

Guidance on using Archives

1. The first step is to do some online research through the archive's catalogue (as well as any of their research guides on particular topics, if they have them). Be very flexible/creative with your search terms, trying multiple types of search. Keep very good records of the 'accession' (reference) numbers of any archives you'd like to look at.
2. Organise your visit to the relevant archive offices. Looking through archives is a slow process so try to allow a full day if you can, at least for your first visit. Check in advance the archive's own website to see their guidelines for visits and opening hours (many have reduced hours since Covid). Some archives require you to book your visit in advance by completing an online form or submitting an email; some also require you to specify in advance exactly which archive items you want to look at (by providing the accession numbers); others are happy for you just to turn up and order the items you want to look at on the day. Do call or email the archive in advance for advice or if you have any questions about anything and use any contacts for this that you have through your group.
3. Be aware that most archives require some kind of ID to get into their 'searchroom' (the place where you sit and actually read the archive materials), so make sure you've checked about this before you visit for the first time and bring the right documents. Some archives have their own 'archive card' system and will require you to set up your card before you can enter the searchroom. This can usually be done on arrival at the main desk the first time you visit – you usually need to provide proof of your name and address.
4. All archives require you to place most of your belongings into a locker before entering the searchroom. You cannot take pens, food or liquids, including drinks or hand sanitiser, into an archive. You CAN usually take in: pencils, notebooks, laptops and tablets/phones (needed for taking photos – see more on this below and note you may also need to take cash or a bank card to pay for permission to take photographs.)
5. Once you finally enter the searchroom, there will be systems in place concerning where you sit (usually at a numbered desk), where and how you place requests for archive items and where to put things back. On your first visit, ask for instructions on what these systems are and for help navigating how to place orders. Every archive has a slightly different system so it's absolutely fine to ask for support!
6. Once you've found your seat and settled in, you will either be able to look straight away at any items you pre-ordered OR you will need to place your first order via the archive's paper-based ordering system, so make sure you have your list of accession numbers ready. Most archives will limit you to a maximum of three items per order and then they may also restrict you to looking at one item at a time. Note: an 'item' is something identified by an accession number and is usually a file of related items. For example, the Basque Children's archive at the Labour History Archive was comprised of various files containing similar items e.g. a file of letters, a file of committee meeting minutes, a file of photos... The ordering system can at first seem rather daunting, as well as very slow/tedious. Be patient

- remember the archivists have to trawl through their extensive ‘behind the scenes’ collections to find each item you want and there will be other visitors in there also requesting items as well. Get tactical about how you place orders e.g. make sure you order the most important items first and get your next batch of orders in as soon as you possibly can, so that items are there ready for you as soon as you’ve worked through your first set.
7. Remember that files will generally be organised by the TYPE of material (e.g. meeting minutes) or by DATE, and this info will probably be written on the front of the file. But remember, you won’t get any helpful written background or introductions at the front of the material explaining what things are – you will just be presented with the items! A tip here is to go back to the online catalogue, as this usually provides a helpful summary/overview of each item. (I often keep the catalogue open on my laptop while I’m working in an archive, so I can keep cross-checking what I’ve looked at and what I still want to see). Generally, though, you will need to play detective to piece together the information and the ‘story’ that is emerging from it.
 8. Learn how to scan through material quickly. For example, it’s often a good idea to choose the smallest files first. Sometimes you will see straight away that a file isn’t helpful but usually you will need to skim through everything to make sure you don’t miss anything important. However, don’t waste time reading painstakingly through a whole document that isn’t relevant at all. Remember: on this project we are looking for stories of **named individuals**, so keep your eyes peeled for any people who have arrived or left the area (or who may have relatives who did so), looking for names and personal details, as well as material that helps you build a picture of that person’s life. You probably won’t find all the information in one document/file but you might be able begin to piece together a story by looking across a range of material and by following up later the various ‘leads’ that the archives present you with (e.g. looking up names or events/dates in the newspapers, seeking out another archive/record that’s mentioned in something you read, or reading up in secondary sources.) SEE EXAMPLE in box below.
 9. Make written notes as you go along of details you find AND WHERE YOU FOUND THEM! Make a note of the accession number – and the specific document, if applicable, as well as page number etc. It’s useful to do this in tandem with taking photos of the documents (putting a piece of paper with the accession number written on it next to the archive document when you photograph it). You will need this info later as all archive information will need to be carefully referenced,
 10. Photographs: archive offices usually operate a system where you pay a flat fee for the day and you can then take as many photos as you want that day. Ask for a photography request form and complete/submit it and pay at the main desk BEFORE you start taking photos! It’s usually £5-10 for a day so it makes sense to try and spend a full day in the archive rather than have multiple trips. When taking photos, remember to write the relevant accession number on a piece of paper and place it near what you are photographing, so you have a linked record (but make sure that the paper/number could be cropped out of the photo later in case we want to publish it). Think about whether anything you’re photographing would look good on the project map/website. If it is, it might be possible to get the archivists to scan it for you, so we get a

higher quality image – but remember you will need to seek permission from the archive to reproduce any images on our website (and possibly also the archive owner, which is the person/organisation which deposited the archive or owns the original image.)

Further advice from the National Archives:

- How to use archives: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/start-here/how-to-use-archives/>
- Where do I start my research? <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/where-do-i-start-my-research/>
- Planning a visit: <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/planning-a-visit/>