



A seventeenth Century engraving of "The Church of England Against the Papacy"

TRACING ANCESTORS USING OATHS OF ALLEGIANCE

If you want to trace your family tree back to before the 19th century, then oaths of allegiance are a great place to start, says **Ted Vallance**

CENSUS RETURNS are a vital first port of call for family historians but if you want to trace your ancestry back before 1800, similar resources can appear thin on the ground. Yet equivalent documents going back to the Tudor period can be found in the shape of surviving lists of people swearing oaths of allegiance.

Some of the "returns" for these oaths (lists of names usually organised by the parish), such as those for the 1641 Protestation (an oath to the Church of England) and the 1696 Association (an oath of loyalty to William III), are national in scope, with lists available for most English parishes (and, in the case of the 1696 Association, returns are also available for Britain's colonies).

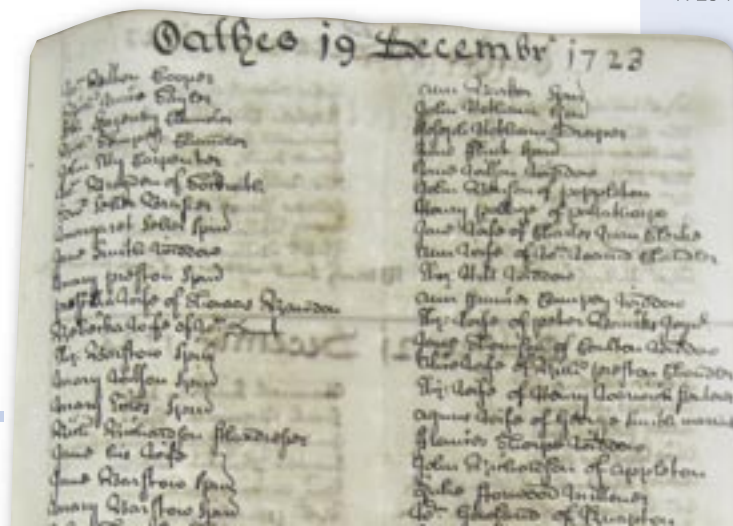
Many of these lists contain detailed information about those subscribing as marital status, occupation and place of residence was often included next to the individual's name. Although initially directed at local office-holders, over the

17th century, political oaths of this kind were taken by most adult males.

The 1696 Association return for Suffolk included some 60,000 signatures or marks. In some cases, the names of women as well as men can be found on these lists.

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A copy of an oath of allegiance dating back to 1723



STEP 1 Getting started

As with most family history research, it is important to gather as much info as possible about your ancestors.

With the exception of the Devon oath rolls for 1723 (see below) and some 1641-1642 Protestation returns, this information has not been digitised and is not easily searchable. You will need to know the family name and have an idea of where your ancestors came from (county, parish and/or town).

STEP 2 Use the guides to oath returns

Jeremy Gibson has produced catalogues for two of the most widely subscribed oaths of allegiance in the 17th century: the 1641 Protestation and the 1696 Association. See JSW Gibson, *The Hearth Tax, other later Stuart tax lists and the Association Oath Rolls* (Birmingham, Federation of Family History Societies, 1996) and *The Protestation Returns, 1641-1642 and other contemporary lists* (Birmingham, Federation of Family History Societies, 1995). Gibson's guides also give information on whether printed transcripts of oath returns are available.

Many oath rolls have already been transcribed by local historians and published in local record society transactions. Local record offices and major public libraries will hold copies of these publications.

If your relatives came from the Devon area, take a look at Simon Dixon's digitised transcript of the 1723 rolls, complete with extensive critical commentary: www.foda.org.uk/oaths/intro/introduction1.htm.

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A brief list of Protestation returns currently available online can be found here: <http://pcwww.liv.ac.uk/~drteduk/OnlineProtestationReturns.htm>

DIY



STEP 3 Be prepared to take a research trip

Many oath rolls are only available in their original, manuscript form and you will have to go to a local or national archive to consult them. In the case of the 1641-2 Protestation returns, the majority of returns are kept in the House of Lords Records Office. Most of those for the 1696 Association are kept in the National Archives, Kew.

For guidance on the oath rolls held in the National Archives, see: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/familyhistory/guide/people/oath.htm.

To be able to read these documents you will also need to learn some of the basics of reading early modern handwriting. You can make your own transcript of these documents by acquiring some palaeographical skills.

Local record offices will offer courses in reading medieval and early modern documents. Alternatively, the National Archives offers a good, basic online course: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/default.htm.

If you have a digital camera, you will probably also find it helpful to take some digital photographs – many record offices will allow you to do this for a small fee. The digital photographs will help you decipher difficult signatures by allowing you to zoom in on a specific portion of manuscript.

STEP 4 Use the internet to supplement the guides

Don't despair if you can't find anything in the printed guides. Gibson's lists for the Protestation and Association Oath Rolls are extensive but they are not completely comprehensive. If these are not helpful, or if you are interested in looking at other oaths of allegiance (like the

1723 oath which does not have printed guide) try the Access 2 Archives website www.a2a.org.uk, which pools the electronic catalogues of UK archive centres into one searchable database.

Opt for a general search, or focus on the records of one particular archive if you know where it is you want to look. You can also try contacting your local record office directly to ask if relevant returns exist, or if they have suggestions as to where you could start searching.

The information on many oath rolls (left) is only available on the original manuscript

GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR RESEARCH!

CHECKLIST

- Get as much information from family members as possible
- Use oath guides to help you navigate the manuscripts
- You need to be able to read the early modern handwriting
- Get on the web if the guides do not cover the lists you need
- Corroborate your oath research with wills, registers etc



Most of the oath returns are kept at the House of Lords Records Office

STEP 5 Collect all of your findings together and corroborate

Collate the material from oath returns with other relevant documents. Once you have found the relevant return you can use other sources (which you will often find in the same record office) to flesh out the information you have gathered from the oath lists.

Some returns give quite detailed information, including the marital status, occupation and place of residence of the person subscribing. In other cases, however, you may just have a name attached to a broad geographical area.

Corroborating the material from oaths returns with the evidence from wills, registers of births, deaths and marriages and, for towns and cities, lists of freemen will help you not only identify the individuals listed but also find out more about their families (names of wives and children, occupation and wealth).

STEP 6 Remember, it will take time

Be patient! Researching your family history using sources like oath rolls will undoubtedly take longer than investigating your ancestry via "user-friendly" data such as digitised census returns.

Making accurate transcripts of original documents is particularly time-consuming. However, the results can be very rewarding. You may find yourself researching in uncharted territory and your own work could help other family historians too. Good luck!