Documentary Research

Building a biography for an area

The aim in producing a biography is to build up a comprehensive timeline and a detailed picture of the chosen area, drawing together lots of different strands of life and work. This can be achieved through using a range of documentary information from primary and secondary sources to reflect different aspects of the area’s history. The biography can be compiled as a ‘stand-alone’ piece of work but will have added value if it is linked to or supplements the information gained from fieldwork. Putting this together will in turn generate new information which can be added to the archival record.

Putting together a military history

Researching a military landscape is much the same as any other archival work supporting a historic landscape study and fieldwork. It is, by its very nature more specific but the same principles apply: map evidence; documentary evidence; illustrations (drawn or photographic) and written memories and oral histories. While there is no shortage of sources, finding the right ones can sometimes be difficult and occasionally, frustrating. A number of records are not in obvious places in catalogues and in many instances ‘lateral thinking’ is required and quite broad internet searches necessary to narrow down what is available and where.

Many local histories simply reply on easily and readily available information. In some instances this will be from previous sources which in some cases can be incomplete or even incorrect. By interrogating archives thoroughly, a more complete story can be pieced together. This is especially so when carried out in conjunction with broader documentary and historical research, as this helps give context to the military element.

WAYS AND MEANS

Types of Information – think laterally!

• Maps
  • Private or Commercially produced Maps
  • Ordnance Survey Series of Maps, available at a range of scales e.g. 1:2500 as well as for different time periods starting around mid-19th century.
  • Estate Plans and Surveys, including sales particulars.
  • Military maps
  • Plans and diagrams of buildings and installations
  • Local defence maps
  • LiDAR
• Information contained in the maps, e.g. place names, fields, roads, buildings
• **Documents**
  - Official Records: committee reports, court records, Government documents etc.
    - Local Authority & Government Reports
    - Enclosure Awards and Tithe Awards; Estate and Manorial Records
    - School and Health Records
    - Electoral Registers and Rate books
    - Parish & Church Records
    - National Surveys and Inventories: Census records
    - Legal Records, Court Sessions and Reports
    - Military Unit histories and operational records
    - Parliamentary documents (e.g. Hansard)
    - Legislative documents
  - Company archives and records includes business records, account books, rentals and leases.
  - Trade Directories
  - Historic England inventories (to find out what is already listed; sometimes include military unit name and/or number)
  - Newspapers, Journals, Pamphlets etc
  - Victoria County Histories and published Historical accounts and Books
  - Personal Diaries, Recollections, Letters etc
  - Google searches!

• **Illustrations**
  - Paintings & Sketches
  - Line drawings
  - Photographs

• **Recordings**
  - Audio / oral history interviews
  - Film
Fieldwork

- Recording features: locations and names
- Surveys

Sources of Information:

- Internet-Websites
  - Internet Sites for Local Historians a directory gives a list of approx. 520 entries, they include general sources such as [www.history.ac.uk](http://www.history.ac.uk) and the specific [www.historicaldirectories.org](http://www.historicaldirectories.org). However, as with other sources these need to be assessed for accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency and coverage.

- Local Historic Environment Records Centres (Sites & Monument Records)
  - Archaeological reports, records & plans of finds and archaeological sites.

- Public Libraries: Local Studies / Reference Sections
  - Maps, census records, published information eg. Books, pamphlets, newspapers, trade directories

- National Archives and County Records Offices
  - Official repositories for legal & administrative records from public bodies, companies and estates.
  - Sheffield Archives and Local Studies Service is run via Sheffield City Council. There is an online search facility and a large collection of images via Picture Sheffield. The online catalogue includes area and topic study guides which give basic descriptions of the history of the area or topic and sources for conducting your own research. These include reference numbers for documents and are a good basis for starting to put together a local history. For example, [https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/libraries/archives-and-local-studies/collections/sale-particulars.html](https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/libraries/archives-and-local-studies/collections/sale-particulars.html)

- Landowners
  - Estate records; surveys; maps; photos.

- Local History Societies and Groups
  - Indirect and direct information depending on interests; and a way of making contacts with other people

- Local People
  - Individual and family information
Sources of Information: Military Research

- Heritage Gateway (https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/default.aspx): A cross-referencing resource which includes sites and buildings which includes access to local Sites & Monuments and Heritage environment Records nationally.
- British Newspaper Archive (https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)
- National Archives, Kew – National archives Discovery section (https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/). The main online search facility of the National archives
- Imperial War Museum (https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections)
- RAF Museum, Hendon (https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/default.aspx)
- Royal Museums, Greenwich (https://collections.rmg.co.uk/archive/objects/466187.html)

Many of the military documents pertinent to this part of the project are likely to be held in the National Archives at Kew.

- Local People
- Individual & family information
- Direct or indirect experiences
- Local connections

Suggested Online Sources

- BBC Peoples War (http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/ - this is an archived section of the BBC and is no longer maintained as the project finished a number of years ago. However, it is the complete result of the entire project).
- Yorkshire Film Archive (http://www.yorkshirefilmarchive.com/)
- Veterans UK (https://www.gov.uk/get-copy-military-service-records - HM Government web site which contains service records of personnel, including Home Guard)
- National Archives Discovery Online (https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ - As part of an ongoing programme, the National Archives are slowly making available documents to view online and download, which requires a free account.)