

# Introduction:

## Doing interwar house histories

The first edition of this book was published just as the first series of BBC Two's *A House Through Time* was broadcast in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Each series tells the story of a single house and its occupants from when it was built to the present. I appear in all three series as a historical consultant, and my particular role focuses on the design, layout and decoration of the house and how it changes through time. I tell these stories through the experiences of the house's residents, and in this book you will find some of the research I have drawn on for the programme. For example, in series one, I talked about the 1930s kitchen cabinet (see chapter 4, on Efficiency).

In this book, you will meet four families who were the first occupants of newly built, modest interwar houses. I chose these as typical examples of interwar homeowners, with particular attention paid to their social mobility and aspirations, and also women's experiences. In chapter one, I introduce working-class, first-time homeowners Vernon and Cecilia Collett and their sons Basil and Roy. In 1934, the Colletts purchased a small semi-detached house with a parlour, kitchen-living room, two bedrooms, a box room and a downstairs bathroom in Wolvercote, near Oxford. In chapter two, I tell the story of Ronald Kingham, a linoleum layer, and his wife Miriam, who purchased their house with three bedrooms, two receptions, a small kitchenette and an upstairs bedroom in Edmonton, Middlesex in 1932. In chapter three, I discuss the intense

desire of engineer Marks Freedman and his wife Tillie to make a modern home in Tottenham in 1943. Purchased for £1020, it was the largest house of my examples and as the first house in the road had a generous corner plot. In chapter four, I tell the story of Mass Observation's Respondent 082, a housewife living in Marlow, Buckinghamshire with her husband and daughter, who gave an account in 1937-8 of living in a house with five rooms and a bathroom and a kitchen-living room arrangement. I constructed all four of these fascinating case studies by using a variety of sources. For each of them, I found that creating a family tree proved invaluable, and I did that by using the tools and resources available from a digital genealogy provider.

### **Title deeds**

If you are researching a particular house then one of the best sources available to you is the title deeds. If you do not have them yourself then they may be with your solicitor or mortgage company. If you are lucky, you will hold deeds recording all the owners of your house since it was built, including details of purchase price and mortgages. Occupations and incomes may also be included.

### **Local archives**

The best place to start researching the history of a house, its occupants and the surrounding area is in a local archive. This might be a local studies centre or a local county archive, where you may find local maps, title deeds, electoral registers and family and estate papers, all of which can be useful when tracing the history of a house. You will need to know the relevant county and registration district of your house (bearing in mind any boundary changes over time). You may be able to find building plans, which would have been submitted to the local urban or rural district council for buildings regulation approval before construction.

Local record offices may hold copies and they may be available online via council's planning departments. For example, a search of Oxford City Council's planning website told me that permission was granted in 1949 for a scullery extension to the Colletts' house at 17 Rosamund Road, and also that in 2001 another application was approved for that same extension to be demolished and replaced.

The National Archives' catalogue contains collections and contact details of local archives around the UK and beyond (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>). Many local archives publish their own guides to doing house history and may even organise training events. There are some useful guides by national organisations:

- Historic England  
<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/your-home/your-homes-history/how-to-find-out/history-of-house/>
- National Archives  
<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/houses/>

## Census Records

Census records are very useful for finding out about the residents of houses in the past.<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, the most recent census available is 1911. I found it an invaluable resource for this book in tracing the family histories of my four case studies. It allowed me to pin down class backgrounds by looking at their parents' occupations, and this in turn helped me to tell the story of mobility and aspirations. For example, Ronald Kingham's occupation of linoleum layer was a step up from his father who was a bricklayer. It also allowed me to tease out the nuances of class differences between married couples, and to understand more about their cultural heritage. In the case of Marks and Tillie Freedman, I found that their parents had been born in Russia and Poland, respectively.

The digitised 1921 census is expected to be released in January 2022. It was taken on 19th June 1921 at a time when the population of England and Wales was over 37 million, and gives greater detail than any previous census, so this will be very exciting for anyone interested in the history of how British people lived their lives. In addition to the questions asked in the 1911 census, the 1921 census included more information about occupations: the materials people worked in, their places of work, and their employers' names. For those over the age of 15, they collected information about marital status, including whether the person was divorced. For those under 15, the census recorded whether either or both parents were alive or had died. It also had detailed questions on education including whether individuals were in full-time or part-time education. The census taken in 1931 was destroyed during the Second World War and no census was carried out in 1941 due to the on-going conflict.

### **The 1939 Register**

Since I published the first edition of the book, the 1939 Register held in the UK's National Archives has become available in digital form.<sup>3</sup> It contains data only for England and Wales and does not include records from households in Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man, but it is a fascinating and rich resource, nevertheless. It catalogues 41 million lives recorded at the outbreak of the Second World War on 29th September 1939. You can see who lived in any house, town or street in England and Wales before the draft. It is possible to search by address, and you can find details of individuals in the register: name; gender; address; date of birth; marital status; occupation; whether they were a visitor, officer, servant, patient or inmate; details of family members, and other members of the same household. Care needs to be taken with the 1939 Register as it does not always clearly record who was resident at the address and who was visiting.

Sometimes you may see extra information on the right-hand side of

the image, such as details of voluntary war work. You may see names crossed out with another name written in an annotation above or at the side, such as women's married names and other name changes. This is because the register was used to track the civilian population over the following decades and from 1948 as the basis of the National Health Service Register. Names have been redacted to protect the privacy of those still alive. Records are added annually for those with birth dates of over 100 years ago, and those whose record of death has been reported to the National Archives.

In researching my case studies, I found that Marks Freedman (described as a heating and ventilating technical engineer) was visiting his parents in Bethnal Green and Tillie was visiting 64-year-old widow Mary Cree (described as 'living on her own means') in Letchworth, Hertfordshire. In the case of the Colletts, Vernon was working as a printer's warehouseman and Roy as a printer's warehouse boy. Basil does not appear at the same address and I have been unable to find him elsewhere. Ronald Kingham was working part-time as a member of the Auxiliary Fire Service. Miriam was staying with her mother in Hemel Hempstead.

The 1939 Register sheds the most light on Mass Observation's Respondent 082 and her family.<sup>4</sup> All I had to work on previously was her married name (which I have been unable to disclose in this book due to the restrictions placed on the use of Mass Observation) and an address. The 1939 Register reveals that her husband was no longer employed as a bus driver but was doing war work erecting metal aircraft frames. Working backwards from this information has allowed me to dig into the family backgrounds of the couple. In her Mass Observation day reports, Respondent 082 complained about the snobbery of her husband's family, which she was acutely aware of because of her own more humble origins. More investigation led me to discover that her father was a bricklayer, while her father-in-law was as an accountant. I also uncovered the distinguished war record of her husband and the fact that she was active in the WAAFs in the First World War.

### Other sources

Electoral registers are another key resource for interwar house history, and many more have been digitised since I wrote the first edition of the book. They are available in digitised form via genealogy websites and in public libraries, including the British Library website.<sup>5</sup> They allow you to trace where people lived during single years, and it is possible to search by address, so you can use them to ascertain the exact year somebody moved to a particular house and for how long they lived there.

I found estate agents' websites to be a very useful source of information about my case study houses. They allowed me to see photographs and plans of my case study houses and their interiors over time and often had relevant written information such as the dimensions of rooms. You can also track changing prices. At the time of writing, Your Move and Zoopla are the most useful sites for that information.<sup>6</sup>

Street and trade directories are a good source of information about addresses and occupations. The National Archives website lets you access various sources, including historical directories for England and Wales for the period 1750 to 1919.<sup>7</sup> They recommend that you start with the person's name, the geographical area where they worked and a date range to focus your search.

### Visual clues

If you are researching the house that you live in (or a house to which you have access) then one of the best things you can do is to examine the house thoroughly for visual clues about its original architecture and design and how it has changed through time. The first thing to do is to look at the outside of your house and compare it with that of its neighbours. Does it have its original footprint or has it been altered with an extension or a porch? Are its original materials visible or has it had a later rendering such as pebbledash? Does it still have its original windows and

doors? If they have been replaced, do they follow the original design? For example, if it is like 17 Rosamund Road, it may originally have had metal Crittall windows divided into small rectangular panes.

On the inside, does the house have its original floor plan or have rooms been knocked through or extended? Are there any original fireplaces and decorative mouldings such as picture rails? Are the interior doors and their fittings original? Your kitchen and bathroom are very unlikely to be original and may well have been relocated and/or extended, unless you live in a 'time capsule' house, unaltered since it was built, like the one that this book begins with in chapter one. If you do some decorating, look out for traces of original paint and wallpaper. If you remove floor coverings you may well find evidence of dark stained floorboards around the edge of the room; there would have originally been unfitted carpet or linoleum.

In this book, I describe what interwar houses would have looked like at the time they were built. In chapter one, I go into detail about my visual sources, which include junk shops, charity shops, car boot fairs and online auction sites, as well as museums, archives and libraries. One of the most useful was Middlesex University's Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, from which many of the book's illustrations are taken.<sup>8</sup> It has wonderful collections of wallpaper samples, builders', estate agents' and building society marketing materials and furniture trade catalogues, as well as domestic advice manuals and homemaking magazines. Many of these have been digitised and can be freely accessed on their website. If you want to delve deeper, you can make an appointment to visit in person. Other places you might want to access online or in person are:

- Design Museum (<https://designmuseum.org>)
- Modernist Britain (<http://www.modernistbritain.co.uk>)
- Modernism in Metro-Land (<http://www.modernism-in-metroland.co.uk>)

- Museum of the Home (formerly Geffrye Museum)  
(<https://www.museumofthehome.org.uk>)
- V&A (including its National Art Library and Archive of Art and Design) (<https://www.vam.ac.uk>)
- Royal Institute of British Architects (library and study rooms)  
(<https://www.architecture.com/about/riba-library-and-collections>)
- Warner Textile Archive  
(<https://www.warnertextilearchive.co.uk>)
- Whitworth Art Gallery  
(<https://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk>)

### Places to visit

I hope that this book will inspire readers to do their own interwar house histories of either their own family or the house that they live in. One of the best things that you can do is to pay a visit to an example of an interwar house open to the public. The Twentieth Century Society and its regional branches sometimes organise special visits and tours.<sup>9</sup> Please note that opening hours and displays are subject to change and some are only accessible via pre-booked tours so do check before you visit. Here are some that I especially recommend, many of which have been featured in my segments on *A House Through Time*.

For 'ordinary' lived in exteriors and interiors:

- Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings (Arcon Mk V Prefab, c.1945), Worcestershire  
<https://avoncroft.org.uk>
- Beamish (1900s town, 1940s farm and new 1950s town under development), County Durham  
<http://www.beamish.org.uk>
- Black Country Living Museum (1930s high street and 1930s domestic rooms)  
<https://www.bclm.co.uk>



- Forties House and Police Box, Cupar, Fife  
<https://www.fortieshouse.co.uk/forties-house>
- Old Forge Wartime House, Sittingbourne, Kent  
<https://oldforgewartimehouse.co.uk>
- Piermaster's, House Liverpool (1850s house staged as wartime house)  
<https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/mol/visit/galleries/piermasters-house.aspx>
- Mr Straw's House, Blythe Grove, Worksop (National Trust) 1920s time capsule interior belonging to a grocer's family in a semi-detached house, Nottinghamshire  
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/mr-straws-house>
- Portsmouth Museum (1930s kitchen and 1930s dining room by Betty Joel)  
<http://portsmouthcitymuseums.co.uk>
- St Fagan's National Museum of History (Llwyn-yr-eos Farmhouse staged as 1930s), Cardiff  
<https://museum.wales/stfagans/>

For examples of Modernism and the Moderne:

- 2 Willow Rd, Hampstead, London (National Trust). Designed by architect Erno Goldfinger for his family in 1939  
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/2-willow-road>
- Bata Heritage Centre, Bata Estate, East Tilbury, Essex. Model estate designed by Czech architects František Lydie Gahura and Vladimír Karfík for workers at Bata Shoe Company.  
<https://www.bataheritagecentre.org.uk>
- Coleton Fishacre, Devon (National Trust). Designed in the 1920s for Rupert D'Oyly Carte, combines Moderne and Arts and Crafts interiors  
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/coleton-fishacre>
- Eltham Palace, London (English Heritage). A former medieval and

Tudor royal residence transformed into a striking Moderne mansion by architects Seely Paget Stephen and Virginia Courtauld in the 1930s.

<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/eltham-palace-and-gardens/>

- Isokon Gallery tells the story of the Isokon building, a pioneering modern apartment block opened in 1934 as an experiment in new ways of urban living, London  
<http://www.isokongallery.co.uk>
- Silver End, Witham, Essex. Model housing by Thomas S. Tait for workers at the Crittall Windows Company.  
<http://www.silverendheritagesociety.co.uk/pages/history-of-silver-end>
- The Homewood, Esher, Surrey (National Trust) Designed by architect Patrick Gwynne for his family in 1937  
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/the-homewood>
- Upton House, Warwickshire (National Trust), large country house remodelled in 1927-9. Highlights include the red, black and silver Moderne bathroom  
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/upton-house-and-gardens>

For interwar Arts and Crafts:

- Goddards Arts and Crafts House, Dringhouses, York (National Trust) Designed by Walter Brierley for the Terry family (of chocolate fame) in 1926 in a fusion of different styles including Jacobean, Queen Anne, Vernacular, neo-Georgian but predominantly Arts and Crafts  
<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/goddards-house-and-garden/features/the-house-at-goddards>
- See also Coleton Fishacre above

### Further reading

Backe-Hansen, M. *House Histories: The Secrets Behind Your Front Door*  
(Cheltenham, The History Press, 2019)

Blanchard, G. *Tracing Your House History: A Guide for Family Historians*  
(Barnsley, Pen and Sword Books, 2013)

All website addresses are correct at the time of writing.