

Finding and Using Photographic Archives

Which Archives might I want to use?

Most archives will hold at least some photographs, relating to their particular institution, area or subject of interest.

Business and charity archives hold the papers of the institution that they serve. They will usually hold photographs commissioned by the organisation either for use in advertising or for documentation of their activities. Businesses who maintained staff overseas (e.g. HSBC bank) will often have photographs documenting 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 of the local government within their area. These often include photographs taken for documentary purposes, for example relating to planning functions. These can include the only known images of buildings that have been pulled down to make way for larger developments. Record Offices also collect in 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 therefore likely to hold the broadest range of photographs relating to the social history of any particular area.

Specialist repositories are archives who collect on a particular subject area. Most university archives will hold the records of their institution but also collect papers relevant to their research interests. For example, SOAS Archive collects archives and photographs relating to British interaction with Africa and Asia over the last 250 years. Museum archives also tend to collect papers around their subject area. The Tate Archive, as well as holding the institution's own papers, collects the papers of British artists from 1900 onwards. These include photographs of artworks and exhibitions, but also of the artists' private lives.

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. Similar records are held at The National Archives of Scotland, the National Library of Wales and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. You can find an overview of The National Archives' photographic holdings at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/looking-for-subject/photographs.htm> and a detailed list of their photographic collections at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/photographic-series.htm>

Tracking down your Archives

Most publically-owned archives have their catalogues online, which can be easily search for photographs. The catalogue may include scans of their photograph collection, or they may have a separate website for digitised material. A lot of archives, including the University of Westminster Archive, host images on Flickr [www.flickr.com/people/westminsteruniarchives/]

Many private collections (e.g. business, estates or families) will require you to contact the archive and request details of their collection. It helps to be specific about the subject and date of images you are looking for (e.g. 'I'm looking for 19th century photographs of ships').

There are several archive 'portals' which allow you to search across multiple institutions at the same time.

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> can help you to track down the archive of a particular photographer e.g. Julia Margaret Cameron. Enter the name of an individual into the search box and the results will come up in two tabs, *Records* and *Record Creators*. The *Record Creators* tab is particularly useful when you need to differentiate between individuals with the same name.

www.aim25.ac.uk hosts descriptions of archives held by London-based universities and colleges. 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.

www.archiveshub.ac.uk covers collections held in Universities across the UK, as well as some small specialist repositories.

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 containing sensitive personal information are often closed for 100 years due to Data Protection legislation. This will include the records of prisons, hospitals and orphanages.

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 in a laptop)
- 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)
- Pay for photocopies or sign a copyright declaration before using a digital camera (not all will allow cameras)
- Most archives do *not* ask you to use white glove with documents, however you may be asked to do so with photographs – they will provide them if so.

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.

Understanding archival cataloguing

Archival cataloguing is different to Library cataloguing. Archives are arranged in a hierarchy, whereas library cataloguing is flat and arranged by subject. When you see an archival reference code, the levels of the hierarchy will usually be separated by slashes or dots. The levels in the hierarchy help you to understand who created the particular archive item, and organises the items into groups so they are easier to use.

As an example, let's look at a photograph album in the University's Archives:

PRA/6/5 Polytechnic Rambling Club photograph album: containing photographs of various rambles and members of the club. 1896-1905

This is an individual archival *item*, which has been put in a group (or *series*) of items called:

PRA/6 Photographs 1880-1960

In a *collection* called:

PRA Records of the Polytechnic Ramblers and Polytechnic Rambling Club 1886-2008

Which number you use to request the documents in the archive, depends on what you want to see (and how large the collection is). If your interest is in Victorian photograph albums, you might ask to see just the one *item*. If you are interested in how the Ramblers photographed themselves over time, you might ask to see the *series*. If you're writing a history of the Rambling Club, you might ask to see the whole *collection*.

Photography sources in the University of Westminster Archives

Archive Services collects and preserves records of the University of Westminster and its predecessor bodies. As well as photographs taken throughout the institution's history, the archive documents developments in photographic technology and photographic education.

The 309 Regent Street building originally housed the **Royal Polytechnic Institution** [1838-1881], founded to promote new science and technology to the masses. The displays and performances included the *Pepper's Ghost* illusion and lectures illustrated with lantern slides. In 1841 Henry Fox Talbot granted the RPI a licence to demonstrate his Calotype process, and the same year Richard Beard opened his photographic portrait studio on the roof of 309 Regent Street – the first in Europe. Popular photography classes began at the RPI in 1852. The RPI folded in 1881.

In the 1860s, Quintin Hogg founded the **York Place Ragged School, Mission, and Boys' Home** [1867-1871] in Covent Garden. The Archive holds a journal kept by the Home's Manager, which includes photographs of many of the boys passing through his care. Hogg's philanthropic work developed into the **Youths' Christian Institute** [1871-1891], where members had use of a library, social rooms & gymnasium, with entertainments and technical classes provided for a small fee. The YCI eventually outgrew its premises in Long Acre and Hogg purchased 309 Regent Street in 1882.

With the moved to Regent Street the YCI was able to offer more classes, including a School of Photography. The YCI 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 Poly's sports clubs were nationally renowned, helping to organise the 1908 Olympics and the London marathon. The Archive holds many photographs relating to the sports and social clubs, an amazing visual resource of not only changing patterns of leisure but also fashions, and the development of vernacular photography. The growth of the tourism industry is documented through the photographic archives of the **Polytechnic Touring Association** [1881-1965, when it became Lunn Poly].

The Polytechnic Magazine ran from 1879 to 1970, and covers all aspects of Poly life, as well as international events such as World War One. The *Magazine* has been digitised and is available to browse and search online, free of charge.

Until World War Two, the Polytechnic largely catered for evening students. More daytime degree-level teaching was introduced in the 1950s and 1960s, and the student body started to seek political representation within the institution. The Archive holds a variety of student publications from this era to the present day, including many photographs of students' extra-curricular activities, as well as posters for gigs and protests

Margaret Harker, Head of the School of Photography from 1959, was instrumental in introducing the first degree courses in Photography in 1966. At the **Polytechnic of Central London** (1970-1992) photography teaching was split into Photographic Arts & Photographic Technology. In 1990 PCL merged with **Harrow College of Higher Education** [1897-1990], another institution with a long history of photographic teaching, before being re-designated the **University of Westminster** [1992-].

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

UOW Archive Services – September 2014