



## 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 valuable research time by exploring their website before you visit. The web address is [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) and it has just had a major overhaul in an effort to make it more user friendly for the less experienced researcher.

The newly designed Home Page presents the viewer with a set of clickable images to explore but if you look at the top of the page there are three important links labelled:

- **Support for your Research - Find guidance**
- **Search 1,000 years of records - Discovery- our catalogue**
- **Find our digitised collections - Online collections**

It's these links that you will probably make most use of and we will look at these in greater detail shortly. The many clickable images below them relate to information on a variety of other more general subjects including how to travel to Kew and opening hours and details of its blogs, podcasts and bookshop.

If you prefer to navigate the website using a straightforward list of named links rather than the modern trend for large thumbnail images you can access these through the red 'Menu' button from the very top of the home page and this button appears at the top of the screen no matter which page you are viewing which is very useful.

Now let's look in turn at those important links mentioned above.

### **Support for your Research - Find guidance**

TNA has now divided this page into sections. This first contains links to a variety of guides that may help you if you are looking for a person, a place or a subject respectively. If you wish to skip this part and access TNA's excellent set of research guides directly you can also do so by clicking on the initial letter of the subject you are looking for. If, for example, I wish to find out more about tax records and what might be available, clicking on the link for 'T' takes me through to a list of subjects beginning with this letter and includes five different research guides on taxation. It's well worth doing some background reading before your visit to check which records

are going to be most use to you and also their availability. While most records can be ordered and viewed the same day, a few have to be ordered three days in advance, while by contrast some have been digitised and your trip to Kew may not be necessary.

### **Search 1,000 years of records - Discovery-our catalogue**

TNA's catalogue, which is now known as 'Discovery', is an essential part of your planning. From here you can search using key words and, once you have found what you are looking for you, can use the relevant reference number to order your documents in advance of your visit. Spend some time familiarising yourself with the different search options on the catalogue. You can choose to search all collections or just those online, while you also have a choice between a basic search and an advanced search. You can also browse records by government department. Although the advanced search facility is very useful, completing the various boxes can be rather longwinded. If you already know the government department and series number you wish to search you can simply enter these details into the basic search box together with the name of the person or place you are searching for. So if I wished to search for my ancestor William Heritage in TNA's collection of registered wills (series number PROB 11) I could simply type 'William Heritage PROB 11' into the basic search box and the search engine will produce any reference to William Heritage found within that series. It's also useful to know that if you click into the various search fields during an advanced search a box will appear that gives useful tips for filling in the field.

### **Find our digitised collections - Online collections**

This page is divided into clickable images by subject matter to help you see which types of records have been digitised. Approximately 5% of TNA's records have now been digitised and put online. This may not sound much but a wise choice of subject matter has meant that these collections have proved worth their weight in gold to researchers unable to visit Kew. Some records are free to download and view but for many you will have to pay a small fee to view the image you require.

### **At the Archives**

TNA is open five days a week Tuesdays to Saturdays. Apart from Tuesday and Thursdays when it is open until 1900, it shuts at 1700 and opens at 0900. 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 also a dedicated car park although it frequently fills up fairly quickly. If the main car park is full there is an overflow car park opposite.

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.

## **Security and Tickets**

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. You will need one to prove your name and one to prove your address, so a driving licence and passport, credit card or utility bill will do. There is no need to bring a photograph as this will be taken on the day and there is no charge for a ticket but you will have to complete a short online e-course in handling original documents before you are issued with a ticket so do allow at least 20 minutes for obtaining a ticket in your schedule. Even if you feel that you will only wish to access documents on microfilm or via the computers at Kew it's always worth while getting a reader's ticket 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.

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 again required.

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 members 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 you must hand these to the security guard on the barrier when you enter or leave the room. You will also need to swipe your reader's card to enter or leave both the Document Reading Room and the Map 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 various sections which include the following: a computer area, a microfilm area and the library. In the first 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.

If you wish to print out a document from one of TNA's computers your reader's ticket doubles up as a printer payment card. Credit can be added using the machines near to the computer terminals. You will find helpful research guides or

finding aids in all the reading rooms, but if you get stuck do ask staff for help. There are several enquiry desks in the open access room.

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.

Relatively few of TNA's sources are still accessed on microfilm and the microfilm area currently houses the Church of Latter Day Saints Family History Centre which gives wonderful access to many parish registers on microfilm and other records. For further details go to <http://www.londonfhc.org/>

You will also find many resources available on open shelves in book form, for example, the calendars to original wills (PROB 12) and also army and navy lists. The latter will help you track down records of officers in both forces. It is well worth taking time to look in the Library, which holds a very large collection of printed volumes of records, local and military histories, and much much more. The Library catalogue is separate from the 'Discovery' catalogue, and can be accessed at <http://tna.koha-ptfs.co.uk/>.

If you need to look at original documents you will use the computer terminals to order the documents and there will be approximately a 45 minute wait for them to be produced. When you place your order you will be allocated a seat or document number. 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. On subsequent visits, when you already have a reader's ticket, you can order up to six documents in advance of your visit, which means you can start work as soon as you arrive on site.

When your document arrives, you will access it in different ways, depending on which room you are using. In the Document Reading Room, documents will be held ready for you in a small locker which has the same number as the seat you will be using. You simply fetch the document and take it to your seat, where as in the Map and Large Document Reading room, you need to go to the service desk at the far end side of the room to get your documents, giving staff your allocated seat number. Take note of how your document 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 or in the edge of the box 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.

TNA has recently introduced spaces in both the Document Reading Room and the Map Room where you can use their fixed cameras to photograph documents. You

can print out the images onto A3 paper, but also you can forward the images to your email address, where you can download them when you arrive home. There is no charge for the email service; to print out the images, there is a standard charge per page (currently 25p).

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, a public telephone, a cash machine 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).

### **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.

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, and remember to make good use of the National Archive website before you visit in order to get the most from your day.

Celia Heritage

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

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