Tracing House and Building History at Portsmouth History Centre

Ivy Street, c.1955. A house of c.1845 photographed by the city council probably when demolition was being considered.
1 Introduction

Investigating a building’s history can be a worthwhile, if sometimes challenging, experience. This guide suggests approaches and introduces sources at the Portsmouth History Centre (PHC). You will need to check both the local studies catalogue and archive subject, name and place catalogues.

Portsmouth has grown, so older records about northern Portsmouth are to be found at Hampshire Record Office, Winchester (HRO). PHC has maps showing changes to borough, ward and parish boundaries. Moreover there are many useful documents created by national government which are now held by The National Archive (TNA). PHC has copies of some of these, but you may have to visit other record offices to find every source for your building.

2 First steps

Tracing a building’s history can be time consuming. Decide what you most want to find out and focus on that – for example, who owned and occupied the house, how it was used, evidence of changes to its structure, what was there before. Always work back from what you know to ensure you are looking at records of the correct property.

Begin by looking at the building. What architectural style is it and how old does that suggest the building is? Is there evidence that it has been extended or altered, such as changes in the brickwork? Might it have been built at the same time as neighbouring buildings?

Ask neighbours or former occupants what they remember about it. If the building is ‘listed’ as being of historical or architectural importance there will be a description on the English Heritage website: http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/protection/process/national-heritage-list-for-england/.

3 Maps

Maps are a crucial source, providing an understanding of how an area developed. If a building is not on one map but appears on the next in date, you have an idea when a structure was first erected on the site – it may, of course, have been rebuilt.

Because Portsmouth was fortified to protect the dockyard it is one of the best-mapped towns in Britain. Most early maps are in other archives; Hodson – see Further Reading – lists them. PHC has copies of many.
The oldest large-scale maps in PHC include **tithe maps**. They and the accompanying ‘apportionments’ were created after 1836 to show who owned the land, current cultivation and the tithe payable. PHC has maps and apportionments for nine local parishes.

PHC has maps of the property of some local landowners. Among them are maps showing strips in the open fields on Portsea Island. It holds one ‘**enclosure map**’ recording the rationalisation of the open fields and there are others for elsewhere in south-east Hampshire in HRO and TNA.

PHC holds **Ordnance Survey** maps at 50” and 25” to the mile from the 1860s to the present day. Some show conservation areas, compulsory purchase areas and land use. OS maps can also be found online.¹

PHC also has an **Air Raid Precautions** map showing the fall of high-explosive bombs during World War II (incendiary bombs caused much property damage, however), and **vertical format aerial photographs** taken in the late 1940s as emergency maps, clearly showing bomb damage.

### 4 Deeds

Deeds are the key source for ownership of property – try to get access to those of the building you are researching. They will name the people between whom the land is being transferred and normally give its boundaries. Modern deeds often contain information drawn from earlier deeds. Check the deeds of other houses in the same street as ‘your’ property – they may be on land once owned or developed by the same person.

PHC holds many deeds and can provide access to deeds for property owned by the city council. There is a ‘place’ card index listing deeds and other documents such as sale catalogues.

Local deeds older than 1547 have been published – see **Further Reading**.

### 5 Directories

Trade directories, such as Kelly’s, are easy to use with other sources to build a list of occupants. Before c.1870 they list tradesmen and the better-off alphabetically, with their addresses. After then most Portsmouth directories also give householders by street. Other family members, lodgers and subtenants are not recorded.

PHC has copies of local directories from 1784 to 1976. They can be supplemented by telephone directories. Some early directories can be found at http://www.historicaldirectories.org/hd/.

¹ Council staff cannot recommend commercial companies but there is at least one that prints historical OS maps to order that can be found online. See also a University of Portsmouth project: http://project.oldmapsonline.org/about.
6 Voting Records
PHC has poll books and electoral rolls from the 1700s to today. **Electoral rolls** list those entitled to vote, so have become more comprehensive as the franchise broadened. Female householders entitled to vote in local elections were included from 1889; all women over 21 were listed from 1928. In Portsmouth before 1876 voters were listed alphabetically in each ward, since then they have been recorded house by house.

**Poll books** recorded how individual voters actually voted and did not usually give addresses. There are none for Portsmouth after 1832.

7 Taxation Documents
**Rate books** are among the most useful records for house historians. They not only give the names of building owners and occupiers, but indicate the type of property and its relative value. PHC has rate books dating from the 1700s.

Some tax records are held by TNA. These include the **Valuation Office survey** of 1910-15 which intended to record the owners, occupiers, character and value of all British property. Only records for the north of the city survived World War II. TNA holds also **Hearth Tax** returns from the late 1600s, listing how many fireplaces each house had. The Hampshire assessment for 1665 is published.

HRO holds **Land Tax** assessments for Portsdown Hundred in the early 1800s. They include all Portsea Island.

8 Censuses
If the building you are researching existed between 1841 and 1911, its occupants will be listed in censuses held every 10 years. These are the only documents available for Portsmouth that give a glimpse of all the residents of a house, but they record only those sleeping there census night. The returns give names, relationship to the householder, rough ages and occupations, and indicate place of birth.

The original documents are held by TNA, but are online (PHC provides free access to pay-to-view websites). PHC also has microfilm copies of the Portsmouth sections. Although the websites can be searched by street, it can be easier to use the microfilm to find your house. PHC has an index giving references to streets in each census, 1841-81.

9 Images
PHC holds thousands of **photographs, postcards and prints** of local scenes showing buildings. Of particular value are the City Engineer’s photos, many taken in the 1950s and ’60s of areas about to be demolished.

It can also provide access to **paintings** in the collections of the museum service, especially good for the fortifications. Its oil paintings are published – see Further Reading.
English Heritage is publishing photographs of all listed buildings at http://www.imagesofengland.org.uk/. HRO also has many images of Portsmouth, some on line.

10 Public Buildings

Decisions about public buildings are recorded in Portsmouth City Council’s committee minutes. PHC holds the architects' drawings for thousands of council houses, schools and other buildings, plus plans of some of the local barracks.

As diocesan record office PHC holds parish archives. These include not only ‘faculties’ authorising changes to church fabric, but churchwardens’ accounts recording expenditure on churches since the 1500s.

11 Other Sources

Local newspapers can valuable, containing adverts for sales and information about planning schemes. PHC has The News and Hampshire Telegraph on microfilm; both are indexed. There are also copies of other 19th-century papers.

PHC holds some film, including a one of the Highbury Estate under construction commissioned by the builders. Many oral history interviews discuss buildings or domestic life in Portsmouth since 1910. Their catalogue is on line at www.portsmouthmuseums.co.uk. There are more local films and oral history recordings at the Wessex Film & Sound Archive, HRO.

An unusual source is reports on buildings condemned as unfit for human habitation, c.1932. They list occupants, owners, rents, number and size of rooms, and sanitation; most have sketch plans. There are also records of house renumbering.

During World War II a fifth of Portsmouth’s buildings were destroyed or badly damaged. PHC has the archive of the city’s ARP department including telephone reports of each incident.

Other sources that give information about property descent include wills and manorial documents. Probate inventories may list the contents and rooms of houses. Wills and inventories from before 1858 can be found at HRO or TNA. Wills proved after then are with the National Probate Service. The National Probate Calendar can be searched on Ancestry.co.uk free at PHC.

Manorial documents relating to the Portsmouth area can be found via TNA’s website, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/mdr/default.htm.

12 Further Reading – all these books can be found at PHC

Balfour, A., Portsmouth (City Buildings Series), London 1970


