

Doing archival research

The vast majority of archival sources have not been digitised, and online catalogues are frequently incomplete. It is often necessary, therefore, to visit an archive in order to find out about the documents they hold. This guide offers some help, but every archive is different, and there is no substitute for making contact in person.

What do we find at an archive?

Archives contain sources of information. When most people think of archives, they probably imagine places where lots of old pieces of paper are stored. This is true of many archives, but there are others which store different types of historical resource.

There are also archives which exist to serve a particular purpose. Indeed, there is no archive which collects absolutely everything. The great majority of archives have some sort of focus, which might involve collecting documents from a particular region, or on a particular subject.

Local archives typically contain the following:

- Manuscript documents produced by individuals, such as letters and diaries
- Local government records
- Records relating to local courts
- Business records
- Plans of buildings
- Records of poor relief, charities and workhouses
- Church records – including registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths
- Photographs
- Collections of materials about important local places or events

- Some property records, such as old deeds and sales particulars

The most common type of local archive is the county record office. At these archives, many of the following resources may also be available:

- Trade directories
- Newspapers
- Local maps
- Study guides
- Published works of local history

In addition to local archives, there are also specialist archives. These can be grouped into two categories:

- Archives focused on a particular type of source, such as the Media Archive of Central England (MACE) or the East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA)
- Archives focused on a particular subject, such as the India Office Records at the British Library, or the Wiener Library (the Holocaust and Jewish history archive)

In Britain, The National Archives (TNA) collects records relating to the UK government. It is based at Kew in London. Sometimes records will be shared between TNA and local record offices, or may seemingly be stored in the wrong place. Letters sent by government officials might be in a local archive, for instance, while letters sent by local officials may be in TNA – this is actually logical when we realise that letters are kept by the people who receive them.

This specialisation and overlap highlights the importance of good background research before you visit an archive.

So how do I know which archive to visit?

The following resources may also be helpful in identifying which archive offices are useful:

- ARCHON Directory – contact details for British Archives, maintained by The National Archives (TNA), <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon/>
- The National Register of Archives – another comprehensive resource maintained by TNA, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/default.asp>

Many archive offices have a website containing information about their holdings, often with a searchable catalogue. You can also search archives through the Access2Archives (A2A) portal maintained by TNA, available at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/>. The A2A catalogue is especially helpful, as many local records will be held by record offices in other counties. Before the First World War many wealthy families had extensive landholdings in several counties, and all those records will typically be held together in one place.

Finding what you need

This can be the most difficult part of doing archival research. At the start, you might not know what kinds of documents an archive holds, or even how to go about answering this question. This can make searching through catalogues for documents to order very difficult.

There are a number of steps that you can take to resolve this dilemma:

1. Use published guides about sources, including any information available on the archive office's website
2. Consult an electronic catalogue, such as A2A: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/>
3. Visit the archive's website and consult its online catalogue. **NOTE: the coverage of Access2Archives is incomplete. The online catalogues of individual record offices can be more comprehensive, although often still incomplete.**
4. Ask for help from a trained archivist, by telephone, email, or by visiting the archive
5. Visit the archive and consult its card catalogue

Another good approach is to consult publications by previous historians who have studied a similar subject. You may be able to look at the source material that these historians have used, which will give you some indication of what's available. Remember that it's very important to give credit where credit is due, and you should never take material from other historians' work.

Before you go

Almost every archive has a unique policy relating to accessing and using its documents. This means that it is essential to do some background research before you go to an archive for the first time. You also need to check the opening hours, as many are not open every day. Otherwise, you may find that you can't get into the archive, or that you can't take notes. It's worth going through the following list of questions before you visit. The answers for the Leicestershire Record Office, as of July 2013, are given by way of example.

Question	Answer for Leicestershire Record Office
Do I need to register?	Yes
Do I need identity documents in order to register?	Yes – proof of name and address, but some places require photographic ID
Do I need to pass a proficiency test before entering the archive?	No – but you do at The National Archives
Do I need to demonstrate that I have a legitimate reason for using the archives?	No – but you do at the British Library
Can I take personal possessions into the archive?	No – basic stationery, computers and cameras only
Can I take photographs?	Yes, but there is a daily fee of £5
Can I photocopy documents?	No – but you can ask staff for a photocopy or digital image. A fee will be payable and it may not be done while you wait.
Can I write in pen?	No – pencil only (and at The National Archives your pencil may not have an eraser at the end)

Respecting others

Once you get into the archive, it's important to respect other users and use the documents you receive in a responsible manner. Here are a few tips:

- Don't talk unnecessarily or use mobile phones. Disable any sounds made by digital cameras and laptops
- Remember that many users of archives are there to work. Some may have travelled a great distance to be there. Respect the fact that some people may only have a limited amount of time to get their work done
- Try to be considerate when using public computers or microfilm machines. If you are going to ask the archivist a long and complicated question, it is polite to let other users jump in front of you if all they need to do is collect documents or sign out
- Don't order too many documents at once
- Don't fold documents or lean on them
- Do wash your hands before handling documents and wear gloves if requested
- Use support pillows or foam wedges to protect the spines of old books.
- Use 'snake weights' to hold down pages, rather than touching the documents unnecessarily with your hands
- Make sure you return bundles of documents in the order they came in

Making notes

It's important to take careful notes. You should be able to produce an accurate and comprehensive reference for each item you consult.

For each item you consult, you should note down:

- The archive in which you found the document
- The collection in which the document is stored (if any)
- The reference number of the document
- The author/source of the document
- The title of the document
- The date of the document
- The page number – if unnumbered, you can count through the individual sheets/pages. These are called folios – the front of a sheet is the *recto* side, the rear is the *verso* side. So 'folio 22v' would be 'on the back of sheet 22'.

Here's an example citation which follows this format:

The Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, Records of the Shirley family, Earls Ferrers of Staunton Harold, Leicestershire, 26D53/2365, Home Farm accounts (1917-22), p. 23

Don't forget to record the documents you have consulted but which you didn't take any detailed notes from – this will stop you ordering them again in future!

Managing your notes

It's also important to have a good system for managing your notes. Some archives will not let you take notebooks or folders into the archive, meaning that a hard day's work will result in a sheaf of handwritten notes. These can get jumbled up very easily. One solution is to number your sheets of paper before you go into the archive. Even if you are using a notebook, it may still be worth giving each notebook a number. Adding the date, or even the time, at the top of each page may also be helpful.

You can also use note-taking software to organise your notes. Many archives permit laptops to be used, and it is common for researchers to type their notes directly into a computer. Common software for this purpose includes:

- Evernote – a free note-taking program. Notes can be synced online, and tools are provided to search, tag and organise your notes

- Microsoft OneNote – a commercial program, but included with many versions of Microsoft Office. Allows the creation of work-books in a manner somewhat similar to Evernote. Also contains search functions
- Zotero – this is a bibliographic reference manager, but it is possible to add notes to references which you store in your database. Zotero is a little harder to use, but the advantage is that you can attach notes directly to your bibliographic data. Perhaps the main problem with this approach is that it is not good at handling complicated, non-standard citations.
- Google Drive – provides the ability to create text documents and spreadsheets which can be collaboratively edited online. Particularly useful if you are working with others.

This material is made available under a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC licence. You are free to use the material as you wish but should give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. Further information about this Creative Commons licence is available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>