (physical or online) where you found it, the date, the full reference of each document, book (+ page, para, line), map, catalogue etc. (This allows others to verify and for you to find it again)
- c. Record searches that haven't disclosed anything (in a couple of months you won't remember if you've done that search or not!)
- d. Write up in note form in chronological order what you find - this helps to get a feeling of the bigger picture and see gaps, inconsistencies, etc. - and it becomes the framework of your house history
- e. Don't go off on a tangent without thinking why you are doing this (could it be done later?)
- f. Don't make assumptions – find the evidence (or identify the lack of it)
- g. House names: these can have various spellings e.g. Bronmanod, Bron y Mannod, Bron-y-Mannod, Bron y Manod, Bronymanod and Cesailgwm, Kesailgwm. These different spellings can cause difficulties when undertaking searches (see i. below)
- h. A person's name: again these can have various spellings e.g. Gabriel family - spelt: Gabriel, Gabrel, Gabral. Also you will come across transcribing errors because the original document is difficult to read (this is especially so in censuses) e.g. Cabrel instead of Gabrel and for first names e.g. Wine instead of Minnie
- i. So, you need to think about spellings and record any variations you find. Some databases allow 'wildcard' searches: e.g. Gab* will find all spellings of Gabriel (and other names e.g. Gabon). Putting inverted commas around a phrase (e.g. "Bryn Dinas") will ensure you get results for 'Bryn Dinas' and not 'Bryn' and 'Dinas' separately. Some databases such as Ancestry check for different spelling automatically, but they won't pick up Cabrel for Gabriel. If in doubt check the 'Help' on the site you are using to see how you can widen or narrow searches
- j. Patronymics: this is a complex area but you need to be aware of it. In early documents you are likely to come across names without surnames e.g. Rhys ab Owain ap Hywel ap Maredudd ap Gruffydd (meaning Rhys son of Owain son Hywel...) and Gwenllian verch Rhys... (meaning Gwenllian daughter of Rhys...). Around the 1700s names started to become anglicised e.g. Dafydd ab Ifan to David Evan then later Evan became Evans. However, the principle of patronymics in some families continued well into the 1800s. Again with the Gabriel family; Gabriel Howell's first son was Howell Gabriel and his first son was Gabriel Howell and so on right up to 1850s.

LOCAL LEGWORK:

- Speak to owners (and previous owners if possible) and local people. Make full notes of the memories shared. If possible get the people involved to check what you have recorded
- Visit local church/chapel and churchyard¹

¹ See also 'Memorial Inscriptions' on page 3

- Is the house listed? If so, the list description will be available via the Historic Wales website (see below). The quality of these varies: many of the old list descriptions are very short, later ones can provide full details of exteriors and interiors along with historical information
- Are there any documents? Deeds, old plans, etc.
- Are there any old photographs?
- Record all information and take copies of documents, photographs, etc. Stories, however unbelievable, can have a basis in truth, so don't dismiss them out-of-hand.

ARMCHAIR RESEARCH ONLINE:

- **Google** - www.google.co.uk/ for general searches
- **Coflein** - <http://www.coflein.gov.uk/en/site/search> for searching the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments Wales (RCAHMW) - the 'Map' tab is particularly useful
- **Historic Wales** - www.historicwales.gov.uk/ for searching CADW listed building, National Monument records, and archaeological sites (Coflein can also be reached via this site)
- **Welsh Tithe Maps and Apportionments** - <https://places.library.wales/> to search for house owners, occupiers, extent of land etc. between 1840 to 1843
- **National Library of Wales (NLW)** - <https://www.library.wales/> – for searching Welsh National Archives, including Wills²
- **National Archives (NA)** - www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ for searching British National Archives, including Wills
- **National Library of Scotland** - <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/side-by-side/#zoom=5&lat=56.0000&lon=-4.0000&layers=1&right=BingHyb> for maps of Wales
- **Bangor University** - <https://www.bangor.ac.uk/library/index.php.en> documents held by Bangor University
- **Welsh newspaper articles** - <http://newspapers.library.wales/>
- **Google Books** - <https://books.google.com/> to search contents of millions of online books and journals
- **Ancestry** - www.ancestry.co.uk for family trees, wills, etc. Free at libraries/archives, by subscription otherwise
- **Family Search** - familysearch.org/search is a free genealogy website.

Most of the above sites can be accessed through the Merioneth Discovering Old Welsh Houses Group portal at <http://www.merionethdowh.info/> as well as:

- **Map of parishes** - a very useful document for finding out which parish your house was in
- **1888-1913 maps** side by side with modern maps
- **Merioneth Historical and Record Society Journal index** of contents from 1949 to 1989. 1990 to the present time is in the process of being indexed. Three important articles are available separately on the portal: the 1662 Hearth Tax³ (1953) and (if your house was in the relevant area) the 1623 Crown Rent Roll for the Commote of Ardudwy and the 1633 Crown Rent Roll for the Commote of Estimanner.

To get information how to use the above sites click on 'more information' on the portal's Research page.

GO TO MEIRIONNYDD RECORD OFFICE (MRO) DOLGELLAU WITH ALL THE INFORMATION YOU HAVE COLLECTED:

- **Talk to the staff** – they may know something about the house and/or the owners. They also will help you find records and show you how to use the microfilm and microfiche readers
- **MRO card indexes** – people and places. This is a card system which is still kept up and contains much information
- **Parish folders** - these contain information from newspapers, books, magazine articles, etc.
- **OS and other maps** - help to see the house in the landscape
- **Land Tax Assessment 1910** - this Assessment shows the owner, occupier, house name, extent of land etc.⁴ This information is helpful when searching the censuses (see below). Knowing the owner may lead to finding Estate papers⁵

² See 'Wills' on page 3

³ May not show name of house

⁴ Houses in towns may not have been assessed

⁵ See 'Estate papers' on page 3

- **Censuses 1841 to 1911** – people and property. At MRO and the library there is free access to Ancestry and Find My Past which among other things have all the publically available UK censuses. The censuses started in 1841 and are undertaken every 10 years. There is a 100 year privacy rule so the latest available is 1911. The censuses give information on all people in a dwelling at the time of the census – so there is lots of information available.
- The information from the 1910 Land Tax Assessment and the 1840-43 Tithe Schedule give you a starting point to search for the occupiers of your house. As you will not have a date of birth from the Land Tax or the Tithe you will have to guess a date of birth (there is the facility of +/- 10 years which helps with this). Also, assume the place of birth as Merioneth to start with (try North Wales if not successful). If all fails, ensure you are in the Welsh Census (as opposed to the whole of the UK) and on the right-hand side of the screen you are given the option of going through each page of the census to find the house and occupiers. The MRO map of parishes will help you locate the parish your house was in. The first page of each Enumerator's district gives a summary of the area covered. You may consider printing out the pages you want is the easiest way of recording the content and ensuring all the information is captured
- **Land Tax Redemption 1798** - this is another schedule of property tax (on microfilm). It shows the name of the owner, the occupier and information on the extent of the property. So, it is only useful if you know the name of owner or occupier. In a few cases the owner's house is mentioned
- **Estate papers** - there is an extensive collection of estate papers in MRO. If you can link your house with one of these estates many more records could be available to you
- **Electoral Rolls** - 1911 to 1915 and 1920 onwards held at MRO
- **Parish Registers** – MRO has an extensive collection of parish registers on microfilm dealing with baptisms, marriages and deaths in Merioneth. Some go back to the early 1600s but many before the late-1700s do not have details of the address of the person(s) concerned. Most early registers are in Latin and some entries are very difficult to read. From the late 1700s onwards clerics were increasingly instructed on what was to be recorded (i.e. where the person lived). From 1839 the present day system of registering births, marriages and deaths came into operation – these records can be searched free at <https://www.freebmd.org.uk/>
- **Wills** – these can give much information on families and to a lesser extent on property. Prior to 1858 you will find wills for most people, if they made a will and it has been retained, at <https://www.library.wales/discover/nlw-resources/wills/> . The gentry and wealthy people (especially if they had property in England) often had their wills proved in Canterbury – unfortunately only the index can be viewed online at the NA – there is a cost to purchase them. For wills after 1858 see www.gov.uk/wills-probate-inheritance/searching-for-probate-records
- **Memorial Inscriptions** – kept on microfiche at MRO and record the inscriptions of people and where they lived on headstones in churches and chapels graveyards. There is an index of people and properties at the end of each collection.

USEFUL BOOKS:

- Pedigrees of Anglesey & Caernarfonshire Families, J E Griffith, 1914 (at MRO)
- Annals and Antiquities of the Counties and County Families of Wales County Families of Wales – 2 vols, Thomas Nicholas, 1872 (at MRO)
- Parochialia, Edward Lhuyd, 1696 (at Dolgellau Library)
- Welsh Family History – A Guide to Research, Federation of Family History Societies, 1998
- Searching for Family and Community History in Wales, Gwasg Carrag Gwalch, 2014
- Houses of the Welsh Countryside (2nd Edition), Peter Smith, RCAHMW, 1988 (at Dolgellau Library)
- Surnames of Wales, John and Sheila Rowlands, Federation of Family History Societies, 1996 (at MRO)
- History of Merioneth Vol II, J Beverley Smith & L Beverley Smith, University of Wale Press 2001 (at MRO)
- The Buildings of Wales: Gwynedd, Haslem, Orbach & Voelcker, Yale University Press, 2009 (at MRO)

FINAL THOUGHTS:

House histories are part of the process of understanding the old houses themselves - house histories and building analysis⁶ together help us understand how people lived at home. It's going to be rare (or you're very lucky) if you can take the documentation back to the date of the building of the house, or even to its earliest changes; but later histories can help us understand later changes, which often took place at key points in a family history - marriage, new generation, change of ownership etc.

WHO WE ARE:

Discovering Old Welsh Houses Group is a registered charity (No. 1131782). Our vision is to celebrate Welsh Heritage through the study of traditional houses and the lives of the people who lived in them. To do this we undertake tree-ring analysis on suitable timbers (dendrochronology), radioactive analysis on suitable timbers (carbon 14 dating), structural recording (building analysis) and research into house histories. The first three are undertaken by professionals, but house histories are done by volunteer members (who are given training).

The Group was born out of the 2004-07 Snowdonia Dendrochronology Project which dated around 25 buildings within a 10 miles radius from the village of Beddgelert, Gwynedd and the 2009-12 North West Wales Dendrochronology Project which sampled around 100 houses across parts of Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy and Denbighshire. We published a book in 2014, 'Discovering the Historic Houses of Snowdonia' with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales on our results. In 2016 we change our name from Dating Old Welsh Houses Group to Discovering Old Welsh Houses Group to better reflect what we do.

HOW TO JOIN:

To join, please go to our website at www.discoveringoldwelshhouses.co.uk and click on 'Membership' and fill in the application form. You can also write to the Membership Secretary at DOWHG, Caerfallen, Ruthin, Denbighshire, LL15 1SN and ask for an application form. Membership costs £15 per year, joint £20. For this you get:

- Membership of a county branch
- Quarterly newsletters
- Training on undertaking house histories
- Insight into dendrochronology and carbon 14 dating
- Visits to houses and study tours.

⁶ See 'Who we are' below
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