

## **The National Archives' catalogue and offensive terminology: our approach**

The National Archives' collections reflect 1,000 years of British and world history. We aim to describe them in a way that is accurate, inclusive and respectful, and which preserves the integrity of the historical record. However, in amongst our 24 million catalogue descriptions are language and terminology considered offensive, outdated or upsetting for other reasons. This document summarises our approach to this terminology.

### Our collections

The National Archives is the official archive of the UK Government, and for England and Wales. We are home to the nation's stories and are the guardians of some of the world's most iconic documents, such as Domesday Book and Shakespeare's will. Increasingly, we also preserve and provide access to born-digital records, such as Downing Street tweets. The contents of our collections are hugely diverse, reflecting more than nine centuries of state institutions and the citizens, communities and territories that the British state has governed and interacted with. They are a vital resource for researchers, both personal and professional, and for organisations and communities in the UK and around the world.

### Our catalogue and terminology

Our online catalogue, Discovery, includes descriptions of the historical records that make up our collections. We aim to describe these records in a way that is accurate, inclusive and respectful of the individuals and communities who have created and use our collections, as well as those represented within them.

Original titles assigned by the record creator are often used when producing descriptions for our catalogue entries. We believe that this information is representative of the time and context in which records were created, and as such is an essential part of the archival record. Descriptions in our catalogue may therefore include outdated language and representations about matters such as race, sexuality, disability and gender. These can be derogatory, inappropriate, abusive, harmful, and offensive. We fully acknowledge that encountering offensive terminology whilst searching for information will be upsetting for many people.

We want to be clear that the presence of offensive and upsetting terminology within our descriptions is not an endorsement of the language or content that may be found within our records. These terms are retained because they exist within the record, have evidential value and reflect the reality of people's lives

over the last 1,000 years. Experience has also shown that these terms can help researchers identify relevant information to support their work. This often helps them to produce work that challenges the values of the original record creators and the societies that informed them.

### Cataloguing guidance and ongoing work

Our cataloguing staff work on an ongoing basis to address offensive, harmful and upsetting terminology in descriptions and to engage with evolving archival practice in this area. We strive to balance preservation of the historical context of records with an awareness of the hurt and impact of language and imagery on our users.

The National Archives observes the following cataloguing guidance, in relation to offensive terminology:

- Language used in The National Archives' catalogue descriptions should be accurate, inclusive and guided by objectivity.
- When using original file titles to create new or enhanced descriptions, staff will ensure that any offensive, pejorative or harmful terms are placed in quotation marks. This is to indicate that it is a direct quotation from the record, not an endorsement of these terms.
- When not using original file titles for descriptions, staff will use neutral and inclusive language to describe the record accurately. If it is deemed relevant and appropriate to keep offensive or pejorative terminology within a description, cataloguers will clearly indicate that it is a direct quotation from the record.
- Cautionary notes may be added to inform users of descriptions containing offensive or harmful language or representations.

Cataloguing staff continuously review this guidance, for two reasons. Firstly, language preferences and society will change over time so our practice needs to keep pace with this change. Secondly, our online catalogue grows every day.

Improved descriptions, avoidance of unnecessary offensive terminology and appropriate contextualisation will therefore remain part of our daily routine.

### User engagement, transparency and redress

We invite users to use the 'Reader suggestion' link on our catalogue, Discovery, to submit corrections to catalogue descriptions. This can include suggesting alternative terminology or reporting a description as offensive. We aim to

improve the wording of this form to make it clearer that other types of suggestions and reports on offensive language are sought.

We recognise that we do not always get things right and welcome feedback from all sources so that we can learn and adjust our practices. We believe that by listening, understanding and learning we can build towards our commitment of making The National Archives' catalogue descriptions more accessible and inclusive to all.

Further information about our efforts to become an inclusive archive is available on our [website](#).

## **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ): Offensive language and our catalogue**

### FAQ 1: Why are there offensive terms in your catalogue?

Catalogue descriptions are often based on original file titles assigned by the record creators and as used in their own time. The language used by the people who created the records is part of the story that the records tell. Our catalogue may therefore include offensive, outdated and upsetting language, just as the historical records themselves do.

We do not endorse these terms and appreciate that their presence may upset users when they search our catalogue or read our records. We present offensive terms within quotation marks in our catalogue to show that they are a direct quotation from the record. Cautionary notes may also be applied to warn users about the presence of offensive or harmful language in catalogue descriptions.

We are monitoring offensive language in our descriptions. Staff will run a project to assess this, and where required, descriptions will be modified or contextualised. We recognise we may not always get this right and welcome user feedback.

### FAQ 2: How can I flag offensive or outdated language?

You can notify us of offensive or upsetting terminology by clicking on the 'Found an error?' link in our online catalogue, Discovery. This is displayed at the bottom of every catalogue entry. We also encourage you to use this form to suggest preferred alternative terms.

Staff will review all reports and suggestions and will aim to balance preserving the historical context with redressing the upset caused by offensive terminology. Sometimes we may use quotation marks or an explanatory note; sometimes we may add contextual information or replace terms.

Where changes affect many descriptions, it may take some time for the updates to be live in our online catalogue.

### FAQ 3: What are you doing to address offensive language in legacy descriptions?

We are examining descriptions which contain information from lists and indexes written years, decades and centuries ago. These may include language which was widely used at the time, but is now considered offensive, harmful or pejorative. Staff will carry out a project to identify and review these descriptions. Where appropriate, they will be revised or corrected. This will be an ongoing

project which will take time, due to the scope of records included and the continued evolution of language.

We acknowledge that we may not identify all problematic descriptions and encourage users to provide feedback by using the 'Readers Suggestion' link on our catalogue, Discovery. (See FAQ 2).

#### FAQ 4: When do you replace offensive terminology in descriptions?

We replace them when descriptions contain offensive terminology which is not part of the record's title or a quotation from the record. We aim to address this by updating these descriptions so that they contain more neutral and inclusive language.

We encourage users to notify us of problematic or offensive language by using the 'Reader's suggestion' link in our online catalogue, Discovery. (See FAQ 2).

This will be a continuous area of work, due to the number of affected descriptions and the evolution of language preferences. The work will be completed alongside our project to improve legacy descriptions. (See FAQ 3).

Improving our catalogue data and addressing user feedback is a regular part of our daily work.

#### FAQ 5: Where can I get advice and support on searching?

The '[Help With Your Research](#)' area of our website is a useful resource for those seeking advice and guidance on how to search for records and use our online catalogue, Discovery.

Our '[Discovery Help](#)' site provides users with a range of advice, guidance and support for searching our online catalogue. This includes tips for doing both general and specific searches as well as guidance on how users can construct a keyword search. A glossary for terms used in our online catalogue can be found [here](#).

The '[Understanding your search results](#)' page gives guidance on how to use and understand your search results.

Our [research guides](#) also provide advice and support on searching our online catalogue. The guides provide useful background information on our collections, and offer tips on searching our records. Guides are grouped together by subject content or can be searched and browsed alphabetically. They include guides on

modern Black British history, disability history, mental health history and sexuality and gender identity history.

Users can get search tips and advice from our staff by using the '[Live Chat](#)' function. This service is available on Tuesday – Saturday, 09:00-17:00.