

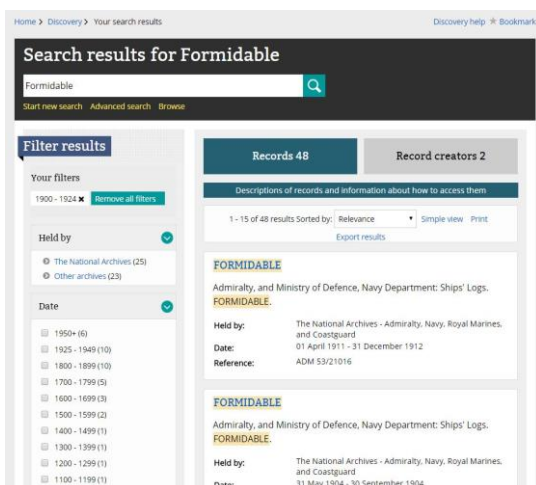
The National Archives

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

The National Archives (TNA, formerly the Public Record Office) in Kew, London, is the UK government's official archive (although Scotland and Northern Ireland now maintain their own). Records from all manner of public records end up here; a very large percentage of the information stored in its vaults relates to the World Wars.

As this is an online catalogue of physical historic documents held at TNA and other archives, it isn't possible to look at the historic documents online (unless they have been digitised, and in that case there is usually an access fee).

Nonetheless, some of the richest sources of historic information can be found in The National Archives ('The' is part of their name so it's capitalised), and it is well worth a visit if you find material in the catalogue that may relate to your research. Consulting the catalogue is essential to gain an idea of how much there will be to look at when you visit.



On the main **Discovery** page (the gateway to the catalogue), you can use the main search box to search their records. Simply type in the ship name and click on the magnifying glass. The website will then return the results of the catalogue search.

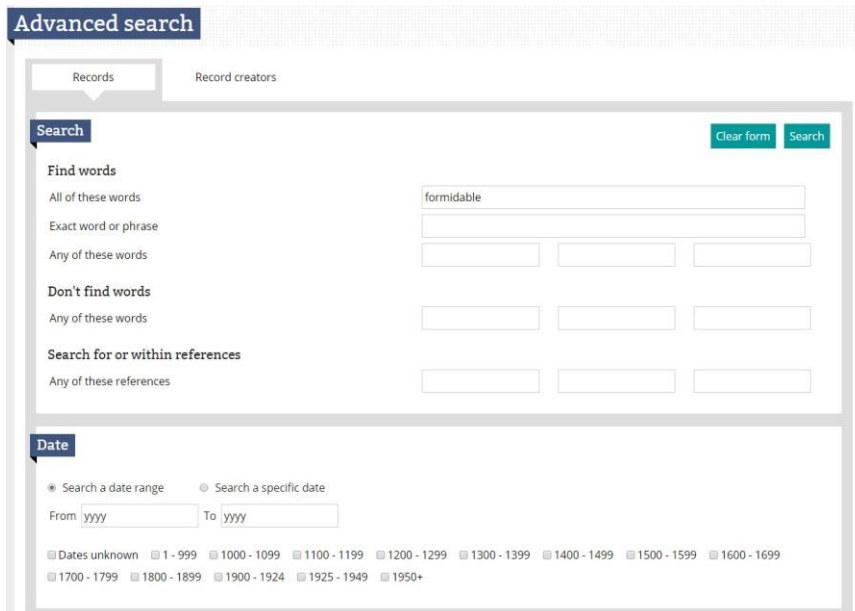
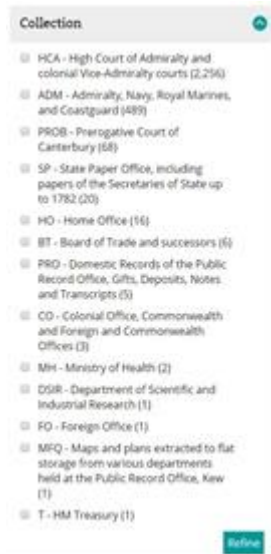
Search results are usually listed in order of perceived importance; if the word appears in the title, it will appear higher up than items where the word only appears in the item description.

As with many other catalogue search engines, there are filters that can be applied to the search results displayed down the left hand side of the page.

The first and most obvious filter to use is the **Date** filter. If you know when your area of interest dates from, you can narrow it down here. This is very useful for distinguishing ships of the same name. In the case of HMS *Formidable* for instance, there are 3,305 records that are returned from a basic search of "Formidable". If you check the date box for **1900-1924** and click **refine**, it reduces the results to 49 (the number of results for that period are shown in the brackets). Although not every single one of these will absolutely relate to the *Formidable* that sank in 1915, it makes searching those records much easier.



Above the date filter is another filter box stating **Held by**. The National Archive’s catalogue searches the indexes of other archives around the country as well and this filter clarifies which archives hold these records. You may wish to see results from other archives, but having performed a search, if you select **Held by** The National Archives (top left) only, a new **Collection** filter appears below the date filter. This allows you to refine the particular collections that material has come to TNA from. Depending on what you’re searching for, you may be able to select specific sources of information that are more likely to have information pertaining to your particular search.



If there are still too many records to search through without more filters, it is worth using the **Advanced** search function (which appears below the search box at the top of the page). Here you will find a range of more specific search functions, allowing you to specify words to find or avoid, restricting records to more specific time frames or even single years and the type of document held.

As with so many other search engines, it is still wise to keep searches general where possible. The National Archive’s catalogue is somewhat restricted to the names and descriptions used by the documents it holds. When searching for warships for instance, some may use prefixes such as HMS, others may not, which can impact on a search if HMS is specified. Some material may not be created or filed for some time after the events that they deal with – a report into a shipwreck from December 1917 may not be filed until 1918 – so it is worth keeping search periods general.

Finally, an absence of results in the catalogue does not necessarily reflect an absence of material in the archive. The documents pertaining to certain people, places or ships may be found in folders with generic titles and descriptions, so they will not appear in a catalogue search. Take the *SS Londonier* for instance. This Belgian-owned merchant ship was sunk by a German submarine in 1918, but being foreign owned, there are no Board of Trade or other such documents. Searching for “Londonier” produces nothing in the catalogue. However, at least three Admiralty reports deal with the loss of the ship in some detail and include such materials as an interview with the Master, casualty lists and Admiralty memos. There is a certain skill in knowing where certain records may be found – particularly ships – but that is beyond the scope of this particular guide.