

Using The Finding Aids In The Record Office

General Reference Skills

Make sure you can carry out general reference tasks like using:

- a library catalogue
- a contents page
- an index
- a bibliography
- footnotes
- reference books.

You will need these sort of skills to use the Record Office properly.

The 'Finding Aids' In The Archives

The public are not allowed into the strongrooms where the documents are stored; so you will need to use the 'finding aids', to discover what documents the Archives has and which of them you want to see. There are two main kinds of finding aids in the Archives, the Card Index and the Catalogue.

The Document Reference Number

Before the Archives staff can get out a document from the strongrooms for you, they need to know its reference number. Every document or photograph in the Archives which has been catalogued has its own unique reference number. This reference number falls into three parts.

1. The Record Office prefix. This tells you whether the document is stored at Caernarfon (X) or at Dolgellau (Z) and consists of a single letter.
2. The class number. This tells you what collection the document belongs to. It can consist of letters or numbers (e.g. M, D30, DVB) or a name (e.g. Vaynol, Poole) or an abbreviation (e.g. D.Q. for Dinorwic Quarries, N.W.C. for North Wales Chronicle papers).
3. The series number which tells you its own individual number in the collection. A full reference would be XS/2744 or Xvaynol/3412.

This is all the information needed on the order form to get a document out for you to see. Make a note of the reference numbers of any documents you consult in case you want to see them again. If you are doing an examination project you should refer to any documents used, giving their archive reference number.

The Card Index

The card indexes are the easiest and quickest finding aids. You will find separate series of indexes for documents, photographs, maps, sale catalogues and education records.

The Persons Index. This is in alphabetical order by surname.

The Places Index. This is in alphabetical order but you will often need to look under the name of the parish for some of the smaller places. Larger villages and towns are listed under their own names but it is always worth looking under the parish name as well. The first step before trying to work on the history of a place is to find out in what parish it was located. There are maps at the Record Office to help you find this information.

The Subject Index. Topics are grouped under very broad subject headings, like Agriculture, Law and Order, Trade and Industry etc.. If you want information on enclosures or farms or farm animals, for instance, you must look first under the main subject Agriculture. You can consult an explanatory list of subjects if you are not sure what heading to look up. Once you have got used to the main subject headings you will find the system very easy to use.

The Catalogue

Catalogues list the whole contents of a collection item by item. The entries are often far more detailed than you will find in the index.

It is often vitally important to a historian to know where and how a document originated and whose hands it has passed through. Catalogues fulfil this function. The documents in a catalogue are arranged in their administrative order - and listed under the department or organisation by whom they were produced or received.

Although the catalogues take a lot of time to read through they can be a very useful guide and can help you sometimes to locate far more documents than simply by using the index.

The Staff

You should not feel shy about discussing your project either with the Archive Education Officers or with the searchroom staff. You will find they can be very helpful. They know the collections well and can often save you time in looking for material. But it is always worth looking in the finding aids as well to find extra material for yourself.

The Reference Library

In the searchroom you will find that the Reference Library has a lot of useful material. There are books and pamphlets on Welsh and local history which can be useful background reading. Articles in the journals of various local and Welsh historical societies are also important. The library also has a lot of older printed material such as government reports, old trade directories, old guidebooks and descriptions of the county.

There is a separate card index to the library section, arranged under authors and subjects.