

## Local History Research - a Beginner's Guide

Where do you start trying to find some background on a Camberwell building or person from the past? The most obvious place is the local studies library, which is part of the borough or local council library service. In the case of Camberwell, this may be split between Lambeth and Southwark. Most of Camberwell falls under the auspices of Southwark's [Local History Library](#), in Borough High Street (covering areas formerly part of Camberwell, Bermondsey and Walworth boroughs). However, the boundary does make some strange twists and turns at Camberwell Green, where it borders on Lambeth. Most of the area south of Camberwell New Road falls under Lambeth, and is covered by their archives, based at the [Minet Library](#).

Most parts of London south of the river were originally part of Surrey, and the Minet Library in Knatchbull Road is also invaluable as a deposit for many of the Surrey County records. They publish a useful [Guide to the Archives](#). However, some older items such as manorial records, together with many other collections, can be found in the [Surrey History Centre](#) in Woking. Much of their catalogue can be searched online.

The Minet Library, especially, has a huge collection of deeds which are part of the Surrey collection. They are well catalogued by owner's name or address of property. These are very useful for establishing the date of a building or details of ownership of property over the years.

London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), near Mount Pleasant, now houses what was the GLC Archives from County Hall. This in turn accumulated the collections of the LCC and various metropolitan bodies before that. They have a comprehensive [Guide to the Collections](#) here. Vital for family history research are the Parish Registers which they hold for most London churches. Other, non-Metropolitan London records are held at the [Guildhall Library](#), Aldermanbury.

The Minet and Local History libraries and the LMA all have extensive archives of maps, photographs and illustrations, catalogued according to street or locality and subject. Photographs mainly date from the 20th century, but nevertheless give fascinating insights into how details of a local area have changed. Some of the Southwark collection can be seen [here](#).

The [British Library Maps Reading Room](#) can also be visited, though you need to apply for a pass; it lists over 500 maps of London from the 19th century alone. Many of these were simply amended copies of earlier maps, containing the same errors or inaccuracies, but they give a good idea of roughly what date an area was built up, if you're looking for local geographical history. The online [Catalogue](#), however, is not so easy to use. Alternatively, access the Crace Collection, consisting of 1200 maps of London and its environs 1570-1860. It's also at the British Library, at the [Collect Britain](#) site.

Most archives will allow you to make copies of maps for private use, though there are copyright restrictions on Ordnance Survey maps. These date from the first series of about 1870, and give the first really accurate picture of the local area. Look for the [five feet to 1 mile large scale series](#) which is so detailed it even names all public buildings in an area.

More specifically on maps, the LMA has bomb damage maps from the second world war giving a very precise picture of the type and size of every bomb which fell on London! Also, the [National Archives at Kew](#) (formerly the Public Record Office - repository of Government records) has very accurate tithe maps of each parish from the 1830s and Inland Revenue land valuation maps from around 1910. They have a comprehensive online catalogue, which can be used to seek out all manner of other official documents on local issues or people.

Before starting any work researching a particular family or property, however, do check out the address. As London grew so rapidly in the 19th century, many streets had to be renamed, some several times, and also the properties in a street have frequently been re-numbered, as gaps were filled in. The LMA has all the re-numbering plans dating from around 1854 when the Metropolitan Board of Works (predecessor to the LCC, then GLC) took on responsibility for re-ordering chaotic metropolitan growth.

Local census returns are kept on microfilm at the local studies libraries and is available on line from various family ancestry sites which are partly free but for full data need payment. The first proper London-wide census was in 1841, and the latest available is 1911, giving you 80 years of details of the occupants of a particular property, although the 1841 census only lists property by street, not house number. Specific details vary between censuses, but things like occupation of the head of household, familial relationships, number of servants and each person's birthplace can be very interesting.

Birth, Marriage and Death certificates from 1837 can also be obtained [online](#). Baptism, Marriage and Death certificates from before 1837 can be found in the parish records at the relevant local studies library.

Rate books give a very precise idea of when an area was developed and who lived in a property, at six-monthly intervals. They record the collection of the Poor Rate and other local taxes. Based on the Parish Vestry responsible, they are also now housed in the relevant local studies library. However, in the early days, properties didn't have individual numbers, so it can take some detective work to pinpoint a precise property.

Directories, such as the Post Office and Kelly's, are kept on microfilm or original copies at most of the above archives and can also be used to find out who lived where on an annual basis. Not everyone could afford to pay for an entry, but most commercial premises such as shops or pubs would be listed, starting from around 1830 (in the Minet) to the present day. The originals are too flimsy to photocopy, but the microfilms can be printed out if necessary. The most comprehensive collection can probably be found at the Guildhall Library. You can see what they look like and maybe find something relevant to you at the [Historical Directories](#) site.

Comprehensive listings of UK archives can be found at the [National Register of Archives](#) or [Access to Archives](#).

Southwark Council also provides a [History of Camberwell](#) page on their website.

## **Bibliography**

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