Navigating the Archival Maze: Audience Handout

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Graham's Genealogy Guide · How to search archives and their catalogues effectively

Most archival records are not online. When the commercial sites run dry, go to the archives directly.

The three warm-up questions, answered

1. **What is Level, and does it matter?** It is the *Level of Description* (Fonds, Series, File, Item). Yes, it matters: information given at a higher level is not repeated lower down, so key facts may sit above your hit.
2. **Where can I find the Finding Aids?** Browse *up* the hierarchy from your hit and look for the Finding Aids field.
3. **What are Dangerous Dates?** Catalogue dates can mislead (see Part 4), so sort results by date rather than filtering them out.

The main points, part by part

1. **Finding archives.** Archives go by many names (record office, heritage centre, library, university). Use TNA's Find an Archive and parish research guides. Search **Discovery** and note which archives the hits come from, but always search each archive's own catalogue too.
2. **How records are organised.** Archives catalogue to **ISAD(G)**: **Fonds › Series › File › Item**, where a fonds is all the records of one creator. Details given higher up are not repeated lower down. There is **no name index** field. Catalogue websites (AIS, CalmView, Epexio, Orange Leaf, Discovery) look different but work alike.
3. **Searching generally.** Read the archive's research guides first. Choose sniper (one fonds, filtered) or scattergun (everywhere). Start with Discovery, then the local archive, then the archive most likely to corroborate a fact. In Discovery click **Show all filters**: Jorden gave 5 hits at Lambeth Palace Library in Discovery but 85 in Lambeth's own catalogue.
4. **Search tactics.** See the table below.
5. **Examining records.** Check every field for clues. Browse **up** for context and finding aids; browse **down** a creator's fonds to see what survives.
6. **Viewing the item.** Check whether it is already online (on the record, higher up, or in a research guide). Search the **FamilySearch** catalogue by Place or Author: it holds parish chest records, Bishop's Transcripts, marriage licences, death duty registers and probate copy wills (saving the £16 fee). Some films need you to be at FamilySearch centre or affiliate.
7. **Using AI.** Use it to brainstorm and plan, and to find whether records exist and where. Don't use leading prompts or ask for paywalled material. Always ask for its sources and verify everything.

Search tactics at a glance

Catalogues differ, so test each tactic first.

Tactic	Try
Variants, wildcards, initials	`Smith` / `Smyth` ; `Sm*th` ; `J Smith`
Exact phrase (may not work)	`"Peter Brown"` ; `Brown, Peter`
Filter by reference code	Words `Jorden` + Reference `C` (Chancery)
Triangulate common names	`Ford Brown Sloper`
Search places and organisations	`Badcox` ; `"Manor of Walkeringham"`
Word stems and spellings	`apprentice*` ; `Kinver` / `Kinfare`
The cataloguer's words	`pedigree` · `marriage bonds` · `"Will of"` + surname

Dangerous Dates: a date may be creation not subject, missing, or just the first and last items. Sort by date rather than filter.

Links and resources

Finding archives

Resource	Web address
TNA Find an Archive	discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/find-an-archive
TNA Discovery catalogue	discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk
County record offices in England (Wikipedia)	en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:County_record_offices_in_England
AIM25 (archives inside the M25)	aim25.com
Archives Hub	archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk
London Lives (portal)	londonlives.org
Digital Panopticon (portal)	digitalpanopticon.org

Catalogues shown in the talk

Archive	System	Web address
Brent Museum and Archives	Axiell (AIS)	bma-collections.brent.gov.uk
Enfield Local Studies and Archive	CalmView (older)	Search "Enfield Local Studies and Archive catalogue"
Westminster City Archives (WESTCAT)	CalmView (newer)	archives.westminster.gov.uk
Harrow Local History Collection and Archives	Epexio	harrow.epexio.com
Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies	Orange Leaf	Search “Hertfordshire Archives Catalogue”
Lambeth Palace Library	CalmView	archives.lambethpalacelibrary.org.uk/CalmView
King's College London Archives	Own catalogue	Search "King's College London Archive Catalogues"

Is it online? (The National Archives)

Resource	Web address
What's online	nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/start-here/whats-online
Research guides: online collections	nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/?research-category=online

FamilySearch catalogue entries (probate)

Record set	Web address
FamilySearch Catalog (search by Place or Author)	familysearch.org/en/search/catalog
Copy wills, Principal Registry (London) 1858–1925	familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/koha:517092
Copy wills, District Registries 1858–1899	familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/koha:580487
Copy wills, District Registries 1900–1925	familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/koha:443192
Diocese of London Commissary Court probate records 1374–1857	familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/283866
Archdeaconry Court of London wills and admons 1368–1807	familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/277571
Dean and Chapter of St Paul's copy wills and admons 1535–1857	familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/202947
Archdeaconry Court of Middlesex, Essex and Herts wills and admons 1538–1857	familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/41422

Sources from the AI worked example

Resource	Web address
Crew List Index Project (CLIP)	crewlist.org.uk
ICRC Prisoners of the First World War	grandeguerre.icrc.org
Find a Will (GOV.UK probate search)	probatesearch.service.gov.uk

Contact

Thank you for coming. For membership enquiries, email **membership@lwmfhs.org**.