

## SOURCES FOR THESES IN MODERN BRITISH HISTORY

### General

The great advantage of choosing to do a thesis on modern British history is the immense volume and variety of sources. The great disadvantage of choosing to do a thesis on modern British history is the immense volume and variety of sources. Therefore, a premium is won by the undergraduate who adopts and follows a clinical strategy. The design should be to identify a subject and question(s) sufficiently circumscribed to be manageable within a finite period of research and a prescribed limit of 12,000 words, yet sufficiently stimulating and significant to warrant treatment. Being alert to possible topics and sources when reading for an outline modern British history paper or associated Optional, Further and Special Subject, will pay dividends in the preparation for thesis work. It is likely that the Bodleian will be your principal centre of operations, although town and county record offices in your neighbourhoods may assume equal importance and, for those living in the metropolitan area especially, the British Library's Newspaper collection at Colindale in North London constitutes a major resource. This guide concentrates largely on the Bodleian and its adjunct libraries. You should bear in mind, whether your chosen topic concerns national or local issues, that the Bodleian is one of only three copyright or legal deposit libraries in England (the others are in Cambridge and the British Library in London). This means that you are virtually certain to find there a copy of every book or pamphlet printed for public circulation by a British publisher. The national libraries of Wales (at Aberystwyth) and Scotland (Edinburgh) enjoy similar status.

### First Steps

You should equip yourself with the three pamphlets styled Readers' Guides, available in the Bodleian catalogue room: *Official Papers*; *Modern Political Papers*; and *The Modern Papers & John Johnson Reading Room (Room 132)*.

**1. The *Official Papers* guide** refers you to the Bodleian's comprehensive collection of parliamentary publications: statutes and legislation; parliamentary papers (reports of Royal Commissions, Select Committees etc.); and parliamentary proceedings (Hansard verbatim reports of Commons' and Lords' debates). Most parliamentary official papers are located in the underground store which is reached through the staff area in the Lower Camera; but the parliamentary debates (Hansard) volumes can be found either in the Upper Camera or in the Law Library, both of which have full sets. Here it is important to emphasise that, even if your topic is local rather than national, and social rather than political, you should not disregard these sources. Royal Commissions of inquiry will include the cross-examination of witnesses drawn from localities who had an interest in a particular matter (e.g. on industrial relations, public health, living conditions etc.). Likewise, parliamentary debates are an under-used source by local historians; yet there are many nuggets to be discovered in them because MPs will often ventilate their constituents' concerns. Moreover, they are easily accessed: each volume contains an index recording when and on what subject an M.P. spoke. Regarding the parliamentary official papers, a *Select List of British Parliamentary Papers 1833–1899* has been published by P. and G. Ford (Irish University Press, 1969). This will give you the right reference number to Royal Commissions and Select Committees of the period, organised by subject matter. Broad classifications (e.g. Government, Finance, Agriculture, Trade and Industry, Energy, Transport, Communications, Mercantile Policy, Labour, Poor Law, Health, Town Planning, Housing, Education, Social Problems, Police and

Prisons) are then followed by arrangement into sub-categories (e.g. the Poor Law section contains groupings according to General Policy and Administration, and Particular Places and Unions; and the Health Section contains groupings according to General Health, Sewerage, Burials, Contagious Diseases, Vaccination, Lunacy, Foods and Drugs etc.). Still more useful are P. & G. Ford's successor volumes, *A Breviate of Parliamentary Papers 1900–1916* and *A Breviate of Parliamentary Papers 1917–1939* (both again published by Irish University Press, 1969), because not only do these provide the right reference numbers to Royal Commissions and Select Committees at work in these periods, they list their membership and summarise their principal findings and recommendations.

The Bodleian also has on microfiche minutes of British Cabinet discussions, dating from 1917 when the Cabinet Secretariat was first formed. And for undergraduates interested in a foreign policy subject, there are extensive series of foreign office papers, including correspondence with diplomats, which have been regularly published ever since the 1920s when H.M. Government decided to vindicate its pre-war foreign and colonial policy by releasing such documents.

**All should note that a thirty-years closure rule applies to most unpublished official records**, although this of course means that dates of access roll forward annually.

**2. The Modern Political Papers guide** gives you an introduction to the Bodleian's holdings of the private papers of numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century politicians, public servants, journalists and others involved in public affairs. These include six Prime Ministers (Disraeli, Asquith, Attlee, Macmillan, Wilson, Callaghan) and cabinet ministers such as Bryce, Harcourt, and Milner. Access to some of these is, however, restricted, so you must establish what is, and what is not available. This Readers' Guide also lists other important directories or handbooks which will inform you about the locations of holdings in other institutions throughout the country. Among these are:

Chris Cook, *Guide to Sources in Contemporary British History: vol.1, Organizations and Societies, vol.2 Individuals* (1994).

Cameron Hazlehurst and Christine Woodland, *A Guide to the Papers of British Cabinet Ministers, 1900–64* (1996).

*The Prime Ministers' Papers, 1801–1902* (HMSO, 1968).

There are comparable guides or directories appertaining to military history archives, literary figures, scientists, businessmen, trade unions etc.

**3. The Modern Papers & John Johnson Reading Room (Room 132) Readers' Guide** refers you to the facilities available in Room 132, on the ground floor of the New (Bodleian) Library. Here are the Conservative Party Archives, containing some nineteenth-century items, though predominantly post-1945. Above all, there is the John Johnson Collection of Ephemera, arranged under some 700 headings, including incidental materials on a huge variety of subjects: politics, publishing, religious movements, and the performing and graphic arts.

**4. The Modern Politics Database (MODPOL)** describes all the Bodleian's catalogued and uncatalogued modern political collections, from 1840 to the present, and is accessible by name and major subjects. It is an excellent point of entry, especially to those holdings described above at 2 and 3.

**5. The Press** – newspapers, magazines and periodicals – is an invaluable source for the modern historian. It has been noted already that the nation’s newspaper library is located at Colindale in North London; but it is the case that town and county record offices invariably contain copies of local and provincial newspapers for their region. The Bodleian has good runs of certain national papers; in particular, a complete set of *The Times* which is the only daily that is indexed. The Bodleian is strongest of all in its holdings of weeklies, such as *The Spectator*, *New Statesman* etc., and of major monthlies such as the *Nineteenth Century*, *Fortnightly Review* etc. Magazines and comics are also to be found there.

**6. Other Areas of Interest:** here your attention is drawn to the specialist historical periodicals, all of which are held in the Bodleian. These you should browse through in order to discover bibliographical leads or to define a particular topic if you have an inclination towards such a theme or interest. For instance, the *Urban History Yearbook* or the *Journal of Urban History*; the *International Journal of the History of Sport*; *Social History of Medicine*; *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, etc. Similarly, there are numerous national and regional journals: *Scottish History Review*, *Welsh History Review*, *Irish Historical Studies*, *Northern History*, *Midland History*, etc. Many of their articles are usefully summarised annually in the September issue of the *English Historical Review*. And there are many excellent source books for particular subjects. One such is Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide 1866–1928* (1999; paperback, 2001) which contains entries on some 400 individuals and 800 organizations involved in the women’s suffrage movement, with bibliographical and archival references. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries are especially rich in social surveys, from those of Charles Booth and Hubert Llewellyn-Smith (on London) and B.S. Rowntree (on York) to Florence Bell (on Middlesbrough), C.B. Hawkins (on Norwich) and D. Caradog Jones (on Merseyside). For an introduction to this literature, see P. Abrams, *The Origins of British Sociology 1834–1914* (1968) and *Practice and Progress. British Sociology 1950–80* (1982). There is also *The Tom Harrison Mass-Observation Archive: A Guide for Researchers* (1991).

**7. National and Local Archive Repositories:** records of central government departments (Foreign Office, Treasury, Home Office, etc.) are accessible at the National Archives and Public Record Office at Kew. You will find their websites helpful: [www.hmc.gov.uk/nra](http://www.hmc.gov.uk/nra); and [www.pro.gov.uk/](http://www.pro.gov.uk/) Correspondingly, records of local administration (municipal and county councils, magistrates’ sessions, etc.) and of local institutions such as churches, schools, and charities are usually held in County Record Offices or other local repositories. Still, you should recognise that, with the increasing integration of local and central government during the nineteenth century and after, there will also be correspondence appertaining to local matters in the files of the relevant ministry (e.g. Local Government Board, Home Office, Ministry of Health) in the National Archive.

#### **8. Standard Works of Reference:**

*Dictionary of National Biography* (the New D.N.B. will be available in print – 60 volumes – and online from Sept. 2004).

*Dictionary of Labour Biography* (an ongoing project, started in 1973 under the editorship of Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville, now edited by Keith Gildart, David Howell and Neville Kirk who issued vol.xi in 2003).

*Who’s Who* (published annually in modern format from 1897).

*Who Was Who* (published decennially, incorporating the entries of individuals in *Who’s Who* who died in a particular decade).

*Who's Who of British Members of Parliament* (ed. Michael Stenton & Stephen Lees). Volume I contains all MPs who sat in Parliament between 1832 and 1885; Volume II 1886-1918; Volume III 1919-1945, etc. Entries are taken from the annual *Dod's Parliamentary Companion*, supplemented with other information.

F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1832-1885*. Subsequent volumes by Craig cover 1885-1918, 1918-1940, etc.

David and Gareth Butler, *British Political Facts, 1900-94* (1994).

*The Chronology of the Modern World 1763-1992* (ed. Neville Williams and Philip Waller, 1994).

*Chronology of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (ed. Neville Williams and Philip Waller, 1996).

A.H. Halsey & J. Webb (eds.), *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends* (2000).

B.R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (1988).

*British Labour Statistics and Historical Abstract 1886-1968* (HMSO, 1971).