

Researching Local History

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Researching the history of your local area can be a very enjoyable and interesting activity. There are many sources of information that can be used when carrying out a study into local history. These fall into two main areas, primary sources, and secondary sources.

Primary sources are items that date from a specific period in history. These can be legal documents such as those produced in law courts, newspapers, letters, or any other miscellaneous document. Primary sources have to be studied and interpreted, and form the parts of a historical jigsaw.

Secondary sources are usually books or articles that have been written about a particular subject by someone who has carried out a study of their own. These can be very useful as they often provide information about a broad range of topics, or have information from a broad range of other sources. They also usually have a reference list containing all of the source material used, which will illustrate the important sources to look for to use with your own study. Secondary sources are the best place to start your research as they will give you good background knowledge. Primary sources are usually very specific, and you will often need to know a little about the period in which they were produced, or be searching for a specific piece of information, to realise their significance.

Both primary and secondary sources can be found in a variety of places which can be visited during your study. These are as follows:

Museums – Local museums are a major source of information for local history. They often have displays dedicated to the history of the area in which they are located, which will give a very good basis for any study. Museums can however provide much more information than they may be able to display in their galleries. Within the museum's collection, there may be books, articles, newspapers, photographs, and many other types of historical source, which you may be able to arrange to see, and take notes from. The staff of the museums represent another potential source of information, as they may be able to answer enquiries, or provide directions for further study.

Libraries – Local libraries often house books on local history, or may have an archive of sources, such as newspapers or other paper documents, which you can arrange to use. Libraries also often have documents recorded on microfiche, which is photographic film with miniature images of documents recorded on it. These can be viewed on special equipment, and provide a quick means of viewing a large number of documents.



Churches – Church records are among the oldest type of records used in any historical study. It is not unusual for records to date back to the late 16th century. They get quite scarce before this date due to many churches being destroyed during Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, when many records were lost forever. They mainly give details of births (or more specifically christenings), marriages, and deaths within the parish, but also often contain information such as professions. One major form of church record that is readily accessible is the information recorded on gravestones.

Public Records Archives– Public records are held in archives which can be accessed by appointment or application. All local governments will have a record office that they use to house their documents, and they are a very valuable source of information. Many of these record offices can be contacted via the internet.

Oral History – If the period of study is within living memory, a discussion with the people that lived during those periods may provide an absolutely fascinating source of information, and a good way of connecting directly with the past.

Historical Societies – Many places have their own historical societies which are made up of people who dedicate some of their spare time in the preservation of local history. Historical societies often hold an archive of their own, made up of either original, or copies of historical documents, both primary and secondary.

One good way of getting to know the history of your local area is to explore it. This is best done when you have at least a basic knowledge of the area, as you will then be able to appreciate the history of your surroundings, and see how it has, or maybe has not changed over time.

