LONDON WESTMINSTER & MIDDLESEX FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY

WHICH ARCHIVES ARE WHERE IN LONDON

'My ancestors came from London – where are the archives?' is a question which comes up all the time and, because it is London, the answer is complicated!

We are very lucky in that the main archives we need to research our family history – the parish registers and the census returns – have all been digitised and are widely available on pay-per-view websites (and may well be free at your local archives centre or library). You can get quite a long way by only using these but to get a more rounded picture of our ancestors' lives there are many other collections we can investigate. However, these are spread between many archives centres and just which ones are where depends on various factors, the first being just what do you mean by 'London'?

'London' has meant different things at different times so you will initially need to check the date you are looking at. What is thought of today as London is what we locals call Greater London. It covers a massive area of 607 square miles and has an estimated population of some 9.5 million people. Greater London was created in 1965 with the formation of the 32 London Boroughs. The ancient and historic City of London (which is not a Borough) is right in the middle. The City was the original London, the smallest city in England with an area of just over one square mile. If your ancestor did something 'in London' before 1889, this is the area you should be concentrating on.

THE CITY OF LONDON

The City of London is one of the oldest settlements in the country, having been more or less continuously inhabited since the Romans established Londinium in about 43 AD. Of course, we don't have archives from 2,000 years ago but they have been being collected for hundreds of years here, especially because London was the seat of government. For example the Pipe Rolls, which are the written audits of the monarch's accounts, have been kept by the Exchequer since 1129. These very old records and others, especially ones with a national slant, are all kept at The National Archives at Kew in the London Borough of Richmond.



The National Archives (TNA) was formed in 2003 from the Public Record Office and the Historical Manuscripts Commission. I'm going to explain a little more about them as knowing their history helps you understand which records they contain. The **Public Record Office** was established by Parliament in 1838 to take over from the Rolls Chapel on Chancery Lane, which then housed the national archives. These included the rolls of Chancery (administrative and legal records including letters and instructions from the monarch, financial records, grants of privileges and liberties, and similar), Domesday Book, Magna Carta and other state papers. Around 1860 the stored records were cleared out of the chapel and taken to a nearby purpose-built Public Record Office, also in Chancery Lane. The **Historical Manuscripts Commission** was formed in 1869 to document the existence and whereabouts of privately owned historical collections, such as those owned by families or institutions, which could be of use for the study of British history. These two organisations, one concerned with public and the other with private archives, formed the basis of the National Archives' collection. There are over 18 million historical government and public records here with less than 10% currently digitised.

Several other organisations then joined TNA. The Office of Public Sector Information (concerned with encouraging the re-use of public sector information) and His Majesty's Stationery Office

(responsible for supplying the public service with printing services) joined in 2006, as did the UK Statute Law Database (giving access to Government legislation) in 2008, the Find Case Law database (giving access to court judgements and tribunal decisions) in 2022. These are less likely to provide fodder for family historians but this is not necessarily the case with the **Parliamentary Archives**, which joined TNA in 2025. For example, the Protestation Returns from 1642 are in this collection and free to view on TNA's website, providing a list of men in each parish who swore allegiance to King Charles I. About a third of these survive including those for most of Middlesex (as North London then was).

Perhaps the main records of use to family historians at TNA are the census returns from 1841-1921 and Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills from 1384-1858 (these last can be downloaded from TNA's website for free if you register with them). However, also here are military records, Metropolitan Police records, prison and higher court records, passenger lists (1890-1960), railway company records and much more which can be very useful to those researching London ancestors. In 1837 and again in 1857 (in particular), nonconformist registers were collected in and these are also at TNA, with copies widely available online. Of course records at TNA are not restricted to London and many pertain to other areas of the county. The National Archive's Discovery catalogue is user-friendly and includes archives from all over the country, so must be a good point to start. It will also tell you whether a particular TNA record has been digitised and how you can access it.

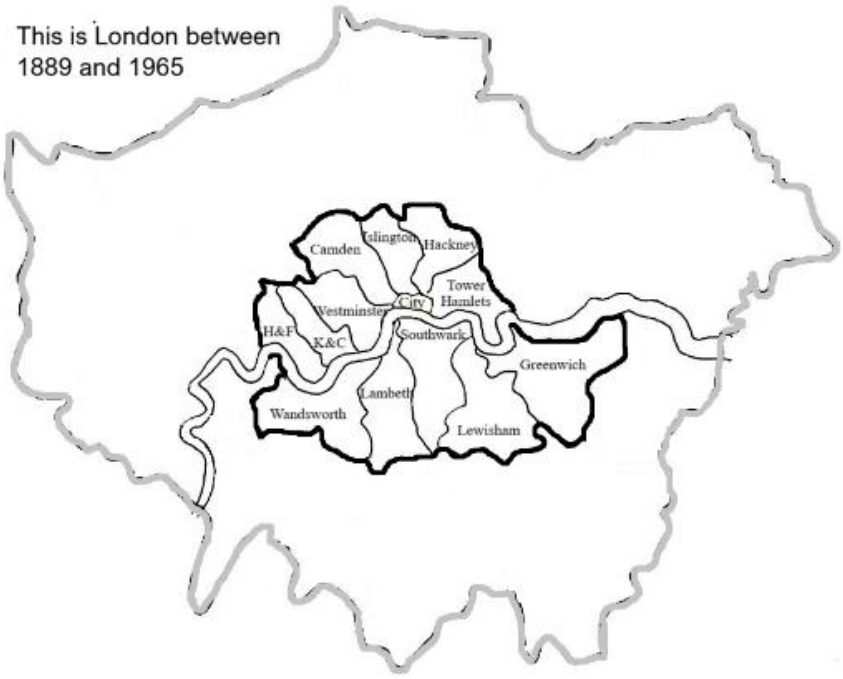
Other records relating specifically to the historic City of London can be found in the **Corporation of London Records Office**, which was created in 1876 to look after the records of the City of London Corporation (previously called the Corporation of London) and is now at **The London Archives (TLA).** Their massive archive dates from 1067-2010 and is thought to be one of the finest and most complete municipal archives in Europe. The PDF file in the digital catalogue at TLA listing the individual items in this collection runs to over 10,000 pages. Almost anything which happened in the City might be found here, from the archives of Ward administration to the Society of Royal Cumberland Youths (a bell ringing society which was established in 1747 and rang peals throughout London and the home counties, especially in the church of St Leonard Shoreditch) to the Benevolent Slop Cutters' Burial Association (whose minute book dates from 1858-1892) to the City Parochial Foundation (which administered the charities of 107 of the City parishes) and much more.

The London Archives, which was known as London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) until 2024, had taken over the Corporation of London Record Office in 2005 and the **Guildhall Library Manuscripts, Prints and Maps** section in 2009 – another City of London based collection. The Guildhall Library prints, maps and manuscript collection is fairly self-explanatory. Many of the images in the London Picture Archive come from this collection.

The Guildhall Library prints, maps and manuscript collection moved to TLA in 2009 but that was not all of the archives at Guildhall. **Guildhall Library (GL)** was founded around 1425 and housed a collection of manuscripts and other items of interest. It took over the responsibility of being the local record office for the City of London in 1945 and its Manuscripts Section was declared a Diocesan Record Office in 1954. It now holds a comprehensive collection of printed books on the City of London together with pamphlets, 18th century poll books, trade directories from 1677, and a complete run of *The London Gazette* from 1665 to the present. It also holds the libraries of the Clock Makers', Gardeners' and Fletchers' Companies, the Antiquarian Horological Society, Gresham College and the Charles Lamb Society and much more. Other archive collections, managed by TLA and accessed at Guildhall Library, include those of 80 City livery companies, the Lloyd's Marine Collection, the London Stock Exchange archive and those of Christ's Hospital and St Paul's Cathedral.

THE COUNTY OF LONDON

We have now looked at the main archive collections which originated in the City of London. However, in 1889 the County of London was formed from the parts of the counties of Middlesex, Kent and Surrey (but not Essex) which surrounded the City of London – ones which had been designated as 'the metropolis' by the General Register Office. The County of London was administered by the London County Council (LCC), and comprised the area which we think of today as Inner London. This is the area which later became the 12 London Boroughs of Camden, Greenwich, Hackney, Hammersmith and Fulham, Islington, Kensington and Chelsea, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Wandsworth and the City of Westminster. This is the area you need to look at if your ancestor lived 'in London' between 1889 and 1965.



The **London County Record Office (LCRO)** was created following the formation of the County of London and was located at County Hall along with the London County Council. The LCRO took over the records of the predecessor administrative bodies such as the Metropolitan Board of Works (not name-rich sources on the whole), the Metropolitan Asylums Board (institutional records from infectious disease hospitals, residential schools and asylums for those with learning difficulties) and the School Board for London (admission registers, minutes, and so on) as well as the organisations which continued their work. The London County Council Education Office school records here, for example, are a fabulous resource for London historians. Division 5 covers schools in Bethnal Green, the City of London, Poplar and Stepney and contains items such as the girls' school log book for All Hallows School in the City dating from 1883 to 1905, and the infants' log book for All Saints, Buxton Street, Mile End New Town from 1928 to 1938. Other records at LCRO were ones of charities, such as the important Foundling Hospital archive (now digitised and can be seen for free on the Coram Story website), parish records and diocesan records.

The London County Record Office, the London County Council Members Library (which contained books about the history and topography of London, along with drawings, maps, photographs and prints) were two of the bodies which merged in 1965 to form the **Greater London Record Office (GLRO),** which was renamed as London Metropolitan Archives in 1997 and is now The London Archives (London is never easy!). The London Archives looks after the historical archive not only for Inner London but for the whole of Greater London and has over 3.5million items. This includes the 19 Outer London Boroughs: Barking and Dagenham, Barnet. Bexley, Brent, Bromley, Croydon, Ealing, Enfield, Haringey, Harrow, Havering, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Kingston upon Thames, Merton, Redbridge, Richmond upon Thames, Sutton and Waltham Forest. If you are looking for people 'in London' from 1965, then you need to look at the whole of Greater London.

GREATER LONDON

I mentioned before that Inner London became the County of London in 1889. Before this date, Greater London north of the Thames and west of the City was in Middlesex (with archives now at TLA) while east of the City of London was in Essex.

The other body which formed part of the GLRO in 1965 and so became part of TLA was the **Middlesex County Record Office (MCRO)**. This was founded in the 1880s as a place to store the old records of the county. At the time, these were described as 'a body of muniments which, relating as they do to the history of the Metropolitan County from Elizabeth to Victoria, may safely be said to surpass in interest, as they probably do in extent, the records of any other county of England'. They included collections such as that of the Middlesex Sessions of the Peace, which survive from 1549 and mention many thousands of Londoners, but did not include the Westminster Sessions from 1620-1844 (despite this being in Middlesex) or the City of London ones (which are in the City of London Corporation archive). Also at MCRO were local government files, coroners' records (although don't get your hopes up with these, newspapers are a better source) and similar.



Essex parishes did not become part of the County of London so if you are searching for events which happened in the areas which became the London Boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Newham, Redbridge and Waltham Forest, you will need to look at **Essex Record Office** in Chelmsford rather than TLA. Essex Record Office does have an excellent digitisation programme called Essex Archives Online.

South of the River Thames were the counties of Surrey to the west and Kent to the east. The parts of Surrey which became Greater London are those now in the London Boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Wandsworth. Archives are held at **Surrey History Centre** and comprise the pre-1889 administrative records such as those of the Quarter Sessions. The parish registers for these areas are at TLA but Poor Law and other records might be at either repository.

You might think that your family were from central London and so you won't need to access Surrey archives. However, they hold the records of Brookwood Cemetery. This cemetery was opened in

1854 by the London Necropolis Company at Woking and was used by the parishes of St Margaret Westminster, St Anne Soho and others. Around 80% of burials were pauper funerals carried out on behalf of London parishes and prisons – these will have had no permanent memorial. Bodies might also have been moved from their original resting places many years later and ended up here in Surrey. Civil engineering projects, especially the building of the railways and road widening, often necessitated the demolition of burial grounds and Brookwood was the final resting place of many of these remains.

Kent Archives does not generally hold records for the parts of Kent which became London Boroughs. These are held at **local London Borough archives**. When the London Boroughs were created in 1965, each got its own archive centre, so there are 32 of them. These tend to hold archives of the Borough itself, such as council minutes, borough magazines but also very local items like directories, newspapers, maybe some poor law or rates records, and so on. It is always worth speaking to their archivists, who are a very knowledgeable bunch of helpful people.

These London Borough collections often also include archives which may have been held by previous local government organisations such as libraries. Harrow, for example. The archive collection here originated from one started at Wealdstone Library in 1948 which was moved to Gayton Library and then to Harrow Civic Centre Library, where it remained from 1972 until this building was closed in 2013. Since October 2013, the Harrow Archive collection has been based at Headstone Manor & Museum. The collection includes local newspapers, electoral registers, directories, photographs and much more.

But back to Kent, records of the Greater London parishes are held at London Borough archive centres: Bexley Local Studies and Archives Centre (Erith and Sidcup), Bromley Archives (Beckenham, Bromley and Orpington) Lewisham Local History and Archives Centre (Lee and Lewisham) and Greenwich Heritage Centre (Charlton Holy Trinity, Charlton St Luke and Greenwich St Paul). Items from Deptford, Woolwich and some Greenwich ones, however, are at TLA.

There are some anomalies, of course! One noticeable absence from TLA is records relating to Westminster. These are housed at the **City of Westminster Archives Centre**, which opened in 1995 to house the records of Westminster, Paddington and St Marylebone. The parish records for churches in Westminster are here, along with rate books, directories, local school records, local newspapers and more. So although Westminster was in Middlesex, the records were not in the Middlesex County Record Office and, in a similar manner, although St Margaret Westminster was the principal church in Westminster, its records are not at City of Westminster Archives Centre. They are at Westminster Abbey Muniment collection, along with the records of Westminster Abbey. This collection includes lease books from their extensive estates from 1486, tradesmen's bills and City of Westminster coroners' inquests, as well items directly about the Abbey.

Three of the parishes in the London Borough of Barnet were not previously in Middlesex. Chipping (or High) Barnet, East Barnet and Totteridge were historically in Hertfordshire until 1965, and the northernmost Middlesex parish of South Mimms was swapped into Hertsmere at that time. This means that you will also need to check **Hertfordshire Records and Local Studies** to find records from these and, in fact, some surrounding areas.

So, archives centres in London include The London Archives, The National Archives, City of Westminster Archives and the 32 London Borough archives but that is not all.

Then there are the **Local History Societies** and Historical Associations. Just about each Borough has one and they can also hold archives. Hornsey Historical Society, for example, covers not only Hornsey but many surrounding areas too, including Bounds Green, Crouch End, Harringay, Muswell Hill, Stroud Green and Wood Green. Resources about these areas include books (of which many are publications documenting the history of these areas, which the Society has produced), deeds, documents (includes some birth, marriage and death certificates), ephemera, exhibitions, indexes,

letters, manuscripts, maps, media (such as CDs and DVDs), newspapers, objects, paintings, pamphlets, periodicals, photographs, postcards, prints and more. Local History Societies can always add colour to a family history and are definitely worth visiting.

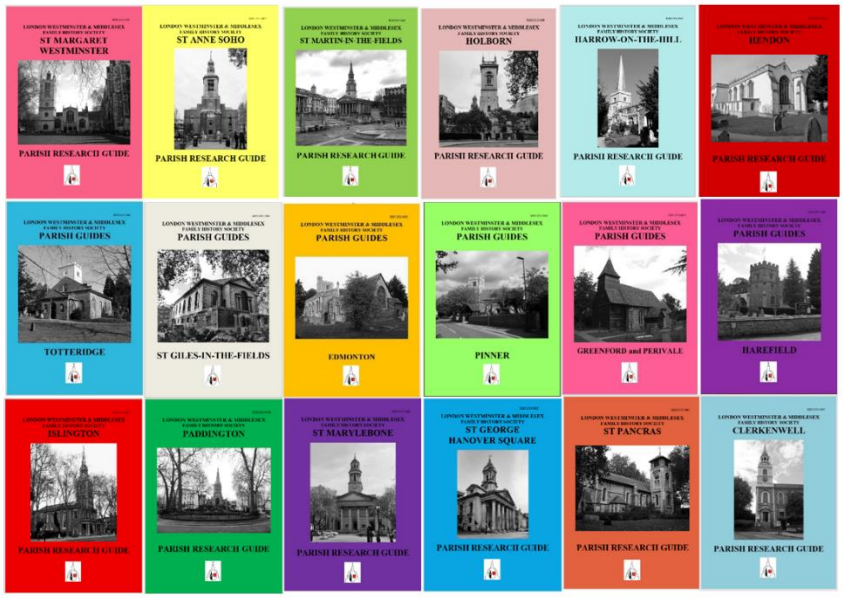
The **Society of Genealogy** needs a mention. Apart from a vast library and copies of the main useful records for those researching in London, there are exclusive records too. For example, there are many manuscript copies of memorial inscriptions which were recorded in times past. You might not be able to get these anywhere else.

And then you might need to think about more **specialised collections**. For instance, the Wellcome Collection has a great many mainly healthcare-based records, London Zoo has its own archives, as does London Transport, the Post Office, Hampstead Garden Suburb, the Inns of Court, the Freemasons, and many other institutions and businesses.

I hope I have given you a good overview of which archives are where in London.

Elizabeth Burling

LWMFHS has produced a series of Parish Research Guides which aim to assemble in one booklet a list of the main records of each ancient parish in our area. We look at all the relevant local archives centres and show which original records are where, which dates are covered, and whether they are also online and on which platform. We hope to inspire family historians and help you locate those important mentions of your ancestors.



Parish Research Guides can be purchased from our online shop

© London Westminster & Middlesex Family History Society 2026

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recorded or otherwise without the prior written permission of the Author and the London Westminster & Middlesex Family History Society.