

Resources for Biographical writing

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Here are some ways to research your diarist, their family, their ancestors, their descendants, their birthplace, grave, marriage, schooling and so on, on the net, and some useful links to diaries and diary collectors in general.

1. Ancestry.com <http://www.ancestry.com/> Use the trial period – but first assemble your facts and basic details – name, birthdate, address, journeys, related names, education –then start your search. And don't forget, if your diarist is alive, they're probably on a social network.

2. Google: Google is still the best search engine there is, and it's worth taking the trouble to find out how to use it.

3. VitalRec.com for United States Birth Certificates, Death Records & Marriage Licenses

http://websearch.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ&zTi=1&sdn=websearch&cdn=compute&tm=14&gps=28_6_1920_930&f=00&su=p284.13.342.ip_p504.6.342.ip_&tt=11&bt=3&bts=5&zu=http%3A//www.vitalrec.com/

4. Obituaries online: Legacy.com <http://www.legacy.com/ns/>

5. Newspapers: General advice

<http://www.theancestorhunt.com/newspapers.html>

6. <http://nationaldiaryarchive.com/> Really interesting and useful US site

7. Interview with a diary collector, Sally MacNamara, based in Oregon, US. We're hoping to have a Skype conversation with Mrs MacNamara during the course. See below for more on this thoughtful, erudite collector and considerate dealer in diaries.

<http://nationaldiaryarchive.com/2012/01/12/interview-with-sally-macnamara-collector-of-handwritten-diaries/>

8. **Sally MacNamara's website:** <http://sallysdiaries.wordpress.com/>
9. **Simon Garfield is the editor/author of Our Hidden Lives,** http://www.simongarfield.com/pages/books/our_hidden_lives.htm, a book of extracts from diaries collected by the Mass Observation project that started in Britain in 1937 and became best known during World War II, although it continued into the mid-1960s *and was revived in 1981).
Mr Garfield has also written To the Letter, a book about letter writing, which you can find on his website here <http://www.simongarfield.com/home.asp>
10. **Mass Observation [UK]**
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass-Observation>
11. **The Mass Observation Archive:**
<http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm>

Some diary collections and collectors

Great Diary Project, UK:

<http://www.thegreatdiaryproject.co.uk/collection/>

Read what they say about the value and importance of diaries, especially the privacy of diary writing:

Diaries are among our most precious items of heritage. People in all walks of life have confided and often still confide their thoughts and experiences to the written page, and the result is a unique record of what happens to an individual over months, or even years, as seen through their eyes. No other kind of document offers such a wealth of information about daily life and the ups and downs of human existence. The Project's idea is to collect as many diaries as possible from now on for long-term preservation. In the future these diaries will be a precious indication of what life, in our own time, was really like.

What we can learn from diaries

The most remarkable details get recorded in diaries. The weather, movement of birds, the price of food, the regularity of the postal service and a hundred other matters ignored in the history books. Some people comment extensively on the

politics around them, others take no notice of such things at all. Among all these come the excitement of children and holidays and remarks on religion, illness, death. All human life, in fact, is there, packed into small pages where every entry – for the future historian – is accurately dated. And what might seem today to be mundane and unimportant will, before long, take on quite a different significance. Imagine if we had hundreds and hundreds of diaries from people in Shakespeare's time today.

Privacy

Most people regard their diary as very private. Often they write about people and events in the certainty that no-one else will ever read their words. With the passage of time, however, this factor diminishes, and the moment comes when no-one any longer could be affected by the contents of someone else's diary. It is then that a manuscript diary passes from being just a personal record and becomes a testimony of far wider significance. Once a diary is no longer 'contemporary' its message can have value and interest for many other readers who come after. From this perspective a private diary becomes an important historical source.

The Independent (newspaper) article about Dr Irving Finkel, a curator at the British Museum

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/the-art-of-diary-writing-1852748.html>

Other collections

1. The National Archives

This is a link to the National Archives. The National Archives holds a large collection of private, unpublished diaries and is an excellent resource.

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

2. The Isle of Wight Great Diary Project is a partner of the Great Diary Project, Mr Frederick Fisher can be contacted for more Isle of Wight deposit information. The March 2010 article, from The Ventnor News, below provides more information on the collection's ethos and history. The article brings into sharp focus the historical importance of written, personal memories.

<http://www.isle-of-wight-fhs.co.uk/newsarch.htm>

The importance of Diaries

On January the first in 2003, five experts from the British Museum sat round a table on national television to decide on which British archaeological find was our greatest treasure. The choices ranged from hoards of gold and silver to the famous Sutton Hoo burial ship. What was surprising is that our perception of treasure i.e. gold and silver only rated third and fourth place. The experts rated the Sutton Hoo burial as our most important treasure followed by something which most people had never heard of.

The Vindolanda tablets.

What was more surprising, was when the significance of these tablets had been explained to the nation they were invited to “phone in” their own top ten order, the Vindolanda tablets were given first place.

Voices from the Past

So what are these tablets and why did they capture the public’s imagination to warrant our “Top Treasure”? The Vindolanda Tablets are personal letters and military accounts written in ink on thin wooden sheets at the roman garrison Vindolanda on Hadrian’s Wall in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. When the garrison left they discarded the tablets and by good fortune these fragile sheets of wood were preserved by the peat.

As to why they were voted number one treasure by the public, Adam Hart-Davies who presented the programme suggests that the tablets presented an opportunity for us to “see” into the minds of our ancestors. What was important to them. How a community lived and loved. In short they are a personal record of how people lived and what they thought nearly 2000 years ago and are the oldest surviving handwritten documents in Britain.

Today’s Treasure

Personal records such as the Tablets are invaluable from both the historical and cultural points of view. They give an insight into how society is shaped, influenced and changed, in much the same way as famous diarists such as Pepys, Anne Frank have been studied.

The Tablets, however, can be compared more to our modern day personal

diaries. They are a snapshot in time, describing everyday events which otherwise would not have been recorded in epics, poems or sagas.

Diary writing captures what is important to the people who write the diary. Outwardly, these jottings may seem mundane and of no interest to anyone other than the writer themselves. However, over the period of time, the diaries give us something which is just as important and fascinating as the Vindolanda Tablets. They give us insight to what was important to one individual in their own lifetime.

If, as with the Tablets, we have many different diaries we can then begin to see a picture of society at that time.

In the short term this may be of little interest but in the long term diaries can be “Our Greatest Treasure” to understanding society as it was.

Lost Treasure

Sadly the modern diarist is fast becoming a dinosaur as social websites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter become the chosen medium for jotting down our daily thoughts.

The pen has been overtaken by the keyboard and, with the pressures of modern life, the younger generation are not inclined to record their daily thoughts on permanent media like diaries.

There are fewer diaries now than ever before.

When we lose someone close to us it can be difficult to know what to do with their diaries. We often read through them and find the person is still alive in just these few pages; telling us about their life and daily routines. The dilemma is what to do with the diaries. Keep them or throw them away. The latter choice is heart rending but more often as not they are discarded to the bonfire or become landfill.

The Edward Hall collection at Wigan Archives Service

Edward Hall was, in a diaroid sense, Dr Finkel's grandfather. His collection spans the very beginnings of the modern era.

Edward Hall Collection, James Hole 1698:

<http://www.wlct.org/WLCT/heritage-services/Edward%20Hall%20Collection%20Public%20Catalogue.pdf>

Sally Macnamara

1. <http://sallysdiaries.wordpress.com/>
2. <http://nationaldiaryarchive.wordpress.com/2012/01/12/interview-with-sally-macnamara-collector-of-handwritten-diaries/>

A word from Sally

It's been 25 years now since I've started collecting antique diaries and in that time I've have the privilege to read around 6,000 original handwritten journals. I've been fortunate enough to get many of those diaries placed in good homes in museums, historical societies and universities and some even back to the original families. Some of course have stayed in my private collection.

What I've learned while reading and researching these precious pieces of history is more than I could even begin to express here. Nor could I fully do justice trying to express what an incredible wealth of historical, valuable and entertaining information they hold between their pages. I am honoured to have the privilege of reading these prized treasures. In this technological era, writing in a diary is truly becoming a thing of the past. We are able to send emails and texts so easily and with one push of a button those thoughts can and are usually are quickly "deleted."

To actually hold in your hand an antique diary, to read and experience the author's life from so many years ago, well, it's really a life changing experience. It's as if you were right there with the author. You're actually holding a piece of their life in your hands. Diaries are treasured pieces, coveted and cherished by the original author and I believe because of these very reasons and more that diaries should be preserved. I believe there is nowhere else on earth, even with the spoken word, that history comes alive more or where the reader experiences a sense of stepping back into time for a brief moment, than while reading a handwritten diary. You become one with a total stranger, the author, who then becomes a beloved friend and even though they have passed on. Their thoughts, emotions and lifetime events live on forever.