

Guide to researching secondary school histories in local archives

Obtaining some archival materials that relate directly to the history of the school you are teaching in, such as pages from a logbook or school magazine from earlier decades, can really bring studying the history of secondary education to life for pupils. If such materials aren't available on-site in your school, you might wish to consider finding them for yourself in your Local Authority archive. This short guide is designed to provide school history teachers who are using the SESC School Resource Packs with tips and advice on using Local Authority archives to find more information on the history of their school and community.



Top tips

1. Find out the basics about your school

Make sure you know the basic history of your school before you start: its previous name(s), its previous 'type' (for example, was it formerly a grammar or a secondary modern school?), has it ever been single-sex/co-educational, where were its previous sites located (if this has changed), and any other basic information you can glean from local knowledge within your school, colleagues, or from simple internet searches. The DofE's ['Get information about schools' search engine](#) can be helpful for filling in gaps in knowledge where schools have previously closed and re-opened under different names, as it includes historical schools and colleges in England, as well as contemporary ones. All of this basic information will also help you work out **which Local Authority archive is most likely to hold records relating to your school**, which is the first step to planning your archival research.

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2. Search the archive catalogue in advance

If in doubt about which archive might hold material relating to your school, start by searching for your school in the [online catalogue of The National Archives](#), which holds metadata for all other Local Authority archives, and will redirect you to their websites. Once you have identified your archive, you will need **to spend some time familiarising yourself with their online catalogue**. There is no standard format for these catalogues, nor is there a standard format for how school records are organised or labelled within the catalogues. **The best way to start is simply by typing the name, or previous name, of your school into the online catalogue of the archive you have identified, and see what results you get.** You will probably get results for individual 'items' at first, such as a school logbook, but from there you can usually work out the structure of the catalogue, and the file name given to the boxes of records relating to your school. There could be multiple items within each box, and it varies between archives as to how much detail the catalogue will carry about each individual item. In other words, you might just have to order a few boxes and see what you find!

→ For example:

- At Glamorgan Archives in Cardiff, **ESEC** is the label for the collections for the 43 individual secondary schools in Glamorgan across the period 1708-2003
- Each school then carries a number, for example Fitzalan High School is number '75', so all records relating to Fitzalan are catalogued under **ESEC75**
- Each individual box of records relating to that school then has a number, so that the first box of Fitzalan items are labelled **ESEC75/1**

3. Consider the implication of Data Protection regulations on your research

You will most likely find that a lot of post-1945 material relating to your school is by default listed as 'closed' on the online catalogue under the Data Protection '100-year' rule. This is often because these records contain names and other personal details about individuals (pupils and teachers) who are still alive. For example, historical school punishment books are very likely to be closed. But an item being closed does not necessarily mean you cannot see it, **it might simply mean needing to explain your research more carefully in advance of a visit, and signing a Data Protection form confirming you will adhere to keeping all sensitive personal information confidential in your note-taking and outputs.**

The introduction of new General Data Protection (GDPR) Regulations in May 2018 naturally triggered reviews and procedure updates in a lot of archives, and some repositories are more cautious than others. **But it is important to know that the UK's implementation of GDPR has adopted all research exemptions and is actually quite favourable towards the retention and use of historical data for research through its concept of 'archiving in the public interest'**, as long as the data in question is stored and shared according to its guidelines (for more on this, see [The National Archive's GDPR FAQs](#)). So GDPR should not, in theory, present a barrier to your research on school records. But you may find you have more administrative hoops to jump through, **so leave plenty of**

time before your visit to contact the archive in advance if you have questions about any closed records you find in the catalogue. In the unlikely event that your efforts are blocked, simply focus your research on archival materials that are designated as open for consultation in the catalogue. These are often things like school magazines, school play programmes, or the minutes from school meetings.

4. Archivists are your friends

Related to the point above, you can contact archives with any questions you have about the records you wish to consult. Archivists and other staff working at Local Authority archives are the experts on their collections and are almost always generous and supremely helpful, but they are also often pressed for time and resources, so be patient. When getting in touch, make sure you let them know that you are planning on visiting to look at the materials, and that you are seeking help navigating the catalogue and knowing which materials you wish to 'pre-order' in advance. This is important because some archives also offer a paid research service, which people who do not or cannot visit the archive themselves use, and which involves archive staff locating, photographing, and sending materials to them remotely. Local Authority archives do not charge researchers to look at their collections.

5. Book your place at the archive in advance

Even more so since covid, it is very likely that you will need to reserve your place at the archive in advance and 'pre-order' the items you want to look at (hence the preparation work with the online catalogue mentioned above). Check the opening times and visitor information on the archive website in order to plan your visit. Many archives are open on Saturday mornings and later on particular weekday evenings, which can make fitting an archive visit in around school hours more convenient. You may also have to register for a 'readers card/ticket' in advance.

6. Taking notes and photographs in the archive

Decide how you are going to take notes when you are in the archive before you start. Some archives will ask you to watch a short training video on your first visit to familiarise yourself with working with their collections. It will be possible to photograph some material (again, depending on Data Protection regulations for that item), although you will likely have to purchase a 'photography pass' from the archive to do this, which usually costs £10-15 per day. But, if you cannot photograph your materials, make sure you have a consistent system for taking notes, either with pencil and paper or on a laptop (never pens!). Always take note of the catalogue reference number for every item you consult, and avoid noting down any personal information (names etc.) wherever possible. For example, in SEESC's research, we would simply write 'Female pupil x' or 'Mr Teacher' in our archival notes, when it was not necessary for us to record the names of individual pupils and teachers.

7. Respect the archive rules that you sign up to, even long after your archive visit

When you arrive at the archive, it's likely you'll have to **sign a permissions form** stating that you will follow copyright and Data Protection rules in relation to the materials you look at and how you use them afterwards. **It's really important that you follow these when you go on to use the archival materials in your classroom.** So, again, be very careful about anonymising any names or personal details in the sources, and do not reproduce the materials on the internet or social media without the explicit permission of the archive.

What sources can you expect to find?

Below are the main types of primary, archival material you can expect to find in Local Authority archives relating to individual secondary schools in the U.K. (although this list is not exhaustive):

Log books: Log books are by far the most common and most likely source to survive, because they were the only record that schools had to preserve for 'the whole life of the school'. Board of Education Administrative Memorandum No. 48, 'School Records', stated that school log books should be completed 'under the supervision of the Head Master or Head Mistress or Superintendent Teacher'. They were instructed to record 'Events specially worthy of record for future reference or for other reasons, such as alterations to premises, introduction of new books and apparatus or of new courses of instruction, visits of Managers or Governors, the absence or illness of a teacher.' This guidance was updated by Ministry of Education Administrative Memorandum No. 531 in May 1956, and noting that 'Entries should be statements of fact only and should contain no expressions of opinion.' School log books are therefore excellent sources for finding out about the daily life of the school in a given period. Of course, they are written from the 'expert' perspective of the Headteacher, rather than the classroom teacher or pupil, thus they give only a partial picture of everyday life in any given school. Some are very descriptive and repetitive, others are much more colourful, so you just have to read a few and see what you find.

Punishment books: These sources are much less common than the log books; they were a statutory requirement but schools were not required to keep them for longer than three years after completion, so it is likely that most were destroyed. Typically, each page contained the date, name of the punished pupil, their offence, the nature and extent of their punishment (cane, strap, belt, slipper), by whom it was inflicted (which teacher), and the initials of Head Teacher. Corporal punishment was abolished in British state schools in 1986, but it was already becoming rarer in the 1970s, and its use varied according to school type and the gender of pupils.

Leavers records: Leavers records are less common than log books but more common than punishment books. They vary in format. You might find a leavers book, a set of pupil record cards, and a set of pupil testimonials. Leavers book recorded information for each pupil who left the school, with details such as when they left, their age, comments on their attitude/performance in school, and what they went on to do afterwards. In this way, they are a great source for finding out

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about the social class make up of the school in the past, and its relationship the local labour market or to further and higher education pathways for pupils in the past.

Internal school documents: Internal school documents produced from ‘above’ (e.g. sixth form guides, speech day programmes, timetables, and annual reports) are often found in Local Authority archives and are an excellent way to get a sense of the culture of the school during different epochs. ‘Bottom up’ school documents such as school magazines, school diaries, school classroom work, photo albums, and scrapbooks, are rarer than the top-down documents. Scrapbooks and programmes are useful for fleshing out log book descriptions of school activities, especially when they contain photographs and pupil-perspective accounts. School magazines from comprehensive, secondary modern, and grammar schools appear in the archives unevenly, but they often contain revealing snippets of writing by pupils that provide valuable, subjective accounts of everyday life in the school.

Governors’ and PTA minutes: Governors’ minute books survive irregularly. They provide a more detailed formal account of the business of schools than log books. A large part of their business is financial and relates to repairs, maintenance, and staffing. You will learn more than you ever wanted to know about the inadequate toilet and changing room facilities of UK secondary schools from these sources! PTA minute books are rarer than Governors’ minute books and slightly more interesting. Most entries relate to fundraising and the organising and running of PTA social events.

