Introduction

Research using archives is rewarding but can also be challenging. Each period of history has its own quirks and this can impact on the ability of the researcher to read and interpret archival material.

The following is a guide to secondary sources, both hardcopy and online, which can be helpful when working with archives in the UK. These reference works will aid the researcher in the correct interpretation of dates, measurements, archaic words and language, and unfamiliar handwriting. They can all be found either at Brynmor Jones Library or at Hull History Centre. Topics covered are:

1. Palaeography
2. Historical Dates
3. Archaic Terms and Spelling
4. Language
5. Weights and Measures

Should you require any further advice, this guide has been prepared by the Hull University Archives team who are happy to help in any way they can. Questions should be directed to HUA staff at hullhistorycentre@hcandl.co.uk by marking enquiries ‘FAO HUA Archives Staff’ in the subject line.
1. Palaeography

Useful Information

Palaeography is the study of historical handwriting, some knowledge of which might be helpful when working with pre-19th century archival material.

If you are using English medieval material it will most likely be in a Latin script known as Anglicana, although a script called Textura was more commonly used for expensive illuminated manuscripts. During the early modern period, Chancery hand was used for royal and parliamentary records, whilst Secretary hand was most commonly used for business and personal purposes. By the 18th century, the more familiar Italic script was used commonly throughout England.

Hardcopy Resources

- L.C. Hector, The Handwriting of English Documents (Dorking, Kohler and Coambes, 1988)
- L.M. Munby, Reading Tudor and Stuart Handwriting (British Association for Local History, 2002)
- Bernhard Bischoff, Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Cambridge University, 1990)
- John Davidson, The Local Historian’s Encyclopedia (1986)

Online Resources and Tutorials

- The UK National Archives – Palaeography: Reading Old Handwriting 1500-1800, A Practical Online Tutorial http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/
- Bodleian Library http://rycote.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/palaeography
- Scottish Archive Network - Online Tuition in the Palaeography of Scottish Documents, 1500-1750 http://www.scottishhandwriting.com/
2. Historical Dates

Useful Information

When using archival material from the pre-19th century period it is necessary to be aware that dating systems have not always been the same as we use today.

Prior to 1752, Britain (minus Scotland) and its colonies operated under the ‘Julian’ calendar rather than the ‘Gregorian’ one with which we are familiar. Under the Julian system, the year began on the 25th March rather than the 1st January. It is important to note that Scotland moved to the Gregorian calendar much earlier than the rest of Britain in 1600. Before the 17th century, holy days or Saints days were sometimes used to denote the date. This required people to know the dates of such feasts so that they could convert to the Julian calendar. It was also common, prior to the 18th century, to use ‘regnal years’ for dating. With this method, the year of a monarch’s reign was used in place of the calendar year, which again required conversion. Finally, Arabic numerals were not used in England until the 16th century. Before this, the Roman numerical system was used to record dates and numbers.

Hardcopy Resources

- John J. Bond, Handy Book of Rules and Tables for Verifying Dates (1866)
- John Davidson, The Local Historian’s Encyclopedia (1986)

Online Resources and Tutorials

3. Archaic Terms and Spelling

Useful Information

Over the centuries word usage and meaning has changed. Some terms have dropped out of use completely. Prior to the mid-18th century, spelling could vary widely between regions and writers. From the mid-17th century standardisation of spelling began to develop, aided by the printing process.

However, modern spelling did not develop until the 19th century. When working with records created before the 19th century you will often, therefore, encounter unfamiliar words, terms or phrases, and spellings.

Recipe books, estate material, court papers and legal records are common classes of archives containing antiquated terminology. Trades and employment have changed dramatically over the centuries and so it is common to find unfamiliar occupations, such as ‘cordwainer’ (meaning leather shoemaker), within account books and apprenticeship records. It is also useful to be aware that certain words may have changed in meaning over the centuries, for example, ‘cell’ was used to refer to a monks room within in monastery, whilst it is now commonly used to refer to a holding room in a prison.

It is helpful to think phonetically when reading unfamiliar words as it was common to spell by ear. It is also important to be aware that certain letter characters have not always been used in the same way as in modern English. For example, ‘u’ and ‘v’ were used interchangeably to indicate both the vowel and the consonant, with ‘v’ used at the beginning of a word and ‘u’ used in the body of the word. The characters ‘i’ and ‘j’ are another example. Silent terminal ‘e’ was much more common, ‘y’ was often used where we would use ‘i’, and ‘c’ was commonly used in place of ‘t’ for words ending as we would now spell them ‘-tion’.

Hardcopy Resources

- Rosemary Milward, A Glossary of Household, Farming and Trade Terms from Probate Inventories (Derbyshire Record Office, 1977)
- James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps, A Dictionary of Archaic & Provincial Words, Obsolete Phrases, Proverbs & Ancient Customs, Form the Fourteenth Century, Volume 1 (1852)
- J.O. Halliwell-Phillipps, A Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words: Obsolete Phrases, Proverbs and Ancient Customs from the Fourteenth Century J-Z, Volume 2 (1887)
- David Hey, The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History (1996)
- Christopher Coredon and Anne Williams, A Dictionary of Medieval Terms & Phrases (2004)

Online Resources and Tutorials

- Glossary of archaic legal terms commonly found in parliamentary and legal papers https://parlipapers.proquest.com/help/parlipapers/Glossary%20of%20Archaic%20Terms%20and%20Phrases.html
4. Language

Useful Information

Prior to the 18th century Latin was commonly used in legal and court records. You will, therefore, most likely encounter Latin if undertaking research in the early modern period. You will certainly encounter Latin if working with medieval records.

Until 1733 Latin was the official language of the legal profession, meaning that deeds and legal documents were most commonly written in Latin. Ecclesiastical works of the medieval period were also usually written in Latin. Court records, such as quarter sessions papers, were mostly written in Latin up until the 16th century, although from the late-1500s it becomes more common to find these records in English. It is helpful to note that most legal documents and court records take a standard form. With this in mind, learning to pick out set phrases can help you navigate through a document.

Hardcopy Resources

- Benjamin Hall Kennedy, *The Shorter Latin Primer* (1896; 2012)
- Carl Meissner, *Latin Phrase-Book* (1938)

Online Resources and Tutorials

- Latin Online Tutorial, University of Texas at Austin [https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/eieol/latol/00](https://lrc.la.utexas.edu/eieol/latol/00)
5. Weights and Measures

Prior to the Metric system, standards for weights and measures were governed by the Imperial System in Britain. Imperial measurements began to be standardised from 1824 with the introduction of the Weights and Measures Act. This system, however, had arisen from centuries of monarchy led standardisation of locally and regionally used units, formerly referred to as Winchester standards. Researchers should also be aware that money used to be calculated in units of pounds, shillings and pence. Pounds were abbreviated as ‘£’ or ‘L’, shillings were abbreviated as ‘s’, and pence were abbreviated as ‘d’.

Hardcopy Resources


Online Resources and Tutorials

- Online table of archaic measures [http://gwydir.demon.co.uk/jo/units/length.htm](http://gwydir.demon.co.uk/jo/units/length.htm)
- Encyclopaedia Britannica guide to Imperial weights and measures [https://www.britannica.com/science/British-Imperial-System](https://www.britannica.com/science/British-Imperial-System)
- Russ Rowlet’s Dictionary of Units of Measurement, University of North Carolina [https://www.unc.edu/~rowlett/units/custom.html](https://www.unc.edu/~rowlett/units/custom.html)
- Online tool to interpret worth of historical values [https://www.measuringworth.com/](https://www.measuringworth.com/)