

The Parish Map in Family History Research

The absorbing and addictive hobby of family background research has gained a remarkably increased following in recent years. This text is intended to assist the researcher in the use of parish maps as an aid to investigations, and as such, does not touch upon many of the unrelated intricacies and recent use pattern changes of these maps.

As an integral part of a comprehensive land recording system, the parish map - although neither designed nor intended as an archival document - can prove a rewarding source of information to the researcher. The information may not be an end in itself, but it can open up hitherto unknown avenues of inquiry. A brief description of the maps will help in understanding their purpose and potential.

County Maps

New South Wales is divided into 141 counties, the boundaries of which have a degree of stability not enjoyed by the more familiar subdivision boundaries of local government, electorate, and regional areas. Each county is, in turn, divided into a number of smaller areas called parishes.

Parish Maps have not been compiled for land in the Western Division i.e., roughly west of a line from Mungindi to Balranald, or for land within the Australian Agricultural Company's 646 640 acre grant in the county of Gloucester.

Parish Maps

There are over 7000 parish map sheets, and inevitably, there have been name duplications; therefore, it is essential always to identify a parish by both its and the county's names.

The parish is divided into portions, the numbers of which are shown on the map face. There are more portions in a closely settled area than in some of the more sparsely occupied parts of the State.

When a town lies within a parish, its location is indicated but relevant information is shown on a more detailed scale in a town or village map. The breakdown is usually into sections and allotments rather than portions. Maps are not produced for "private" towns which have been subdivided out of privately owned land. In recent years portions, allotments and sections have given way to the better known real property system terms "lots" within "deposited plans", but this is of little significance to most researchers.

The majority of parish maps are still in imperial measurements, so confusion with metric must be avoided. Areas are normally expressed in acres, roods and perches. (40 perches =1 rood; 4 roods = 1 acre). To convert hectares to acres multiply by 2.4711.

In some recent parish maps the face is left relatively clean, with the data included in the tabulated statement, which is common to all parish sheets.

Survey Plans

A plan of survey has been compiled for each portion and for each town / village section. As well as showing distances, bearings and other survey data, these usually contain a condensed history of the particular parcel of land, albeit in a somewhat cryptic format. Crown Lands Office staff are available to provide interpretation and explain how to use these records to gain access to other facets of the overall land recording system.

These plans are of enormous archival value, and to protect them from further damage from handling and copying, they are being progressively micro-filmed. Eventually all micro-films will be accessible at the Registrar General's Office; in the meantime inquiry at the Plan Records room at the Crown Lands Office is necessary.

Grants and Landholders

The term "grantee" is used to include the beneficiaries of free grants, grants upon completion of conditions, and leasehold grants. The term "first holder" denotes the person by whom a lease, or land still in the course of purchase was taken up.

Bearing these definitions in mind, the parish map shows, for granted land, the name of the grantee and for leaseholds or current purchases, the name of the first holder.

The parish map does not go beyond issue of the Crown grant. Subdivisions occurring after grant are recorded on deposited plans at the Registrar General's Office. The parish map is not updated in response to any such event.

Title References

In most cases, the tabulated statement on the parish map gives a "Volume and Folio" title reference, which is sufficient to enable access to be gained to the Crown grant held by the Registrar General. Should this information not be shown, the name of the grantee and date of grant will be sufficient.

Sometimes, it will be necessary to get these particulars from the survey plan.

Current tenures (leases and incomplete purchases) can be readily identified from the parish map, and may be searched at the Crown Titles Branch of the Registrar General's Office.

To search behind a grant, prior title identification may be gained either from the original grant or from the survey plan. As there has been such a multiplicity of land tenures over the last century, guidance from experienced Crown Lands Office staff is recommended. The path is strewn with snares for the uninitiated. Once identified, prior titles may be searched from old land registers.

Place Names

The researcher trying to identify a particular landholding or seeking maps of a particular locality should be careful never to discard any fragment of geographical information, however insignificant it might appear.

The Lands Map Sales and Information Centre possesses a place names list which is, in its own right, an historic document. Compiled and meticulously handwritten in 1954 by an Information Officer, the late Ernest C. Gleeson, it lists alphabetically all place names that appear in eastern and central division parish maps. There are an estimated 22500 entries in this list.

Place names appear in birth, marriage and death certificates, family bibles and numerous other documents discovered in family archives. Unfortunately, there was a tendency last century to use property names as birth-places, and many of these have not survived as recorded place names. However, with the aid of various cross indexes held at the Crown Lands Office, even these can sometimes be identified if there is a supplementary clue given. Watch for creek or gully names, the name of a hill or any geographical feature in land descriptions.

Shortfalls in the System

Having been designed to meet a continuing day-to-day need in an overall land recording system, the researcher will often be frustrated by a number of inherent shortcomings when trying to use the parish map as source of historic data. The observed success rate however, is in the order of 60 per cent so the researcher should not be discouraged. Failings mainly are:

- the mortgagee will appear as grantee if there was a mortgage existing at the time of issue of the grant. This accounts for the high incidence of Banks' names on every map.
- the grantee may not necessarily have been the original selector. The land could have changed hands many times between selection and grant.

- original selection may have been under lease many years ago. Conversion in recent years to a purchase could result in the first holder's name being deleted and replaced by the first holder of the new purchase tenure.
- any reference to grants or first holders is removed if land is resumed or otherwise returned to the Crown. Examples would be resumption for National Park, dams or State Forests. In the 1940-1950's extensive acquisitions took place for War Service Land Settlement; "first holders" under War Service Land Settlement schemes would replace the grantees of earlier years on the map face.

If necessary, earlier editions of parish maps may be examined at the State Archives Authority.

Further Information

Parish, county, town and village maps may be inspected at the Bridge St Plan Room, 23-33 Bridge Street, Sydney, between 1pm and 4:30pm

Due to the conversion of hard copy records to electronic format please call (02) 9228 6374 to assure the availability of maps.

Prints of maps are available. P.O.A.