

## CHAPTER ONE

# WHERE TO START?

### *Deeds, Documents, and Archives*

Every house has a story: a unique history all of its own. The nuances and details of the people that have called it home and the events that have unfolded within its walls make the history of every home different. The three houses in Liverpool, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and Bristol that feature in *A House Through Time* were built in a bygone age. But much of England's surviving housing is older than we might imagine. Of the twenty-three million or so inhabited houses standing today around a fifth were built before the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.

Architectural styles change but the great majority of homes, the grand terraces, suburban villas, and humble back-to-back streets, were put up by speculative builders who did not own the land they built on but who hoped to turn a profit by satisfying changing tastes as fashion dictated. In time the brand-new terrace might become run-down and multi-occupied or turned into a hostel or some other kind of institution. Then, if it survived demolition, it might have a new lease of life as a newly fashionable 'gentrified' town house cherished by its new owners. It is a familiar pattern repeated through the centuries.

If walls could talk, all of these pre-1914 houses would have extraordinary stories to tell. Much of the drama that has been played out in them might be difficult to retrieve, but a great deal can be unearthed with some detective work and persistence. It can be exciting, and to learn about the history of your house inevitably leads to a fascination with past lives and the discovery of the rich social history of the home. *A House*

*Through Time* is not so much about the buildings as about the lives of former residents who once thought of them as homes.

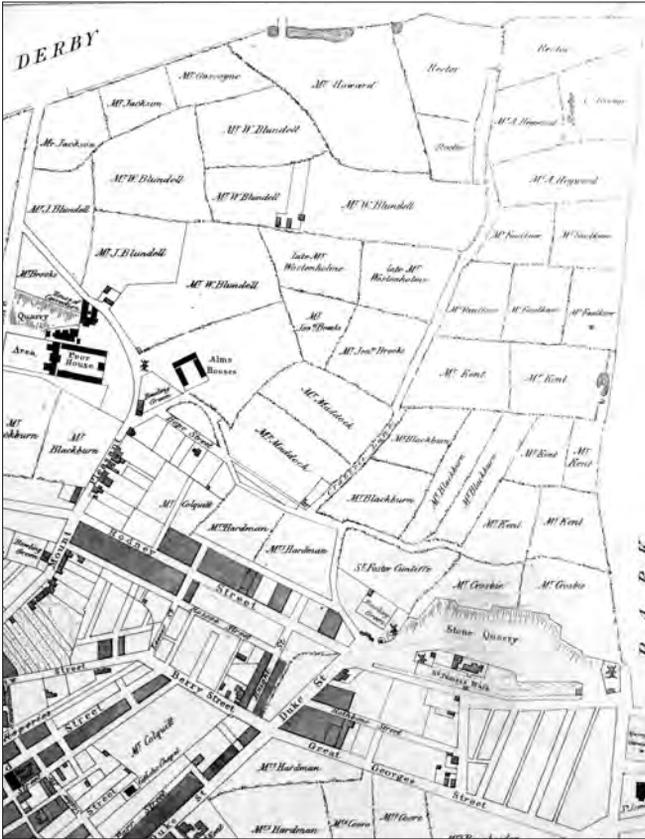
Some of the detective work which went into the revelations of the television series can be a guide for anyone fascinated by the lives of those who shared the four walls of their home in history. This book is both an introduction to the many sources of information that can be found in documents held in archives, and a social history of housing from Roman times until the present day.

The older the house, the richer the history is likely to be. But there is still a great deal to discover about the past life of your home if it's one of the semi-detached suburban houses built between the world wars. Just under four million survive today and they represent a clear break with the past in a great many ways. As in the Victorian era, the majority were put up by speculative builders who created huge new estates. But, from 1918, for the first time in the country's history, the government provided the funds to build council-house estates: what we now call 'social housing'. In fact between the wars there was fierce competition for land between councils and private builders as the major cities spread over the countryside.

Whatever the age of your house, if you want to delve into the history of the area in which you live, or perhaps where you lived when you were younger, you have to start somewhere. If you wonder when the house was built then its appearance, its architecture, is the first clue. Getting it exactly right might be difficult, but broadly speaking with a little knowledge, you can tell if a house is Victorian or built between the two world wars. With a little bit more knowledge you might judge the house is Georgian, built during the reigns of the Hanoverian kings from 1714 to 1830.

There are many different approaches to researching the history of a house and its former residents. You can go to any of the archives now available: the national censuses (for the years 1841 to 1911), the electoral registers, the street directories, the Land Registry, and the title deeds, to name just a few. However, before jumping into the documents and and perhaps finding yourself a little muddled, a key tip for researching the history of a house is to work backwards in time. Start with what you know, such as the names of more recent occupants, and this will provide clues about which sources to research and how best to use them

## A HOUSE THROUGH TIME



A map from 1796 shows the area of Falkner Street, Liverpool, prior to major development. A number of fields are owned by 'Mr Faulkner'.

as you search further back in time. Street names and house numbers often change, sometimes several times, so this will also help to ensure you are researching the right house and people.

Perhaps the most instantly rewarding and enjoyable starting point is to go to the great variety of maps which can offer a vivid picture of the changing setting and fortunes of our homes. Only a few specialized maps will tell you about the people living in the area (some are described later on), but you can check on the era in which your street was built. It might not exist on an 1860s map but appear on one drawn ten years later. You can also find, if the map is large-scale, roads which have been renamed since a map was drawn.

In local archives there will be maps of your area or town, such as those that form part of landowner surveys, municipal maps for the building of new roads, or maps of industrial sites or in preparation for new developments. One such map of the 'Town and County of