

# **City of Westminster Archives**

## **Access Policy**

**March 2023**



City of Westminster

## 1. Purpose

- 1.1. City of Westminster Archives is part of the Libraries and Archives service within Westminster City Council and is committed to the service vision “to drive equality across our communities as the most inclusive library and archive service in the UK”.
- 1.2. A key objective of the Archives service is to proactively provide and improve access to collections and other resources in its care to all communities. Access is the means by which records are offered for use, either directly or indirectly, both in terms of physical access and opportunity to use and engage with material, both onsite and remotely.
- 1.3. Long-term access to information is at the core of the Westminster City Council Fairer Westminster strategy by: -
  - Providing cultural and learning opportunities for Westminster residents by maintaining access to physical and digital materials.
  - Ensuring long-term access to the information and services they need,
  - Making it easier to find the information and services people need to improve their lives, by providing remote and onsite access to collection material.

## 2. Legislation and Standards

- 2.1. City of Westminster Archives subscribes to the principles of the *Standard for Access to Archives* (National Council on Archives: Public Services Quality Group, 2008), the *Public Library Standards* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2008) and *Principles of Access to Archives* (International Council on Archives, 2012)
- 2.2. The statutory framework for access to information is listed below:
  - Local Government (Records) Act 1962
  - Local Government Act 1972 (s. 224)
  - Public Records Acts 1958 and 1967
  - Data Protection Act 2018 and UK General Data Protection Regulation 2021
  - Freedom of Information Act 2000
  - Environmental Information Regulations (EIRs) 2004
  - Equalities Act 2010
  - Church of England Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978, amended 1992
  - Manorial and Tithe Documents Rules issued under the Law of Property Acts 1922 and 1924 and the Tithe Act 1936
  - Library byelaws for the City of Westminster (under section 19 of the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964)

### **3. On-Site Access**

- 3.1. City of Westminster Archives places access to its collections at the heart of its services. The City of Westminster Archives Centre welcomes all visitors to its service and will take all necessary steps to ensure they are able to undertake research and use facilities without encountering barriers.
- 3.2. The City of Westminster Archives Centre has opening hours designed to reflect its wide range of visitors. It is open 5 days a week, including 3 evenings and Saturday opening every week.
- 3.3. All visitors can expect to be greeted in a polite and helpful way by staff. All staff will strive to offer the highest level of customer service to all visitors and assist with enquiries. Using their expert knowledge they will provide accurate and appropriate advice on material held by the archive, online resources, and material available elsewhere.
- 3.4. In the search room there is space for up to 12 researchers at desks, 14 at microformat machines, 6 at public computers and 1 at a book scanner. Access to collections in our stores is by prior appointment, but on the day requests will be accommodated where possible. If the material is unavailable for legal or conservation reasons, this will be explained to the researcher in a clear and informative way.
- 3.5. Onsite staff will be able to direct researchers to a comprehensive range of catalogues and finding aids, including onsite access to online catalogue WESTCAT and commercial sites such as Ancestry and Find My Past. Support will be given when required.
- 3.6. To enable access and protect the materials from damage, staff will provide advice and guidance on the suitable handling of original local studies and archival material for researchers. The public have access to book cradles, magnifying glasses, paper weights, cotton or disposable gloves, and other resources to assist with the use of the collections. A range of reprographic services are offered to meet the needs of the customer, without placing documents/items at risk of damage. This includes self-service photography and the opportunity to order reproductions from the service.
- 3.7. The City of Westminster Archives Centre provides a clean and safe environment in both the search room and other public areas of the building. The Centre has 6 toilets available for visitors (including an accessible toilet), a locker room for the safe storage of bags and personal belongings, and a common room which contains comfortable seating, a water machine and space for visitors to eat and take a break. All toilets offer free period products to visitors.
- 3.8. City of Westminster Archives is fully compliant with the Equalities Act and strives to be a Dementia friendly organisation. Access provision includes: -
  - An accessible toilet

- Clear signage throughout the premises
- A passenger lift to all publicly accessible floors
- Hearing loop provision in the Meeting Room
- A Large digital screen in the Meeting Room
- Hybrid meeting facilities in the Meeting Room
- Magnifying glasses available upon request
- Adjustable height seating and computer screens
- Well lit public areas
- Staff who can provide physical assistance e.g. lifting heavy volumes

## **4. Remote Access**

- 4.1. City of Westminster Archives offers those who are unable to visit the Centre in person a number of options for access to the information and collections held onsite.
- 4.2. We welcome remote enquiries which can be accepted by telephone, email or letter. Enquiries will be answered within 10 working days. If there is to be a delay in answering the query, the customer will be told why and given an indication of when their enquiry may be answered. All enquiries received via social media channels will be directed to our email service.
- 4.3. All telephone enquiries will be answered promptly and politely and the member of staff answering.
- 4.4. Enquiries that will be answered free of charge will include fact checking, confirmation of references and collections held, advice on where to look for information and general support with research.
- 4.5. A paid research service is available for local history, building history or Gillow furniture history research.
- 4.6. Substantial historical research cannot be undertaken by the service but staff will advise remote researchers on suitable independent researchers available for hire.
- 4.7. The service offers a range of price options for the supply of analogue and digital copies from the microformat surrogates and original material.
- 4.8. City of Westminster Archives will seek to make information about its collections and services publicly accessible via its website. This includes: -
- Our online catalogue WESTCAT which contains archive collections catalogued to recognised international standards, and digitised images.
  - Guide To Holdings to the main archival collections
  - Information Sheets on population sources for family historians
  - Project partner websites showcasing subject matter relating to the collections.

- Details of all local history books and pamphlets accessed through the online Libraries Catalogue.
- 4.9. Online access to key collections, such as the parish records, have been made available through the digitisation of these records by commercial third parties. The service will continue to expand material available online.
- 4.10. City of Westminster Archives will contribute to regional and national archive networks and initiatives, such as the Discovery at The National Archives.
- 4.11. City of Westminster Archives uses social media to help promote the service and collections to new online audiences. This includes using its own Facebook Page and Westminster Libraries Facebook, Twitter and Instagram Pages.

## **5. Closed Records**

- 5.1. City of Westminster Archives endeavours to make as many of its collections open to researchers as possible. Throughout the acquisition process, the accessibility of records will be taken into consideration when assessing the value of the records, which may help influence the decision on whether to accept items for the collection.
- 5.2. Records that contain personal data or sensitive information will be reviewed for potential closure in line with the Data Protection legislation, Freedom of Information Act, Public Records Act and any other identified relevant legislation. If a closure period is applied to the records, this length of the closure and its review or opening date will be clearly marked on the catalogue record.
- 5.3. In a small number of cases the service holds collections on 'Indefinite Loan'. Where permission for access is required from the collection owners' staff will direct researchers to the right contacts so that they can obtain the necessary permission. City of Westminster Archives will not accept new loans with access restrictions unless the restrictions are underpinned by legal requirements.
- 5.4. Requests to see closed records under the ownership of City of Westminster Archives will be reviewed by one of the service's Archivists, in line with the relevant legislation and best practice guidelines. Any requests which fall under the processes of the Freedom of Information Act and/or Data Protection, will be handled in line with the relevant legislation and the policies of Westminster City Council. Appeals for information which has been refused are to be directed to the Service's Development Manager.
- 5.5. City of Westminster Archives are committed to ensuring any records that are closed to the public are marked as such on WESTCAT. The new version of the site (due Spring 2023) will display this information.

## **6. Learning and Engagement**

- 6.1. City of Westminster Archives creates formal learning opportunities to engage new audiences with its collections. These are targeted at mainstream schools, specialist schools and further education institutions covering ages 4-18, as well as community groups and societies.
- 6.2. Wherever possible external funding is sourced to maximise the impact of the learning offer. Additional funds are used to widen the target audience, further the reach and create projects with tangible legacies that will continue to deliver after the close of the project.
- 6.3. Wherever possible, project partners will be found to strengthen funding bids and enrich the quality of the offer through complementary collections and organisations.
- 6.4. Short-term learning placements with the Conservator are offered to international students through formal programmes.
- 6.5. All City of Westminster Archive learning and engagement activities will address the interpretation and education biases often found in the study of history and the past. It will strive to provide context for archival collections which have been created through colonial systems.

## **7. Outreach**

- 7.1. City of Westminster Archives participates in national programmes such as school Takeover Days, Explore Your Archives and Open House. Participation is both virtual, through online campaigns, and onsite, through workshops, tours, and other special events.
- 7.2. A public programme of talks and regular special events around the use and exploration of the City of Westminster's collections are held onsite. The service also offers private tours to a wide range of organisations who can learn about the building, service and see tailored selections from the collection.
- 7.3. Opportunities are taken up wherever is practicable to develop partnerships with community groups and organisations who do not access archives on a regular basis, such as Global Majority communities, local homeless organisations, and day centres for those who are physically less mobile. These partnerships are developed to ensure that access is possible for people who may not otherwise be or feel able to engage with the collections and service.
- 7.6. The service offers its expertise to other organisations in the form of delivering talks and workshops to promote the collection and engage new audiences.

- 7.7. Staff provide expert advice to other Westminster libraries and departments who hold special collections and historic materials, for them to safely promote access to their collections.
- 7.8. Social media is used to help promote the service and collections to new global online audiences. This includes using its own Facebook page and Westminster Libraries Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages.
- 7.9. As an Accredited service, City of Westminster Archives will work with other accredited and established organisations to facilitate loans for items in the collections to be used in exhibitions and displays globally.
- 7.10. City of Westminster Archives has a wide range on long and short-term volunteering and schoolwork experience placements on offer.

## **8. Review**

The Access Policy will be reviewed in March 2026.