

Researching the history of a Muslim Communities and Mosques

There are many reasons why exploring the history of mosques and Muslim communities is important. First of all, it helps us to avoid repeating mistakes that we may have made in the past, as well as helping us repeat practices and ideas that previously may have been very successful and useful. It also allows us to identify information that can be used to discredit and challenge prejudices, negative representations and hearsay. As well as such 'myth busting', exploring our past can help us feel rooted in our community and can provide us with a sense of belonging. By preserving our history, we can also help young people and future generations understand the tradition of which they are part, and the responsibility that they then assume in continuing its path.

Exploring our history also helps us identify and engage with other communities. We may discover that we have experienced similar obstacles and challenges as others in the past. We may then find that we can identify useful solutions and ideas by discussing our shared experiences, and achieve mutual benefits from addressing any current shared challenges together.

Exploring the history of a particular mosque or community certainly can be rewarding, but it can also seem rather daunting. Sometimes it can be difficult to know where to start your investigations and which resources to use. This guide will help you begin your research and will present a range of sources that are available to you.

You can find out much about the history of a mosque and/or a Muslim community without doing any research in a library or archive, and even without doing much reading. We suggest the following sequence of activity: *Look-Listen-Read-Research*

Look

When exploring the history of a mosque, you could begin by looking at the building itself – which may already be very familiar to you – with new and inquisitive eyes. By examining the exterior and the interior, see if you can discover the following:

- When was the mosque built? Architectural style and other evidence can give useful clues.
- How does it compare to other mosques?
- Are there signs that the building has been changed in any way? Has the structure been significantly extended, altered or rearranged? If so, are there any clues as to when and why?
- Many mosques have a pre-history as another type of building (usually a church). Are there any signs that this is the case?

- What ancillary buildings are there? (for example, additional halls or rooms) What are they used for? Was this their original purpose, and if not, how has its use changed?
- How does the mosque relate to its physical surroundings? Is it on a main road or a back street? Do a lot of people live nearby? Does it look like a focal point for a community, or a building that is hidden away and is easily ignored? Is there evidence that such factors have changed over the years?
- What does the mosque exterior say about its first community?
- What sort of statement was it originally making in the local area?
- Inside the building, what can you find out about its history and community? Are there any pictures and posters that can reveal anything about the history and community of the mosque?
- Look also at any burial grounds. What can be found here about earlier and more recent generations? What is the oldest date you can find? Are there any prominent graves, and if so, who do they belong to? Can you identify why there are prominent?

Listen

The memories and testimony of others can form a significant and particularly enlightening aspect of a research project. Their perspectives are part of a collective memory that can provide valuable insights into mosque and community life, past and present. In particular, talk to the Imam and longstanding members of the mosque and local Muslim community. Find out what they can tell you about the past history they have lived through, and perhaps about earlier periods they have themselves heard about. They may know much about the history of the mosque and about other premises that may have been used before it was built. They may also be able to tell you about other key figures in the history of the Muslim community, who you can then interview or investigate.

The collection and sharing of these 'oral histories' can be particularly fascinating because they can tell us things seldom recorded in official documents. Even if they are not completely historically accurate, they can tell us much about the views and cultures of a community. The collection of oral histories is particularly important for the Muslim communities that do not have much 'written' documentation or archives to refer to. Many of the older members of Muslim communities have important stories to tell and pass on to younger generations, so it is crucial that they are recorded whilst it is still possible to do so.

Oral history projects can involve schools and colleges. For example, local school children can interview former students, teachers and their parents and grandparents. These projects can be a useful way of engaging young people with their local community and mosques, as well as connecting them with older generations. They also help older generations remain engaged with the community and demonstrate their value as community members.

See our [Oral History Guide](#) for guidance on developing an oral history project, including sample questions to use. This oral history guide also provides links to further useful guidance as well as case studies. See our [School Projects](#) webpage for more information on developing projects with schools.

Read

Published material can provide an excellent 'way in' to a project, perhaps orientating you to different themes and issues or describing a wider historical context. A selection of useful background reading is suggested below.

Published books

Humayun Ansari, *The Making of the East London Mosque, 1910-1951*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Humayun Ansari, *'The Infidel Within', Muslims in Britain Since 1800*, Hurst Publishers, 2004.

Anne Kershen, *Strangers, Aliens and Asians: Huguenots, Jews and Bangladeshis in Spitalfields 1660-2000*, Taylor and Francis, London, (Routledge), 2005.

Open Society Foundations, *Muslims in London*, Open Society Foundations, New York, 2012

This publication is available as a pdf on the Open Society Foundations website:

www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/muslims-london

Richard S. Reddie, *Black Muslims in Britain*, Lion Hudson, Oxford, 2009

Online resources

There is a growing wealth of websites and online resources that can also guide and inform your study. Some useful examples are given below. See also the online resources provided by archives in the *Research* section.

Professor Humayun Ansari from Royal Holloway, University of London, *Three Centuries of the British Mosque*, BBC Radio 3.

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b017lz5l

East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre

www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk/history

Emel

www.emel.com/section_home?z=6

Islam in British Stone

www.islaminbritishstone.co.uk

Muslim Council of Britain
<http://mcb.org.uk/library/studies.php>
www.mcb.org.uk/downloads/MCB_acheivments.pdf

Muslim Heritage in Croydon
www.muslimheritageincroydon.org.uk

Salaam
www.salaam.co.uk/knowledge/index.php

The Shah Jahan Mosque
www.shahjahanmosque.org.uk/heritage

As demonstrated above, many mosques have their own websites with links to relevant articles and other useful materials, such as newsletters, publications, letters and obituaries.

See also our blog for presentations given at our mosque workshop at the East London Mosque (www.open.ac.uk/blogs/boh/?p=20) and the public seminar held at the Croydon Mosque and Islamic Centre (www.open.ac.uk/blogs/boh/?p=292).

Research

Undeposited material

The mosque is a good place to start your research. You may well find that they have many invaluable sources. Are there some records gathering dust in some dark corner? Is there an old run of magazines or event flyers piled in a side room? Or has someone kept a parent's or grandparent's diary or photograph album recalling mosque life in earlier times? Such material can be very useful and revealing.

Archive material

Mosques are becoming increasingly aware of the need to store and archive documents and important records, such as minute books, which are very important sources for research. Flyers and leaflets from festivals, celebrations, events and other activities will also provide valuable insights into the broader roles and functions of the mosque. (If you are yourself involved in archiving for a mosque, see the guidance provided by the National Archives found on our blog at: www.open.ac.uk/blogs/boh/?p=20#more-20)

A good place to start exploring through archives will be the relevant local archive centre. A comprehensive list of London Borough Local Studies Centres is provided by *ancestor-search.info* at: www.ancestor-search.info/lib-london.htm, but a sample list is provided below. Many of these centres also have online search facilities, although you may need to visit the archive to register in the first instance.

London Borough Local Studies Centres

Barnet Local Studies and Archives

www.barnet.gov.uk/info/200111/local_studies_and_archives/702/local_studies_and_archives

Barking and Dagenham Archives and Local Studies Centre

www.lbbd.gov.uk/MuseumsAndHeritage/BoroughArchivesandLocalStudies/Pages/home.aspx

Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre

www.camden.gov.uk/ccm/navigation/leisure/local-history

Croydon Local Studies *Library and Archives*

www.croydononline.org/history/places/lslibrary.asp

Hammersmith and Fulham Archives and Local History Centre

www.lbhf.gov.uk/Directory/Leisure_and_Culture/Libraries/Archives/17430_Archives_and_Local_History.asp

Lambeth Archives

www.lambeth.gov.uk/Services/LeisureCulture/LocalHistory/Archives.htm

Newham Archives and Local Studies Library

www.newham.gov.uk/entertainmentandleisure/libraries/librarydetails/newhamarchivesandlocalstudieslibrary.htm

Southwark Council Local History Library

www.southwark.gov.uk/info/200161/local_history_library

Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives

www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgsl/1001-1050/1034_local_history__archives.aspx

Main Archive Centres

There are also many larger archives across London, which may also have useful material on mosques and Muslim communities:

The British Library

www.bl.uk

City of Westminster Archives

www.westminster.gov.uk/archives

The Guildhall Library

www.history.ac.uk/gh

London Metropolitan Archives

www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/lma

The National Archives

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Additional online archiving resources

Access to archives
www.a2a.org.uk

AIM25 (an archive for London and the M25 area)
www.aim25.ac.uk

Archives for London
www.archivesforlondon.org/london-for-researchers

The British Library online catalogue
http://catalogue.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?vid=BLVU1

Images of England (photographic library of England's listed buildings)
www.imagesofengland.org.uk

London's Past Online
www.history.ac.uk/projects/digital/londons-past-online

The National Register of Archives database
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/default.asp

There is also the British Newspaper Archive
www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

Other faith communities

Exploring the history of your own faith community can bring it closer to others. Indeed, you can work with other faith communities to explore your shared history. You may find that other faith communities can provide useful advice and resources on local historical exploration from their own research that can be very helpful to you. Examples of such would be the 'history audit' methodology produced by the *Building on History: Church in London* project (see: www.open.ac.uk/Arts/building-on-history-project/resource-guide/history-audit.htm), and the Grove Booklet by Neil Evans and John Maiden, *What Can Churches Learn from their Past?* (Cambridge: Grove, 2012). While it should be noted that these resources were written with the Church of England primarily in mind, there is much here that is useful and readily transferable to research undertaken by other faith communities.

Finding out about aspects of Mosque and Muslim community histories

There are certain aspects of mosque and Muslim community life that you may wish to explore. Some suggestions are below.

The beginnings of a mosque

Investigate why a particular community developed in a particular area and why a mosque was built in a particular location. Again, this would be a very good subject for an oral history project, which could also accompany and inform a broader study of relevant archives. Also, local newspapers and websites will often have articles on the opening of a mosque. You could perhaps examine the difference in perspective from comparing the information retrieved from these various sources.

Imams and community leaders

Imams will, of course, have played a central role in the life of the Muslim community. A research project could explore the life story and memories of the Imam, as well as other prominent and longstanding members of the local Muslim community.

Outreach

Many mosques play a crucial role in the local community, providing direct and indirect welfare through community and health programmes, as well as educational and social activities for children and adults. You may find details of such outreach activity in their records, websites, and from looking through any collections of leaflets and posters. You may also find local and newspaper articles that report on such engagement.

Madrasahs

Madrasahs are often an important part of the life of a mosque for younger members of the Muslim community. You may find collections of minute and attendance books in the mosque that you could examine.

Research in context

To understand the development of a particular Muslim community, it will be instructive to examine the broader context. Consider the wider community demographics, significant political and socio-economic developments, and the experiences of other Muslim and non-Muslim communities. To this end, you could explore local archives on the history of the local area, including searches of articles in local newspapers and websites. An oral history study could also capture the views of prominent community leaders and representatives of different local faith communities.

Good luck and let us know your results!

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