

Hints and Tips: British Asian History

Introduction

There are a large number of sources documenting the history of British Asian individuals and communities, both in the UK and overseas. Many of the relevant archives are actually held with The National Archives at Kew rather than local archives services. In the case of York, we currently hold very little relating to Asian individuals and communities in the city, but this is something we are actively looking to rectify. Please contact us if you think you might be able to help.

The options for studying British Asian history are vast, and you can take your research in any direction you like (which can sometimes become a problem!). Read on to discover our Hints and Tips for getting the best from your research, and some of the key sources you might want to consider.

Where to begin?

What subject to choose?

The first question you need to ask yourself is what area of study actually interests you, as the field itself is so wide-ranging. Are you interested in:

- family history (either your own or someone else's)
- the history of a particular colony or colonies
- migration from the colonies to the UK and more recent history
- migration from colonies or countries which were not part of the British Empire

The type of history you are interested in will dictate how you proceed, and knowing the scope of your research in advance will help greatly when you talk to archives services.

Have a clear end goal

It is very easy to become overwhelmed by the amount of information on offer, particularly online. Identify a clear goal in terms of what you want to achieve (even if

those goals need to be revisited over time). It is sometimes better to just start with a smaller topic, such as the history a single family or colony, before scaling up your research.

Having a clear goal from the start will help you to keep focussed on your research, and *should* stop you getting side-tracked as often!

Terminology

One thing to bear in mind as you research is the terminology that can be used in archives. Often the terms used in historical records reflect attitudes and language at the time which may now be considered derogatory or offensive.

Things to remember

Work backwards

It is much easier to work backwards in time systematically, especially as there are often a lot more sources for the 20th century than there are for previous ones. If you have a good grounding in the more recent past, this will aid you as you work backwards in time.

Remember that the further back in time you travel with your research, the more complicated the handwriting styles of written documents can get. Before the 18th century most legal documents were written in Latin too, so you might want to learn some new skills as you go. The [UK National Archives](#) has some great free tutorials for handwriting and Latin that may be useful.

Keep good notes

This is arguably one of the most important tips, as without keeping good records of what you have seen, and where you obtained them from, you may be left going round in circles! Save any images you download from internet sites or photographs you take with a suitable name or location and the type of record it is in the title, as well as the date if possible. Arrange files on your computer in a way that makes sense to you (by place, person or time period are common ways to split the information up). For written notes, keep them in a secure folder with dividers.

If you are consulting sources in an archives service, *always* make sure that your notes include the name of the service (particularly if you end up visiting more than one) and the full reference name and title of every source you looked at. This is invaluable if you decide you want to revisit sources in the future. For sources you

have obtained online, the reference number is usually included somewhere on the image or on the web page.

Not everything is online (or where you expect it to be!)

It is very easy to assume that with millions of records now available on sites such as [Ancestry](#) and [Find My Past](#), everything you need is online. Whilst it may look that way, it is worth remembering that only a very small fraction of the sources available in the United Kingdom have been digitised, and records for many of the former British colonies may not have been digitised at all.

[The National Archives \(UK\)](#) has created a number of introductory guides to their records, which can be the best place to start (see below). These will tell you what is available online (from The National Archives themselves, or from [Ancestry](#) or [Find My Past](#)) and where copies of the original archives can be ordered from The National Archives direct.

It is worth noting that if you are interested in Family History and have ancestors who were born, married or died outside the United Kingdom, including in countries which were formerly part of the British Empire, their records are most likely going to be held in the country concerned. There are, though, some exceptions, as in theory copies of registers relating to British nationals were sent back to the [General Register Office](#) in London. More information on those records can be found [here](#).

Speak to your local library or archives service

If you get stuck, or would like more information or advice, consult your nearest Local Studies Library or archives service, and they will be able to point you in the right direction. In York, our Archives and Local History Service at York Explore Library is the place to contact.

It is important to remember that in a lot of cases, ethnicity was not recorded in the archives as it was not required for the purpose of the document being created. This means that we often can't tell someone's ethnicity or characteristics unless it is explicitly stated in the records, making the search for individuals more complicated. In the case of York, individuals of Asian origin may well be found in the apprenticeship registers, registers of Freemen and Poor Law Union records amongst others, but it is rare (but not unheard of) that their ethnicity was ever identified. If in doubt, please ask us and we'll help your research in any way we can.

We provide free access to [Ancestry Library Edition](#), [Find My Past](#) and the [British Newspaper Archive](#) in all our libraries, both on the Public Network PCs and on your own laptop or tablet over our Wi-Fi network.

We are always happy to answer any questions you have about your research. Just contact us on 01904 552800, or email archives@exploreyork.org.uk.

Key sources and research guides

The following research guides, arranged by topic, have been compiled by The National Archives to help researchers locate what they need. These records are, in most cases, held by The National Archives rather than local record offices. In some cases these records can be found online, but in often you would need to visit The National Archives in person to consult them as they have not yet been digitised. Please see [The National Archives \(UK\) website](#) for more information on visiting them.

You can also view our [Getting Started page on Family History](#) for more information on how to research your family tree.

Migration and naturalisation

Please note, the term 'alien' is used from as early as the Tudor period to describe anyone not from a particular area (city, region or country). Naturalisation is the term used when someone goes through the process of becoming a British citizen.

- [Alien Arrivals, 1810-1811 and 1826-1869](#) [these records can be found on Ancestry]
- [Alien Entry Books, 1794-1921](#) [these records can be found on Ancestry]
- [Alien's Registration cards, 1918-1957](#)
These records are for over 600 immigrants to Britain, but cover the London area only. They include British-born wives of aliens, who lost their British status upon marriage.
- [Emigration from Britain](#)
This research guide will help you locate records held at The National Archives relating to emigration and individual emigrants. Over the last 400 years, the majority of British emigrants have travelled to the United States of America,

Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, and such those countries form the basis of the guide.

- [Immigration to Britain](#), 13th century onwards
This research guide also covers records relating to government policy towards immigration over the same period.
- [Naturalisation case papers 1801-1871](#)
These records include applications to the Secretary of State (1844-1871) and by private Act of Parliament (1801-1868). They also include some letters regarding denization, where people were entitled to certain rights, but not the full rights of a British citizen.
- [Naturalisation, up to October 1986](#)
For naturalisation certificates after 1 October 1986, and for records of indefinite leave to remain from any date, go to the [United Kingdom Visa and Immigration Service](#).
- [Ships' passenger lists](#) [available on Ancestry and Find My Past]
Detail of passengers who arrived into the UK between 1878 and 1960 can be found on Ancestry, whilst details of passengers who left the UK between 1890 and 1960 can be found on Find My Past. There are very few records in The National Archives relating to passengers travelling before 1878.

Colonial Office correspondence

This collection of correspondence is an invaluable resource for studies of the history of the British Empire and the individual countries which were once British colonies.

Different guides exist for different periods of history:

- [Colonial Office correspondence, 1815-1870](#)
- [Colonial Office correspondence, 1820-1850](#)
- [Colonial Office correspondence, 1850-1926](#)

History of the British Empire

- [Records of the British Empire, Colonies and Dependencies](#), from 1782.
This guide covers records held at The National Archives.

- [Empire and Commonwealth records held by other archives.](#)

Indian Army personnel

- [Indian Army personnel](#) records are predominantly held by the British Library.

Indian Indentured labour

- [Indian Indentured Labourers](#)

Under colonial rule, India's population provided the British Empire with a ready source of cheap and mobile labourers. When faced with widespread famine in the 19th century, many Indians agreed to become indentured labourers. Demand for indentured labourers increased substantially after the abolition of slavery in 1834, when large numbers were sent to produce sugar in Africa and the Caribbean.

Further resources

[British Association for South Asian Studies](#): one of the world's leading learned societies for the study of South Asia. It is the largest UK academic association for the study of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and the South Asian diaspora.

[British Library](#): the British Library website contains a microsite specifically looking at the history of Asians in Britain.

[Tracing your Asian roots in Britain](#): originally from 2011, this web page from the BBC contains useful information on tracing your British Asian history.