



RESEARCH

Top tips for research

This guide has been created by Scotland's Urban Past (SUP), a five-year community-engagement project from Historic Environment Scotland.

We support communities to record, research and celebrate the history on their doorsteps.

Through our free training and resources, people of all ages can discover and share the fascinating stories of Scotland's towns and cities.

www.scotlandsurbanpast.org.uk

Top tips

When you begin thinking about your Scotland's Urban Past research project, take the time in advance to ask what, when, where, how and who will research, and together devise a plan. Reflecting on the points below should help you get started.

1. What would you like to explore?

Once you and your group have identified the area, site(s) or building(s) you wish to research, **identify what you would like to explore**. For example:

- the history of the building
- the architect and design of the building and of any later additions
- the trades and craftspeople who constructed or added to the site/building
- the function(s) of the site/building over time and how and why this has changed
- the people who have occupied the building; what they have done there
- companies associated with the site/building; clubs, activities and social life of these firms
- machinery or equipment in the building
- artefacts, documents or publications associated with the site/building, associated people or companies

2. What is most important to you?

Next, **identify the goals for your project**. An example goal would be 'to find out about the expansion of X factory building in the 1890s, the design of the new building and the work and social lives of the people who were employed there'.

This will help you to **prioritise your research goals**. In the above example, the research goals are to find out about the design of the building, the architect, the equipment used in the building and the lives of the workers.

3. Where to find information sources

With the help of our [Using Archives](#) and [Research Resource](#) guides, identify where you can locate primary sources (original handwritten and printed documents, photographs, drawings, among others) and secondary sources (websites and forums, books, journal articles, newspaper articles describing or reporting something about the subject). Many archives compile subject finding aids which will help you with this task. Be aware that this can be time consuming.

4. How to find information

Identify key names, places and words to help you **search** archive and library online catalogues and databases, card catalogues, paper indexes and other finding aids. Further details on finding information can be found in our **Using Archives** document.



Participants cross reference architectural drawings (copies) and online resources during a Historical Research Skills training workshop in Aberdeen.

5. How long does research take?

A vital part of planning your research is to **give yourself enough time**. There are many points to consider, such as:

- how much time do you personally have each week to spend on research?
- do you have deadlines for completing research tasks, for example, for a Doors Open Day event or a talk?
- how much time will it take to locate material in archives in advance using online search tools?
- do you have to travel to archives and libraries? How long will each journey take?
- do you know how far in advance you need to make an appointment at an archive and if you have to order items in advance?

When you are planning research visits to an archive or library, please also consider these questions:

- do you know how long it takes for items to be brought to you?
- do you know how often each day archive staff retrieve material?
- do you know how many items an archive will let you view and handle at once?
- do you know how long it will take you to view a printed versus a handwritten document or volume and take notes?

6. Working together or alone?

Some people prefer to work on this methodical and analytical task alone, while others prefer to work in pairs or larger groups. However, it may be helpful to book a larger group visit to an archive so that group members can experience and support each other with more challenging tasks such as deciphering handwriting, reading architectural drawings, using maps.

To plan and organise your research you may find it helpful:

- to devise a timetable for your archive visits and research deadlines
- if you or a small group follows the research process through to completion on one theme

7. What are the research steps?

Ensure everyone involved in the research project follows a series of clear steps throughout their research process. You may like to follow this simple research methodology:

- locate and take notes from primary sources (all types of documents, photographs, drawings) which give you essential facts about your subject or building
- visit and perhaps participate in [recording your site or building](#)
- locate and take notes from secondary sources about your subject or building (remember these can often include author interpretation and/or ideas or views from a particular time period which are no longer considered appropriate)
- keep track of sources used in your research (see below)
- use and share your research in your projects outcomes

8. Keeping track of sources

As a researcher it is essential to **keep a careful record of the primary and secondary sources you consult** in order to make references in your written or creative work and to help future researchers find the resources you used. You might like to invest in a separate paper notebook or keep a separate document on your laptop/tablet for this purpose.

What kind of information should you keep details of?

- the name and location of the archive/ collection you are working in
- its archive number
- what each item is
- each item's collection number
- the item's title, if it has one
- the item's creator
- when and where the item was written, made, photographed or published
- which page or pages you are taking notes or quoting from
- if it is a photographic item, architectural drawing or object, what are its dimensions, materials, photographer/draughtsperson/maker, date created?

Notes

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Scottish Charity No. SC045925