

Norfolk Record Office Information Leaflet 40

Adoption Records

There are around half a million adopted people in this country, many of whom wish to find out about their birth family. Also, the birth parents and siblings sometimes wish to find out what has happened to the adopted person.

Adoption was put on a proper legal footing by **the Adoption of Children Act of 1926** which came into effect in 1927.

Prior to 1927 adoptions were arranged by adoption societies and privately between individuals. Some societies such as the Church of England Children's Society (Edward Rudolf House, Margery Street, London WC1X 0JL) maintain records of the adoptions which they arranged. Boards of Guardians were also sometimes involved but there are few surviving records.

From 1927 adoptions had to be approved by magistrates meeting in a **Petty Sessions Court** and each court maintained a register. In Norfolk there were 28 Petty Sessional Divisions and the NRO has registers for around half of them. They give the date, name and date of birth of the child to be adopted, name and address of the birth mother and occasionally of the birth father, name and address of the adoptive parents, name of person or body acting as guardian ad litem, and decision of the court. The registers can be disappointing. They often do not give all the details and sometimes the handwriting is illegible. They are closed to public inspection for 75 years.

The Clerk to the Petty Sessions Court kept a file on each adoption. In many cases these have been destroyed but Norwich Magistrates' Court (Bishopgate, Norwich NR3 1UP) has many adoption files (which the Clerk intends to deposit in the NRO eventually). Please note that these files are closed to public inspection.

Local authorities were given responsibility for supervising adoptions and a Children's Officer was appointed. In the case of Norfolk County Council the Children's Officer was based in the Education Department (before the creation of the Social Services Department in 1971) and kept a register of all the cases with which she was involved. The register (which is closed to public access) is dated 1927-1945 and is a useful indication of whether there are any papers relating to the adoption amongst the Children's Officer's files. If the register records that the County Council acted as guardian ad litem, there should be some relevant papers.

The Children's Officer's files can be disappointing but usually include a form signed by the birth mother relinquishing her parental rights. There is usually correspondence with the clergyman of the parish asking for his opinion of the couple seeking to adopt. Sometimes there can be other information such as a note that the birth mother is a wartime landgirl and has no means of supporting the child or a letter from a husband stating that he will stay with his wife so long as the child to which she has given birth as the result of an affair is removed.

Occasional references to adoptions can be found in the minute books of the **Children's Committee** of Norwich Board of Guardians (N/TC 3/91-97), of Norwich City Council (N/TC 31/3/1-9) and of Norfolk County Council (C/C 10/79-87) but it should be emphasised that such references are rare.

The Adoption and Family Finding Unit (3 Unthank Road, Norwich NR2 2PA, tel. 01603 617796) should in theory have a file for every individual adopted in Norfolk, although this is not always the case in practice. It has been agreed that the NRO will take the files when they become 75 years old but the Social Services Department wishes them to remain closed to public access for 100 years.

Registers of all adoptions in England and Wales are kept by the General Register Office and indexes to them can be seen in the The Family Records Centre (1 Myddelton Street, London EC1R 1UW). However, only the adopted person can be given the information which links the adoption certificate with the original birth certificate. The Office for National Statistics website <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/> registration has useful information.

When the Adoption Act of 1926 was drafted, it was envisaged that an adopted person's break with his birth family would be total and both birth and adoptive parents were subsequently led to believe that adopted children would never be able to find out about their origins.

The Adoption Act of 1976 changed this and gave people adopted after 11 November 1975 the right of access to their birth records once they reached 18 years of age. The Act also gave people adopted before 12 November 1975 the right of access to their birth records but with the proviso that they must see a counsellor beforehand. An appointment with a counsellor can be made through the Social Services Department of the area where the adoption order was made or where the adopted person lives or through the General Register Office. The NRO cannot release closed information without a certificate from a social worker or counsellor.

At the moment the birth parents and other birth relatives cannot have any information about an adopted relative. However a bill going through Parliament at present will alter this and should become law next year (2004).

The Adoption Contact Register was established by the Registrar General on 1 May 1991 (under the Children Act of 1989) and enables adopted people and their birth relatives to register their willingness to be contacted. An entry may lay dormant for many years before a second person seeking the first places him or her self on the register. There is a one-off fee for entry onto the register: £15 for the adopted person and £30 for the birth relative. An application form can be obtained from: The General Register Office, Adoption Section, Contact Register, Smedley Hydro, Trafalgar Road, Birkdale, Southport PR8 2HH.

NORCAP is a registered charity which offers practical advice and assistance to adopted people who wish to trace members of their birth family and to both

their birth parents and adopted families. For further information contact: 12 Church Road, Wheatley, Oxfordshire OX33 1LU.



If you need this leaflet in large print, audio, Braille, alternative format or in a different language, please contact the County Archivist on 01603 222599 and we will do our best to help.

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