V&A Archive Research Guide
Sources for the history of the V&A’s buildings
The complex of buildings that form the Victoria and Albert Museum is the result of several important architectural developments. Originally temporary sheds constructed of iron and clad in corrugated iron (they were quickly dubbed the ‘Brompton Boilers’ following their description as a ‘threefold monster boiler’ in The Builder), the iconic buildings that were erected in their place are recognised as objects worthy of study in their own right. Short accounts of the History of the Building and Victoria and Albert Museum Decorative Sculpture are available online (see useful links below).

The V&A Archive holds a variety of records that aid a further understanding of the conception and development of the buildings on the South Kensington site. These are available for study in the Blythe House Reading Room.

Possible topics for research include:

- Design and construction of the South Kensington Museum
- Construction and decoration of the North and South Courts
- Design and construction of the Façade designed by Aston Webb
- Decoration of the interior spaces (e.g. Ceramic staircase, Leighton Frescoes, the Green Dining Room, mosaic floors)
Principal secondary sources


Principal archival sources

Many of the archives listed below which are referenced ED 84 were formerly held at the PRO/The National Archives but are now at the V&A Archive. This series of files relates to the early history of the Museum and its buildings. Files ED 84/48-101, 254-263 and 311-312 are all relevant. The V&A’s correspondence files post-1930 are voluminous and are not listed below; information about specific projects can be provided upon request.

- Précis minutes of the Board of the Department of Science and Art, 1852–99
  ED 84/35-43

- Annual reports of the Department of Science and Art, 1854–99 (available at the National Art Library or V&A Archive)

- Entry book of tenders and acceptances for works and services, 1859–73
  ED 84/3-7

- Miscellaneous letter books, reports etc, 1860–91
  ED 84/10-15

- Report on the Commission on Heating, Lighting and Ventilation, 1869
  ED 84/22

- Correspondence: construction of Museum buildings, 1857–1930
  ED 84/54-59

- Correspondence: heating, lighting and ventilation, 1859–1930
  ED 84/60-66

- Correspondence: alterations, decorations and repairs, 1863–1934
  ED 84/67-71

- Correspondence: plans and designs, 1864–1929
  ED 84/72-73
Correspondence: site and adjoining property, 1858–1952
ED 84/254A, 254B, 312

Office of Works/Property Services Agency (PSA) files, 1870–1988, are at The National Archives in WORK 17

Plans

Relatively few 19th-century MS plans survive. Those that do may be consulted in the Prints & Drawings Study Room at the V&A and may be located by reference to the artist’s name: viz. Francis Fowke, Owen Jones, Frank Moody, John Liddell, Aston Webb, Edward Burne-Jones, Reuben Townroe, Godfrey Sykes, Alfred Morgan, William Bell Scott, and Richard Redgrave.

Printed plans are scattered through the ED 84 files in the V&A Archive, including:

- Plans c.1870 of the South Kensington Museum
  ED 84/47
- Block plan of buildings at South Kensington
  ED 84/52:
- Plan of new building, 1865
  ED 84/55/1
- Plan of buildings in progress, 1869
  ED 84/52/2
- Plan of entrance
  ED 84/59
- Plan of the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1905
  ED 84/190
- Plans of the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1909
  ED 84/195
- Plans showing scheme of arrangement of the collections, 1909
  ED 84/197
- Plans, drawings and elevations, principally from Aston Webb’s office, 1900–26, are at The National Archives in class WORK 33. A copy of the list is available in the V&A Archive.
- Some plans are held by the National Monuments Record (NMR), the public archive of English Heritage
- Plans c.1970 onward are held by V&A’s Projects & Estate Department; where these have been added to project files, they may be in the custody of the V&A Archive.
Photographs

Photographic material is dispersed mainly between several sections of the V&A, including:

- The Photographs collection, accessible via the Prints & Drawings Study Room, holds mainly early photographs of the Museum, especially under the pressmark X601.

- Some historical images of the construction of the V&A, and of its exteriors, interiors and gallery spaces, are freely available to view via V&A Images.

- The V&A Archive holds over 900 photographic guardbooks, 1853–1996, which include images of the South Kensington site and Museum interiors. The index to these volumes is held by the V&A Archive; staff can check these for any negative numbers relating to your area of research. With these negative numbers, it should be possible to identify the relevant guardbook(s). Some of these volumes have been digitised and the images linked to the relevant guardbook record on the online catalogue. The V&A Archive also maintains ring binders of V&A site images in the guardbooks (and elsewhere in the V&A’s collections), which you can search in the absence of negative numbers.

Press cuttings

- Press cutting albums for 1837 to 1955 are held by the V&A Archive MA/49.

Useful links

- 'Brompton Boilers' - the Museum's temporary buildings fail to impress
- History of the Building
- The National Archives
- National Monuments Record
- V&A Images

Search

Search the V&A Archive

Access

The V&A Archive is located at Blythe House, near Olympia in West London and can be consulted by appointment only.
Find out how to access the V&A Archive

Contact

V&A Archive
Blythe House
23 Blythe Road
London
W14 0QX
Tel: +44 (0)20 7942 2340

Contact us online

Images:
