

This leaflet describes the main sources of archival and printed records relating to researching the history of a building. There is a short summary of information highlighting sources to help with researching the occupants of those buildings.

Planning and building control records

Planning and building control records are two parts of an application and construction process that were historically overseen by the Council.

Planning applications are the owner's proposal for a construction or alteration of a building that are examined by Planning Officers to ensure they meet planning requirements for the location and type of building. The public may examine and comment on planning applications before they are passed by a planning officer or sent to committee for discussion and decision. [See the Planning Department website](#) for more details on the process.

Building control files concern the safety, materials and construction of the application and follow the work being carried out until passed as safe by a building inspector.

These files may contain identical plans that cover the requirements of both regulations. We will only produce the plans from a file and not the correspondence or accompanying paperwork unless the file is over 82 years old due to Data Protection laws. Please contact the Record Office for more information about accessing paperwork relating to files less than 82 years old.

NB: The city boundary changed several times in the life of these records, so your property may have been outside the city limits at the time of construction or application.

Planning Applications

Bath has some very early planning files as the council introduced an interim planning application process in 1934. This gave builders an assurance that their work would be acceptable when the planned national scheme was instituted and would not require major alteration or removal of the building at a later date. A hiatus due to WWII meant that it wasn't until 1948 that a national planning application scheme was introduced.

The pre-1948 files usually only contain a plan with no correspondence, and the majority are only available on microfilm. Some applications may include many iterations of the same plans as alterations were made in line with planning requirements. Not all applications include plans, and not all applications were actually built.

Holdings

The printed applications up to 1996 have been catalogued and can be searched on the [Archives catalogue \(ref BC/8/6/8\)](#). The microfilm-only records prior to 1948 have yet to be included in the main catalogue but work is ongoing to accomplish this, [there is a list available here](#). For applications after 1996 please search the [Planning Portal](#).

Records after c.2008 have been digitised, but please [contact the Planning Department](#) for access to any other records after 1996.

Wansdyke District Council

For files relating to the former Wansdyke District Council, 1974-1996, please contact the Planning Department as these files have not been transferred to the Record Office. Prior to 1974 any surviving files will be in the care of [Somerset Heritage Centre](#).

Building Control

Bath instituted byelaws relating to building standards in 1866 mainly to help improve public health standards through good building practices. Further rules were added two years later to cover drainage, opening windows, privies and the distance between houses.

The earliest applications, from 1868, are usually only an elevation with a separate 'block plan' to indicate drainage. Whilst minimal, these plans are useful for giving the footprint of buildings and the plot boundaries. The scope and quantity of the plans increased and were often latterly the same plans as those used in the planning application.

Holdings

We hold files from 40 years ago and older, so we currently (in 2020) have original plans from 1868 to 1980. They are not catalogued, but we have several finding aids in the office for the staff to help search for a property. For applications after 1980, please contact Development Control. They have an [online portal listing developments](#) after April 1995.

Plans for buildings that were incorporated into the city of Bath through boundary changes in the 1950s and 60s are in the collection, but we do not have a list of these yet.

Architecture and building conservation

We have a number of plan collections from architectural firms as well as plans from Council projects and properties. Records relating to the conservation of buildings are mainly Council files.

Architecture

Bath is renowned for its architecture and there have been significant architects working in the city. Sadly, few plans survive for the architects of Georgian Bath: John Wood Sr., John Wood Jr., Thomas Warr Attwood, Thomas Baldwin, and John Palmer. There are no original or 18th century plans for Queen Square, King's Circus or the Royal Crescent.

Beresford Smith & Partners, 1740-1989 (ref 0529)

This collection is the papers of a single firm, with various partners, operating from 1826 onwards, culminating in Beresford Smith & Partners. It includes work by

George Phillips Manners (who founded the original firm), J. Elkington Gill, Mowbray A. Green and F. Beresford Smith.

The documents are mainly 1820s-1980s and provide an insight into local and social history through changing architectural fashions, e.g. conversion of stables to garages and the introduction of interior bathrooms. The collection also covers assessments of war damages following the Bath Blitz. There are plans & drawings, specifications of work, correspondence, invoices, photos and other paperwork.

David Brain Partnership c.1970-1997 (ref 0812)

Started by David Brain in 1967, this company has continued past his retirement in 1992. The business worked mainly in the south of England, particularly the south west, and worked on historic building renovations as well as conversions and new builds. Plans and project photos.

A.J. Taylor & others 1877-1958 (ref 0323)

Plans of work by various architects who undertook contracts in Bath and the surrounding area. It includes work by A J Taylor, C E Davis, G A Jellicoe, Sir Albert Richardson, Molly Taylor, A C Fare, Crozier-Cole and Doulton & Co.

We also have some plans of unbuilt Bath where the project was not undertaken. These include the new Royal Mineral Water Hospital on Peter Street, C E Davis's design for the Roman Baths and Concert Hall, and Atkinson's design for a concert hall at Parade Gardens.

Plans of Council properties c.1775-c.2001 (ref BC/6/4/1)

Lease plans and one set of architects' plans for several buildings including the Guildhall & markets, Roman Baths & Pump Room, Assembly Rooms and ground plans for several cemeteries.

Bath Improvement Act 1789 (ref BC/22/3)

This Act was intended to protect and improve access to the Baths and includes plans and elevations relating to the street improvements around the New Pump Room at Stall Street & Abbey Churchyard, Bath Street and the Cross Bath.

Building Conservation

Under the 1937 Bath Act the Council acquired powers to protect buildings of architectural or historic interest. This was the first attempt to list protected buildings built before 1820 (BC/8/8/2).

After WWII the emphasis was on reconstruction and the Comprehensive Development Areas from the late 1950s identified sub-standard 'slum' housing, often Grade III Georgian artisan houses, that were to be replaced. Following a public outcry from the early 1970s central government started providing grants for the renovation of these buildings. The Council created a Conservation Architect's department to administer grants, survey buildings and provide advice on the care and upkeep of historic buildings. They produced the 'Saving Bath' report on conservation areas in 1976-8. (BC/8/8/7-13)

The collection of David McLoughlin, Conservation Architect 1975-2005, contains his research papers, correspondence and slides prepared for various exhibitions. It is not yet catalogued (ref 1042).

Kay Ross, of McLaughlin Ross LLP, was a house historian and her collection contains research notes as well as completed reports on selected historic buildings (ref 0950).

Property records

Information about a property can also be gleaned from sources other than building plans. Below are some suggestions.

Deeds

Deeds are the records of changes in ownership of property and can often involve several documents. Since the registration of property with the Land Registry was made compulsory, early property deeds are often no longer required to be held by householders or their solicitors and many have been deposited with or donated to archive services.

The term 'deeds' covers several different kinds of documents: leases, releases, mortgages and sales. There may be a plan of the plot included in a lease, but more often it is a description relating it to neighbouring plots. A builder's lease was granted to a builder to construct a new building on a virgin plot and may also include an elevation of the building in some parts of the city. This was common in the first leases granted in Bathwick where Thomas Baldwin's elevation was included to ensure the houses conformed to the overall design required to create e.g. Great Pulteney Street. An Abstract of Title acts as a summary of all the documents (and may survive even if they have not) and provides an overview of the dates and names for changes of ownership through the years.

Many solicitors' collections have been added to our archives where they were not retained by the homeowner. Unfortunately, few of them have been catalogued in detail to make them findable on our catalogue, but there are finding aids available in the Record Office that can help locate some of these deeds.

The Council is a major landowner within the city of Bath, and there is an extensive collection of deeds from the 16th century onwards at ref BC/6. This series includes accompanying records such as surveys, rentals and plans as well as deeds for property such as bridges and roads.

Contracts

The Council contracted out the building and maintenance of their properties, and many of these survive from the 20th century. They include the contract, the building and materials specification and, in some cases, plans and maps relating to the contract. The contracts cover large building projects, such as housing estates, as well as smaller contracts relating to upkeep and refurbishment projects. Currently we only have a printed handlist of this collection, but there are plans to catalogue this collection over the next two-three years.

Estate Records

There were several estates that owned land within the current boundaries of the city of Bath. Depending upon surviving records, there could be property deeds, lease records, rental ledgers, sales documents and other administrative paperwork in the collections. For estates outside the city boundaries, any surviving records will be with the Somerset Heritage Centre or, possibly, with the estate itself as in the case of the Duchy of Cornwall or St John's Hospital. We own collections related to two of the main estates within the city (not completely catalogued but there are finding aids available):

Bathwick Estate (refs 0036, 0044, 0055, 0082, 0103a) – essentially the Parish of Bathwick, it was owned by the Pulteney Earls of Bath from the 1720s and was mainly developed from the 1780s onwards. Most of the properties were sold off by the last owner, Captain Forester, in the 1920s and the Bathwick Estate Company, which managed the remaining properties, was liquidated in the 1970s.

Rivers Walcot Estate 1547-1920 (ref 0810) – this estate was principally the lands of the Manor of Walcot and the records mainly cover its ownership, development and sale by the Rivers-Gay family and their descendants. The estate covers much of the area developed in the Georgian era by the architects John Wood Sr & Jr.

Wills

Wills can provide some detailed evidence of the changing ownership of property between generations and may include some very specific descriptions. The archives include several wills spread throughout the collections, mainly in solicitors' collections. They are poorly catalogued, but there are finding aids available in the Record Office to help with the search. For more information on wills in general and how to locate them, see the [Family History leaflet](#).

Printed sources

There are a number of printed and secondary sources that may assist your research:

Maps

Maps are useful for giving an overview of an area at the time a building was constructed and the following years. They are unreliable as absolute dating aids but can guide you towards the right period of years in which to look. For more information about our map collections [see our web page and leaflet here](#).

Newspapers

As a public forum for advertisements and reporting, these can give a wealth of detail about property sales and other land developments through the years. They also covered Council proceedings, often in quite a lot of detail from the middle of the 19th century. These could include details of planned developments, permissions granted, and infrastructure needs of a growing city. For more guidance on our collections, see our [Newspapers web page and leaflet here](#).

Images

Bath has been captured in images many times over the centuries, but the vast majority of these images cover the famous locations such as the Royal Crescent and Circus. There are fewer images of the ordinary streets, particularly before the age of photography. The archives contain some series' of photographs relating to the Council's housing and infrastructure developments, but these are not yet catalogued. [Bath in Time](#) acts as a finding aid to the Local Studies collection of images. For more information about our collections, [see the web page here](#).

Sales documents

Sales brochures can give some detailed information about the real estate and may also include a sale of the moveable property associated with the building. The sales were often advertised in the newspaper with a summary of what was on offer, but the brochures expand on this. The archives have catalogued a collection of brochures under the [ref SP/, available on the catalogue](#), and there are several more through the rest of the collections, such as the estate records. Any printed material in the Local Studies collections is included in the [LibrariesWest catalogue](#) online.

Books

We have a large collection of books and pamphlets that relate to the history of Bath, its growth and its architecture. The history of the surrounding is less well covered, but we do have some items that may be of interest. The Local Studies collection of printed materials can be found on the [LibrariesWest catalogue](#), and the archives' collection is on the [catalogue under ref PP/ where they have been added to the catalogue](#). Some titles that may be of interest to you include:

- Blanchard, Gill, *Tracing your house history : A guide for family historians*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2013
- Davis, Graham & Bonsall, Penny, *A history of Bath : image & reality*, Lancaster: Carnegie, 2006 (general history of Bath, concentrating on the social aspects)
- Forsyth, Michael, *Bath*, New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2003
- Green, Mowbray A., *The eighteenth century architecture of Bath*, Bath: George Gregory, 1904
- Ison, Walter, *The Georgian buildings of Bath : from 1700 to 1830*, London: Faber, 1948 (reprinted 1969 & 1983)
- Jackson, Neil, *Nineteenth century Bath : architects & architecture*, Bath: Ashgrove Press, 1991 (reprinted 1998)
- Lees-Milne, James & Ford, David, *Images of Bath*, Richmond-upon-Thames: St Helena, 1988.
- Mowl, Tim & Earnshaw, Brian, *John Wood : architect of obsession*, Bath: Millstream, 1988

Records related to occupants

The occupants of a house can tell you a lot about its status, what it may have been used as and its layout at the time. Most of the resources to help you with this aspect of your research are covered in the [Family History](#) and [Reference Material](#) web pages and accompanying leaflets. They include wills, census returns, electoral registers, directories and rate books. Census returns will give you a snapshot of all the occupants of a building on the evening of one day of a year, whereas electoral registers will only cover those eligible to vote by age or status. Most other sources only list the main householder or the owner the property.