

Exploring the History of your High Street

Researching the history of a building or place

There is a variety of primary sources that are useful for investigating the history of a place and these vary depending on the age of the site you are looking at. The key sources are historic maps, plans and illustrations. Wills and probate records, indentures and tax assessments are particularly useful for the 18th century and earlier periods but usually only provide a glimpse into the appearance of a building or place through brief descriptions. Topographical accounts and trade directories often give a formal description of a place from the 18th century onwards. From the 19th century, there are sales particulars, building control plans, Ordnance Survey maps, Tithe plans and awards, Census returns and of course photographs.

Many archives have subject guides for their collections to help guide you further. The National Archives also have a selection of useful guides for research:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/>

Local history books and oral history accounts are a great way to start understanding a place and can often include copies of primary documentation such as photographs and postcards to give you a head start. A lot of this information is increasingly found on the internet through local history or community groups, or through social media.

Hints and tips

- Remember that the name or number of a building may have changed over time.
- All sources must be treated with caution and are not always correct or may be bias. It is important to use the documentary research in conjunction with the site evidence – even the Ordnance Survey have got it wrong on occasion!
- Beware of unreferenced secondary texts and try to follow up information with primary records or a closer examination of the site.
- Keep a record of your information and where you found it. Consider a simple table with the building/ structure/site name, location, description and any archaeological, architectural or historical notes. If you create a word table, you may want to consider using footnotes or endnotes for references.
- Consider creating a timeline to help you understand how the site has changed over time.
- Label any copies of your material including any references and details of where you found it. This includes digital copies which could be renamed by reference and placed in a folder labelled by archive/ source.
- If using online repositories, always check the original document against any transcriptions. It's easy for transcribers to misspell or omit details.
- Beware of 'hints' and always check these out against the original documents, if available.

What to do with your research

Rather than leaving your research to gather dust in your notebook, why not share your findings? If the building is listed, then you can add your information as part of Historic England's Missing Pieces Project (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/missing-pieces/>). If the building is not listed, the local authority's Historic Environment Record (HER) is likely to be interested in your research

to add to their records. HERs, which can be searched via the Heritage Gateway, are a good source of local historical information and are consulted to inform planning decisions. In addition to this you might also consider writing your findings up into short formalised histories such as the ones produced by members of Wakefield Historical Society as part of another High Street Heritage Action Zone: see <https://www.wakefieldhistoricalsociety.org.uk/projects/the-westgate-project/articles-on-westgate-buildings-and-yards/>.

Further information and sources

For a brief overview of Listing: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/what-is-designation/listed-buildings/>

For an overview of Architectural Investigation:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/methods/architectural-investigation/>

Historic England, Researching the History of Your Home (much of the guidance also relates to non-domestic buildings as well). <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/your-home/your-homes-history/>

Historic England online sources

National Heritage List for England. If your building is listed it will appear on this online searchable database. You could find out what's important about it, and see if there are further details on its age and style. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>

Historic England Archives. Online catalogue of photos and archive material held at the Historic England Archive in Swindon. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/>

Aerial Photo Explorer. Explore aerial photos of your area on a map. Over 400,000 photos from Historic England's aerial collection of 6 million have already been digitised. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/aerial-photos/>

England's Places. A photo collection dating from the earliest photography in the 1850s up to the early 1990s. Subjects include churches, country houses, historic buildings, modern architecture, street scenes and village-scapes. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/englands-places/>

Other key online sources

Ancestry. This website requires a subscription but is usually available through your local archive. It allows you to build a family tree and find out more about individuals. It's most useful for browsing digitised historical documents. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk>

Archaeology Data Service. A repository for archaeological data and reports (including many building and places surveys). <https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/>

Britain from Above. Images from the Aerofilms collection, a unique aerial photographic archive of international importance. <https://www.britainfromabove.org.uk/en/about>

British History Online. Primary and secondary sources for the history of Britain. The Victoria County Histories and the RCHME volumes are digitised and fully available through this free website. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/>

British Newspaper Archive. This website requires a subscription but is usually available through your local archive. It holds over 67 million newspapers dating from the 1700s. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

Find your local archives. Enter your postcode to find your local authority archives. <https://www.gov.uk/search-local-archives>

Genuki. This website provide lots of information about a place, including lots of statistics and links. <https://www.genuki.org.uk>

Heritage Gateway. You can search national and local records of England's historic sites and buildings on the Heritage Gateway website. <https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/>

Historic Environment Records (HERs) . Maintained by local planning authorities, HERs provide comprehensive information and evidence about the historic environment in a particular area. <https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/chr/default.aspx>

Historical Trade Directories. The collection contains over 600 directories, with at least one directory for every English and Welsh county for the 1850s, 1890s and 1910s. Searchable by name, place and occupation. <https://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/digital/collection/p16445coll4>

Land Registry. Information on home ownership and title deeds may be found at the Land Registry. <https://www.landregistryuk.online/>

Local History Online. This website contains useful information as well as many links and contact details for local history societies. <https://www.local-history.co.uk/>

National Archives. The UK Government's official archive holds over 1,000 years of public records. Its website includes a searchable online catalogue and online guides to various topics such as wills and probate records, and census returns. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

National Map Library for Scotland. Despite its name, this website holds a large collection of maps for the whole of Britain, including a full set of historic Ordnance Survey maps. <https://maps.nls.uk/>

The Enclosure Maps of England and Wales. Searchable database of the enclosure maps of England and Wales, giving their locations at archive repositories. <http://hds.essex.ac.uk/emapweb/index.html>

Victoria County History series. An encyclopaedic record of England's places and people from earliest times to the present day. <https://www.history.ac.uk/research/victoria-county-history>

Useful publications

Alcock, N. W., Barley, M. W., Dixon, P. W. and R A Meeson, R. A. 1989 *Recording Timber-framed Buildings: an Illustrated Glossary*. Council for British Archaeology Practical Handbooks in Archaeology volume 5.

Alcock, N. W. 2003 *Documenting the history of houses*. British Records Association.

Alcock, N. W. 2017 *Tracing History Through Title Deeds: A Guide for Family and Local Historians*. Pen & Sword; the National Archives.

Barratt, N., 2006 *Tracing the History of Your House*. The National Archives.

Beech, G., and Mitchell, R., 2003 *Maps for Family and Local History: The Records of the Tithe, Valuation Office and National Farm Surveys of England and Wales, 1836-1943*. The National Archives.

Brunskill, R. W. 1981 *Traditional Buildings of Britain*. Orion Publishing Group, Limited

Brunskill, R. W. 2000 *Vernacular Architecture: An Illustrated Handbook*. Gardners Books

Gibson, J.S.W., and Rogers, C., 1990 *Electoral Registers since 1832 and Burgess Rolls*. Federation of Family History Societies.

Gibson, J.S.W, 1996 *The Hearth Tax, Other Later Stuart Tax Lists and the Association Oath Rolls*. Federation of Family History Societies.

Grannum, K., and Taylor, N., 2009 *Wills and Probate Records: A Guide for Family Historians*. The National Archives.

Hall, L. 2005 *Period House Fixtures and Fittings 1300 – 1900*. England's Living History.

Harvey, J. H., 1968 *Sources for the History of Houses*. British Records Association.

Morris, R. K. 2000 *The Archaeology of Buildings*. Tempus.

Pevsner, N 2010 *Pevsner's Architectural Glossary*. Yale University Press.