

Etna Explorer 3.0  
User testing report v1.0  
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THE	
NATIONAL	
ARCHIVES	

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# Executive summary

Following testing of version 2.2 we set about building a new HTML iteration. After reviewing the prototype we concluded that it would take a very long time to build filtering functionality and realistic result sets. We considered limiting the data set to make the HTML build simpler but this would have required approximations that would cast doubt on subsequent research findings. As a result we decided to wait for the site components and new API to be built before re-testing the prototype. While we built these the Explorer was de-scoped to focus on a selection of the most interesting and significant records within the archive. As we were building the prototype components there was doubt about whether navigation cards should have more than one link within them. To get clarity on the card linking a high-fidelity mock-up of a small journey within the new proposed highlights version of the Explorer was designed and tested with a mix of six new and non-users.

We found that some elements of the proposed design worked well:

- Topics conveyed the breadth of information within the site and participants wanted to explore areas related to their own interests.
- The imagery drew participants in. It reminded them of their own past and helped communicate the historic nature of the archive.

Overall, however, users struggled to find information using the prototype and they didn't know what the archive was or what it contained. Participants didn't understand that the site was limited to a curated selection of the archive. Once understood, there was some indication that they would prefer to browse the full site.

The proposed design relied on card patterns to support user exploration and navigation. These were problematic. The time period cards gave users a better idea of what to expect within the archive, because they included example document types and collection highlights. However the cards took up space and participants didn't scroll through the full page to view all the cards. When participants scanned through the page and saw the many paths and text, most wanted quicker navigation options – search or a menu or filters. While the homepage cards helped users understand the time and topics available, when they went to subsequent pages, the topics and time periods were no longer visible and they couldn't remember what the site contained.

I don't recommend iterating on a pattern that doesn't work well for end users, however if the project deadlines mean the initial site must be built using card navigation:

- update the topic card descriptions so they represent the records and collections that appear on subsequent pages
- shrink the amount of space cards take up so that users can more easily scan all the navigation options. Consider any of these:
  - reduce the image size
  - remove the time period cards
  - place the explore by time and explore by topic sections within carousels
  - provide alternative views that are easier for users to scan, such as a list view

- consider providing search and/or an A-Z index as alternative safety net navigation in case users struggle to find content related to their interest using the card navigation

Otherwise I strongly recommend we reconsider earlier proposals for a generous interface or faceted navigation. Showing record thumbnails could help users understand what the archive holds – records – while also allowing them to browse quickly. Facets or filters would also allow users to examine and compare the archive contents around topic, time or any other facet. Faceted navigation also persists while users are navigating so they are reminded of what the archive contains.

Further research could examine whether limiting the site to collection highlights appeals to users. If the project schedule determines the amount of information the site can include, link to the main catalogue so users can still browse the full catalogue collection. Make it clearer that this site is just a selection:

- include a site tagline that communicates this across the site
- on the homepage update the copy and remove the reference to 24 million records
- update the topic card descriptions so they accurately show the the content and collections that appear on subsequent pages

The process of iterating the prototype and conducting research could be more efficient. Time was spent hearing things we had already discovered in earlier studies, testing things that were not well written, or going backwards because the prototype changed seemingly without reason.

- Develop prototypes in collaboration so they make use of the specialist expertise of team members
- Ensure previous research findings and recommendations are incorporated into subsequent iterations
- Ensure all changes to prototypes have a design rationale ideally evidenced from earlier research

Lastly, provide an adequate recruitment budget so that research can be conducted in a timely and professional fashion using participants that are representative of the UK population and design personas.

# Approach

To understand whether card designs should include desperate links a high-fidelity mock-up of potential Explorer pages was stitched together using UXPin. This was tested with six participants. Moderated sessions were conducted on the 8th and 9th of June via the Microsoft Teams platform. Six participants matching the 'first-time Frank' or 'non-user Nadine' personas were recruited. Participants were asked to explore the mock-ups imagining that they were looking for general information on copyright in connection with a public speaking talk.

While I aimed to recruit participants to match the diversity of the UK population, I was unable to find participants under 35 and where I did recruit participants under 45 or those of minority ethnicities, participants tended to be from London and the southeast rather than the whole of the UK.

# Findings and Recommendations

## Homepage

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[Home](#) > [Explore the collection](#)

# Explore the collection


Expertly hand-picked, a selection of the most important, unusual and interesting records held within The National Archives' 24 million records on Britain and British history.

## Explore by topic


Discover highlights of The National Archives' collections.




**Agriculture and environment**  
Farming, food and royal parks




**Arts and culture**  
Photography, performing arts and sports




**Business, finance and innovation**  
Banking, taxation and computing




**Crime, courts and justice**  
Pardons, pirates and prisons




**Family and identity**  
Census, children and gender




**Health and welfare**  
Medicine, nursing and welfare




**International trade and affairs**  
Slavery, trade and aid




**Land and buildings**  
Construction, maps and manors




**Religion**  
Discrimination, persecution and witchcraft



**Agriculture and environment**  
Farming, food and royal parks



**Arts and culture**  
Photography, performing arts and sports



**Business, finance and innovation**  
Banking, taxation and computing

## Findings

- The topic headings were easy to scan and understand. Some participants wanted to click into them to learn more about topics they were interested in
- The layout was seen as clear and neat with good spacing
- Non-user participants didn't understand what the archive had:
  - While the topic cards and images gave some indication of the subject matter and time, participants thought the site included articles and background information
  - When asked if it was a museum participants didn't or couldn't explain how the site or archive was different
- It wasn't clear or obvious that the site only included highlights:
  - Participants didn't read the blurb under the header 'Collection Highlights' and as this was the only place that told them the collection was a selection of records users didn't realise this was the case. They expected more information within the site
  - After reading the blurb under the header, participants weren't sure if the site included 24,000,000 records, or thought it did
- One participant didn't know that this wasn't the main site for the archive and when they found out, wanted to go to the full site to browse the entire collection. Another participant said they would contact the archives to get further information. The proposed solution may not be a minimum viable product
- Participants didn't know how far back in time the archive went; they didn't scroll down far enough to see the time periods
- A few participants seemed to indicate the records behind the time periods and topics were different
- The site lacked colour. The previous prototype had blue links but this version had black ones
- Some participants struggled to find information on a subject of interest – copyright. They considered different sections: Arts and culture, Business and innovation and Crime, courts and justice
- Participants didn't know where to find copyright information and wanted search (internal or external), faceted navigation or an A-Z index to look for a topic of interest:
  - these would be quicker than reading through many cards and card blurb on the home page
  - these would be quicker than navigating up and down the site through potentially hundreds of topics and sub-topics
  - it wasn't clear from the topic cards what was included under the topics and whether the listed sub-categories included everything. They also needed to read the information underneath each card

## Recommendations

- To help first time and new users, understand what the archive is, and how it differs from a museum or encyclopedia and what to expect consider any of the following:
  - Surfacing document types and collection highlights under topic cards
  - Surfacing the records themselves on the homepage using faceted navigation or a generous interface

- Adding a tagline directly under the logo, making it clear that the site includes government records. E.g. 'UK government records from 964 to 2000'
- Make it clearer that the site only includes a selection of the archive:
  - Mention highlights in the site tagline and/or header/name
  - And re-write the blurb under the header so it's clearer that this is just a selection
  - Do not mention that the archive has 24,000,000 items
- So users can browse items that may not be within the highlights site, link to the main catalogue. Further research could examine whether collection highlights is a proposition that people can and want to use. Consider alternative MVPS, such as narrowing the scope by topic, for example
- To make it easier for users to view the time periods:
  - Consider placing the topics in a carousel so they take up less vertical space
  - Or instead of stepped navigation by cards, use filters or faceted navigation and place the time period filters at the top of the page alongside topic filters
- If continuing with the stepped card navigation, examine whether the sections are perceived as having different content. Consider making it clearer that records could be found in both a time period and a topic:
  - update the section headers to make it clearer that the cards are one way of exploring the collection
  - provide faceted navigation so users can apply filters for topic and time at the same time and understand the relations between the two.
- Add more colour to the site throughout. Consider colour headers, links or background colours. The link colour on the prototype changed. Ensure that changes to the prototype are made with a rationale in mind so that research findings build incrementally
- Labels and categories must make sense to users. If not, users will not be able to find or navigate to a topic of interest and will abandon the site. Ideally the information architecture would have been designed prior to prototyping. Use a user-centred design process and undertake this research as soon as possible
- Consider allowing users to navigate using faceted navigation or a menu to help them find records related to their interest more quickly and without having to read lots of text or scroll up and down the length of the page or up and down the site hierarchy. If a card pattern must be used in order to build an MVP to deadline, consider limiting the number of cards and/or making the card images smaller so more cards can fit within the viewport. If possible, avoid reducing card descriptions as these provide information scent to help users know what to expect behind a link



## Homepage cards



## Findings

- The time period cards were clear and helped participants understand what kind of documents or records the archive has and what to expect if they were to click through
- The collection highlights under the time period cards gave participants an idea of what to expect, and participants also understood they were only a sample.
- On clicking a collection highlight link participants expected to go straight to a document, for example, Battle of Britain map
- One participant thought the content under the time period cards was too much.
- Within the World War II topic, participants expected any content that fell within the time period, even if not usually associated with war, e.g. Education
- Some users found the topic sub-categories appealing but they were misleading:
  - Participants interpreted the subheadings under the topic cards as the sub-category navigation and broad subject matter within a topic when this wasn't the case
  - There was some doubt that the sub-headings were comprehensive
- Behind topics most participants expected background information, articles and further navigation behind them, not records. Without clicking into the card they didn't know what to expect
- One participant expected the sub-headings under the topic cards to be linked so they could go straight to that sub-category

## Recommendations

- Keep the information and links under the time period cards but consider ways to condense the cards so users can easily scan them, such as:
  - limiting highlights to a maximum of 3 bullets,
  - removing 'Categories include:'
  - removing the volume data if limiting the site to just highlights
  - reducing the size of the images
  - alternatively consider a generous interface/faceted navigation that could show what the archive contains with filters that take up less space within the page
- So users understand what's behind a topic update or remove the topic subheadings:
  - If including only highlights consider linking directly to the highlights within the section
  - If the website includes more of the archive, consider applying a similar treatment to that of the time period cards. Some of the sub-headings shown were those with the fewest records and not all sub-headings were shown. Consider showing those that represent the depth and breadth of the content
- To help users understand what to expect within topics, and to help them understand what the archive contains surface topic meta-data under the image, similar to the treatment applied to the time period cards. Alternatively consider a generous interface/faceted navigation that would allow users to see and understand the types of information the archive holds
- If surfacing records or navigation behind a card, link to it, so users can quickly go deeper within a topic or time period

# Topic page



[Home](#) > [Explore the collection](#) > [Arts and culture](#)

## Arts and culture

Collections related to art, photography, literature and the performing arts.

### Collection highlights

From the well-known to the unusual, browse highlights from The National Archives arts and culture collections.



#### **The Muybridge Collection**

Pioneering work in photographic studies of motion, and early work in motion-picture projection.



#### **The Design Registers**

An astonishing collection of mid-Victorian ceramic designs and other curiosities.



#### **Building Britain**

Plans, sketches and maps of famous buildings including the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben.



#### **Football teams**

A photographic collection of football teams through the ages.



#### **Victorian photography collection**

Glimpse the unseen lives of Victorian England



#### **Public Information Films**

A selection of the most memorable public information films covering fascinating events from British post-war history.

### Arts and culture collection insights

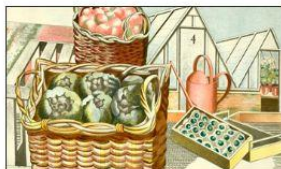


#### **Victorian advertising and design**

Among these records are one of the great British photography collections of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, with well over 100,000 individual images. There is also a huge and wonderful collection of British branding and advertising images from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

### More Arts and culture

Find out more about Arts and culture at The National Archives.



#### **Art and artists**

This guide covers records related to art and artists for the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries



#### **Transforming Archives: Rambert Archive**

Rambert is a name that is familiar to many people across the country; some still refer to it as 'Ballet Rambert'



#### **War Girls - poetry and prose by women in the First World War**

Ruth Sillers talks about, and performs extracts from, her audio book compilation, War Girls

## Findings

- The images were interesting and enticing, especially the public information cartoon
- The collection highlights section was understood as highlights
- Having just highlights didn't match participant expectations. The highlights seemed a random presentation of things that were much more specific than they expected. Some participants expected more information on the page and most expected and wanted broader categories within the topic page, possibly to start with before going narrower
- On this page, most participants doubted the site would have information on their topic of interest - copyright:
  - Nothing on the page indicated that there were records or information related to copyright from this page
  - Seeing the specific collections made them think the amount of content was limited
- One participant was surprised to see a highlight collection honed in on Victorian times, and they commented that they couldn't remember what time period(s) the site covered. There was nothing on the page that explained what the archive was or included and those that had learned this after viewing the homepage were reliant on their recollection
- Participants expected more context on this page:
  - A historical overview
  - An explanation as to why the collection highlights had been chosen
- The visual presentation indicated to participants that Collections Insights was featured, but they could only guess why. Participants didn't understand the distinction between an insight and a collection
- It wasn't clear how the content under 'More arts and culture' was different from the items within Collection Highlights or why they were selected.
- 'Art and artists' was perceived as having more - possibly all - the information for the category. One participant this at the top of the page as this was the broader content they were looking for earlier
- It wasn't immediately clear that the War Girls card went to a podcast and even after slowing down to read the description this wasn't always clear to participants.
- The Rambert Archive blurb said 'Rampbert is a name familiar to many people' but one participant commented that that while most had heard of it – they hadn't

## Recommendations

- Users are likely to expect more content on the site. If limiting the site to highlights:
  - add a strapline to the site that explains that the site only offers a selection of content
  - link to the main site so that users can find the broader content they might expect.
- Use descriptive card titles and copy that reflects the contents on the following page. This will help users understand what to expect on the next page so that they understand what the site includes, so they do not needlessly abandon the site, or so that they do not need to click into pages to find out what they contain. This is

especially important if only including collection highlights as the content within the page was perceived as very specific and random.

- Those who land on this page wouldn't know how far back in time the archive goes. Consider a strapline to help users who land on this page know what the site and archive includes. This could be coupled with faceted navigation which would provide a visible reminder of the breadth of the archive's collection.
- As earlier research also found, users expect context on these topic pages. Consider including copy that gives a historical overview and explanation of what the archive holds, and why. Incorporate previous research findings into prototypes so that research time is not wasted repeating earlier findings.
- Throughout the site, make it clearer that the archive holds records and documents of historical significance and make it clearer that a collection insight differs. Consider:
  - Using a more descriptive title
  - Using the description to explain that the page includes interpretive content
  - Adding icons that indicate there is explanatory text, audio and/or video commentary
- So that users understand how 'More arts and culture' is different from other content make it clearer that the explorer holds government records and consider a more descriptive header for this section that explains 'More arts and culture' is interpretive content. For example 'Art and culture discussed' or 'Art and culture – what the experts say'
- If limiting the site to highlights omit the research guide as this is likely to mislead and confuse users. If and when including a research guide, make it clearer within the description that it is a guide to help the user navigate the archive, not a collection in its own right.
- For the War girls podcast and other different content types consider adding a label and or icon so that users can quickly distinguish content types without having to read descriptive copy.
- Reword the description under the Rambert archive. Delete 'a name that is familiar to many people across the country' and instead include copy that explains what Ballet Rambert is or where it came from. Throughout the site, refrain from assuming that users will be familiar with cultural references.

# Collection Highlight page

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Home > Explore the collection > Arts and culture > Design registers

Design registers

Highlights from The National Archives relating to Arts and Culture.


Design registers features a selection of fascinating designs registered by designers, individuals and companies from the mid-Victorian period, in order to obtain copyright protection. Whether the designs submitted were detailed line drawings or examples using early photography, they show marvellous examples of jugs, plates and other treasures (including urinals!).

56 items

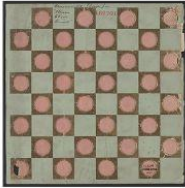
Sort by: 

Date (newest to oldest)


George Augustus Prince - 07 November 1864 - Purpose unknown




Alexander Wilson - 03 January 1865 - Album Chess Board




Wilson & Amphlet - 03 January 1865 - Tape Measure Classes 2 & 4




George Moreton - 09 January 1865 - Boot Top




Alfred Jugla - 06 March 1865 - Fastening for a glove




Paul Emile Chappuis - 25 March 1865 - Whist Marker




William Brown - 09 May 1865 - Pipe




Rabone Brothers and Company - 19 May 1865 - Knife handle



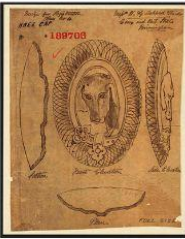
Ellezer Edwards - 08 May 1866 - buttonhole/nosegay holder




B and F Lyon - 30 June 1865 - Bear's grease



William W Ashford, George A Ashford and Walter J Winder - 12 September 1865 - Knee cap



Vergoe Son & Co - 24 August 1865 - Paste-box cover



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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

>

## Findings

- Once on the page users understood that the it contained designs, but they didn't understand why they were featured on the page
- A few participants expected filters on this page to help them sift through the records
- One participant balked at the pagination options and wanted the option to view more records on a page
- The sort by date was initially perceived as the date the item was added to the website, not the date of the design
- The date order 'newest to oldest' didn't correspond with the order of the item in the results
- One participant didn't notice the sort options
- The titles were slightly difficult to read:
  - The object was at the end of the title so users had read the through the rest first
  - One participant confused the designer name as the object name

## Recommendations

- To make it clearer what design registers are. Consider:
  - a different more descriptive title
  - a descriptive subtitle
  - revising the blurb at the top of the page:
    - explain why the content is featured
    - explain how it ended up in the archive and/or why it was recorded
    - keep it brief and to the point so users can easily scan it
- Provide filtering options to allow users to navigate the data set in a meaningful and quick way. Use a user-centred design process to generate the labels and groupings for these filters
- Consider providing different view options to help uses scan and browse large result sets:
  - the option to show more items per page
  - the option to switch to a listview with more items on a page
  - the option to hide image thumbnails so more items can fit within the page
- So users don't get confused, specify that the sorting options are by record date or record creation date
- If testing the mock-ups again, ensure that the results match the sorting shown in the mock-up
- To make it clearer that there are sorting options, consider applying a visual treatment to make the sorting more noticeable to users, such as:
  - making the component darker
  - applying a different background colour
  - or another treatment
- If possible, break the record titles up so that users quickly grasp what the object is and can distinguish it from the creator and lead with the name of the object

# Conclusion

Due to the forthcoming deadline Explorer content was limited to collection highlights. This was not understood by users. Future research should investigate whether suggested changes to the design may make the site scope clearer. The proposition itself should be re-tested to understand whether a limited selection appeals and makes sense to users.

Earlier research suggested that records needed to be grouped into small categories so as not to overwhelm users and so they can make sense of result sets. This research has explored one proposed way of grouping records using the stepped navigation approach and card patterns. While the card component may be ready for the private beta deadline, the number of potential cards and the amount of space they took up on the page made it difficult for users to browse the collection. Without additional metadata such as document type, users struggled to know what the archive or topics included, yet adding this information would make the cards bigger, and more difficult to navigate. I strongly recommend we explore alternative navigation patterns such as filters and facets. Either pattern must be underpinned by a user-centred information architecture. Work to create meaningful, understood categories and labels is ongoing. Ideally this work would have been planned beforehand. It is fundamental to the site's usability and content findability whatever pattern is used on the site.

After a lull in prototypes it was great to test a proposed solution with users. I look forward to testing the site using the API and the components currently in development and working collaboratively on future iterations and making full use of the team's collective expertise.

Some of the internal barriers to participant recruitment are being reviewed and I hope we are able to remove these obstacles so that we can conduct research in a professional and timely way with people that represent the diversity of the UK population and our design personas.