What's in the local history collections?

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The University of Leicester Library holds one of the largest local history collections in the country. But what's actually in the collections and how can you use them?

As part of Local History Month, I thought we would give an overview of our print collections in the main library. This is intended as a draft of a more permanent and detailed guide.

The first thing to emphasise is that we collect on all the historic counties of England (and London). We have more titles on Yorkshire, for example, than we do on Leicestershire. This follows the comparative approach of the Centre for English Local History. We also hold many works relating to landscape history and topography, another strength of the Leicester tradition.

The main collection is on floor 3 of the David Wilson Library. It contains around 37,000 titles. We hold major reference works, printed primary sources, monographs, finding aids and bibliographies, maps and ephemera. And a lot of directories...
The collection begins with general works (like the Victoria County History and the Buildings of England), dictionaries and guides to sources. You will also find books on methods here and major works of interpretation e.g. W.G. Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*.

The rest of the collection is organised by county beginning with Bedfordshire and ending with Yorkshire. Within each county Record Society volumes come first, then items relating to the county as a whole, and then items relating to individual places within the county.

For researchers, the printed primary sources are very useful. Some are original items, but others have been edited and published by record societies, large and small. These sources can help you by: saving a trip to an archive; abstracting information to make it easier to find and re-use; providing historical context to aid interpretation. Having many similar sources in one collection is a great help to anyone working on a topic.

**Example source: poll books**

We have over 100 poll books in our collections. Before the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872, England had so-called open voting. The names of who voted in an election, and who they voted for, were recorded in either manuscript or printed form. These 'poll books' are of obvious interest to anyone studying political history. Indeed, they give historians information about voters that contemporary political analysts cannot access. They are also useful to someone researching local society, because of the class and status criteria that determined the franchise. Many poll books include further information such as where the voter lived and their occupation. Full names linked with a date and place are also useful for family historians and genealogists. Below are a few examples.
This is a printed poll book from the 1852 General Election, recording the voters in the North Lincolnshire constituency. The title page and dedication ("Glorious Protection Triumph" & "To the tenant farmers and Yeomanry") indicate it was printed by opponents of the repeal of the Corn Laws. This book is particularly detailed as it includes summary statistics of the voting, the candidates' speeches and humour inspired by the campaign.
Poll of the burgesses of Monmouth, Newport, and Usk, at the election of Member of Parliament for the boroughs, 12th March, 1715 (Usk: 1906). H941.69 AAA/MON.

The title page tells us that it was transcribed from a manuscript in private hands.
The Bath poll book, 1855: being a list of the names of persons with their residence and calling, who voted, or were entitled to vote, at the election of a member for the city and borough of Bath, June 4th, 1855 ... (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1974) LOCAL HISTORY F 942 SOM/BAT /POL.

The uses of ephemera. This is a facsimile of the Bath Poll-Book for 1855, printed for an Open University course in 1974.

Other topics you can find sources on include parishes, local government, religion, land and landowning, and the cooperative movement. We have even more in Special Collections and Archives who hold associated rare book and archive collections (https://www2.le.ac.uk/library/find/specialcollections/c-themes/hist).

Special Collections Online (http://specialcollections.le.ac.uk/) has several large digitised collections including the Historical Directories of England and Wales and the East Midlands Oral History Archive. The PhD theses awarded to students of the Centre are freely available online (https://elhleics.omeka.net/). Soon we will add the occasional papers series originally published by Leicester University Press.

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