

NOTES FOR UNDERGRADUATES TACKLING THEIR DISSERTATIONS USING ORIGINAL SOURCES IN COLLEGE ARCHIVES AND OTHER ARCHIVES

Plan ahead

Make sure that there is enough material on your chosen topic before you start. Your tutors and the archivists will be able to advise.

Manuscript and early printed material cannot be made available outside working hours. If you wish to study original sources you must be aware that you will have to plan to use these materials in libraries or archives, under supervision, using correct techniques, and in the hours stipulated by the archivist or librarian. Many archivists, particularly, have very limited hours and very limited space for readers.

Pick a topic you can handle

The archivists can only offer limited assistance, both under the regulations laid down by the faculty, and within the constraints of their own working day, so topics chosen for study must be ones that you can tackle. Most pre-1800 topics, using original manuscript material, will require some palaeographical skills and perhaps a knowledge of Latin. Remember, too, that the papers for the topic you have chosen may be scattered geographically which will have an impact on your time and your budget.

Places to go

College archives may find it difficult to provide sufficient topics to satisfy all comers. You will find interesting ideas at County Record Offices, local studies centres (such as the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies above the Westgate Library), and the National Archives. There are innumerable other archival repositories and collections, many of which can be found in Foster and Shepherd's *British Archives*. Most libraries and/or archives should have a copy of this for consultation. If you still can't find a repository, just ask. Of course, there are overseas archives and libraries as well.

Electronic resources

Subjects may be found in the subject index to *British Archives*, the National Register of Archives on-line catalogue (<http://www.hmc.gov.uk/nra/>), ARCHON (<http://www.hmc.gov.uk/archon/>) the on-line National Archives catalogue (PROCAT) (<http://www.pro.gov.uk/>). Access to Archives (<http://www.a2a.org.uk>), the Higher Education Archives Hub (<http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk>) etc.

Contacting an archive

Most archives, except the biggest like the National Archives, require some notice before a visit. When approaching a repository for the first time, it is best to do so in writing (e-mail is fine). Archivists will be more than grateful if you make it extremely clear what it is that you would like to see. If you do not have details of specific papers, be specific about your subject. If you send an SAE, your consideration will be much appreciated but make sure it's big enough for the archive to include leaflets and guides.

A lot of information and even catalogues can be found on a repository's web-site. Just try typing in the name of the archive ('Oxfordshire Record Office' for example) into the search engine, and you should get a link straight there. Mugging up a bit first will help you to ask the right questions and get the right answers quickly.

Be warned that a small repository (like some of the college archives) may only be manned for a day or two a week so if you don't receive a reply immediately, don't assume you have been forgotten; be prepared to wait a week for a response.

You are likely to be required to produce some sort of ID; for a college archive then your Bodleian card and a recommendation from your tutor should be sufficient. However, if you want to use a County Record Office, you might be asked to show a CARN or similar ID card. If you don't have one, don't panic – go to the Record Office armed with some form of alternative ID (with your name, address, and signature) and two passport photographs, and you can usually be supplied with a card on the day you arrive to consult your material.

Handling original material

Archivists are always happy to show you the best way of handling original material. If you are asked to wear gloves or use special equipment, please comply. You are much more likely to be welcomed back if you follow the few rules! For frequently used material, you may be asked to use a microfilm copy – this is just to preserve the original, not to make your life difficult. You should always use pencil, and never eat or drink in a search room. You probably won't be allowed to have photocopies of original manuscript material or from early printed books, although you should be able to get print-outs from microfilms. Allow time to make thorough notes or transcripts.

It's *your* project!

Remember that archivists do not have time to do your research for you. They are, of course, happy to help with technical details like oddities in the handwriting, or to make suggestions about further places to look.

WHAT YOU MIGHT FIND IN A COLLEGE ARCHIVE

Academic records

These are often rather sparse. Most colleges will have some form of admissions file, particularly for more modern periods, but there may also be a record of collections, tutorial notes, disciplinary procedures, etc. Remember, though, that the papers of living people, and those which mention living people, are subject to the Data Protection Act, and cannot be made available. It may be possible, though, to study developments in the curriculum, for example.

Accounts

Financial records of all sorts including battels, receipts, disbursements (expenditure), etc. Early disbursement books are funds of useful and interesting details. Studies have been done on topics like the purchase of wine in colleges and book purchasing, but there are numerous other possibilities especially if one is prepared to do a comparison of, say, two or three colleges. A number of college accounts have been published.

Building records

Plans, accounts, commissions, etc. of collegiate buildings. The study of the construction and history of one particular building could be an interesting topic. College gardens may be an interesting field for study, as well.

Club records

Minute books, accounts, photograph albums, etc. of sports clubs, debating societies, dining clubs, etc. Music and drama are always popular themes, but has anyone looked at the development of the dining club in the early C20?

Estate records

The older colleges, particularly, had landed estates which provided income. Records include leases, surveys and terriers, maps and plans, correspondence, etc. Studies could be made of an individual land-holding, farming techniques, agricultural buildings, patterns of tenancy, etc.

Private papers

Occasionally college archives (or sometimes the manuscript sections of the college libraries) hold personal or business papers donated by an individual. Biographical studies are always a possibility although these may require additional research further afield (the National Register of Archives is perfect for finding papers concerning a specific person).

The *History of the University of Oxford* volumes used college and university archives extensively. It may well be possible to find an interesting topic in one of the volumes and develop it further, perhaps studying it more thoroughly and relating it to events and ideas in the wider world; or possibly to do this the other way round, to take a local or national issue and see how it affected the University, for example the arrival of the railway in Oxford, or the effect of the 1665 plague in London.

OTHER REPOSITORIES

Local Authority Record Offices were set up to preserve the administrative records of their county. Most will contain judicial records from local courts, county council legal and administrative papers, diocesan and other ecclesiastical records, manorial documents (although in Oxford a lot of these are still held in the colleges), other local council records (parish, borough, district, etc.), coroners' records, poor law papers, records of local businesses, personal papers, deeds, maps, etc. The Oxfordshire Record Office can be found on-line at <http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/oro>

Local Studies Libraries tend to complement rather than compete with the Local Authority ROs. They often hold collections of local photographs, libraries of books on local matters including trade directories, material for family history research, local newspapers on microfilm, etc. The Sites and Monuments Records (the record of archaeological sites in a county) may be either at the Local Authority RO or the LSL. If you are in any doubt over which location holds the material you wish to see, ring or check the web-sites. Certainly at the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies there is a poster telling you what to find where.

The National Archives (formerly the Public Record Office) is the national version of the Local Authority Record Office, holding the administrative records of the state back beyond Domesday. Everything you can find in a local office, you can find at the National Archives, only on a bigger scale.

Specialist repositories

Where to begin? There are archives of hospitals and medicine, sports clubs, schools, military colleges, film and TV, music, churches and missionary societies, livery companies, inns of court, trades unions, galleries and museums, hotels and travel companies, business archives, gentlemen's clubs, country houses, charities, transport, theatres, etc. The sky is the limit. If you have an idea, or something that just takes your fancy, there is bound to be an archive which will have something relevant. We are here to help, with advice, even if we can't provide the material on your doorstep!