

# turn back time

BBC

A guide to researching the history of your high street





Hi, I'm Eric,  
I think old stuff rocks! Look out  
for me in this booklet, I'll tell  
you about lots of ways children  
like me can get involved.

Watch my adventures through  
time and find details of activities  
and events around the UK online:  
[bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory](http://bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory)



**HANDS ON  
HISTORY**





Whether you're a history expert or you're exploring the past for the first time, this is your chance to travel through time and become a high street historian.

On your way you will uncover images, evidence and characters to build up the story of your local high street through the ages.

Once you've done your research, join in by adding your findings and photos to our Turn Back Time Flickr group, an online record of high street history from across the UK.

Read on for practical advice on how to get started, details of useful places to go and people to speak to and instructions for contributing to the Turn Back Time photo gallery.

Have fun and good luck!

**Gregg Wallace**  
Presenter





# GETTING STARTED

Working out the history of your high street is a bit like undertaking an investigation. Each piece of information you gather is a clue to help you build a picture of what happened, when, why and how.

Start your investigation with what you know. From there, you can visit your local library and archive and speak to people face to face to build up the story of your high street through the ages. This booklet will give you tips to try out all of these approaches.

## Researching independently

Why not focus on one or two shops? You'll probably find, early on in your research, particular shops will stand out as more interesting to you, or you may find an intriguing old photograph which will help you focus your research and will be ideal for adding your findings to the Turn Back Time photo gallery later.

## Working in groups

If you are planning to Turn Back Time as a family project or with a community group, you can research a row of several shops or your entire high street. You can then add several images to the Turn Back Time photo gallery to share your findings.

## Be sensitive

Remember, you are going to find out information about the past and possibly about other people's relatives or the businesses they ran. Be careful to handle your information sensitively, particularly if you decide you want to find out more by talking to people face to face.



## THE HIGH STREET

The high street has been the backdrop for dramatic changes in British life; from refrigeration to rationing, recession to rock and roll and right up to the arrival of the modern shopping centre. By learning about its past and how it has adapted to survive, we can understand the way it is today and what its future may hold.

### First clues

Before you start your research, take a walk along your high street to look at how it is today. As you walk up and down, make a note of what you see now and what you remember about the high street yourself. There are probably shops that have changed hands many times just while you've been in the area, so imagine what you may find out about the more distant past.

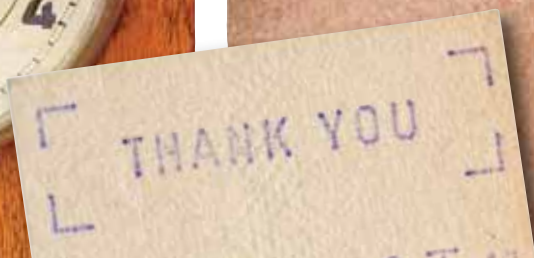
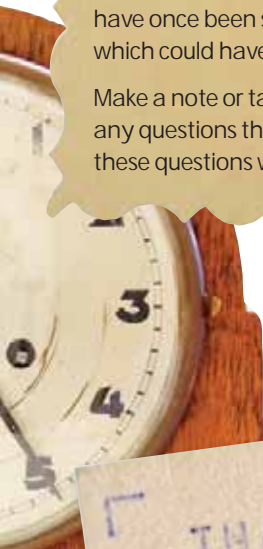
If you're not sure where to start, take a step back and look up at the buildings – there are often old signs or names painted on the brickwork left over from other uses.

Now look down. You may see unusual markings on the pavement where walls once were, old doors with signs from the past or even a surprisingly large cellar which may indicate that a building used to be a tavern. Remember – some buildings that are now houses may have once been shops. Look out for large front windows which could have been shopfronts.

Make a note or take a photo of all the clues you find and any questions they raise. When you start to research, these questions will help you get going.



Children love taking photos and drawing pictures. Take them on your walk around the town and they can record the clues for you.



# WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR?

- Photos
- Old products, packaging and branding
- Newspaper cuttings
- Copies of local records
- Oral history – recordings and notes you've made when talking to shopkeepers and residents

## How old is my photo?

Photographs are a great source of information. If you're not sure what period your photos are from, ask yourself some questions to help you identify when they were taken:

- Is it colour, black & white or sepia tones?
- What kind of paper is it printed on?
- Are there any notes on the back? If so, what does it say?
- If there are people in the photo, what are they wearing?
- If there are vehicles, what are they? Can you see a number plate to help you identify the year?
- Is there any street furniture? (Postboxes, street lamps, street signs, traffic lights etc)
- Are there any other clues? Look at the skyline and trees and for landmarks you can date, for example war memorials or town fountains.

You'll find some examples of old photos on the Turn Back Time Flickr group.

Visit: [bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory](http://bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory)





## TURN BACK TIME – THE HIGH STREET

This major BBC One series charts the changing face of the British high street over the course of a century. The six eras visited in the series represent some of the biggest changes on the high street and will be a good reference point as you explore your own.

### Victorian era

The Victorian era saw the creation of the high street as we know it today. As more people moved into the cities, fewer were able to grow their own produce and began to rely on shops for food and other goods. Meat and vegetables were displayed for all to see outside the shops, so the early high street looked more like what we would now call a market. The buildings had small windows to help keep the contents cool and some would have had workrooms for making the products on sale. Victorian photos are extremely rare, but sketches and cartoons may be found.



### Edwardian era

In the Edwardian era shopping became a pastime in itself. Cheap imports meant even the poorest people were able to afford meat on occasion and canned goods were becoming more popular. Selfridges opened in 1909, bringing luxury to the people as never before. The start of the First World War in 1914 shattered the comforts of the early 1900s and food prices soared. Edwardian photos are black and white or a brown, sepia colour. You can differentiate them from the 1930s images, as shops still tended to show their wares outside.



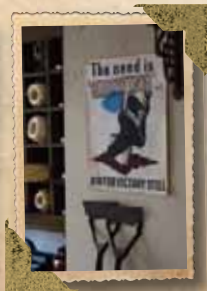
## The 1930s

During the 1930s shopowners began to use the power of advertising and window displays to draw in customers. Goods inside were displayed in glass cabinets and brands we'd recognise today appeared. Shops like Woolworths, Burtons and Boots began to dominate the market. Food was becoming relatively cheap, with fruit and vegetables year-round staples and tinned foods growing in popularity. Refrigerators began to make an appearance in some domestic kitchens, allowing people to store food for longer and shop less frequently. This trend would become more pronounced in later decades. Photos from the 1930s are black and white with advertising posters and branding appearing on walls and windows.



## World War Two

In the Second World War, particularly once rationing began, shoppers would queue for hours outside shops if they heard food was available. Shop windows displayed posters about saving food, fuel and goods and, inside, many shelves were empty. People had to register with most shops to be able to buy goods, so shopkeepers became very important in the community. As imports fell, favourite products became rare and buying new clothes became almost unheard of. Paper was scarce, so purchases were often taken home unwrapped. Photographs from this era are still black and white, though there may be some very early colour.





## The 1960s

In the 1960s self service became the norm in most shops and mass-produced bread meant many bakeries closed. Shops became brighter and more colourful both inside and out, with neon, plastic and Formica appearing. This was particularly noticeable in milk and burger bars, some of which had jukeboxes. Fluorescent lights were introduced in many stores, as well as the shopping trolley. Better food packaging, refrigeration and a rise in car ownership led to the swift growth of supermarkets which changed shopping patterns from daily to weekly. Photos from the 1960s are often shinier (both black and white and colour) with white borders.



## The 1970s

The 1970s saw the establishment of the 'weekly shop' in large supermarkets, as more women worked and shopping was done at the weekend. Shopping deliveries ceased, with newspapers and milk remaining the exceptions. 'Sell by' dates began to appear on packaging and frozen food became much more prevalent. Corner shops could stay open for longer hours than supermarkets, and often became the hub of a community. Record and betting shops, Chinese takeaways and boutiques became high street stalwarts. Photos from the 1970s will still often be black and white (and may be a bit 'foggy'), so look out for clothing hints, like flared trousers.



# PUBLIC LIBRARIES

The best place to start is the Local Studies Library for your area. Most local studies collections will have the following resources:

- Local maps and books on the history of your area
- Pamphlets and periodicals produced by local organisations
- Old and current trade directories

Your local library may also be able to offer:

- Local newspapers from pre-1900 to the present on microfilm or as digital copies
- Press cuttings and ephemera (advertisements, leaflets, etc)
- Illustrations, sketches and photos of the area
- DVDs, videos and CD-Roms about your local area

Your library is likely to have some handwritten copies of older records. The librarian or local archivist should be able to help you understand them – particularly if the writing is difficult to decipher.

You can find details of your public library and its local history collection on the DirectGov website: [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

To find the page, click on the Education link and enter 'library' into the search box, then click on 'Libraries and Books' and scroll down to 'Find out about the historical search service in a library'.

## Top Tip

Old telephone directories may seem a strange place to look, but they can provide invaluable evidence of the past life of a shop and may also include adverts for shops which will give you even more information. Look out for Yellow Pages or directories from the past, including: Bennett's, Kelly's, Pigots, Post Office, Slater's and White's.



## LOCAL ARCHIVES

The local Record Office covering your city, town or village will offer lots of information including details of local estates, families, towns, deeds, leases, sales particulars or maps and photographs. These records can be used to follow a shop from the present day back into the past as it has changed hands and use.

Find your local Record Office by either asking at your local library or searching online: [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon/)

Before you visit the Record Office itself you can find out what sort of evidence you'll find there by visiting the A2A section of the National Archives website. You can also read an introduction to searching archives by visiting the 'Need Help?' section: [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a/)

Once you have completed your search online and noted down the results you can then visit the Record Office in person and read the documents themselves. The staff can often help you interpret what you've found.

## LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETIES AND MUSEUMS

The British Association for Local History can put you in contact with your local history society. Remember, they do not all have 'local history' in their name! Some societies have collections of local records, photos or artefacts they can share with you and they may even hold exhibitions and guided walks around town centres.

Many towns and villages have books written by local historians that provide helpful local history information. These can often be found in the library but also in local shops and tourist information centres.

You may be lucky enough to have a museum in your town or village – or nearby – and this could prove an invaluable source of information. Many local museums have staff or volunteers who are passionate about the area and will be happy to share their knowledge.





# PEOPLE

One of the most important resources in finding out about your high street is people. By talking to shopkeepers and local residents you will make the most of local knowledge and find stories and rumours to investigate.

## Possible leads include:

- Shopkeepers – you may find they have inherited information, photos or news clippings about the site itself from previous owners.
- People who work with the public and have a knowledge of the geographical area such as bus and taxi drivers, police officers, post and milk deliverers.
- Local publicans – publicans often have good stories to tell and can be a great source for old photos.
- People from traditional professions such as undertakers, chimney sweeps and stonemasons. Often their family will have worked in the industry and in the area for several generations.
- People who are members of community organisations – like the Women's Institute, the Mothers' Union or the Bowls club.
- Places of worship – many faith groups keep good local records including photos.



**SOLD**



Children love hearing stories! Ask them to interview older relatives or neighbours to find out their stories about the history of the high street. They can write down or record the answers for the investigation.



# WORKING ONLINE

If you are not familiar with working online, you may want to get a friend or family member to help you get started. You can also find help on the BBC Connect website, a useful beginners' guide to using computers and getting online: [bbc.co.uk/connect](http://bbc.co.uk/connect). Local libraries have computers you can use free of charge.

## 5 top tips

- If you are using a search engine, try a few variations. For example, don't just put in 'Local History [your town]', also try 'maps [your town]' 'shops [your town]' etc.
- Check if your town was known earlier by a different name or if your county boundaries have changed, as this will affect your search.
- Write down the searches you've done as it will save you duplications.
- If you find a great site, either add it to your favourites or make a note of the address.
- Many local organisations keep records online, for example your local chamber of commerce, local tourist board and local authority.



## Useful websites

There are lots of excellent national websites. One that is particularly useful for Turn Back Time is 'Historical Directories'. This includes a digital library of local and trade directories for England and Wales from 1750 to 1919: [www.historicaldirectories.org](http://www.historicaldirectories.org)

You can research online to find out about painters, poets and authors who may have visited your town and produced works featuring it. You can also visit websites that include travel writing. Two great sites to try – [www.visionofbritain.org.uk](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk) and [www.imagesofbritain.org.uk](http://www.imagesofbritain.org.uk)

You can search census returns (results) online. From 1851 they include the occupation of the head of the household. Census returns are not accessible for 100 years – so the most recent returns you can access will be from 1911:

England and Wales: [www.ukcensusonline.com](http://www.ukcensusonline.com)

Scotland: [www.scotlandspople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspople.gov.uk)

Northern Ireland: [www.nisranew.nisra.gov.uk/census](http://www.nisranew.nisra.gov.uk/census)

Find lots more great websites on the back of this booklet.



## TURN BACK TIME: Flickr group

Now that you have built up a picture of the history of a shop or the entire high street, it's time to share your findings by adding them to the Turn Back Time Flickr group and add to a growing collection celebrating the high street across the UK.

### What to do

- Choose a photo from your research that is over one year old.
- Take this photo out with you into the high street and find the spot from where the photo was taken.
- Hold the photo out at arm's length in front of you (or ask a friend to hold it for you).
- Use buildings and landmarks to line it up with the street as it looks today.
- Take a new photo to create a 'now and then' image.
- Return home to upload it to our gallery or, if you need some help, visit your local library.





### The rules are really simple:

- The only part of you (or a friend) that should be visible in the photo is a hand.
- Photos must not be copyright in any way – for example the photo must be your own or you must have permission to use it.
- When you upload your photo, tag it with your location so other people in your area can find it, and include your favourite information from your research.
- You will find full terms and conditions along with clear instructions for uploading your photo at: [bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory](http://bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory)

To find details of family activities and events taking place across the UK go to: [bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory](http://bbc.co.uk/history/handsonhistory)



**HANDS ON HISTORY**  
[bbc.co.uk/history](http://bbc.co.uk/history)



# USEFUL CONTACTS AND WEBSITES

These are just a few of the many organisations that could help you in your research.

## Archives Wales

[www.archiveswales.org.uk](http://www.archiveswales.org.uk)

## Ancient Monuments Society

St Ann's Vestry Hall, 2 Church Entry, London EC4V 5HB

[www.ancientmonumentsociety.org.uk](http://www.ancientmonumentsociety.org.uk)

## Baptist Historical Society

[www.baptisthistory.org.uk](http://www.baptisthistory.org.uk)

## Black & Asian Studies Association

[www.blackandasianstudies.org](http://www.blackandasianstudies.org)

## Brewery History Society

[www.breweryhistory.com](http://www.breweryhistory.com)

## British Association of Paper Historians

Find lots of information to do with paper manufacture, including mills.

[www.baph.org.uk](http://www.baph.org.uk)

## British Association for Local History

Offers guides to researching and presenting local history and reading old handwriting, as well as a directory of other websites to try.

[www.balh.co.uk](http://www.balh.co.uk)

## British Brick Society

[www.britishbricksoc.free-online.co.uk](http://www.britishbricksoc.free-online.co.uk)

## British Library

[www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk)

## Chapels Society

[www.britarch.ac.uk/chapelsoc](http://www.britarch.ac.uk/chapelsoc)

## English Place-Name Society

[www.nottingham.ac.uk/~aezins/index.php](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~aezins/index.php)

## Federation for Ulster Local Studies

[www.fuls.org.uk/fulsmembers.html](http://www.fuls.org.uk/fulsmembers.html)

## Historical Association

[www.history.org.uk](http://www.history.org.uk)

## Historical Directories

A project by the University of Leicester which has a range of directories online that you can search and print off pages from for your own use.

[www.historicaldirectories.org](http://www.historicaldirectories.org)

## The London School of Economics Library

London School of Economics and Political Science  
10 Portugal Street, London WC2A 2HD

[www.lse.ac.uk](http://www.lse.ac.uk)

## The Modern Records Centre

University Library, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL

[www.warwick.ac.uk/go/modernrecordscentre](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/modernrecordscentre)

## The National Archives

The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU

[www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)

## The National Archives of Scotland

[www.nas.gov.uk](http://www.nas.gov.uk)

## The National Library of Wales

[www.llgc.org.uk](http://www.llgc.org.uk)

## The National Museum of Wales

[www.museumwales.ac.uk](http://www.museumwales.ac.uk)

## The Peoples History Museum

Left Bank, Spinningfields, Manchester M3 3ER

[www.phm.org.uk](http://www.phm.org.uk)

## Pub History

A guide to working out the age of a pub.

[www.sfwlwr.force9.co.uk/page\\_12.htm](http://www.sfwlwr.force9.co.uk/page_12.htm)

## Public Record Office Northern Ireland

[www.proni.gov.uk/index/about\\_proni.htm](http://www.proni.gov.uk/index/about_proni.htm)

## Scottish archives, libraries and museums

[www.scotlandsinformation.com](http://www.scotlandsinformation.com)

## Scottish Screen Archive

[ssa.nls.uk](http://ssa.nls.uk)

## The Scottish Association of Family History Societies

[www.safhs.org.uk](http://www.safhs.org.uk)

## The Working Class Movement Library

51, The Crescent, Salford, M5 4WX

[www.wcml.org.uk](http://www.wcml.org.uk)

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this booklet.

**HANDS ON  
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