

So you want to be a Structure Sleuth?



- Curious about that ancient building?
- Want to know more about your old house?
- Like looking at old, unusual structures and want to know more?

Then put your Structure Sleuth hat on and get ready to do some detective work!

What do I need?

Apart from time and patience the following may be useful:

Pencil
Rubber
Notebook

Camera

Coins
for
photocopier

Folder
to keep
copies in

Access to a computer
most libraries now have
public use computers

Where do I start?

Begin with your chosen structure. What type is it?

- Is it a house or another type of building?
- Or is it another type of structure such as a bridge, statue or war memorial?

Think about your structure.

- Why do you suppose it was put there?
- Who do you think might have built it?
- Do you think it is very old?

Look at your structure.

- Are there any inscriptions, plaques or date stones on it which may give you more clues?
- Do you recognise any particular styles of architecture or design which may help date the structure?
- Does it look as if the structure has been altered in some way at any time?

Ask about your structure. The following people may be able to give you useful information:

- Family (especially the older generations)
- Neighbours and friends
- People who live in the area
- Local historians (is there a local history society in the area?)



Make a record of your thoughts and answers to these questions in your notebook. You may need the information later.



You may also be able to search the internet for information. A list of useful websites is given at the end of this sheet.



It may also be useful to take some photographs of the structure. Make sure you have the permission of the owner if it is on private land.

What do I do next?

Now you need to begin your fact finding mission...

The Local Library

The local library is always a good place to start.

Ask for...

Local history books

Old photographs of the area

Old maps of the area
(especially old Ordnance Survey maps)

Articles from old newspapers

Why?

Because they can tell you more about the history of the area and perhaps your structure too.

Because they can show you how the area once looked and possibly even what your structure once looked like.

Because they can show you the layout of the area and allow you to plot changes. Your structure may even be on them!

Because they can reveal news worthy stories which may be about your structure or other events connected to it.

The Local Studies Collection

The Local Studies Collection is usually held centrally in an area's main library. Most of the items listed above can usually be found there along with other resources.

Other resources usually held in a Local Studies Collection

- In most collections information files about local places exist with copies of maps, newspaper cuttings, printed articles and photographs all gathered together in an alphabetical system. It is worth checking to see if there is a file on your chosen structure or its surrounding area.
- Copies of the National Census Returns from 1841-1901 are usually available in libraries also. These can provide interesting details about the occupants of a property if your structure happens to be a dwelling of some description.
- Most collections will also have a series of books referred to as Trade Directories and old Electoral Registers both of which can be useful for finding out who may have been connected with either a commercial or domestic property in the past.



Make sure you have exhausted all the information sources offered by the area's library service before you proceed. Try not to exhaust the library staff in the process however! Remember, they are always willing to help and can offer invaluable insights with their local knowledge but you will not be their only customer so try to work as independently as possible.

Where can I find more information?

Once you have exhausted all the library service's information sources you may wish to visit the area's local record office, sometimes referred to as 'The Archives'. You can usually find out where the nearest record office is from the library. The area's local council should also be able to tell you and most record offices will be listed in the telephone book. Many now have their own websites with location maps, contact details and other useful information.

Record offices contain a wealth of historic material some of which may be helpful to you in your structure sleuthing:

Useful Record Office Sources

Old maps	Estate Agent's sale catalogues	Parish records
Photographs	Title deeds	Council records
Building plans	Solicitors records	Monument records
Architect's records	Estate records	Business records

You may be wondering what some of these records are and what they can tell you. It is a good idea to do a little research before you visit a record office so that you are prepared. Most offices have free information sheets about the sources and some of the reference sources mentioned at the end of this sheet will also be useful.

Anything else I need to know about record offices?

Yes!

- Unlike libraries you cannot borrow material from a record office. Most of the records are extremely old, many are fragile and all are irreplaceable. They need specialist care and security to ensure their survival.
- All record offices have procedures to ensure the protection of the documents in their care and you will be asked to play your part in this when given access to them.
- Most record offices operate a card scheme similar to a library card for which you will need to register on your first visit. You will normally be asked to provide proof of your name and permanent address. Once you have a card you will be allowed access to original documents.

Other document preservation and security measures you will come across:

- Use of pencils only for writing
- No food and drink allowed near records
- Some users will be asked to wear cotton gloves when handling certain records
- Signing a receipt for records you use
- Coats and bags to be left in a secure area (such as a locker)

Always contact a record office before visiting to find out what their procedures are and whether you need to take any personal identification with you.

Useful Reference Sources

The following list outlines some information sources you may find helpful, however it is not exhaustive. As your structure sleuthing progresses you will find it necessary to consult many more sources than those listed here.

Books

Hey, D. (ed.) 1996 *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History*. Oxford University Press.

Richardson, J. 1989 *The Local Historian's Encyclopaedia*. Phillimore.

Fowler, S. 2001 *Starting Out In Local History*. Countryside Books.

Winterbotham, D. and Crosby, A. 1999 *The Local Studies Library: A Handbook for Local Historians*. British Association for Local History.

Websites

English Heritage's Images of England

An image/text database of England's 370,000 Listed Buildings.

<http://www.imagesofengland.org.uk>

Church Plans On-line

An image database of 1818-1982 plans and designs for Anglican Churches.

<http://www.churchplansonline.org>

The Defence of Britain

A project to catalogue British WWI and WWII defensive structures.

<http://www.britarch.ac.uk/projects/dob/index.html>

The Public Monument and Sculpture Association (PMSA)

An image/text database of public monuments and sculpture in the UK.

<http://pmsa.courtauld.ac.uk/home/dtbfrm.html>

Green Lion Database

A searchable database of British inns and public houses.

<http://www.jetlink.net/%7ebconroy>

The British Library

<http://www.bl.uk>

The National Archives

<http://www.pro.gov.uk>

Groups, Clubs and Societies

There are many local history groups across the UK as well as groups who specialise in the study of particular types of structure. The internet or your local library is often a good place to find out what is available in your area.