



## USING THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES (TNA)

A visit to Kew can be exciting and rewarding but your first visit can also be a rather daunting prospect. Here is some advice to help you on your way.

### Before You Go

For the majority of us the National Archives is not an easy place to get to, so you want to make the most of the time you have there. You can save a lot of time by exploring the National Archives website before you visit the archives. The web address is [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk). The website has just had a major overhaul in an effort to make it more user friendly for the less experienced researcher.

Start by visiting the Home Page. From here you can check out the latest news and new document releases, sign up for the regular email newsletter (which I highly recommend) and most importantly take a look at the “Visit Us” so that you know what to expect when you get there. You can find this from the *Quick Links* on the home page or via the *About Us* section. Make sure that you read the rules about what you may and may not take into the research rooms (more on this later) and if there is a possibility that you may wish to look at original documents during your visit make sure that you take two forms of ID with you in order to obtain your reader’s ticket. There is no need to take a photograph as this will be taken on the day and there is no charge for a ticket.

### Do Your Homework!

Make sure you do your homework in terms of knowing which documents TNA holds that are likely be of use to you. All this can be done via the website before you visit, leaving you free to concentrate on your actual research while you are at the archives rather than wasting the day finding out what you can look at. To do this, go to the [Records](#) menu from the Home Page. This has been recently revamped to help those less familiar with the National Archives find out what documents will be of use to them. On the right of the page are “Quick Links” to TNA’s excellent Research Guides (these are a real goldmine of information), to The Catalogue which is the comprehensive listing of all documents held by TNA, and to the “Documents Online” collection which are documents available to download online from your home computer. You may find you do not need to travel to Kew after all!

The Records page is organised to help you find out which documents exist for your particular enquiry and the main body of the page is organised according to whether you are searching for a person, a place or a subject. Each category is further divided into time zones and provides useful information as to what sort of documents you should be searching, how to search them and what you need to know before you start your search.

If, for example, you want to find out more about an ancestor who served in the army as a private before World War 1 the guide will tell you that it helps to know your ancestor’s name, regiment, rank and date of discharge before you start. It then tells you what records, if any, are currently available online or are in the process of being digitised. Finally it tells you which records are available at Kew to facilitate your research

and whether these are held on microfilm or whether you will need to order the originals. This is important, as if it is the latter, you will need a reader's ticket and will need to order the documents. Remember that each document at TNA will have its own personal reference number. The reference number is made up of several parts and will always begin with two letters and these letters indicate the origin of the record e.g. WO = War Office, RG = Registrar General, HO = Home Office.

For more in depth information scroll to the bottom of the page where there are links to related in-depth research guides that will tell you more about the subject. Don't rely entirely on the research guide links at the bottom of the page. There may be other guides which will also be of use to you, so do use the link from the main Records page to see if there are any other guides on topics of interest to you. In this case there is another useful guide to be found entitled *British Army: Useful Sources for Tracing Soldiers*.

Although the website is very helpful it does not give you all the information you may need and it pays to read around the subject as well. In the example above, it does not provide much information on what to do if you do not know your ancestor's regiment, nor does it make it as clear as it could that this is less important when searching the period between 1760-1854 for which there is an alphabetical list of soldiers discharged regardless of regiment.

If you don't know the regiment of your army ancestor then firstly check all family papers and ask around the extended family to see if anyone has any old family papers that have not previously come to light. If you are lucky you may even turn up his army discharge papers this way, while the regiment and rank may be noted on other civilian documentation including records such as birth, marriage and death certificates and census returns. If you have no luck here, then old family photos of your ancestor in uniform may help identify his rank and regiment from his cap badge. Use a website such as <http://www.armylists.org.uk/badges.htm> to help spot his regiment while medals will also usually give the information needed on the rim of the medal.

## At the Archives

Opening hours have just been reduced from six to five days a week: Tuesdays to Saturdays. Apart from Tuesday and Thursdays when the archives is open until 1900, it shuts at 1700 and opens at 0900 apart from Wednesdays and Saturdays when it opens at 1000 and 0930 respectively. Last document orders are taken at 1615 on all days, apart from late evenings when this is extended to 1700.

The National Archives can be reached by train, bus or car. The nearest train and underground station is Kew Gardens in Zone 3, which is a ten minute walk away while the R68 bus route (from Hampton Court via Richmond) stops outside the entrance to The National Archives. If you are travelling by car and using a GPS the post code is TW9 4DU. There is a car park, although from April 2010 you will be charged £5 for the privilege of parking. If the main car park is full there is an overflow car park opposite. Make sure you validate your parking ticket at reception before you leave the archives.

When you arrive, walk in through the rotating doors and head left, past the cafe area and bookshop to the locker room where you will need to deposit your coat and bag. Lockers are free. If you are less confident, do stop at the reception desk in the main entrance and staff will point you in the right direction. It is well worth taking one of the daily familiarisation tours when you arrive at Kew. These are free and start at 11.30 in the Talks room on the first floor. There is no need to book.

## Security and Tickets

On the first floor you will find the **Open Access Reading Room**, where no reader's ticket is required, and the **Document Reading Room**, for which a reader's ticket is required. On the second floor is the **Map and Large Documents Reading Room** for which a reader's ticket is also required. Reader's tickets are needed

if you wish to look at original documents. Bear in mind that many documents such as census records, the GRO index and popular army records are now available via the Internet or microfilm in the Open Access Reading room, so you may not need a ticket. However, it is always worth while getting one before you start as you never know when your research will suddenly lead you on to original documents. When you are in the full swing of your research you will not want to have to break off and waste time applying for a ticket. Tickets are free and valid for up to three years from date of issue. You will need to bring two forms of identity in order to get one – one to prove your name and one to prove your address, so a driving licence and passport, credit card or utility bill will do.

The Document Reading Room and the Map Room are subject to security regulations so make sure that you know what you are allowed to take in with you - so no pens, pencil sharpeners or rubbers and no more than 20 sheets of loose leaved paper or one A4 notepad (that's to stop you hiding original documents as you leave). This may seem daft but there have been several thefts and attacks on original archival material over the years. Although some security staff are less vigilant, you don't want to lose precious time being sent back to the locker room to divest yourself of prohibited items! All papers and pencils must be placed in a polythene bag (available free of charge in the locker rooms – just help yourself) and hand these to the security guard on the barrier every time you enter or leave the room. You may take in your camera for photographing documents (but **do not use flash** as it damages the documents and you will be reprimanded by staff!), your mobile phone (again for taking photos) but keep it on silent of course and also your laptop.

## The Reading Rooms

The first floor Open Access Reading Room is divided into three areas – computer area, microfilm area and library. You will find hundreds of computers linked to Internet sources such as Ancestry, as well as TNA's site which can be accessed free. Here you can access not only census and BMD records online but you can also seek assistance from members of staff. Bear in mind that you can access the 1911 census free of charge here rather than pay the hefty fees currently required for home viewing – the only charge you will pay will be to print out census pages if you wish to do so. To do this you will need a reader's ticket as this doubles up as a printer payment card. Credit can be added using the machines near to the computer terminals. In the microfilm area you will find a series of finding aids in the form of leaflets, but if you get stuck do ask staff for help. There is a general enquiry desk as you enter the open access room and one for research enquiries in both the computer area and the microfilm area. Before you ask for help make sure you know the dates and geographical area of the ancestor you are trying to locate and **don't bore the staff (who are often very busy) with minute details of your family history!** As mentioned already, you can access TNA research leaflets on line before you go which will save you a lot of time.

Some of the records you can find here include sources relating to the Army and Navy, notably the Army and Navy lists in book form, which will help you track down records of officers in both forces. You can also currently access the WW1 attestation papers (WO 363) and documents relating to WW1 pension claims (WO 364), although WO 363 and 364 are two sets of documents that have been earmarked to go into cold storage on the grounds that they are available on line via the Ancestry website (free access at TNA). This is a great pity as, as we all know, search engines do not always find the required record even though it may be there! Sometimes a search of the originals is the only way forward. Remember too that the original records of WO 363 are only 40% complete; the remainder of the records were destroyed by enemy action in WW1.

If you need to look at original documents you will use the computer terminals to order the documents and there will be a 30-45 minute wait for them to be produced. When you place your order you will be allocated a seat or document number that you will give to staff when you collect your order. You can check to see if your order is ready by swiping your reader's ticket through one of the computer terminals or through the wall terminals that are conveniently placed at strategic points around the archives, including one in the restaurant area.

When your document arrives, take note of how it is parcelled up as you will be expected to return it to the document collection area similarly packed. You will be given a yellow slip with the document stating your name and the document number. Ensure that when you return the document you place or tuck this slip in with the document so staff can easily check the document back into the storage area and so that it is clear that it is no longer in your possession. Once you have unwrapped the document, assess its size and condition. It may come in a large box or be rolled and wrapped. If it is a large book you will need to take a foam book rest to support the spine, while if it is rolled you may require weights or laminates to help weigh it down. Make sure that you never lean on a document no matter how large and difficult to read it is. If in doubt ask the staff on duty in the reading room for advice on handling the document.

Remember that talking should be kept to a minimum in both the Document Reading Room and the Map Room. If you need to talk, talk quietly and respect other researchers' need for peace. If you finish for the day but have not yet looked at all the documents you have ordered, either tell the staff at the document collection point or use the option on the computer system to indicate your departure. This means that staff can return the unwanted documents to the storage area rather than have them left over until the end of the day.

### **Refreshments and Bookshop**

Unless you are made of stalwart stuff, you will need a break at some point during the day, or when you are waiting for documents to arrive. Now is your chance to grab a bite to eat or explore the excellent bookshop. Both are on the ground floor where there are also vending machines, public telephones and even a post box. Toilets are on the ground floor near the restaurant and also on the first floor in the library area. (Head right when you reach the library shelves).

These are just a few tips for your first visit. Do not expect to achieve too much in your first visit as it will take you time to become familiar with things, but do make full use of the National Archive website before you visit in order to get the most from your first visit.

If you are planning to undertake much research at Kew then it is worthwhile buying [“Tracing Your Ancestors in the National Archives”](#) by Amanda Bevan. This is the bible for anyone spending a lot of time at Kew. Standard retail price is £19.99 but usually available significantly cheaper from [Amazon](#) books.

### **Further learning**

TNA's website also contains an excellent Education section where you can improve your skills by means of on line workshops or listen to podcasts on a variety of subjects. It is well worth spending several hours just exploring the website to see what it has to offer.

Celia Heritage

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

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