

Finding Wheathampstead in Digital Archives



What is document archiving?

Archives are windows to the past and compiling archives has been part of our culture for thousands of years. They can provide evidence, explanations and context, which help us understand the past and inform the future.

Traditional physical archiving involves storing original documents systematically in folders, files and boxes in a dedicated area. While this method is effective, it requires a significant amount of storage space and a collection can be vulnerable to wear and tear, damage, loss or even theft. In recent years, this process has become more streamlined and convenient, with a transition from traditional physical document archiving to digital archiving. Historical material is transferred online with search facilities to allow faster and more efficient retrieval.

Physical or Digital Archiving?

Physical archiving, the traditional archival standard for centuries, provides a sense of authority and authenticity. It does not require technology to access, can serve as a backup in case of technical failures, and original documents and artefacts are preserved. Digital archiving is easily accessible, has transformed and expanded search opportunities, and can be backed up and stored in multiple locations. Both physical and digital archiving are essential: they serve and support historical societies and museums when they are used together.

Types of Digital Archives

There are many types of historical digital archives and the range of original documents reproduced online is increasing year by year.



The most recent is **Coram story: The Foundling Hospital Archive**, published online in October 2024. Documents from the 1740s through to the 1950s reveal the experiences of foundlings and the part played by nurses in counties around London, who were recruited to care for them.



The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, **oldbaileyonline.org**, the largest body of historical text detailing the lives of ordinary people ever published, contains nearly 200,000 criminal trials and 127 million words, allowing us to hear the voices of people from 1674 through to 1913.

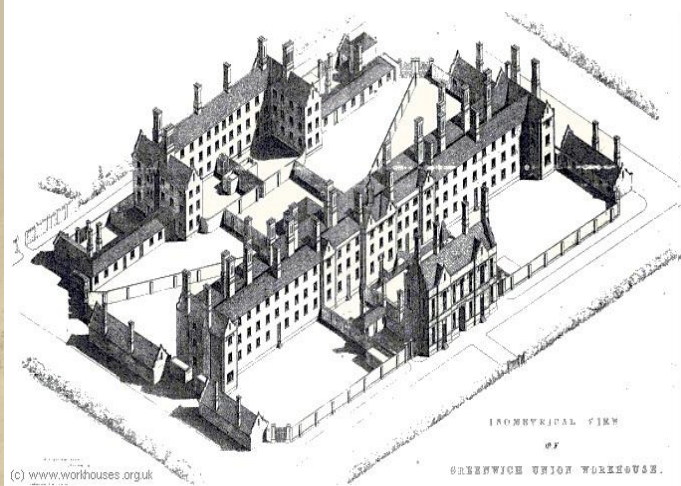
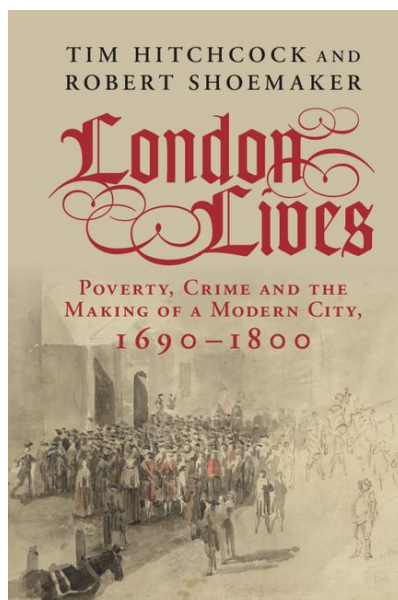


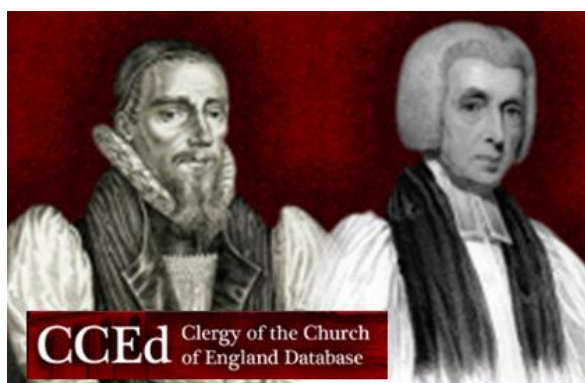
Publication of **The British Newspaper Archive** online, with original text from publications dating from the 1700s for over 300 years, has transformed historical research, which previously would have involved days, weeks or even

months trawling through endless reels of microfilm for a particular research topic.



The databases of the **Commonwealth War Graves Commission** record the details and commemoration location of every Commonwealth casualty from the First and Second World Wars and the **CWGC War Archive**, which holds over 60,000 items from the Commission's past, includes personal correspondence, maintenance and tour reports, staff records, photographs and press cuttings.





Research on specific topics has been collated online in, for example, **London Lives**, 1690 to 1800; **www.workhouses.org**, and the **Clergy Database**, 1540-1835, where information can also be accessed with speed.



British History Online from the 11th to the 20th centuries, and copies of written volumes, such as the **Victoria County Histories**, the **Dictionary of National Biography** and the records of **Hansard**, the official report of Parliamentary debates, are now available with search facilities for easy access.



Ancestry.com and **Findmypast** include material such as records of births, marriages and deaths; census returns from 1841 to 1921 and the register of 1939; wills and probate; Kelly's and Pigot's Trade Directories; records of

Oxford and Cambridge Alumni; information about immigration and travel and much more, but these websites both require a subscription.



FreeBMD is an ongoing project to provide free internet access to births, marriages and deaths. This is a charity and transcribing the records is carried out by teams of dedicated volunteers. It currently contains index information for the period 1837-1997.

Catalogues of local archives such as **Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies** {HALS} offer information and access to documents online, without the need to go there.



Local History Society websites, including WHS, also contain a wealth of searchable information accessible from home. The websites of many history societies in Hertfordshire are listed on the Links page of the WHS website.

Using Digital Archives for researching Wheathampstead

Over recent years, contributors to the Wheathampstead History Society have used a range of digital archives in conjunction with other sources to produce articles and books about our village. Using Wheathampstead or a personal name, specific event or topic as the search keyword has uncovered stories and

new information that would have been almost impossible to access from traditional physical archives.

The new online **London Foundling Hospital Archive** revealed children cared for in Wheathampstead by nurses in Luton Lane during the General Reception, a crisis period at the Hospital from 1756 to 1760. The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, **oldbaileyonline.org**, produced information about Sir Samuel Garrard's presence in the Central Criminal Court while he was the Lord Mayor of London in 1709; and the story of Reuben Dunham of Wheathampstead, sentenced to seven years in Dartmoor Prison in 1899, is recounted in 'From The Folly to the Old Bailey' on the WHS website. Wheathampstead was, and remains, a small rural village, so the number of references contained in these huge digital archives is limited. Nevertheless, the items recovered are significant for our local history and afford local people, both rich and poor, the right to be remembered.

More detailed information about our village is available in the **British Newspaper Archive** (BNA). The WHS publication *The Pubs of Wheathampstead 1830 to 1914* made extensive use of this archive to access information on people and events that took place in inns and beer houses. This archive was also used, together with the **Clergy Database**, in the article, 'The Notorious Rector of Wheathampstead and his Unfortunate Curate'.



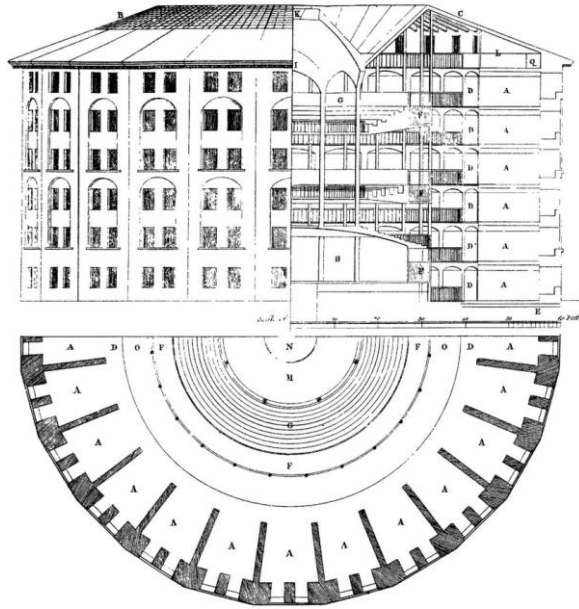
The Times Digital Archive has been used to access Letters to the Editor from Wheathampstead residents on subjects such as pilgrimage and tourism to the battlefields of Flanders in 1919, and dissatisfaction with the new automatic telephone exchange installed in Wheathampstead in 1938.



The website **historyofparliament.org** contains biographies of members of the Brocket and Garrard families and others from Wheathampstead involved in politics. *Wheathampstead: An Eighteenth-Century Village*, made use of the **London Lives** database, which provides a useful list of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills for Wheathampstead available at the National Archives, throwing particular light on those of eighteenth-century women.

A number of digital archives with information about Wheathampstead have yet to be explored.





Jeremy Bentham's plan for the 'Panopticon', the all-seeing prison.

The Digital Panopticon, digitalpanopticon.org, traces thousands of convicts in Britain and Australia from 1780 to 1925, offering information on their physical appearance, crimes and punishment. James Wright and Charles Daws, both from Wheathampstead, appear in this archive. What did they look like? What crimes did they commit? How were they punished? To find out, type Wheathampstead as the search keyword into the website and then click on the Metropolitan Police Register of Habitual Criminals for additional information.



The website of **Herts Past Policing** includes biographies of men who served as police officers in Wheathampstead, including P C Albert Shambrook, born in Gustard Wood in 1885; P C Henry Alban Freeman, whose parents lived in Necton Road and who is commemorated in St Helen's churchyard following his death serving in the First World War in 1917; and P C Percy Crispin Godfrey, who lived on the High Street from 1921 to 1926. There are many more to be explored in this archive, and information could be linked to policemen already mentioned on the WHS website and to other sources.

The British Newspaper Archive (BNA) can be investigated further in various ways, using the search keyword Wheathampstead, a personal name or a village location or event. Access this archive by going to www.hertfordshire.gov.uk and typing 'Wheathampstead Community Library' in the search box at the top of the page. Click on the name of that site, then type 'Reference Library Online' in the next search box. Click on that site, scroll down to and click on 'Newspapers and Magazines' and then on the BNA.



In the same way, **The Sunday Times Historical Archive, 1822 -2016** offers further material about people, places and events in the village. There are 399 results under the search keyword Wheathampstead but the majority are multiple classified advertising items. However, by scrolling down the various pages, the following relevant items appear:

The Pollution of the River Lea, 4 April 1886

Alarming Railway Accidents, 26 Sept 1869

The Skylark's Song, Letter to the Editor, 26 Feb 1928



Diane Munday



Grahame Dangerfield

This archive also includes more recent information about two well-known residents, Diane Munday of Brewhouse Hill, the political activist who played a prominent role in the decriminalisation of abortion in the UK in 1967; and Grahame Dangerfield, the British naturalist, author and broadcaster of the 1960s, who ran a private zoo in Wheathampstead.

Abortion Laws, Letter to the Editor from Diane Munday, 15 Oct 1961

Grahame Dangerfield, TV animal man, cleared of poaching, 15 Sept 1963

How to breed a barn owl, re Dangerfield, 23 Mar 1975

All these items, not found elsewhere, can be linked to other relevant material online to produce further information about Wheathampstead and its residents.



Items from the **Wheathampstead History Society Archive** are available to view on request in Wheathampstead Community Library but cannot be removed.

This is just the beginning. Digital archives will continue to be created and more will come online in future years. As history continues to be written, innovators will find smarter ways to document it, adding to the rich heritage available for local historians.

Dianne Payne 2024