

# House History

By Ellen Leslie

*What's the Storey?  
Why It's Important to Know the History  
of Your Historic Home*

**W**hy do people want to know the history of their house? On first consideration it is simple curiosity to know the story. Delving into your home's past allows you to play sleuth and find out who lived there or maybe even discover tales of scandal or intrigue. But, whilst it is interesting to know the people and events that crossed paths in your house, the reasons to understand your home's history are in reality more practical than that.

If you live in an historic building there are hands-on and structural reasons for knowing not only who lived there but when it was built and by whom; knowing what it is built of, what alterations there have been, when they carried out and how the building was used. It is this sort of information I uncover for people. All these elements together define the historic significance of the building and knowing these facts can help you, as the owner, particularly when it comes to repair and maintenance.

But at the top of the list of reasons to uncover the history of an historic building is that such information is needed when applying for planning permission and listed building consent.

In 2010 the Government updated its planning guidance for the historic built environment. The excitingly named Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5) (Section HE2) requires an "Evidence Base for Plan-Making". This means it strongly advises the inclusion of historical research to inform the planning process. The information is needed to make sure that as much is known about the history of a building or area, to understand its historic significance, to ensure that nothing is lost through ignorance and to highlight any heritage assets that may have been overlooked.

So, in your quest to understand your historic house, sources can include historic maps and plans, building accounts, title deeds, sale particulars, census records, specialist archive collections and planning records in national and local archives. Photographs and early drawings are particularly telling when look for visual examples of how ▶



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your house has changed. Some of it will be held by local authorities, English Heritage and its National Monuments Record as well as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). But often this information is minimal (usually only the statutory listing description for most listed building) and even that information can be too vague.

I recently researched a house in Eaton Square, in London, which has a group value of Grade II\*. While I am used to a degree of vague descriptions, in this case it was so general that it failed to give even a close date of construction or the correct name of the builder. This can have a huge effect on a building's historical significance and therefore as the owner it could affect your ability to make alterations and improvements.

Even when technically accurate, that information on its own would not be enough to aid a properly informed planning decision. It is the accessing of all sources and bringing them together when the most comprehensive history can be uncovered and usefully used.

Over all, the provision of a professionally researched history can be welcomed by conservation officers and planning officials as it helps them make a sound and informed decision based on historical fact. An example that I worked on was a house built in the 1870s in Hampstead. It is a large detached house on a double plot which was bought in 1904 by Sir Joseph Beecham the pharmaceutical heir and he built a huge extension with a double height ground floor. Sir Joseph's son was the famous conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham, which proved pivotal in the story of this investigation.

In the 21st century the new owners of the house were looking at what to do with the building. Virtually untouched in 100 years they were wondering what alterations could be done to make the house suitable for 21st century living. The big stumbling block for them was the double-height extension which was thought to have been the location of some of Sir Thomas Beecham's music concerts in the 1910s. If this were the case, any attempt at altering this historically significant space would prove problematic.

However, in advance of any alterations, I was brought in to research the social and structural history of the house. My research showed that not only were Sir Joseph and Sir Thomas estranged through a family feud (so Beecham Jr holding concerts at Dad's house would seem unlikely) but contemporary press coverage referred to the art gallery Sir Joseph had built at the house to accommodate his renowned Collection. The purpose of the double height single space was found, the significance was therefore less than previously thought and the owners had more options with regard to alterations, albeit still sympathetic to the building.

Knowing your listed building's history has a day-to-day practical reason too, beyond addressing legal requirements and the bureaucracy of permission and consent. Whilst I am never one to assume, I hope that sympathetic repair and maintenance is the intention of most people owning an old building. Finding out as much as possible about the construction materials used and knowing how your house has evolved over the decades and centuries can prevent you from causing irreparable damage to original features. Further research can also guide you to use the right materials and repair techniques, which would be sympathetic with the house.

Once you have addressed the planning requirements and the structural well-being of your historic home, you can address the stories, the scandal and the intrigue. Knowing your home's past can help solve mysteries, puzzles and rumour.

I have researched many buildings where local legends of famous or notorious past occupants are rife. Popular ones are that someone famous slept there, the cavity in the wall is in fact a priest hole or even that Queen Elizabeth I once stood under the ancient oak tree in the grounds. A little archival digging can help to solve some of those intriguing possibilities.

So, it is important to know the social and structural history of your house and to know your home's past from cellar to attic, from front gate to the back wall, specifically to aid the planning process. It can prove an essential tool for successful sympathetic repair or maintenance of your listed building and may lay a few ghosts to rest.

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Ellen is an Affiliate Member of the IHBC, a member of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain and a member of [projectbook.co.uk](http://projectbook.co.uk)

