

Hints and Tips: Local History



Introduction

Local History is a great hobby – it helps us find a sense of place, and roots us in our communities. The subject is 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 Local History research.

Where to begin?

What subject to choose?

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

- the development of your village or town
- local industries or businesses
- the wider landscape, including nearby areas of countryside or farmland
- wider themes, such as education, health or shopping in your town or village

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 your Local Studies Library or archives service.

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 small topic, such as the history a single shop, business or street, before scaling up your research to, say, the history and development of a type of business in your area. Chocolate in York is one such example where there is an abundance of potential sources you can use in your research, so it can be better to start small.

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

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 it from, you may be left going round in circles! Save any images you download from internet sites or photographs you take with the name of the building, 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 or by 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.

Not everything is online

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. This is particularly true with sources for Local History, as they often are not as name-rich as family history resources, and are therefore not of as much interest to specialist genealogical web companies.

There are, however, some good general sites for Local History, including the Ordnance Survey map collections held by [National Library of Scotland](#) (the collection actually covers the whole of the UK) and the database of UK trade directories which is now part of [Ancestry](#).

If you want to conduct more in-depth research about a particular area of local history, you will most likely need to speak to your local archives service (or the archives service covering the area you are interested in). More details about local archives services in the UK can be found in the [National Archives' Find an Archive portal](#).

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. At York Explore we have a dedicated Local History Room with thousands of reference books on all aspects of York's history. We also have:

- an extensive map collection, including Ordnance Survey and earlier maps
- local trade directories from the late 18th century to the late 20th century, covering York and the surrounding area
- Post Office directories (the precursor of the telephone book)
- Introduction to Local History workshops (for a charge) covering key sources to get you started with the history of York. Please check with staff as to when these workshops will next be run.

We also 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. Whilst these portals are usually used for family history research, they do contain some key sources for local history, including trade directories and electoral registers.

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

Further resources:

The [British Association for Local History](#) is the key organisation to look to for advice and support about researching local history.

[TimeLine York Plus](#) is a York-based umbrella body for local history societies. It contains a directory to help you find your local society, where you can get more tailored local help and support, as well as meeting likeminded individuals.