My experience of being a research assistant at The National Archives was incredibly stimulating and valuable. The atmosphere of the archive is very professional yet with a friendly environment that is welcoming to the public. As a research assistant I was able to work behind the scenes to understand the running of the organisation and how it benefits the public. Indeed, I was given a variety of both independent and assisting tasks during my four weeks at the archive. From working with documents from as old as the 13th century, cataloguing photographs to assisting the public on enquiries, I felt my position was very valued.

One of the major tasks facing the archives in the modern world is making the documents accessible to the public. With digital technology available today The National Archives is doing excellent work on digitising the documents so the public can access them online through their electronic catalogue. Consequently one of my main roles during my placement was to collect data from original documents to be uploaded to the archive catalogue. I worked on the ‘Copy 1’ project which has been an on-going project for more than ten years.

Working in such a vast and professional historical work space was eye opening into the way history is cultivated in the public sphere. Indeed, each staff member is required to give a few hours a week of their time to ‘public duty’ which involved helping with enquiries through both emails and personal assistance at the archives. Consequently I was able to assist in such tasks and learnt a lot about the way in which the archives cater for the public. I was also given the opportunity to work in Document Services to collect the documents the public ordered from the repository.

The staff themselves are all experts in their field of knowledge which made the experience more rewarding as I was able to engage with them and learn more about my field of interest; particularly helpful for my dissertation. I was given the opportunity to listen to talks from The National Archives project; ‘Writer of the Month’ for which Philippa Gregory, author of ‘The Other Boleyn Girl’ gave a talk. Furthermore I was able to have a discussion with the director of the museum at the archive. Both talks were further examples of how The National Archives strives to immerse the public in history.

During my placement I also got involved in research for a fire of London exhibition at the archive that took place to educate children, which involved going through documents to find articles of interest such as newspaper report on the fire. Much of the work I was involved with included looking over the archive material to help the staff members. Cross referencing the data entered on the catalogue to the original material is of vital importance to ensure the public receives the correct information. As a result, my time at The National Archives was incredibly varied which meant I was consistently learning and being challenged.