

## Research Guide: Local Authority Archives

### What is a Local Authority Archive:

Local authority archives hold records relating to the local area. This area can be either a county, borough or city with some archives encompassing more than one of these. Records held by local authority archives include those of its governing body (e.g. a city or county council). Local authority archives will also hold records relevant to the local area including, but not limited to, schools records, local business records, asylum and prison records. Local authority archives are a great starting place for exploring history relating to your local area such as place, house, or family history.

Records held by local authority archives are public records under the Public Records Act and therefore are freely available to any member of the public (with caveats for some records under the Data Protection/Freedom of Information Acts.) You do not need to have a specific research reason to visit a local authority archive.

Local authority archives will have a public reading room open for users to come in and access the archives in person. Alongside this many local authority archives have digitised parts of their collections which may be available online.

### What material may be held:

- Parish registers of baptisms, marriages and burials
- Official records of the local area
- Records of local organisations, institutions, families and businesses.
- Maps of the local area
- Illustrations and photographs of the local area.

Most local authorities hold material covering a wide date range, often going back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century right up to the present day.

Material may be paper or digital.



**Riverside Building Borough Hall, home of Bedfordshire Archives** – *image copyright Bedfordshire Archives*

### **Where to start:**

#### **Identify your research goals:**

Although you do not need to have a specific research goal to visit a local authority archive it is useful to have an idea of what you are looking for prior to your visit. This may be a specific family member, a business, a house address or an event. It may be that your research widens or changes after you begin your search but having a clear starting point will help you focus your research.

#### **Identify your relevant local authority archive:**

Once you have your research goal the next step is to identify your relevant local authority archive. This will generally relate directly to the area you are researching, for example if you are looking for a family member who grew up in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, the relevant local authority archive will be Nottinghamshire Archives.

It may be that the area you are researching is covered by more than one local authority archive, for example if you are researching an event in Brent, London some of the records relating to the area may be held at Brent Archives, and some at the London Metropolitan Archive. Checking the local authority archive websites for types of records held may help you to identify the correct archive. It may also be useful to contact the archives direct as they will be able to help you identify where records relevant to your search are held.

As local authority archives are linked to local authority boundaries these may have changed over time. Therefore, you may find that records you would expect to be in one archive may be held elsewhere (for example Gloucestershire Archives and Bristol Archives have some crossover where local authority boundaries have changed in the past). Again, archivists at the relevant archives will be able to provide advice on this.

In Northern Ireland local authority archives are generally held centrally at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast.

The National Archives (TNA) has a useful tool for identifying archives by area <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/find-an-archive> - this tool includes non-local authority archives too.

### **Check the catalogue/finding aids:**

Most local authority archives will have a catalogue or finding aids accessible on their website which you can use to identify records. Many catalogues will have a search tool where you can enter key search terms and dates to try and locate relevant records.

It is worth noting that due to the vast number of records held by local authority archives each record might not be catalogued individually and therefore might not be picked up in a keyword search. However, you may be able to find a relevant series (e.g. Register of Marriages, Baptisms and Burials – 1835-1874) that the individual record you are looking for might be located in. If in doubt the best thing to do is contact the archive and they will be able to provide searching help and advice on where relevant records might be located.

Once you have identified the records you would like a look at make a note of their reference number (this will often be in a format with numbers, letters, and slashes – e.g. BA/44721/5/1) - this reference will allow the archivist to identify where the record is held in the archive stores. It is often useful to make a note of the title of the record too as an additional form of identification.

### **Contact the archive:**

Although at many local authority archives you can visit the reading room without an appointment, it is generally better to contact the archive in advance. This way an archivist can identify the records relevant to your request and ensure that these are ready for your visit. Local authority archives will make their contact details publicly available on their website. When contacting the archive you may be asked some questions about your research, this is to ensure that the relevant records to your request can be identified, and any additional records you may not have located in your search can be included.

### **Visiting the archive:**

- The archive will be based in the local authority area it covers.
- Most archives are open during normal working hours, but some may have restrictions on days and times they open so it is best to contact the archive in advance to check and book an appointment.
- Once at the archive you will consult your requested records in the reading room. Reading rooms will have a set of rules to ensure that the archives are appropriately handled and no damage occurs. Rules generally include: using pencils only, no food or drink, and using appropriate handling equipment. An archivist will let you know the correct procedure once you arrive.
- There will generally be lockers or safe spaces to store your personal belongings.
- Many local authority archives will have refreshment areas, accessible toilets and exhibition spaces to showcase some of the collections.
- Most local authority archives will allow photos of the records to be taken however may have rules regarding flash photography. You may also have to fill out a form regarding copyright permissions.



**The Reading Room at Teesside Archives –**  
*Image courtesy of Teesside Archives*

**Examples of local authority archives:**

- **Bristol Archives** – holds records relating to the City of Bristol
- **Brent Archives** – holds records relating to the borough of Brent
- **Kresen Kernow** – holds records relating to the county of Cornwall
- **Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives** – holds records relating to Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire
- **Glamorgan Archives** – holds records relating to Cardiff, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf and the Vale of Glamorgan.

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