

Section A: Getting Started

1. Before you start:

- Discuss your article with the Project Director or Volunteer Co-ordinator to make sure that you are clear how the area to be covered by your article is defined for VCH purposes (whether it is a single township or the whole of an ancient parish, for example).
- Take a look at the 'Jubilee Digest' for the place you are studying on the Cumbria County History Trust website by clicking on the map at <http://www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk/map> This will provide a quick overview of its history and ought to identify the institutions (places of worship, schools etc) within the boundaries of your parish/township.
- **PLEASE DO NOT EMBARK ON RESEARCH WITHOUT FIRST CONTACTING THE VOLUNTEER CO-ORDINATOR, TO MAKE SURE THAT NO ONE ELSE IS ALREADY WORKING ON AN ARTICLE FOR THE SAME PLACE!**

2. How to work: individually or in a group?

We aim to enable volunteers to contribute to the VCH project in whatever ways they feel most comfortable. While some will wish to work on all aspects of the history of a particular place, we recognise that others may prefer to concentrate on one topic (perhaps researching this subject for several places) or on collecting material about a specific period of history. Consider how you would feel most comfortable contributing to the project. Would you prefer to work individually, taking full responsibility for the article for a particular parish or township, and gaining the satisfaction of 'ownership' of that article? Or would you prefer to work as part of a group, enabling you to concentrate on those aspects of the research which particularly interest you and gaining support from fellow group members?

If you would prefer to work as a member of a group, please contact the Volunteer Co-ordinator as soon as possible: it will probably take time to set up a group. If working in a group, take a look at the separate briefing paper on 'Working Together: Guidance for Research Groups' (available on the project website at <http://www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk/briefing-papers>)

However you decide to work, you will be invited to join group meetings for training and support. Once you begin to draft your article, you will receive detailed individual feedback and have the opportunity for one-to-one supervisory meetings.

3. First steps

- **Identify your key sources.** The first task should be to draw up a list of sources, both published and manuscript. The 'Checklist of Essential Sources' (below, pp. 62-69) includes most of the core sources that are likely to be available for most places – and you will need to work your way through the indexes to these as your research progresses. However, you also need to be aware of other sources which relate to your parish/township in particular. Use the six databases listed under 'Preliminary Finding Aids' (below, p. 62) to draw up a bibliography specific to the place you are researching. This will include both published work (in *Transactions of Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society*) and archives held both locally and elsewhere. You should also search for other published studies on the history of your parish or township, including local histories and articles in scholarly journals – searching the Lancaster University Library Catalogue (http://primo-se1.lancs.ac.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?mode=Basic&vid=LUL_VU1&tab=catalogue&) by the name of the place in question ought to yield quick results here.
- **Take a walk** (or, at least, a virtual walk). Whether or not you know the place you are researching intimately, we suggest that you explore it *on foot* (or, possibly on a bicycle or on horseback – but not in a car!) with a large-scale (1:25,000 or, even better, Six-Inch) map in your hand early in your research. If you are unable to walk over the ground, you could explore your parish/township on the satellite images on Google Maps, using the Street View facility to take a virtual walk through built-up areas. Buildings (particularly the inscriptions they sometimes carry) can be read as historical sources, as can churchyards and other cemeteries. Get a feel for the lie of the land, patterns of land use, the layout of tracks and roads. Where you can, follow the parish/township boundary (are there boundary stones or other markers?). Much can be gained by looking – and knowing the landscape can often be vital in helping to interpret documentary sources.
- **Plan your line of attack.** If you read this Handbook from cover to cover you may end up feeling out-faced! VCH research is demanding, both in its breadth and the depth that is required. As so often in a complex project, the solution lies in breaking the task into manageable portions, so, once you have completed the initial searches,

start by focusing on one of the sections of the article. Which one you choose is up to you (though we suggest that you leave the Introduction until the end). There is something to be said for starting with Landownership, as establishing the outlines of landownership across the centuries will almost certainly help when it comes to other sections, particularly Economic History and Local Government.

- ***Decide how you are going to keep your research notes.*** We ask you to retain (and eventually to archive) your research notes and other raw materials (such as photocopies of documents) in either hard copy or electronic form, so that there will be a paper (or 'e-paper') trail back to the primary sources from which your article has been built. The working papers and research notes will remain your private property but the County Editor may well need to consult them during the editorial process. Before you start work in earnest, decide on a system – it might be helpful to think in terms of keeping a file (whether physical or electronic) for each section of your article, together with a file for sources which provide evidence for more than one section.

4. Ground rules: research discipline

Working as part of project involving numerous researchers requires all concerned to be sensitive to the need for communal disciplines, even though much of your time will be spent ploughing a lonely furrow among the archives or at the computer. The following advice is offered in the hope of ensuring the smooth running of the project:

- ***Honour your commitment to the project.*** If circumstances prevent you from completing a task you have offered to undertake, please let the Volunteer Co-ordinator know as early as possible, so that someone else can take the work on.
- ***Avoid treading on the toes of fellow volunteers:*** please check with the Director or Volunteer Co-ordinator before you embark on your research to make sure that the place or topic has not already been assigned to someone else (particularly important if you are working as part of a team).
- ***Always adhere to good practice when using archive sources.*** Follow the Search Room rules for users of archives in record offices, remembering that these may vary in detail from one repository to another.
- ***Before approaching owners of records in private ownership, please check with the Director or Volunteer Co-ordinator,*** who will be able to advise and to provide a letter of introduction if one is needed. When consulting private archives, do nothing

which might in any way damage the reputation of the project or the Trust. The wishes of archive owners in relation to handling and copying of documents should always be respected.

- ***Only post on the project website material which you have obtained permission to publish.*** In particular, remember that in no circumstances should you post an image of a document taken for VCH research without the owner's consent.

5. Time frame

The VCH has been going for 113 years, so don't feel that you must complete your article by the end of next month! Conversely, try to avoid relaxing into such a slow pace that progress grinds to a halt. Researching and writing for the VCH is painstaking, methodical work and you must give yourself time for checking, pursuing leads and – importantly – thinking and digesting your material. Don't rush! We suggest that you discuss the time frame in which you'll work on your article with the Director when you embark on it and monitor progress at regular intervals. As a guideline, a volunteer putting in, say, a day or two per week should probably expect to complete the draft of an article for a rural parish or township in around a year.