

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AT KEW – YOUR FIRST VISIT



For those who would like to make their first visit The National Archives at Kew (referred to as TNA), the following is a step-by-step guide as to what to do.

Preparation:

It is best to do some research before you visit, to avoid using up your time there searching the catalogue. To do this go onto the TNA website www.nationalarchives.gov.uk Click on to ‘The Catalogue’ and then click on to ‘Search the Catalogue. You will get a page that has three spaces to fill in. The top space is for a searchword; the middle spaces for first/last search dates, and the bottom space for the relevant Class. If you are researching areas of aviation technology – aircraft, engines, equipment, test reports etc, then type in AVIA. If you are researching Squadrons and Operations, then type in AIR. If there are a large number of files you will get a page(s) that list the various groups within say, AVIA, the number of files in each being recorded in the right-hand column (see reproduction of page below). Click on this number to see the full list within that group. In the example below the searchword is ‘engines’, which will appear in the titles of many documents – normally a searchword might not have such a wide field and all document titles will appear on clicking Enter. You will only get titles of documents that have your searchword in them – be aware that your subject could be found by other searchwords – think laterally. You might find something relevant in other Classes, such as Foreign Office (FO). A listing of these with their relevant Class initials can be found on the website. If you want to search all of the Classes then leave the last space blank, then Enter – the list shown below would be extended to show the other relevant Classes.

So, a typical set of entries might read:

Mustang
1939 1945
AVIA

The screenshot shows the 'The National Archives' website interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the text 'Search the archives' and a red 'Search' button. Below the search bar, the page title is 'the Catalogue'. A navigation menu includes links for 'Welcome', 'About', 'Research guide', 'Search', 'Browse', 'Help', and 'Seal'. A search box contains the text 'type reference here' and a 'Go to reference >' button. The main content area displays search results for 'engines' restricted to 'AVIA'. It shows a list of 2545 results, grouped by division and series. The results are displayed in a table with columns for 'Catalogue Reference', 'Title/Scope and Content', 'Covering Dates', and 'Results'. The table lists various AVIA entries, such as AVIA 15, AVIA 54, AVIA 65, AVIA 10, AVIA 53, AVIA 89, AVIA 63, AVIA 22, AVIA 46, AVIA 55, AVIA 8, AVIA 2, AVIA 98, AVIA 56, AVIA 57, AVIA 47, AVIA 114, AVIA 92, and AVIA 12. The page number 'page 1 2 3 4' is visible at the bottom right, along with a 'Refine search >' button.

Catalogue Reference	Title/Scope and Content	Covering Dates	Results
Division within AVIA	General records relating to aircraft research, development, production and civil aviation		913
AVIA 15	Ministry of Aircraft Production and predecessor and successors: Registered Files		524
AVIA 54	Ministry of Supply and predecessor and successors: Research, Registered Files (Series 7), Reports and Specifications	1930-1977	114
AVIA 65	Ministry of Supply and successors: Registered Files		100
AVIA 10	Air Ministry and Ministry of Aircraft Production: Miscellaneous Unregistered Papers		31
AVIA 53	Ministry of Supply and predecessor and successors: Contracts, Registered Files (Series 6)		21
AVIA 89	Ministry of Supply, Ministry of Aviation, Ministry of Technology & Ministry of Aviation Supply: Electrical Inspection Directorate: Reports		20
AVIA 63	Ministry of Supply, Air Division, and Ministry of Aviation: Registered Files (AA1952-1973 Series)		16
AVIA 22	Ministry of Supply: Registered Files		16
AVIA 46	Ministry of Supply: Establishment, Registered Files (Series 1)		12
AVIA 55	Ministry of Supply: Production, Registered Files (Series 8)		10
AVIA 8	Air Ministry and successors: Inventions, and Research and Development, Registered Files		10
AVIA 2	Air Ministry and predecessor and successors: Civil Aviation, Registered Files		10
AVIA 98	Ministry of Aviation and successors: Scientific Research (Air) and Future Aircraft Division, Hovercraft Section and successors: Registered Files (AW Series)		7
AVIA 56	Ministry of Supply: Inspection, Registered Files (Series 9)		5
AVIA 57	Ministry of Supply: Disposals, Registered Files (Series 12)		3
AVIA 47	Ministry of Civil Aviation: Bristol Aeroplane Company Limited, Type Record Sheets and Assembly Drawings for Brabazon Aircraft	1945-1948	3
AVIA 114	Ministry of Aviation and successors: Aircraft General Services Research and Development Division, Resident Technical Officer (Aircraft) Administration and successors: Registered Files (QAY/SST Series)	1956-1972	2
AVIA 92	Ministry of Aviation and successors: Interdependence, Exports and Electronics Industry Division and successors: Registered Files (ZF Series)		2
AVIA 12	Ministry of Supply and Ministry of Aviation: Second World War and Miscellaneous Unregistered Papers		2

Make a note of what files you will need to look at – the piece numbers, such as AVIA 38/865, for example. In the Research Room at TNA there is a set of red-covered volumes with all document descriptions and their piece numbers; also the internal computers will give you the search facility. This is a more-friendly system than that employed by the US National Archive's website search facility.

Have a click around – clicking Records/The Catalogue/Research Guides will get you a list of subjects. Clicking on Air Transport will get you into the identification of the type of information you will find in the various aviation-related classes.

Getting there:

It is likely that your journey will commence from central London. Take the Underground (the term Metro is not used) to Kew Gardens station on the District Line (green line on the map – pick up a free map at the ticket office). If you are going to make a number of trips to TNA, or if you are

going to spend some time sight-seeing in London, then get an Oyster Card from the ticket office at the station and load it with pre-paid fares – say, seven to ten pounds a day. The journeys are slightly cheaper by this method and it means that you do not have to keep buying tickets.

Consult the Underground system map. You might not be at a station on the District Line, so note where you need to change trains where the line you are on intersects the District Line, and follow the signs. Note that the train that you require on the District Line travels in the west direction to Richmond. Richmond is shown on the front of the train above the driver's cab – do not board a train that does not display Richmond. To enter the system you have to place your Oyster card on the touch-pad to open the gateway leading to the platforms. Note that there is a small screen next the touch-pad that tells you how much money is remaining on the card. You have to use the card at the end of the journey, and you will see that the amount remaining has reduced by the cost of the journey – prices are higher at the 'rush hours' (be prepared to emulate a sardine!). If you need to add more money to the card you can do this at a ticket office, or if it is not manned at a machine (instructions tell you how to do this). An Oyster card is for one person only – two people travelling together means two cards. Changing lines during your journey does not affect the price – you use your Oyster card when entering the system and leaving at your destination.

At Kew Gardens station touch the Oyster Card on the pad and leave the station. (As an aside, leaving the station on its opposite side will take you to Kew Botanical Gardens). Across the way is a road and a few yards down it is Burlington Avenue. There is a sign on the corner directing you to the National Archives. You will probably find that other people are going there – it is a well-trodden path. Turn into Burlington Road and walk down to the crossroads. Cross over to Ruskin Avenue and the Archive building is straight ahead, looking a little like a wartime concrete fortification. The walk will take about seven minutes. See the map at the end of this guide (follow the red dots). On your return to the station take the underpass to put you on the eastbound platform back to London.

If you travel there by car, parking is free at the time of writing but spaces are limited, so an early arrival is recommended.

At the Archives:

You enter into an area that has an information desk, and a room for internet access. Turn left into the area that has the restaurant and café on your left, and the bookshop and lockers/cloakroom on the right. Leave any bags and coats in the locker room; they are not allowed in the Reading Room, which is where you will be looking at the documents. Also not allowed in the Reading Room are pens and erasers – use pencils without an eraser. Apart from coat-hangers there are lockable compartments – you retain the key and there is no charge.

After leaving the lockers climb the stairs to the first floor and enter the Research & Enquiry Room. Here you will need to obtain a Reader's Card. Ask at the Help Desk where to go. You must have means of identification that says you are who you say you are – a passport is OK. This takes a few minutes only. You are now ready to begin your research. If you have already made a note of the items that you want to see then turn left as you enter the Research & Enquiry Room and swipe your card to enter the Reading Room area. Anything you are carrying might be inspected, likewise when you leave. If you have not made a note of what to see then the previously-mentioned red books in the Research & Enquiry Room will have to be consulted. To save time just ask one of the people at the Help Desk to show you the ropes – they are very helpful and very knowledgeable. The Research & Enquiry Room is also where family history research is undertaken and also where the microfilms are kept – it might be that what you are looking for is on a microfilm. If you do use the microfilms then get instruction at the Help Desk.

Ordering documents:

You are now in the Reading Room where you will see row of terminal screens as you walk in. Occupy one and click on Order Documents (the Catalogue is also accessible from this screen). Swipe your card and the screen will welcome you by your name. Click on Order Documents. If this is the first time that day that you have done this (and it will be), it will allocate you a seat. If you are not satisfied with its choice you can choose you own preference – it tells you how to. If you are going to take photographs then a place near a window might be better, but the light is good throughout the room. Normal-voice talking is not allowed but you can communicate quietly in the reading area. The reading area has around 200 seats.

Having been allocated seat it will take you to the order screen. In the space provided type in the piece number of the document you want to see. You can order three documents at a time. To make certain that you are ordering what you want click Description to see the document's title; if OK then click Enter and order another. Unlike the US archives you can keep ordering documents all day (up to three on order/in hand). When you have finished with one take it to the returns desk and then order another document. Keep doing this if you have a lot of documents to see; it will save time. Depending how busy they are it will take anywhere from 20 to 40 minutes for a document to arrive. When it does it is placed in a compartment that has your seat number on its door (see picture). If the document you have ordered is large then it will be sent to the room above – big volumes and maps are seen here – and you will be told.



If you are returning the next day and you have not seen, or finished with all of the documents that you have ordered, then go to the screen and click on the instruction to save what you have – return it to the compartment and it will be retained there ready for you to pick up first thing next morning, or at another day. This will also reserve the seat that you have been using.

Recording information:

There are a number of ways in which you can record information.

The age-old method of writing it down – in pencil, no erasers, no pens (they will be confiscated).

Photocopy – there is an area where this can be done for you, for 20 pence a sheet. Once very popular this is the least-used method nowadays.

Digital camera – now the most popular. There are many camera stands, all near the windows, where you can attach your camera, instead of shooting hand-held. Flash photography not allowed.

Laptop. Very popular. Be aware that the power sockets are UK standard with three square pins. If you are from America or the Continent you will require an adaptor to take you from your pattern of plug to the UK pattern. You might also require a transformer – UK is 220 volts.

Scanners: Not permitted.

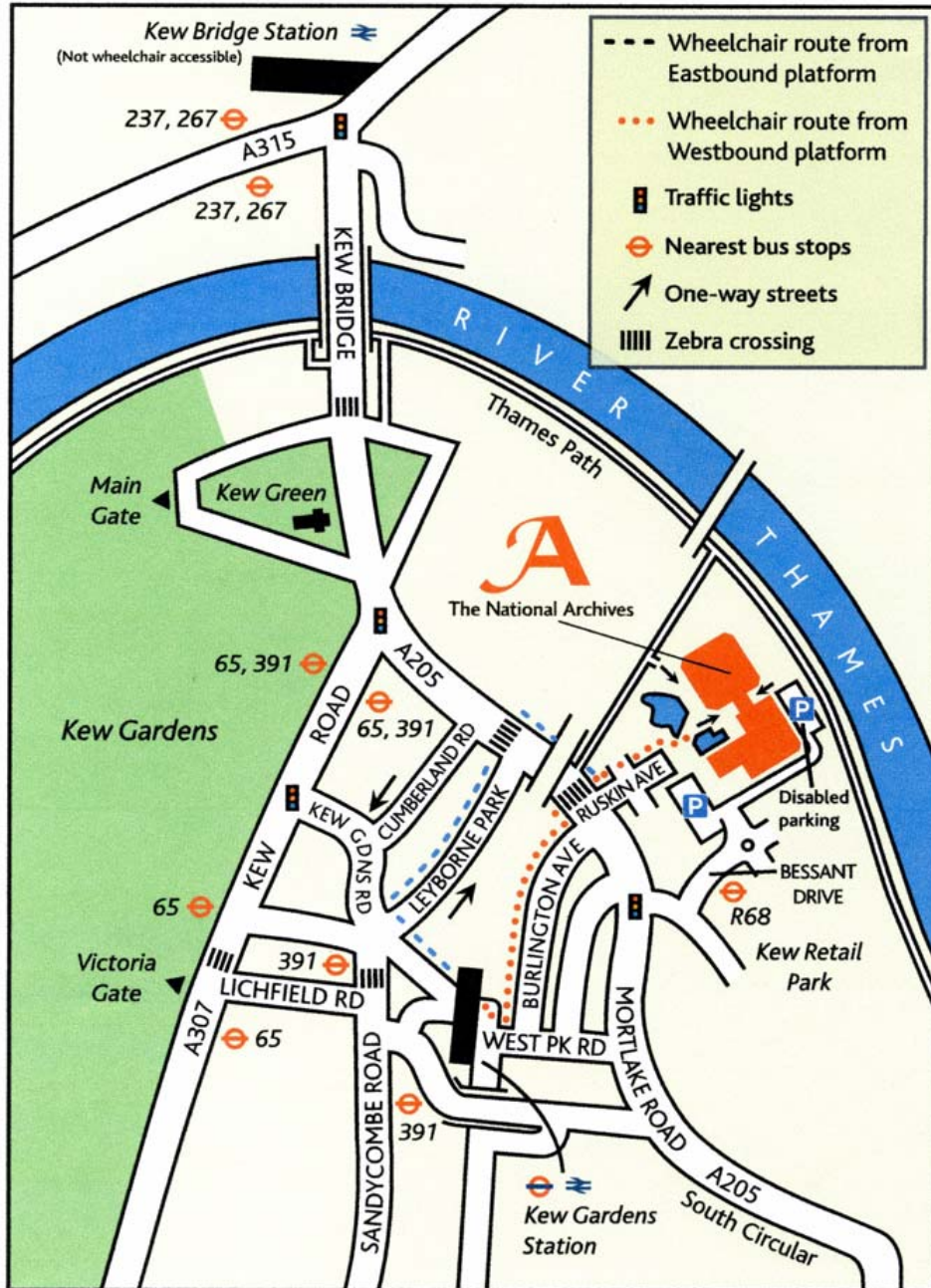
The latest method has replaced the do-it-yourself photocopies. There are camera stands that have the Archive's own cameras fixed to them. With these you can take a picture of your page and either print it out on paper or send it to your Email address. The image you take is transferred to a screen for you to manipulate, should you need to before printing or sending. If you want a print it will cost 20 pence, and to pay for this – it will not work unless it has read your Readers Card and sees the amount loaded on to it – there is a facility at hand that accepts money and puts its value on your card. The printed results seen by the writer are not very good.

If you want to send the images to your own email address, or any other email address, you must first register the address, then you can go ahead. Ask at the Help Desk. This facility is free.



Other points:

The above photograph shows the Reading Room. There are six places to each table, each with a plug-in power point. The camera stands can be seen near the windows.



In the Research & Enquiry Room there is an excellent library holding books on many subjects. The bookshop sells books on all subjects – many are concerned with the World Wars.

If, at the end of your visit, you would like a record of the documents you have booked out, then a printout can be obtained; you will need money loaded onto your Readers Card.

Opening hours are: Closed Sunday and Monday. Tuesday and Thursday 09.00 to 19.00. Wednesday, Friday and Saturday 09.00 to 17.00. The building opens at 08.30, as does the café and the restaurant for breakfasts. The restaurant re-opens from 12.00 to 14.30 for lunches. There are a few days in the year when it is closed; consult the website before making plans.

The smoking area (covered) is outside the main entrance hall, opposite side of entry door. If you wish to stay in the local area during your time there, there are guesthouses, etc. nearby.

Update

The National Archives has introduced an alternative system of searching the Catalogue, known as Discovery. At present the Beta (test) version is in operation on its website. It presents the catalogue in a different manner to that outlined above and makes searching easier, particularly so in that related areas of search are easily available. I have tried it and found it be an improvement over the original method. There is nothing wrong with the original method and it may suit some people to keep using it, though there will come a time when Discovery will replace it – user experience is being evaluated. To use the Discovery method you need to:

Enter the National Archive website, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk as before and click on **The Catalogue**. This will bring up the familiar page that has Search the Catalogue, but note the legend above that says ‘Use our new catalogue to discover records’ Click on this and you get a new page that has the Searchword facility (of which more later) and a series of squares lettered A to Z. As your interest is likely to be aviation related then click on the **A square**. This will show all the departments whose initial letter is A, which will include AIR for Air Force records and AVIA for aviation records. For the purpose of demonstration we will concentrate on AVIA records.

Click on the **AVIA** section and you will get a Hierarchy of all departments, the descriptions of which are shown within squares. Examples are Royal Aircraft Factory, British Air Commission, etc. (Clicking on **View the File** will get a quick overview of related areas of search.) Click on, say, **Royal Aircraft Factory** and you get another Hierarchy giving a brief descriptions of what the various AVIA classes contain. For example; **AVIA6** series has files dating from 1908 to 1991 concerning Ministry of Defence and predecessors, Royal Aircraft Factory, Royal Aircraft Establishment, and contains 26014 files and volumes. Click on this and you will get another Hierarchy showing subjects, eg. **Aerodynamics, Engines, Experimental Flying**, etc. Click on, say, **Engines** and you get a descriptive list of every file in AVIA6 concerned with engines, giving the piece number, eg, AVIA6/4671. This is the file number you book out to view. Each page has a number of description squares; to view more click on the progressive page numbers at the bottom.

Some of the squares do not have a description but have a note saying ‘Description available at other catalogue level’, but it does give the AVIA piece number. **Click on the square** and you will get a more detailed description of the files that have that particular piece number. Click on a square again and you will get an **order form**.

Many documents have been digitalised; many haven’t. **Clicking on a description square** will get you the means to order a copy of the document. This is particularly useful for those not resident in the UK. If a digitalised copy is available then it will give you the price, and also the number of pages and the file KB count. Click on the **Order a Copy** button. Your order can be delivered either digitally by email or pages by post. If not digitalised then you can request a cost of digitalising the document.

If you use the searchword facility, headed ‘Discover our Collection’, there is a space to type in your searchword. Note that it says ‘All Collections’. This means that if you type in, say, ‘Packard’, then apart from getting file descriptions concerning engines, you will also get files concerning people with the name Packard. To narrow down the search, click on ‘**more options, dates and subject**’ – this case you might enter dates 1939 to 1945, and click on the Military and Air Force tick boxes. This brings the system in line with the one described previously.

I think there is little doubt that the Discovery system will prevail, and researchers would be wise to get used to it. — © David Birch. August 2012