

Recorders Visit National Archives, Kew, in November 2011

A group of more than 30 people from across Uttlesford joined the Recorders of Uttlesford History for a visit to the National Archives in Kew on November 1st. Debbie Lowe, Recorder for Wicken Bonhunt coordinated the visit with National Archives staff to provide a guided tour, document display and time for independent research in the Reading Rooms.

Our coach left Saffron Walden at 8.15 am and made pick up stops at Newport and Stansted. Although we were held up on the M11 for almost an hour due to an accident, our driver made good time crossing London on the North Circular so that we arrived at Kew at 11.45 am.



The National Archives at Kew

We had a short walk around the National Archives buildings which are vast. After collecting our pre-ordered Reader Tickets and depositing our bags we were joined by Sarah Hutton and her team who showed us to our document display room. Sarah explained that The National Archives were the repository for the records of central government; however many of the document collections were relevant to local and family historians.



Our room was set out with six table displays of original documents featuring crime and punishment, farming, poor laws and other interesting selections. After a short introduction to these collections we were able to handle the documents and ask questions of the National Archives staff.



We were then guided through a demonstration of how to get the most out of searching the National Archives vast online catalogue. Using a big screen, we were shown a step by step process of making searches and we looked at lots of local records.



This was the most informative part of the day, and some people came especially for the talk and display. It helped us realise that just searching a name or place will not come up with all the results, but if we follow a procedure, we can find an awful lot more. Sarah Hutton and her team did a marvellous job of answering individual queries and chatting about personal research projects with everyone.

We broke for lunch around 1.15 pm and went our separate ways to the restaurant and coffee bars which served good food at reasonable prices before making our way to the Reading Rooms for an afternoon of independent research.

Our group were allocated places in various locations. The whole building was well staffed with security stations and enquiry points. The main Reading Room contains microfilm resources, published material and original documents, while the second floor houses maps, large documents and records dated before 1688. As our group had pre-ordered our Reader Tickets, we had been able to pre-order up to six documents each which were waiting for us at the collection points.

The Reading Rooms were large and well used, however, we did not feel overly crowded and the special rubberized floor covering absorbed noise so efficiently that you could hear a whisper but were not disturbed by other researchers. The Reading Rooms are exceptionally well equipped with computers, camera stations, extra lighting, document rests and weights. We were not asked to wear protective gloves but were shown how to handle original documents with great care.



The second floor Reading Room with pre-1688 documents

Our group were using Reading Rooms throughout the building and finding fascinating things. Several people looked at bombing raids and air crash investigation reports from the First and Second World Wars. Other people concentrated on local wills for village history, or using the 1911 census for family genealogy.

We were all impressed by how clean and efficient the facilities are and by the support and advice we received from National Archives staff. We met our coach for the return at 4.30 as planned and made good time crossing central London. The coach reached its final destination in Saffron Walden at 6.50 pm.

It is hoped that future Recorders visits will also be available to anyone interested in local or family history. For details see www.recordingutlesfordhistory.org.uk