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7 Finding Historical Data

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Synopsis

Historical data in geography are materials that can be used to provide interpretations and analyses of the geographies of past periods. Finding such data is a matter of their survival and of discovering where the data are now kept and how the data can be accessed. Historical material is not just something found in libraries and archives but also includes letters, personal diaries, photographs, works of art, etc.

This chapter is organized into the following sections:

- Introduction
- Sources for questions and questions for sources
- Survival and archives
- Finding historical sources
- Access and data collection.

INTRODUCTION

There is a huge variety of historical data that can be used within human geography. As well as all sorts of written and numerical material which can tell us about social and economic history – diaries perhaps, or the census – historical geographers have also used methods as diverse as oral history (interviewing people about what they and others did in the past – see Rose, 1990), dendrohistory (determining the types of the wood used in building to understand regional economies, societies and cultures – see Biger and Liphschitz, 1995) and the cultural interpretation of visual images or maps (see, for example, Heffernan, 1991, for an analysis of French representations of desert landscapes in the nineteenth century, and Harley, 2001). This range suggests that many of the issues raised by the use of historical data are

the same as for work on contemporary human geographies (see Chapters 10 and 28). However, there is a particular set of questions which always need to be considered in relation to historical work: what sources of data have been kept, where and how they are kept, who can get access to them and what you should do when you get access to them? While this chapter cannot give you a guide as to how to find exactly the sources you are looking for, it can give you an indication of how to begin to look and what sorts of issues you will need to consider. To do so it will deal first with the relationship between *research questions* and *historical sources*; secondly, with the question of the *survival* of material from the past; thirdly, with the practicalities of *finding historical sources* in libraries and archives; and, finally, with the issues of *access* to archives and the *collection* of historical data. The place to start is deciding what you are looking for.

SOURCES FOR QUESTIONS AND QUESTIONS FOR SOURCES

In any historical work there are always limitations on the sources you can use. As one historical geographer has put it, 'the dead don't answer questionnaires' (Baker, 1997: 231), so you are restricted by the 'survival' of sources: whether that is those people who have survived to tell you about the past or, more usually, which maps, documents, pictures, sound recordings, physical objects or landscape features have survived for you to interpret. This means that anyone considering historical work needs to think both about the research questions they want to answer and about whether the sources they will need to use to provide those answers exist and are accessible. Indeed, it is sensible to think about your research questions in terms of the available sources as well as thinking about the availability of sources for particular research questions which may have been devised through more theoretical work or through reviewing the existing literature.

You can come at this problem from either end. It is possible to derive a set of research questions about the past from just a few interests and ideas. For example, following feminist debates and contemporary concerns it would be interesting to ask about women's use of public space in the nineteenth-century city (see, for example, Domosh, 1998; Walkowitz, 1998; Rappaport, 2001). You might want to know what sorts of things women did in public space (and what sorts of public space they did those things in): was it leisure, shopping, paid work, education, political activism or charity work? You might need to ask whether this differed by social class or age. You might also want to know what people thought of the women who did those things, and what the women who did them thought of them too. All these possibilities can be worked through without considering the

sources of information you might use. However, beginning to do so means making some choices and ruling lines of inquiry in or out on the basis of the sources that can be found to answer the questions. For example, you would have to decide on which city or cities to look at. This is a theoretical question: should it be an industrial city (Manchester, Lyons, Chicago), a capital city (London, Paris, Washington), an imperial or colonial city (Calcutta, Melbourne, Buenos Aires) or some other sort of city? It is also a practical question: can you read the necessary languages and get to where the sources are to be found? You would also have to consider which sources would tell you about the activities you want to focus on. What are the sources for the history of women shopping in nineteenth-century Calcutta? What are the sources for women's charitable work in nineteenth-century Melbourne (see Gleeson, 1995)? In this way you can generate a sense of what historical data you are looking for and can begin to think about where you might look for it. In doing so you will realize that different sources will answer different sorts of questions, and that some questions are more easily answered than others. For example, due to differences in work, leisure and education in the nineteenth century it is much more likely that you would find reflections by middle- and upper-class women about their lives and activities than for working-class women, and much more likely that you would find European women writing about life in the colonial city than African or Asian women (Blunt and Rose, 1994; Bondi and Domosh, 1998). This does not mean that the material does not exist at all, that it is not important to look for it (you never know what you might find) or that it is not possible to expand the definition of what counts as a source when asking new sorts of questions. It does mean that you have to keep formulating research questions and considering how you can find data that will help you answer them.

This means thinking about the other end of the problem too. What are the sources that are accessible to you, and what sorts of questions will they provide answers to? In the absence of any really clearly defined research questions – but with some interests in particular periods, places, events or activities – you can begin by looking at a source or set of sources and thinking about what sorts of questions they could answer. This does not have to involve anything more elaborate than a trip to the nearest library, but it is a way of tying the material available to you into wider research questions and broader literatures. So, for example, if you picked up Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton* (1848) about life in early nineteenth-century Manchester (Gaskell, 1970), or Edwin Chadwick's (1842) *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (Chadwick, 1965), or a set of letters written from or to your great, great grandmother who lived in Liverpool in the 1880s, you could begin to ask

questions about women's lives in nineteenth-century British cities. You could also begin to think about the research questions to which these sources might begin to provide answers, what other sources you would need and what wider theoretical and substantive literatures you would need to cover in order to make sense of them.

In fact, it soon becomes apparent that you need to do both at the same time: working out what sort of sources will answer the questions you want to ask and deciding what sorts of questions are appropriate for the sources you have available. This means that there is a need to think about ways of finding sources that allow both general and specific searches to be carried out, and ways of quickly evaluating the sources that you have found prior to your full analysis or interpretation of them (see Chapter 27).

SURVIVAL AND ARCHIVES

It is obvious that not everything that happens leaves a record (in writing, sound or image), and equally obvious that not every record that is made survives and is stored away for later use. If any place where such records are kept so that they can be used as sources of information is thought of as an 'archive', we must include our own personal archives – of letters, photographs, perhaps even diaries – as well as the official archives of companies, organizations and public bodies – and the libraries and galleries – local and national libraries and art galleries, university libraries, sound libraries, map libraries and picture libraries – where books, recordings and images are kept for later enjoyment and use. What is created and what survives in these archives is a social and political process which can tell us much about the conditions under which information of different sorts is produced, used and evaluated (Ogborn, forthcoming a). As was pointed out above, a middle-class woman in the nineteenth century was more likely to have kept a diary than a working-class woman, and that diary was more likely to have survived in a family or public archive, or even in a later published form, than that of her working-class counterpart. One woman had more time, space and power than the other to construct this sort of version of her life for herself, and possibly others. Yet it does not always work this way. For example, there is no record in the Indian Mughal empire's archival record of many of the earliest encounters with English traders in India in the seventeenth century – we only have the letters and journals of English merchants and diplomats. This is not because they were more powerful than the Mughal emperors; far from it. They do not figure in the Mughal record because they were deemed to be an insignificant force in India compared with the other Asian rulers and traders with whom the

Mughal leaders had to deal. Their activities in India were not worth recording. Although these cases work out differently, in each one the creation and survival of a record are at least in part a matter of power. For a fragile manuscript, magnetic tape or photograph to survive, someone has to think it is worth keeping and have the ability to keep it secure and legible (Ogborn, forthcoming b).

Yet it is also more than just a matter of power. Archives, understood in this broad sense, are the sites of memory. They are the places – whether a cardboard box in the attic or an imposing public building – where people can begin to construct accounts of the past. This means that they are also full of emotion because they are the places where people's lives are remembered, and where we have a responsibility to think carefully about how we reconstruct those lives in the present and for the future. What is held within these archives and how we can use that information are shaped by the commitments of many people to maintaining a record of the past. This can take many forms (Samuel, 1994), but each one contains within the selection of material that is kept, stored and catalogued – the word 'archived' serving to cover all this – a commitment to remembering the past, a valuing of certain sorts of relationships and representations, and a sense of how that material might be used. Trying to understand each archive and each source within it in terms of both power relations and emotional investment in the past can help us to understand the historical data we are using better.

In the remainder of the chapter I want to deal with some very broad categories of archive and archived historical sources, how to find them and what questions to ask about using them.

FINDING HISTORICAL SOURCES

Libraries

As was pointed out above, the search for historical data can certainly begin with the libraries you have access to – whether these are local libraries, university libraries or specialist libraries. I have made a distinction here between libraries and archival collections to deal with the difference between printed sources which can be available in many places and those, usually manuscript (meaning handwritten), sources which are by their nature only available in one place. This does not mean that libraries do not also hold archival collections; many of them do. What it does mean is that they are certainly places where printed sources of various kinds (including printed editions of manuscript sources) are available to you.

BOOKS

It may be an obvious point but printed books from the periods and places, and on the subjects, that you are interested in are a crucial source. There are, for example, many different ways in which geographers have begun to make use of fictional literary representations, particularly novels, to explore the geographies of the past (Sharp, 2000). For example, both Mandy Morris (1996) and Richard Phillips (1995) have worked on ideas of gender, childhood and nature in two quite different children's books: Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) and R.M. Ballantyne's *The Fur Trappers* (1856). In a quite different context, David Schmid (1995) and Philip Howell (1998) have explored the representations of the city in detective fiction. There are also many examples from literary studies in all languages of interpretations which are attentive to questions of space, place and landscape. Beyond the fiction section, it is worth considering whether the books which you might otherwise pass over as 'out of date' could become the sources for a historical study. The resurgence of interest in the history of geography and of geographical thought has been based upon using old geography books and periodicals to try to understand and explain the sorts of geographical ideas – and the representations of people, places and environments – that were part of understandings of geography in different periods and places (for example, Livingstone, 1992; Matless, 1998; Mayhew, 2000; Barnes and Hannah, 2001; Driver, 2001; Withers, 2001). Indeed, the same sorts of ideas and methods can be applied to any set of books or periodicals from the past on any subject you are interested in. One example is Chris Philo's (1987) examination of the changing ideas of madness and its treatment in the now discontinued *Asylum Journal*, a periodical for those involved in what he calls the 'mad business' of nineteenth-century England and Wales. Another example is Mona Domosh's (2001) use of urban exposés of New York in the 1860s to interpret the sorts of ideas about women and public space outlined earlier in this chapter (see also Howell, 2001). Finding these books is simply a matter of using the library catalogue and scanning along the shelves in the sections you are interested in. However, you also need to be aware that any one library collection may not have all the books which you will require: perhaps all those by one author, or those which are referred to by the authors you are interested in as influences on them or that put arguments they want to challenge. Finding these texts involves some detective work, and one useful resource is the public catalogue of the British Library (available at http://www.blpc.bl.uk) since you can use this to search for books by author and subject whether or not you have access to that particular London library. You should also be aware that there are many specialist libraries for all sorts of subjects which may

be able to provide access to collections of books that will answer your research questions. Some libraries specialize in terms of their subject matter – for example, in Britain, the Wellcome Library for the History of Medicine, the Cornish Studies Library or the Manx National Heritage Library and, in the USA, the Library for Caribbean Research in New York or the library of the Black Film Center in Bloomington, Indiana. Other libraries are defined by the sort of material they hold – for example, map libraries like the collections at the British Library, the National Library of Wales, the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers and the Newberry Library in Chicago, or newspaper libraries such as the British Library Newspaper Library at Colindale in north London (http://www.bl.uk/collections/newspapers.html). These libraries can be found in the same way as archives (see below).

PRINTED SOURCES

Many libraries, especially university libraries, also hold printed sources of various sorts. We might certainly include printed maps under this heading. Another good example, for Britain, are the nineteenth-century parliamentary papers. These are the record of the inquiries and reports made by contemporary politicians, civil servants and reformers on a whole range of subjects of concern: poverty, prisons, prostitution, the conditions of work in factories, public health and so on. Through the collection of opinion and statistics they tried to reach conclusions about what could or should be done. As a result, they provide a very rich source of information on the subjects they were dealing with and on contemporary ideas about those issues and how they could be addressed (see, for example, Driver, 1993, on the poor law; Ogborn, 1995, on prisons; and Kearns, 1984, on public health). Your library may have them in their original series or in the facsimile editions produced by the Irish University Press. It should also be noted that other countries have comparable forms of official publication on all sorts of issues of concern to them (see the *Checklist of United States Public Documents, 1789–1909* (US Government, 1911) and, for an example that uses US government inquiries into early twentieth-century immigration, see King, 2000).

Parliamentary papers were printed in the nineteenth century to make them available to as many people as possible, and other institutions have also used printing to do the same for manuscript sources. For example, there are printed versions of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century diaries, memoirs and journals (for example, those of Samuel Pepys (1970–83), Giacomo Casanova (1997) and Fanny Burney (1972–84)). There are also series like the Hakluyt Society's publications of travellers' accounts or the Chetham Society which, since 1843, has published material relating to the counties of Lancashire

and Cheshire (see http://chethams.org.uk). The former series, which has produced over 350 volumes since the mid-nineteenth century, provides annotated (and sometimes translated) transcripts of ships' logs, journals and letters for a huge range of voyagers to and from a wide range of places, giving easy access to material which would otherwise be only available to a few in forms that are difficult to read and understand (for an example of work based on these and other printed versions of manuscript sources, see Ogborn, 2002).

Archival collections

There is no cast-iron distinction that can be made between libraries and archives. What I want to stress here is that archival collections can be thought of as holding material that is unique to them. Because of that, and also due to the increasing importance of visual sources in historical geography, I include art galleries in this section as well. This is not simply because of the particular set of things that archival collections and galleries have, but also because of the nature of much of the material they hold which – in forms like handwriting or oil painting – are one-offs which have to change their form to be reproduced as printed sources or photographs. Having said that, archival collections can be full of all sorts of material, both rare and commonplace, and another aspect of them is that their collections have often been put together in relation to a particular individual, family, institution or theme. People have their own archives, as do charities, businesses and public bodies (even university geography departments – see Withers, 2002). The largest archives are those of governments or states (and those of Europe and North America the largest of those) which have been established as gatherers and collectors of material for some considerable time, and they are often organized according to the government departments that collected and archived the material.

Finding whether there is archival material on a historical subject you are interested in means thinking carefully about who – in terms of individuals or organizations – would have produced information about it at the time and where that might now be stored (if it has survived at all), whether it is still with the person or organization concerned or deposited in a public archive. As with finding artistic works it means searching for those who produced the sources and for thematic collections within which they are now held (for examples of work in historical geography that use visual images, see Stephen Daniels' (1999) study of the landscape garden designs of a particular individual, Humphry Repton, and James Ryan's (1997) study of photography in the British Empire, which uses lots of thematic collections of photographs including the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers picture library: http://www.rgs.org). In both cases

this means careful attention to individuals and to the institutional contexts within which they operated in order to track down appropriate archives.

There is, therefore, a huge number and variety of archives. ARCHON (the Historical Manuscripts Commission's principal information gateway for users of manuscript sources: http://www.hmc.gov.uk/archon) lists nearly two thousand archives and libraries of all sorts in the UK and the Republic of Ireland from the Abbot Hall Art Gallery and Museum in Kendal to the Zoological Society of London. There are many thousands of others all over the world. Finding out which ones hold sources that might be useful for your project is made easier by reference guides in both book form and online. A few of these are listed below:

- Janet Foster and Julia Sheppard's (2000) *British Archives* is a single-volume guide with entries on over a thousand archives giving contact details, information on opening times, access, finding aids and facilities, as well as brief outlines of major holdings. The entries are organized alphabetically by town, with an index by archive name, an Index to Collections which is predominantly made up of personal and organizational names, and a Guide to Key Subjects which offers broader categories. There are other similar guides for other countries, including the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (1988) *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States*, which is organized by state, gives full contact details along with brief descriptions of the main holdings and has a full subject index.
- *The National Register of Archives* (http://www.hmc.gov.uk/nra): the NRA's indexes – available through this website – contain references to the papers of about 150 000 corporate bodies, persons and families which are held in archives and libraries across the UK. The indexes can be searched by corporate name, personal name, family name or place-name, or they can be browsed alphabetically. This means that you need to know the names of the people and organizations you want to trace since there is no subject key-word search to allow searching by topic. References in NRA are linked directly to ARCHON.
- *ARCHON* (http://www.hmc.gov.uk/archon): this site gives contact details (including addresses, contact names, telephone and fax numbers, email and website addresses) for nearly two thousand archives and museums, as well as cross-referencing them to their NRA listings. Similar access for Australia is made available through the *Directory of Archives in Australia* (http://www.asap.unimelb.ed.au/asa/directory) with details of nearly five hundred repositories. There are also sites such as *Libdex* (http://www.

libdex.com) and *Libweb* (http://sunsite.berkley.edu/Libweb) which provide access to many thousands of library home pages and online catalogues worldwide.

- *Access to Archives* (A2A) (http://www.a2a.pro.gov.uk) is a database of catalogues of UK archives. It allows you to search the titles that appear in those catalogues. This means that you can do subject key-word searches. However, searches for the names of places, people and organizations are likely to be more productive as they are more specific and are likely to appear in the titles of archival records. You should also be aware that this site contains the catalogues of a relatively small (but growing) proportion of all the archives in the UK. Again, a similar service is provided for Australian archives by the National Library of Australia's *Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts* (http://www/nla.gov.au/raam).

In many cases, where the project is based to any extent upon material gathered by government departments, the sources will be held by the appropriate national archives. These have very extensive holdings of material and, in many cases (including that of Britain), their catalogues can be searched online: see, for example, the British Public Record Office (in Kew in London) at http://www.pro.gov.uk; the French Archives Nationales (in Paris) at http://www.archives nationales.culture.gouv.fr; the US National Archives and Records Administration (in Washington, DC) at http://www.nara.gov; and the National Archives of Canada (in Ottawa) at http://www.archives.ca.

It is also useful to be aware that some archives are dedicated to specific forms of material. In Britain, much oral history material and other audio sources are held at the National Sound Archive at the British Museum (http://www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/nsa.html). Moving images can be found at the National Film and Television Archive at the British Film Institute (http://www.bfi.org.uk), and the Mass Observation archive at Sussex University (http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/massobs) holds a collection, gathered since 1937, of material based on observations of everyday life.

Finally, historical source material is increasingly becoming available in electronic and online formats. For example, the British Calendar of State Papers, Colonial for North America and the West Indies for 1574–1739 and a vast Transatlantic Slave Trade database are both available on CD-ROM. Online resources include the Great Britain Historical GIS project (http://www.geog.port.ac.uk/gbhgis/index.htm) which is making available both geographically located social, economic and demographic statistics (mainly from the period 1851–1939) and the GIS through which they can be mapped. For an earlier period, Robert Shoemaker and Tim Hitchcock's Old Bailey Proceedings

Online project (http://www.shef.ac.uk/hri/bailey.htm) will make available the full proceedings of London's central criminal court for the period 1670–1834 and the University of Edinburgh's Charting the Nation: Maps of Scotland and Associated Archives, 1550–1740 project (http://www.chartingthenation.lib.ed.ac.uk) has over 2000 cartographic images and descriptions on its website. There is also information on a wide range of data deposited by historical researchers with the History Data Service at Essex University and searchable via their website at http://hds.essex.ac.uk.

ACCESS AND DATA COLLECTION

In most cases the uniqueness of the material, the level of development of online services and the expense of photocopying or photographing texts and images mean that you will have to go to the data rather than having them come to you. This means thinking about some practicalities. First, is the material available to you? Different archives have different rules on who is allowed to access the material. Private archives of families, companies or charities are not obliged to allow you access. You will have to find out who is in charge and explain your project and the reasons why you want to see the material they have. They may restrict certain items or restrict the use you can make of them – for example, not using people's names or not publishing work based on their collection without permission. Public archives often have rules which restrict material for time periods from 30 to 100 years for reasons of confidentiality and sensitivity, but they are also committed to making their collections accessible to public use. Secondly, when is the archive open? Opening times vary, and you need to make sure that the archive is open when you get there and not going to close shortly after! Finally, is it worth the trip? Often items in lists and catalogues sound more interesting and useful than they are. You need to find out as much as possible about them before you commit your time and resources to a research visit. You can write to, telephone or email the archive and ask about the material you want to see. You will want to ask for a description of what is there in qualitative and quantitative terms. The archivists know their collections better than anyone so they can be a lot of help to you. If you have to travel a long way and stay away from home for an extended period, archival research can be a costly business. Make sure you have thought about the resource implications of your research before you devise a project on 'race' and urban change in the 1940s which can only be undertaken in the municipal archives of the City of Los Angeles.

Once you have located the material and decided that an archive needs to be visited, there are a few hints about working methods

which might come in handy. First, talk to the archivists early on and ask them about the material you are interested in. They may also be able to point you towards other useful material that you have not located in advance. Secondly, find out how that particular archive works – what are the opening hours, how do the catalogues work, how do you order material to read, how much can you have on your desk at any one time? You need to ensure that you have a steady flow of material coming to you. If you find yourself waiting around with nothing to read, use the time productively by searching the catalogues or the book shelves for other relevant material, or by talking to other researchers. Thirdly, work out how long the archival research is going to take you. You should, perhaps even before you get to the archive, have a full list of the material you want to look at. After you have looked at roughly a tenth of that material, you should assess how long the job will take if you keep working at that rate. On the basis of those back-of-the-envelope calculations and the time (and resources) you have available for the research, make a judgement about whether you need to begin sampling the material differently or prioritizing what to read in a different way. It is very unlikely that you will be able to speed up significantly unless you change how you are doing the research, since the limits are usually set by the material you are using. You need to come away from the archive with what is most useful to you in the time available. Fourthly, keep a clear record of what you have read and what you still have to cover. You must also always ensure that both the notes you take on the material and your lists of what to read use the reference system which the archive uses, whereby each item will have an individual reference number (the one you use to order it in the reading room). If you have to recheck a quotation or some figures then you have to know, at any point in the future, where they came from so you can go back to it. And when you use those data in your work you will also have to tell others where the data came from using this reference number. Finally, always take a pencil, a pencil sharpener, an eraser and some paper. Most archives only let you use pencils and, whether you are equipped with a laptop or not, you will certainly need one for jotting down research notes and so on. There is nothing worse than spending the first precious hours of archival research trying to find a pencil in a place you don't know.

Summary

- Work out what sort of sources will answer the questions you want to ask, and decide what sorts of questions are appropriate for the sources you have available.

- Remember that the nature of the material that survives in 'archives' is a matter of both power relations and an emotional investment in the past.
- Historical sources can come in many different forms – literary, visual, printed official publications, manuscripts – and there are many different libraries, galleries, archives and museums that contain this material.
- Find out about access to the archives and plan your collection strategy carefully.

Further reading

- Discussions of archival research methods in historical geography can be found in Baker (1997) and Ogborn (forthcoming a).
- Useful surveys of the sorts of work that has been done and is being done in historical geography can be found in Dodgshon and Butlin (1990), Graham and Nash (2000) and in articles published in the *Journal of Historical Geography*.
- Details of British archives and their collections can be browsed through in Foster and Sheppard (2000) (this is its fourth edition). Previous editions (written by Janet Foster) are still useful if in danger of having some out-of-date details.

Note: Full details of the above can be found in the references list below.

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