

**BBC**

# HANDS ON HISTORY

## A guide to historical research

Historical research can begin with any subject or piece of historical evidence that inspires you – it could be a photograph, a letter, a building near your home or a history programme on television or radio. This guide will help you undertake your own research. There is a video version of this information on the Hands on History website.

### Get started

The first step in your research is to think carefully about exactly what it is you want to find out. To do this it is useful to set a research question. Try and be as precise as possible with your question to help you undertake focused research.

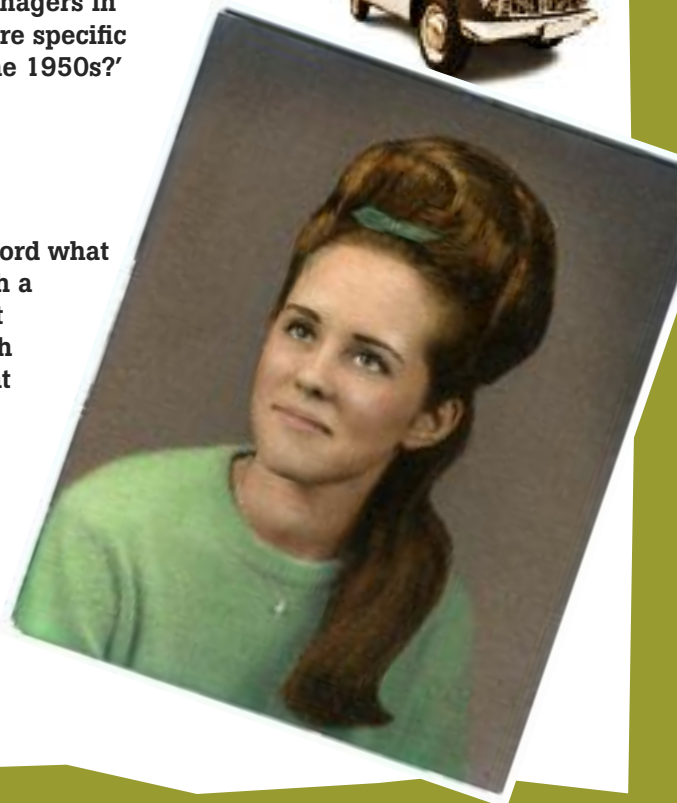
For example, if you have been inspired by a photo from the 1950s, a very broad research question like 'What was life like in the 1950s?' may make it difficult to focus your research.

A good specific question might be 'What was life like for teenagers in London in the 1950s?' Follow up questions that are even more specific may also help, for example – 'What did teenagers wear in the 1950s?' or 'What sort of music did teenagers listen to in the 1950s?'



### Keep notes

As you do your research, it's important to make sure you record what you find and where you've found the information, either with a notepad and pen or electronically using a computer or tablet device. This means that when you look back at your research you'll have a clear record of your sources. You may also want to return to some sources later in your research.



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## First steps

Before you begin, check if anyone has already done your work for you. There might be a book all about the subject you're interested in which will help answer your questions. It could save you a lot of time and effort!

## Libraries

A good place to start your research is in your local library.

There's much more than books in most libraries. You can often look at microfilm of old documents, borrow DVDs, use the internet and computers or even find old and new newspapers and magazines.

Some libraries have specialist collections on historical subjects too, so if you're interested in a particular topic, you can look online and see if there's a specialist library collection suitable for you.

## Archives

Archives look after printed and handwritten documents, as well as images and films that aren't normally on display but can be requested to be viewed.

They can be particularly useful for local history or family history research. The most requested type of material is birth, marriage and death records.

Archives can be found in a variety of organisations, from museums to universities, libraries and even businesses.

The person in charge is called an archivist, and it's their job to help you understand and access the collection by answering questions you may have and helping you search the archive yourself.

## National institutions

If you're researching something of national significance you may need to go to a national institution, such as the National Library of Scotland, the National Archives in Kew or the National Media Museum in Bradford.

At these sorts of institutions you'll find not only books, but letters, documents, leaflets, sound recordings, video and even art and objects.

## Online

The internet is one of the most valuable tools available to researchers today. The best way to start with online research is to simply tap your subject into a search engine and see what comes up.

Remember that although the internet is powerful and can offer up lots of information, it's not always right! Online collaborative encyclopaedias in particular can be full of useful information, but they can be edited by anyone, so approach the information with caution. You'll find links to useful research sites at the end of this pack.

## Out and about

If you're researching something local to home take a walk around the area and look out for interesting features, such as dates on buildings, old street signs or evidence of former uses for buildings, such as old advertising. Many towns also have a local museum which can be a great resource.



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## Talk to people

There are over 1000 Local History Societies across the UK. These are groups with a passion for history, usually made up of enthusiastic local volunteers. They offer talks and courses and often produce publications relevant to the local area – anything from the origin of local street names to the history of a disused railway line. Some history societies have their own collections of material as well and they can be a real wealth of information and advice.

There isn't one central place to find details of Local History Societies, but the easiest way to find out if there is one in your area is to search for the phrase 'Local History Society' plus your village/town/city name online using a search engine.

If your research subject is within living memory, you might want to talk to someone of the right age who remembers it. Asking people questions about the past is called oral history, because it's spoken, not written down. You'll find detailed guidance for undertaking your own interview in our Oral History film on the Hands on History website.

## Who to trust?

Whenever you approach a new source of information – be it a book, newspaper article or a website – always consider how much you trust it. Things to think about include; where the information has come from and who has written it.

Try to approach all sources and information with an open mind and look for balanced opinions. If you find a source that you are unsure of, it's a good idea to look for a secondary source to back up what you've found.

### In summary:

- Identify what you want to research
- Record your progress
- Undertake research in libraries, archives and online
- Question the information you find





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### Useful contacts and websites

#### Archives Wales

Online catalogue of Welsh historical records

[www.archiveswales.org.uk](http://www.archiveswales.org.uk)

#### BBC History

Portal to all BBC History content

[www.bbc.co.uk/history](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history)

#### BBC Webwise

A beginners guide to using the web, including undertaking web searches

[www.bbc.co.uk/webwise](http://www.bbc.co.uk/webwise)

#### Black & Asian Studies Association

Research organisation for the history of Black and Asian people in Britain.

[www.blackandasianstudies.org](http://www.blackandasianstudies.org)

#### British Association for Local History

Includes guides to researching local history and a directory of other useful websites

[www.balh.co.uk](http://www.balh.co.uk)

#### British Library

Search the British Library collection online

[www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk)

#### Direct Gov

Click on Registering Life Events to find out how to order certificates and records

[www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights)

#### Historical Association

An independent charity supporting the study and enjoyment of history

[www.history.org.uk](http://www.history.org.uk)

#### The National Archives

Search records and find details of other useful sites to visit

[www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)



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## **The National Archives of Scotland**

Information about Scottish national archives

[www.nas.gov.uk](http://www.nas.gov.uk)

## **The National Library of Wales**

Includes the principal centre for researching Welsh genealogy

[www.llgc.org.uk](http://www.llgc.org.uk)

## **The National Museum of Wales**

Explore collections and find out how to visit

[www.museumwales.ac.uk](http://www.museumwales.ac.uk)

## **The People's History Museum**

Manchester-based museum charting the history of working people in Britain

[www.phm.org.uk](http://www.phm.org.uk)

## **Public Record Office Northern Ireland**

Information on PRONI archives and services

[www.proni.gov.uk](http://www.proni.gov.uk)

## **Scottish archives, libraries and museums**

Listings for archives, libraries and museums across Scotland

[www.scotlandsinformation.com](http://www.scotlandsinformation.com)

For lots more information and tips for getting hands on with history, including how to interpret historical evidence and tips for undertaking oral history interviews, visit the Hands on History website.

[www.bbc.co.uk/handsonhistory](http://www.bbc.co.uk/handsonhistory)

