

Using County Directories as a Resource for Garden History

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Trade and street directories contain a rich source of information about gardeners, nurserymen and suppliers of tools and equipment. They also include details of owners of houses and estates. In Devon, there are good holdings of county, Exeter and Plymouth directories which can be found in local record offices, the Devon and Exeter Institution Library, local libraries and museums. Many directories are also now digitised and can be accessed on-line.¹

Directories were first published for large towns around 1800, earlier for London and major cities. The first national series, published by James Pigot from 1814, included Devon (1822). This only covers a few of the major towns in the county which was not surprising as twelve counties were included in a single volume.² One of the earliest Exeter directories is contained within the *Exeter Pocket Journal or West Country Gentleman and Tradesman's Memorandum Book* first published 1788. The volume for 1801 is similar to a diary and account book. It contains information about MPs and Churchmen and includes 'A Complete Directory for the City of Exeter and Suburbs containing An Alphabetical List of the Merchants, Traders etc. with their Address, Residence and Occupation'. Although this portion of the volume is only eight pages long, it is a template for most future directories. Contained within this list are seven gardeners and nurserymen.

Geo. Cox, [c.1744–1831] Gardener & Fruiterer,
High Street

Philip Drake, [d.1802] Gardener, Southernhay
Ford & Please, Nursery Warehouse, New Bridge

William Ford, Nurseryman, Alphington Street

John Luccomb, [1755–1845] Seedsman, New Bridge

William Moreton, [d.1816] Gardener, Alphington Street

Nicholas Strong, [c.1743–1813] Gardener, St Sidwells

Another city directory, Besley's *Exeter: Itinerary and General Directory* (1828), is laid out in the form of a descriptive walk around the city with lists of 'Gentlemen's Seats and Villas' on roads leading into Exeter as well as those listed in the city itself. These include details of owners and/or occupiers. There is a section on 'Professions/Trade etc. with the addresses in the 'General Directory'. Seven nursery businesses are listed, as well as 'Fruiterers', some of whom were market gardeners. However, a trawl through the 'General Directory' will reveal a few additional 'gardeners'. Again these are almost certainly market gardeners. It was not until 1883 that head gardeners were listed under the trades section of Kelly's directory as 'Private Gardeners'. Previous to this a few of the more prestigious head gardeners, such as Amaziah Saul at Castle Hill, Filleigh, and Charles Harrison at Ugbrooke, Chudleigh, were listed under parish entries, for example, in White's 1850 directory.³ This was the first to cover every parish and one of the most accurate. Within the information contained for each parish there are topographical details, brief bibliographies of some of the

more important families, details of their holdings within that parish, dates when houses were built or upgraded and, on occasion, descriptions of gardens. Some are well-known, such as Powderham Castle, Kenton, Castle Hill, Filleigh, and Endsleigh, near Tavistock. Others are less well known, such as St. John's Cottage and Bassett Park in Exmouth.⁴

... *St. John's Cottage*, late the seat of Chas. Sanders, Esq., standing in the midst of extensive and beautiful pleasure grounds, on an elevated site, commanding a fine view of the sea and coast. It is an elegant cottage *ornée*, and has a beautiful conservatory, and some pretty artificial rocks, and a small waterfall in its tasteful grounds. *Bassett Park*, in a picturesque vale half a mile from Exmouth, is the seat of Chas. Wheaton, Esq. The mansion is a modern structure, in the castellated style, with turrets and battlements, and a tower in the centre. The flower garden is ornamented with a rustic fountain, and near it is a model cottage, approached by serpentine walks, and surrounded by artificial rock work and other ornaments. The lake is crossed by a curious rustic bridge, leading to a plantation on the higher grounds, which commands a fine view of Exmouth and the sea.⁵



Bassett Park was renamed Withycombe House in the 1860s, became a girl's residential school in 1948 and has now been converted into luxury apartments. Author's collection

A succession of directories followed White's, which included Slater's (1852–3); Billings' (1857); Harrods' (1878). Some were simply copies of each other. Kelly's is the directory that most researchers are familiar with. It appeared approximately every five years from 1856 to 1939. Following World War II, county directories were replaced by separate area telephone and trade directories.

Information to be found in directories

Early directories only included wealthy or notable private residents. Later directories included names and addresses of heads of households, especially where they are set out by street names. The Post Office directories, published by Kelly's, were important for recording the correct postal addresses of a growing population.

Most directories contain separate lists of the 'Principal Seats' of the gentry. These are useful to ascertain who was living where and who owned which property or properties and can highlight family links. The lists can also be used

to track the contemporary importance of a property, which could be judged by whether a house was included or not, and the status of the owner or occupier. Most of the 'seats' were occupied by the aristocracy, gentry, churchmen, JPs, military and naval men. Some were leased out temporarily or permanently for reasons of financial embarrassment or holding other property elsewhere. The effects of tax changes prior to the First World War, the war itself, and the following recession are clear. The heyday for country house and villa owners was the first few years of the twentieth century when almost five hundred properties were listed in Devon. By 1910 this had already dropped to 351 and the following years saw the numbers of important properties reduced to about 250. Of those properties listed as unoccupied this grew from four in 1910 to twenty-three in 1930.

Each parish or town entry contained information about the settlement and surrounding area including population, church history and information about important houses in the area and their inhabitants. Details of charities were also included, not only their benefactors but also information about almshouses with their gardens, charity lands and sometimes allotment sites.


The organisation of each directory varied. Some had a 'miscellaneous' list at the end of the trades section under each town to cover professions and trades that did not fit into the

categories used. White's directories did not always separate commercial entries from private citizens. For larger towns professional people and tradesmen were listed in two places, under the entry for each town and again in the classified lists of trades. For smaller towns and villages the tradesmen were listed alphabetically by last name. Entries in successive years showed changes of address for individuals and businesses. It is possible to trace the growth of towns and cities and the changing names and numbers of streets. There were also many small courts and terraces where families lived, sometimes in just one or two rooms: most have disappeared today.

The growth of interest in gardens, and money available to spend on them, is demonstrated by the increase in listings for individual businesses. For example, iron founders, such as Wrights of Tiverton, manufactured metal gates and fences; Charles and William Buswell of Torquay manufactured garden chairs and seats, some of which were used in the Royal Terrace Gardens, Torquay (Rock Walk). Sanders and Biss were horticultural builders and heating engineers, initially at Howell Road in Exeter, then later at 172 Sidwell Street and Cheeke Street.⁶ It was obviously worthwhile for out of county traders, such as Sutton's Seeds from Reading and garden implement manufacturers from Norwich, to have their company listed in Devon.

By the end of the nineteenth century gardener entries in the 'Trades' section included jobbing, landscape, market and private gardeners. The latter being for the most part head gardeners, although by the 1930s foremen or deputies were sometimes included, for example James Bray and William Cockram at Ashley Court, Tiverton.⁷ Classified lists of head gardeners can be used to find out whether head gardeners moved from one garden to another within the county. Cross referenced with census returns, parish registers, newspapers, estate records and contemporary journal articles, some of which were reprinted in local newspapers, it is sometimes possible to determine where a gardener received his training, who trained together, how long they stayed in a garden, (thirty years in the case of Walter Searle at Chanter's House, Ottery St Mary), how much influence they had by propagating individual plants or as a judge at local horticultural shows. It is also possible to see which gardens had a high turnover of staff as at Arlington Court, the home of Miss Chichester, or where one head gardener, content with his employment, remained for many years within one garden, despite sometimes the employer changing. William Gullick (1840–1925), for example, worked at Kelly, Lifton from at least 1870 to 1923, serving first Arthur Kelly, next Reginald Kelly, then the Revd Maitland Kelly.⁸

No garden exists in isolation. Gardeners, whether on large estates or in smaller establishments, needed to know where to purchase tools, fencing, plants and seeds, where and when the local markets were held. An important aspect of the directories, both useful when they were published and for historians today, is the information on communications, carriers, coach services and later the railways. Transport timetables for stage-coaches detailed the length of the journey, collection and dropping off points, mostly local inns. Transport of goods included local waggons and their costs. From the middle of the nineteenth century, railway timetables were also included. This was essential information

THE
POST OFFICE
DIRECTORY
OF
EXETER
AND SUBURBS,
For  1881,
WITH A PLAN OF THE CITY.

PRICE TO NON-SUBSCRIBERS,
TWO SHILLINGS.

EXETER:

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY H. BESLEY & SON,
Directory Office, 89, South Street.

Post Office Directory of Exeter and Suburbs (1881)

for market gardeners who needed to send their produce to London and other large cities, for nurserymen who needed to move plants and trees around the country quickly and safely and for those head gardeners in Devon who were purchasing the latest plants or who sent produce from kitchen gardens to a gentleman's town house or other family properties.

Miscellaneous information included details of taxes from window tax to servant tax, stamp duty on newspapers, postage rates and times of collection, and similar information that was useful for readers. There are also advertisements, often with engraved images of shops or details of equipment sold, which illustrate where gardeners might have purchased plants, tools and equipment.

Advertisement for Victoria Nurseries of Paignton from Kelly's Directory (1923). Three years later a similar advertisement showed that J. E. Mayo had become the proprietor and the Nursery had moved to 5 Croft Terrace, Paignton

Limitations of Directories

Information was frequently out of date by the time a directory was printed. Early directories listed street names but not house numbers, as many streets did not have numbers and those that did frequently changed as towns grew. The *Exeter Trades Directory* was an annual directory which listed inhabitants by street and by name, so it is possible to discover, not only the areas of growth within the city, but also the movement of people as they became wealthier or their status changed for better or worse.

Although each successive directory, especially those with street directories, included more people and more trades, many people were always excluded. No wives, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, servants, nor labourers or employees were included, despite many being partners in a business. Most women were excluded, unless they were widowed gentlewomen or proprietors of a business or trade as were the sick, retired and those who did not work. Although street directories were more inclusive, only the head of the household was listed; even when it is shown in census returns that other family members and servants lived at the same address, these people rarely appeared in a directory.

Accuracy is sometimes an issue. For example, in 1881 a Mrs Katherine Barnes, a widow living with her sister, was listed as Mrs Caroline Barnes under her address, 3 Belmont Road, St. Sidwells and Mrs C Barnes in the index. By 1883 that had been amended to Mrs K Barnes in the index, but still Caroline Barnes under her address. The listings were reversed in 1884, but thereafter listed correctly.⁹

None of the information gleaned from Directories should be used in isolation but should be cross-referenced with other material. The 1850 White's *Directory* listed a James McKay as gardener at Endsleigh, Milton Abbot but when checked with census returns and parish records, it was apparent that his name was Alexander Mackay. The census gives details of family members, their ages and where born. Parish records, civil registration records of births, deaths and marriage will give more accurate dates for these events. Newspaper advertisements, articles and reports will flesh out the details of individuals, their business or property. Contemporary books contain descriptions and illustrations of properties. One description of Oxton House, the seat of Revd John Swete, a follower of the eighteenth-century improvers such as Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and Nathaniel Richmond, both of whom worked in Devon, explained how Swete had adapted his own garden to follow prevailing fashion:

The old house was disfigured with formal terraces, cropt hedges, and yew-tree monsters; but these have been swept away, and their places occupied by a few straggling trees, gently sloping grounds, and a pleasant meandering rivulet; which, after two or three falls, spreads its waters beneath a fine hanging wood.¹⁰

Swete himself travelled around Devon illustrating and describing, not always favourably, the gardens and designed landscapes that he encountered.¹¹ His journals were published by the Devon Gardens Trust in four volumes from 1997 to 2000.

A much later volume is that of Frederick John Snell. Entitled *Devonshire, Historical, Descriptive, Biographical*, it was published in 1907. A cultural history of the county, it is useful because it includes photographs of some of the properties listed in the directories; a separate section contains biographical information, including photographs of their owners. Those included were probably subscribers.

Research helps with planning issues and creating conservation management plans, especially in writing 'statements of significance' which detail why a landscape or garden is important and why it should be conserved. Trade directories are only one of many sources of information, but this much underused resource can bring history to life.

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2. Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cornwall, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Hereford, Monmouthshire, Oxfordshire, Somerset, Wiltshire as well as Devon.
3. William White, *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Devon* (Sheffield, William White, 1850), pp. 219, 588.
4. White, *Directory* (1850), pp. 412, 587, 622.
5. White, *Directory* (1850), p. 253. St John's Cottage became a farmhouse, suffered a serious fire in 1903 and although it was lived in later, now no longer exists.
6. *Kelly's Directory of Devon and Cornwall* (1897, 1906).
7. See 'Private Gardeners' in the 'Tradesmen' section in *Kelly's* (1930, 1935 and 1939).
8. *Kelly's Directory* (1883 to 1923): Census returns for Kelly, (1871 to 1911).
9. *Besley's Post Office Directory of Exeter and Suburbs* (1881 to 1885).
10. John Briton, *Beauties of Devonshire*, (1801).
11. See Margery Rowe and Todd Gray eds., *Travels in Georgian Devon: The Illustrated Journeys of the Reverend John Swete, 1789–1800* Vols 1-4 (Devon, 1997–2000).