WHERE THERE'S A WILL – IAN WALLER

We opened the New Year on Monday 19 January 2026 when Ian Waller presented his talk "Where there's a Will" to an audience gathered in the Fromus Centre, Saxmundham as well as those members who joined remotely from their homes on Zoom.

Ian is a retired professional genealogist with considerable experience in English research. He currently serves as the vice chairman and education officer of the Family History Federation and is a Fellow of the Society of Genealogists.



Ian opened by telling us that his talk was intended to show the value of Wills and Probate in family history research. He added that Wills are an under-used resource in family history research and it is a misconception that poor people didn't leave Wills.

Wills are important because they:-

-provide cast iron evidence of family relationships

-indicate the wealth of the Testator

-may provide burial information

-assist with contemporary history of the family.

Ian's talk was divided into two parts, the first covering Wills dated after 1858 to modern times, and the second covering Wills dated pre 1858.

Ian started by explaining some of the terminology used in Wills as well as explaining the terms Intestate (when someone dies without leaving a will but their estate is sufficient value for it to be administered by a Court) and Testate (when someone dies having left a valid Will.)

Although there is much legal jargon in a Will, Ian explained that reading carefully and extracting key information from the document (including name, address, occupation, date of Will, burial instructions, names of beneficiaries and Trustees, description of Property, and names of Executors, Trustees and Witnesses) was the best starting point.

Finding a Will - Part 1 Modern Wills (those written after 11 January 1858 to today):

The Find a Will website (https://probatesearch.service.gov.uk/#wills) was explained. A copy of a Will and Probate can be obtained through this website which will come through electronically as a PDF, however the fee is £16 per Will.

Ian explained that Probate would not always be granted if no property is owned and the value of the estate is small.

There is a National Probate Calendar (online) from 1858 which will show the name of the deceased, date of death and value of estate.

As an alternative to paying £16, Ian suggested that Family Search Centres (for Suffolk Centres see end of text) will provide copies of Wills dated from 1858 to 1925 from their Probate Records (although you would need to use a probate calendar to find what you are looking for).

He also mentioned the http://www.haine.org.uk/wills/willsearch.php website which is available through the Family Search Centre.

Finding a Will – Part 2 Wills written prior to 1858

Ian explained that Wills written after 1858 were proved by the Civil Courts nationally, but prior to this date they would be proved by the Church Courts. It was therefore necessary to find copies of them through the Ecclesiastical Courts.

Although there were 390 Courts around the country, the Prerogative Courts are Canterbury (in the South) and York (in the North). The Court used was normally determined by where the land or property of the deceased person was. The Phillimore Atlas and Index of Parish Registers have maps to help you locate the relevant Ecclesiastical Court. Most Wills are held locally in the Diocesan Record Offices – although systems vary around the country.

Ian talked about documents associated with older Wills – including Inventories (which are lists of the deceased's personal belongings, goods, debts etc – and tend to date from 1342 – 1760s)

People who died with investments in the Bank of England may have details in the Bank of England Will Extracts.

The Royal Navy have 20,000 Will records for men who joined between 1786 and 1882.

The East India Company have Wills of people who died in India and dependency countries and these are held by the British Library.

Death Duty Registers (held by the Inland Revenue) show records of death duties (up to 1903) and are available online via FindMyPast.

There were many interesting facts imparted during Ian's talk and feedback from members suggested that they had found it very useful. At the conclusion a variety of questions were raised which Ian was able to answer.

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Ipswich Family Search Center, 42 Sidegate Lane West, Ipswich IP4 3DB
Open 10-4 Wednesday and Friday
by appointment only (email for an appointment)
UK_Ipswich@familyhistorymail.org

Lowestoft Family Search Center, 165 Yarmouth Road, Lowestoft NR32 4AQ
Open by appointment only (email for an appointment)
UK_Lowestoft@familyhistorymail.org

Helen Taylor