

Mytimemachine.co.uk research guide 1

Visiting a records office

Your first visit to a records office can feel uncomfortably like the first day in a new school. Everyone else seems to know what to do and where to go, while you worry that you will inadvertently break the rules.

Don't worry. The people who work in and visit records offices are almost invariably friendly and helpful. And by planning ahead, you can make this an enjoyable and fruitful experience. A little preparation can help to put your mind at risk, and will certainly ensure you stand a better chance of finding the information you want.

Here we look at the things you can do to make your visit a success.

Preparing for a visit

Don't be in too much of a hurry to head to the records office. Exhaust sources of freely and easily available information first, and use your day at the records office to fill in gaps and open up new avenues of research.

Have you:

- Been to the library and read any general histories dealing with your subject?
- Asked family members if they have any recollections, photos or documents that may help?
- Checked the many free resources available online? Family history researchers should at least try
 - [FreeBMD](#)¹
 - [Ancestry](#)² and
 - [Familysearch](#)³.

If you've done all these things and found all the information you can get in this way, you may now find that the only way to get more information is to join one of the many paid-for subscriber websites providing history information, or to head for the records office.

This is the time to marshal your information and be clear about what you want. The more focused you can be the better. A search for Great Uncle Ernie who was in the merchant navy some time in the

1930s might not get very far; knowing when he was born and when he signed up might narrow things down a bit.

Before you go

Find out the location of the records office, and its opening hours. You can check this online through the [myancestors.co.uk directory of local and specialist records offices for England and Wales](#)⁴ and our [directory of local and specialist records offices for Scotland](#)⁵. Or give them a call.

You might want to ensure that there are no restrictions on access to the documents that you want or on the way they are used. Sometimes you will need permission from the person who deposited them.

Make sure that the records you need are going to be available. Sometimes documents can be withdrawn for conservation work, or they may be stored off-site and require an advance order.

Find out whether you need to book, either to visit or to ensure desk space to work at and the use of a microfilm or microfiche reader.

When visiting any records office for the first time, you should find out which of the items on our checklist are permitted and whether there are restrictions on their use.

Ask about any other facilities you might need:

- Is there a car park either on-site or within walking distance?
- Are there lockers or a cloakroom in which you can leave a bag and coat?
- Is there a café, or can you bring sandwiches?
- What coins are required for car parks, lockers and photocopiers?

Getting a readers' ticket

Not every records centre requires identification, though almost all will expect you to sign in. Local studies centres, found in many large public libraries, for example, are usually open to anyone who turns up.

Many local records offices are members of the County Archive Research Network

(CARN) and researchers will need to obtain a CARN readers' ticket.

You can apply for a CARN ticket on arrival at a records office using this scheme by completing a simple form and producing some proof of identity which shows your name, current address and signature. A driving licence is ideal.

Other suitable documents, which may need to be used in combination, include a bank or credit card, passport, bank statement, utility bill, Post Office savings book, disabled person's registration or pension book.

A ticket will be issued immediately; it is completely free of charge and remains valid for four years. It can be used to gain access to more than 60 participating record offices in England and Wales, and to the Society of Genealogists library in London.

The National Archives at Kew operates its own readers' ticket system along similar lines. Once again, proof of identity is required, and cards – valid for three years – are issued on the spot. Staff will take a photograph of you and this appears on the card.

You will need this card to order documents and reserve a seat in the reading room – either online before your visit, or on the day.

Things to take with you

You will kick yourself if you find that crucial document in the archives and then have no way of keeping a proper record of it for yourself. So be prepared.

You might want to consider taking:

- **Two pencils** – not pens, most records offices don't let you use them for fear of damaging the original documents. And make sure they don't have erasers attached as these are also often forbidden.
- **Paper to make notes.** Some records offices allow a limited number of loose A4 sheets, while others prefer that you use a spiral-bound notebook (the National Archives, for example, changed its mind in 2006 and now prefers notebooks).

- **Camera.** Make sure you can switch off the flash. The National Records Office will insist on checking your camera. It will then give you a small sticker which allows you to bring it through the security check on future occasions.
- **Laptop computer.** Many records offices provide powerpoints, but make sure the battery is fully charged just in case. And don't forget to turn off the sound – the musical note most laptops play at start-up can be startlingly loud.
- **Means of identification.** Whether you need a temporary or permanent pass, most records offices will want to see a passport, driving licence or something similar which shows your name, address and signature.
- **Cash.** Enough to pay for a car park, lunch, the use of a locker or cloakroom and any photocopies you might need.
- **Research notes.** If you have not ordered documents in advance, you will need a reminder of what you are looking for. Ideally, your laptop could have a copy of all your research to date so you can see what gaps you are trying to fill.
- **Mobile phone.** Can be used as a camera, and will also be useful for calling home when you discover you don't have that vital document with you! Almost invariably, you will need to switch the phone to silent and use it only to text.

Things to leave at home

- **Food and chewing gum.** Banned from every records office in the country for obvious reasons. If you have brought a packed lunch, leave it in a locker.
- **Biros, fountain pens, pencil sharpeners and pencil erasers, coloured pencils and handheld**

scanners. Stick to pencils – without erasers.

- **Cigarettes.** Smoking damages the documents (as well as your health). From summer 2007, smoking in any enclosed public space is against the law.
- **Pets.** Guide dogs are likely to be an exception, but check what facilities are available.
- **Children.** Many records offices, including the National Archives, do not allow entry to those under 14. If a younger child wants to visit, or you need to take a child with you, please check first.

Getting professional help

Records office staff are knowledgeable about the collections they have, and will be pleased to offer help and advice. But there are many demands on their time and they will not be able to do the research for you.

If you really cannot carry out the research you need to do, it is possible to pay a professional to do the leg work for you.

REFERENCES

1 www.freebmd.org.uk/

2 www.ancestry.co.uk/

3 www.familysearch.org/Eng/default.asp

4 www.mytimemachine.co.uk/archives.htm

5 www.mytimemachine.co.uk/scottisharchives.htm

6 www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/gettingstarted/paid_research.htm?source=ddmenu_research7

7 www.ffhs.org.uk/General/Help/recordoff.pdf

8 www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/visit/?source=ddmenu_visit0

Many specialists advertise in family and local history magazines. The National Archives also has a [list of independent researchers](#)⁶ on its website.

Before entering into a contract it is only sensible to be sure exactly what you are paying for. You should also ask yourself and others how likely it is that even an expert will be able to track down the information you want.

Further information

- The Federation of Family History Societies has a short leaflet called [You and Your Records Office](#)⁷ which has advice on how to prepare and what to expect.
- The National Archives has a comprehensive [set of guides](#)⁸ to help you prepare for a visit.

After your visit

Write up your notes while you can still remember enough to fill in the gaps and make sense of what you have written down. The longer you leave it, the more difficult it will be.