

Finding and using Archives

Which Archives might I want to use?

Business and organisational archives will hold the papers of the institution that they serve. These will include records such as minutes, financial papers, correspondence, advertising materials, photographs and sometimes samples of products. Large organisations may also have in-house magazines and information about any clubs and facilities provided for staff. Those businesses who maintained staff overseas (e.g. HSBC bank) will often have material relating to the social lives of their staff and their interactions with the local community.

Local record offices (e.g. London Metropolitan Archives, City of Westminster Archives) hold records for the local council, but also collect archives related to their geographical area. These can be the records of local businesses (e.g. City of Westminster Archives holds the records of Liberty & Co and Jaeger), clubs and societies, landed estates and private individuals (including letters and diaries). They are also likely to have large collections of photographs and printed ephemera.

Specialist repositories are archives who collect on a particular subject area. Most university and museum archives will hold the records of their institution but also collect papers relevant to their interests. For example, the University of Westminster Archives collects the papers of former students, with a particular focus on Town Planning and Architecture. The Tate Archive collects the papers of British Artists 1900 onwards and the Wellcome Library collects records relating to medicine and disease.

The National Archives at Kew holds the records of national government, the central courts of law, the armed forces and the railways, as well as some large development projects and events like the Festival of Britain. These can be difficult to use at first, but they produce some excellent research guides on how to look for people, places or themes in their collections. Some of the more popular records have been digitised (such as wills, migrations papers and records of service personnel), but this is only around 5% of their total collection. Similar records are held at The National Archives of Scotland, the National Library of Wales and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.

Tracking down your Archives:

'Portal' websites:

There are several archive 'portal' websites which allow you to search across multiple collections at one time. These are often the best place to start.

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> helps you to find archives held in repositories across the UK. Enter the name of an individual/organisation or a topic into the search box and the results will come up in two tabs, *Records* and *Record Creators*.

The *Records* tab will give you results for that individual/organisation/topic within the catalogue of the National Archives itself and certain other repositories. The *Record Creators* tab is more useful as it will give you an overview of individuals/organisations relevant to your search and the archive repositories who hold major collections relating to them. Bear in mind that the *Discovery* portal relies on voluntary submissions of information once per year, so it is not always comprehensive or up-to-date.

www.aim25.ac.uk hosts 'collection-level descriptions' of archives held by London-based universities and colleges. This means that it holds very broad descriptions of groups of archives (see **Understanding archival cataloguing** below) rather than details of every individual item within those collections. As it is restricted to collections in the London area, it can be useful if you know that you want to use archival material but you do not want to travel too far. As well as searching for the archives for specific individuals, you can also browse by subject (e.g. Drama, Military History, or Technology).

www.archiveshub.ac.uk covers collections held in Universities across the UK, as well as some small specialist repositories. It includes a mix of collection-level descriptions and complete catalogues (i.e. listing every item within the collection). You can search by name, subject or keyword.

Where you know that a business or organisation holds a historical archive, you may also want to contact them directly. Please note that private businesses and organisations are not obliged to keep their archives and any access is at their discretion. If the contact details for their Archive department are not obvious on their website, they should be available through the National Archives' **Find An Archive** search at <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/#archive>.

Printed sources:

The book *British Archives: A Guide to Archive Resources in the United Kingdom* by Janet Foster & Julia Sheppard (London: Macmillan, 1995) is invaluable for thematic study. It contains a list of archival repositories with a broad guide to their holdings, and is indexed by personal name and subject. If you have a rough idea that might you like to study something to do with e.g. religion, this book will help you track down relevant collections. A copy is available in Regent Library, and there is a reference-only copy in the Archive Reading Room.

You may also want to follow-up references to archival material in published sources. In this case, the footnotes/endnotes should tell you where the collection is held and hopefully also give you the exact reference for the document quoted.

Accessing archival collections

Most archival repositories will publish their access conditions online. These are not designed to keep away researchers, but are dictated by the resources available and to ensure that the archival material is protected for future researchers.

Common conditions for access are:

- Make an appointment in advance – this is usually due to space/staffing restrictions.
- Show photographic ID/complete a registration form – archives are unique and valuable and it is our duty as archivists to look after them for future generations. Theft is rare but it does happen, and we need to be able to trace who has seen documents.
- Letter of reference – this is rare these days but some archives will still ask you to prove you are a 'bona fide' researcher. Again, this is for security. A letter from your tutor on headed paper should suffice.

In advance of your visit you should contact the archives to check that the collection you want to see is accessible. Sometimes documents are loaned to exhibition or may have gone for conservation. Collections can also be closed due to Data Protection legislation if they contain personal information, or are closed because of the wish of the depositor.

Archives are not kept on open shelves like library books, someone will need to fetch the material for you. Each archival repository has different procedures, depending on their staffing levels. This may be in advance of your visit, immediately on request during your visit, or at set production times during your visit (e.g. 11am and 2 pm only). It's important to check this in advance so that you are not left waiting for material after you arrive.

At the Archive

For security and preservation of the collections, most archives will ask you to:

- Put your bags and coats in lockers
- Only use pencil or a laptop to make notes (check if they have power terminals for you to plug a laptop into, sometimes there are limited numbers and again, you might need to book this)
- Not eat or drink in the reading room
- Not lean on the documents, keep them flat on the table and/or use any supports that they provide for the documents
- Limit the amount of material you use at any one time (e.g. 1 file or volume at a time - discuss this with them in advance if you want to compare documents)
- Pay for photocopies or sign a copyright declaration before using a digital camera (not all will allow cameras)

About the University of Westminster Archives

The Archives Service here at the University holds and collects papers relating to the University and its predecessor bodies. Those predecessor bodies are rather unusual so there are records here that you might not expect!

The 309 Regent Street building originally housed the Royal Polytechnic Institution [1838-1881], which was founded by Sir George Cayley to promote science and technology to the masses. It hosted scientific displays and performances, including the illusion known as Pepper's Ghost and lectures illustrated with lantern slides. Our collections include a small number of catalogues, programmes and flyers for the institution, as well as press-cuttings and publications written by its staff.

In the 1860s, Quintin Hogg founded a ragged school and home for poor boys in Covent Garden, and then later the Youths' Christian Institute [1871-1891]. The YCI was a philanthropic institute providing for the athletic, intellectual, social and religious needs of young men. Membership fees paid for free use of a library, social rooms, gymnasium and entertainments, with a small additional fee for technical classes. The YCI eventually outgrew its premises in Long Acre and Hogg purchased 309 Regent Street in 1882 after the Royal Polytechnic Institution folded.

The records we hold relating to these early years include a journal kept by the manager of the Castle Street Working Boys Home which Hogg founded, with photographs of the boys in his care, descriptions of their circumstances and reports on what happened to them afterwards. In these early years, Hogg also started a magazine for the members called "Home Tidings" (later "Polytechnic Magazine"). It includes reports on all aspects of the Institute and its members and includes line drawings and, later, photographs. The magazine continued up to 1970 and includes a wealth of information about the institute, London and national affairs.

The YCI gradually took on the name over the door at 309 Regent Street and became known as The Polytechnic [later Regent Street Polytechnic, 1891-1970], the first of its kind in the UK and the model for all the other polytechnics. The number of educational classes increased hugely and the sports clubs also become very important, helping to organise the 1908 Olympics and the first marathon. The Archive holds a great number of records relating to clubs (which also include other leisure activities such as rambling) including photographs, publications and memorabilia.

Until World War II, the Polytechnic largely catered for evening students, with only a few technical classes held during the day. This all changed in the 1950s and 1960s and we start to see the emergence of a defined student body, seeking political representation within the Institute. The Archive holds a variety of student publications from this era, before the creation of a formal Students' Union. During the Polytechnic of Central London period [PCL, 1970-1992] the student body was very political and the Archive holds a nearly complete set of the Union's magazine (McGarel) as well as assorted flyers and posters relating to occupations and protests.

Another unexpected aspect of the Polytechnic is its travel bureau, the Polytechnic Touring Association, which later became a part of Lunn Poly. The Archive holds records for the organisation from the 1890s to the 1950s including brochures, guidebooks and postcards, as well as collecting diaries and photographs created by people who went on the tours.

Please see www.westminster.ac.uk/archives for information on our collections, our online catalogue and digitised resources, and arrangements for using the Archive.