

Electrifying Women Training

Research handout

Nina Baker (independent engineering historian)

Blog with contact form: <https://womenengineerssite.wordpress.com/>

Electrifying Women Training: Down the 'Fractal Rabbit Hole' - Online sources for hidden histories



Some of the many online sources I use when researching the life and work of women in engineering. I should mention that I principally research dead women which can, in many ways, be a lot easier than those who are still living, due to obvious data protection rules which archives have to observe.

Assuming you have exhausted your Googling skills and still seeking data, here are some that I use. Some of the suggestions are really just catalogues with no access to actual documents online, but in some cases the catalogue entry has a lot of detail in its own right.

I call this the fractal rabbit hole because of the numerous times I have been diverted from my main search into a fascinating sideline and thence to yet another. Before you know it, it is 10'clock in the morning and you find yourself doing just one more search.....

Free Sources

Industrial

Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) Archives

Material relating to the IET and its 48 (!) predecessor institutions as well as the history of engineering and technology, including innovation and developments in these areas from the fourteenth century. Based at Savoy Place, London the IET Archives (super-helpful but with limited staffing) also hold the Women's Engineering Society archives.

<https://www.theiet.org/publishing/library-archives/the-iet-archives/search-the-iet-archives/>

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The Woman Engineer

Digitised versions of volumes 1-19 of the Women's Engineering Society journal, each volume being for 5 years. As it is only possible to search within individual volumes, there is a downloadable PDF index to women's names to help you pinpoint which volumes to look in. The journal can be accessed lower down on this page:

<https://www.theiet.org/publishing/library-archives/the-iet-archives/online-exhibitions/women-and-engineering/the-woman-engineer-journal/>

The OCR is rather variable between volumes and names do not always show up in the search. Permission will usually be given to use pictures, but ask IET archives first:

archives@theiet.org

The Grace's Guide

A wonderful source of historical information on industry and manufacturing in Britain, companies and individuals, with images. A lot of the materials come from old engineering journals. Contributor volunteers are welcomed but it is not as open as, say, Wikipedia. There is a small fee to download pdfs of magazines but the vast majority of the site is free to access. https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Main_Page

Royal Aeronautical Society catalogue

<http://aerosociety.cirqahosting.com>

The Nick Baldwin Collection

Catalogue of images and documents and images preserved by British Motor Industry Heritage Trust. <https://baldwin.britishmotormuseum.co.uk/index.htm>

The History of Radio

Online downloadable radio magazines going way back. Despite the URL, there are lots of UK sources here too. <https://www.americanradiohistory.com/>

Horseless Carriage Foundation library

Motoring history, some sections have to be paid for but some are free. <https://www.hcfi.org/searchHCFI.html>

Europeana

Industrial heritage and working lives in 465,407 photographs, videos, objects, documents from Europe. The photos seem to mainly come via paid-for picture libraries (eg Topfoto) <https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/collections/industrial-heritage>

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Motor Sports magazine

Online archive allows you a certain number of free pages at a time. <https://www.motorsportmagazine.com>

Austin Harris photo archive

Motoring history. He owns the pictures so you do need to get permission to use them from him. <http://austinharris.co.uk>

Farnborough Air Sciences Trust

Museum and archive relating to work done at the former Royal Aircraft Establishment, also the early history of aviation. Quite a lot of women worked there as scientific civil servants. <https://www.airsciences.org.uk/association.html>

Academic

The Davis Historical Archive

A list of women who graduated in maths before 1940, with basic information about their university so you can go to that archive. Many mathematicians ended up doing engineering, so this is a useful check. <http://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/Davis/index.html>

British History Online

University of London graduates 1836-1926, all degree levels and also recipients of awards and scholarships. Basic lists – you would still need to ask the university's archives for the detailed record cards held. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/london-university-graduates>

University of Glasgow

Searchable list of graduates to 1919. Detail available per person varies. <https://www.universitystory.gla.ac.uk/browse-graduates/?gt=1>

World Cat

Worldwide catalogue of library holdings, which will tell you where the nearest library is that holds what you are looking for. But most usefully, it is a good way to check if your target has published anything. <https://www.worldcat.org/advancedsearch>

Google Scholar

Mainly academic papers, citations and patents, but can include items mysteriously not included in World Cat. <https://scholar.google.com>

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British Library

Another place to check if your target has published anything. <http://explore.bl.uk>

General

The National Archives

Principally government and legal documents. You can order materials to be scanned (at a cost!) and sent to you but some catalogue entries are so detailed you might not need to either visit or buy scans. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Imperial War Museum

Women's Work collection in particular is full of treasures. Online search of catalogues but documents can only be seen if you go to IWM. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections>

The Internet Archive

This is essentially a fully searchable online library of complete scanned old publications, which you can read in a basic text format or as facsimiles. <https://archive.org/advancedsearch.php>

Espacenet

Online patent search. In many cases for older patents there are downloadable images of the patent summary. <https://worldwide.espacenet.com/>

BBC Genome Project

Listings information which the BBC printed in Radio Times between 1923 and 2009. <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/>

Paid-for Sources

In most cases the following sites will let you search and sometimes see a little bit, without paying.

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)

The ODNB is a paid-for site but most universities and many local authority libraries have subscriptions and you may be able to access it for nothing by using your local library card

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number. The ODNB has been making proactive efforts to add more women engineers to its biographies. The biographies are very carefully checked and can generally (NOT always of course) be relied upon to be accurate. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/>

Ancestry.co.uk

Family history site. I set up a family tree for almost every woman I research, especially if very little is known, e.g. if no Wikipedia page, ODNB etc, as it can often reveal a lot about the woman's life – where she lived, who she lived with etc. IMechE and IEE have uploaded their older records too. <https://www.ancestry.co.uk>

Family History, Find Your Ancestor, etc do a similar job but their resources vary from company to company.

British Newspaper Archive

Huge assortment (but not all!) newspapers and some magazines, searchable for any names, topics etc, and can be refined by date and location. I use this a lot, as it can often reveal information about a woman's early life, eg school and college qualifications or awards. You can download complete single pages and also plain text per article. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/search/advanced>

Forums and chatrooms

There are a gazillion specialist online forums around, especially on military history and transport history. They are populated by a knowledgeable, usually friendly and usually largely male demographic but can be very useful for specific info, eg on an airfield, ship, car type etc. You will have to join each one in order to be allowed to post requests for info or to reply to other people's posts, but it is often worth putting queries out there even if it takes months or more for anything to come back.

Other sources accessed via the Internet

Not necessarily direct sources of information, but local history societies, local newspapers and local branches of women's organisations are absolutely worth contacting. I have had wonderful help from such groups. They appear to love to be contacted and will usually make every effort to find out if there is anything for you. I have contacted such groups all over the world.

Finally, I try to remember to make a point of sending back my accumulated information about a woman to the sources who have been helpful, especially university archives.

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I have found that doing this often builds up a relationship such that they will contact me with interesting information and also some will then do research and scanning for free that strictly they are meant to charge for! It pays to be kind, it seems.