

Information for your First Visit to an Archives Office

Archive Offices, often also known as Record Offices, come in a variety of guises. Most archive offices run by local councils will contain a wide range of documents and photographs relating to that particular city, town or county although there are also specialised archive offices which will cover a particular subject area (such as the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust at Gaydon in Warwickshire) and archives which are part of universities (such as Birmingham University's Special Collections Department). Although this information leaflet is designed with Birmingham City Archives in mind, many of the issues raised will be relevant to any archive office that you visit.

The archive collections in Birmingham City Archives date from about 1120 to present day and come in a variety of media – paper, parchment, film, photographic prints, sound recordings etc. The key thing to remember about archives is that they are unique and irreplaceable items which can often be very fragile. They are also often “on deposit” or “on loan” to archive office from the owners. As a result there are several issues to remember when visiting an archive service and using original documents.

➤ Access

Most archive offices are open to anyone to use, free of charge, although as they all have different opening times and some have booking procedures **always check their website or phone or e-mail in advance of your visit.**

Because of the unique and irreplaceable nature of the material there are a few basic rules everyone has to abide by when using archives:

- ❖ You will have to bring proof of identification showing name, address and signature (some specialised or university archives ask for a letter of introduction)
- ❖ You will have to put your bags in a locker
- ❖ You will be asked to sign a visitors' book or register giving your name and subject of research
- ❖ You will have to use a pencil and not a pen for taking notes (you can also use laptops in most places)
- ❖ You cannot eat or drink near documents
- ❖ You may be asked to wear gloves or use foam blocks or cushions to help preserve the document you're using at the time

Occasionally you may not be able to see the document you want. This can be for a variety of reasons:

- ❖ The document is too fragile to handle until it has been conserved
- ❖ Legally you are not allowed to see it because of the Data Protection Act or personal confidentiality e.g. hospital or school records less than 100 years old
- ❖ The person who owns the document may have imposed access restrictions as a condition of giving the document to the archives

You can get photocopies of most documents unless:

- ❖ copyright law forbids it
- ❖ the document is too fragile to copy
- ❖ the document would be damaged by copying

➤ **Handwriting**

At first glance some documents can seem unreadable, and look very unfamiliar. Before 1800, the majority of documents are written very neatly - but not always using familiar letter shapes. For example a "long s" which looks very like an *f* is used in early printed as well as handwritten sources. The consistency of the handwriting can help in understanding a document. Once you've correctly identified a letter shape you can then match it to other examples in the document. However, particularly after 1800, difficulty in reading a document can have as much to do with bad handwriting as unfamiliar letters.

Early documents will also often be in Latin.

➤ **Spelling**

Standard spelling is a relatively new idea, and some of the words found in older documents can look bizarre to modern eyes. Try reading the word out loud as this often helps.

➤ **Unknown words**

Some words have either changed their meaning altogether, or fallen out of use. Dictionaries, like the Oxford English Dictionary, contain many redundant words and there are several helpful reference books in the library, such as guides to particular trades, place names or dialects. Many educational resource packs and on-line resources also have glossaries and explanations of unusual words.

➤ **Context**

Understanding why the document was created and how it relates to other documents in the collection can transform your understanding of the information in the document. The lists or catalogues of the documents often have helpful introductions written by the archivist who catalogued them which will give crucial background information and will show you what else the collection contains.

And remember...

The staff on duty in the research room are there to help you and to answer questions however busy they may seem. They are usually also very knowledgeable about the collections and how they can be used. Archive services often have large cataloguing backlogs and the staff may well know of material which you won't find in the indexes because it is uncatalogued or because it might have been acquired very recently.

Useful websites for archives

This is not an exhaustive list but includes websites for archive sources in and around Birmingham and major national websites which will enable you to find where a particular collection is located or which act as portals to other websites.

www.birmingham.gov.uk/archives - website of Birmingham City Archives

www.digitalhandsworth.org.uk - material from Birmingham City Archives and Local Studies relating to Handsworth including some online learning activities, photographs, documents etc.

www.revolutionaryplayers.org.uk - material from archives across the West Midlands relating to the Industrial Revolution and individuals who played a key part in the industrial history of the region.

www.movinghere.org.uk – archive sources relating to 200 years of migration to Britain including material from Birmingham

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk - on-line catalogue, guides, activities, exhibitions, advice on research etc. from The National Archives. It also includes *Archon*, which will link you to the websites of every archive service in UK, and the *National Register of Archives* - a searchable national database of catalogues to archive collections.

www.a2a.org.uk – a national searchable database of catalogues to archive collections including many collections from Birmingham City Archives and the University Special Collections. A very useful site for finding out where archive collections are located.

www.archiveshub.ac.uk – searchable database of lists and catalogues from university archive services. A very useful site for finding out where archive collections are located.