

# St Mary's, Witney

## *Digital Reading Room: A Guide*

### Introduction

As part of the work to document the history of St Mary the Virgin, Witney, key historical records have been gathered into a central digital archive. These range from the Victoria County History and the Oxford Archaeological Unit's excavation report on Mount House to specialist studies and earlier guides to the church.

To make this material searchable, the archive uses Google NotebookLM: an AI tool that acts as a digital reading room. You can ask questions of the archive in plain English to check facts, compare interpretations, or follow a particular theme through the sources.

This guide explains how to access the archive and get the most from it.

### The Archive: Welcome Text

The following text appears at the top of the NotebookLM notebook. It is included here for reference.

#### **History of St Mary's, Witney**

*44 sources · A research archive for the parish church*

#### **Welcome to the St Mary's History Archive**

This notebook gives you access to the historical sources behind St Mary's Witney: A History, from the Victoria County History to archaeological reports and specialist studies. You can ask questions in plain English and the AI will search across all the documents to find relevant evidence.

#### **To get started:**

1. **Tick your sources** on the left, or leave all boxes ticked to search everything.
2. **Ask one clear question** in the chat box below, for example: *"What do the sources say about the north transept?"*
3. **Copy and paste this prompt** for more reliable, cited answers:

*Using only the selected sources, explain what the documents say about [YOUR TOPIC]. Prioritise the Victoria County History and the Mount House archaeological report. Distinguish between documented fact and interpretation, and give a citation for each key claim.*

#### **A note on the sources**

Not all sources are equally reliable. Files starting with VCH and MHouse are the most authoritative. Files starting with ACH or GUI are older or more general, useful for context but worth checking against the primary sources.

Click any citation number in an answer to open the original passage and verify what the AI has found.

## Access Instructions

Accessing the archive requires a Google account. If you do not already have one, you can create a free account at [google.com](https://www.google.com).

4. **Sign in** to your Google account.
5. **Open the notebook** by clicking this link:  
<https://notebooklm.google.com/notebook/09f3c6c6-0f3b-495c-81e5-372e4d5fa3f0>
6. You have **Viewer access**: you can safely explore and query documents without altering the original files.

## How the Sources Are Organised

The 44 sources in the archive are organised into three tiers, indicated by a prefix in each filename. Understanding the tiers helps you judge how much weight to give an answer.

### **Tier 1: Authoritative (VCH, MHouse)**

Primary evidence and official records. The Victoria County History of Oxfordshire and the Oxford Archaeological Unit's report on Mount House. If these sources state a fact, treat it as the most reliable account available.

### **Tier 2: Modern Scholarship (SCH, WBP, DIR)**

Academic papers and peer-reviewed research. Useful for interpretation, architectural analysis, and specialist context. Should not contradict Tier 1 factual statements.

### **Tier 3: General and Antiquarian (ACH, GUI)**

Older guides and antiquarian texts, including the nineteenth-century histories by Giles and Monk. These may contain errors or simplifications. Useful for background, but should be checked against Tier 1 sources where possible.

# Research Prompts

## Simple Prompt: Quick Fact-Checking

Use this for straightforward questions about specific features, dates, or events. Ask narrow questions for the best results.

Examples of good questions:

- *“What evidence exists for the date of the north transept?”*
- *“When was the churchyard level lowered and why?”*
- *“What do the sources say about pluralism at Witney?”*

### Simple Research Prompt

Answer the question using only the uploaded sources. Search the documents for relevant evidence. Prefer the most authoritative sources where possible. Distinguish clearly between documented facts and interpretation.

For every key claim, give a citation using: (Author or Source Title, page number if known).

If the documents do not contain evidence, say: “The uploaded sources do not contain evidence for this.”

## Advanced Prompt: Investigating Disputed Claims

Use this when you want the AI to weigh sources against each other, flag contradictions, and separate fact from interpretation.

### Advanced Research Prompt

Answer the question using only the uploaded sources, applying the following evidence hierarchy.

**Tier 1 (VCH, MHouse):** Treat as authoritative fact. If a Tier 1 source states a fact, it takes priority.

**Tier 2 (SCH, WBP, DIR):** Use for explanation and interpretation. Do not contradict Tier 1.

**Tier 3 (ACH, GUI):** May contain errors. If a Tier 3 source contradicts Tier 1, label it “a common misconception or outdated interpretation.”

Establish chronology where possible using precise dates and architectural phases. Distinguish clearly between documented fact, scholarly interpretation, and inference.

Every factual claim must include a citation: (Author, Work or Source Title, page number if known).

If sources disagree, present the Tier 1 evidence first, then summarise alternative interpretations from Tier 2, and explain the difference.

Structure your answer in three parts: (1) Answer, (2) Evidence from sources, (3) Notes on interpretation where relevant.

If the answer is not supported by the uploaded documents, respond with: “The provided sources do not contain evidence for this.”

# Other Ways to Use the Archive

## 1. The A/B Test: Comparing Perspectives

This feature shows how understanding of the church has evolved over time. By selecting only certain sources, you can isolate the historical voice of a particular era.

How to do it: use the source checklist on the left to tick or untick files.

- **The Victorian view:** Select only files starting with ACH. Ask: “When was the north aisle rebuilt?”
- **The modern view:** Deselect those and select only MHouse and VCH. Ask the same question.
- **The result:** You will likely see a shift from local folklore to evidence-based dating.

Note: if you are testing only Tier 3 sources, do not use the standard research prompt, as it will instruct the AI to look for Tier 1 files that you have unticked.

## 2. The Needle in a Haystack: Finding Connections

The AI can instantly trace a name or feature across all 44 documents, work that would take days to do manually.

How to do it: ensure all boxes are ticked to search the entire archive.

- *“Summarise all references to the Wenman family monuments.”*
- *“Identify every mention of the thirteenth-century spire construction.”*
- *“Trace the history of the chancel from 1200 to 1800.”*

## 3. The Fact Check: Verifying the Source

Scholarly rigour requires checking the original text, not just the AI summary.

- **Citations:** At the end of sentences in a generated answer, you will see small grey numbers such as [1] or [2]. Click them to see the original text.
- **Verify:** Clicking a number opens the source document on the left and highlights the specific passage used. This is essential for checking that the AI has not stripped away important context.

## Limitations and Scholarly Caution

Google NotebookLM is a powerful tool for synthesis, but it is an aid to research rather than a replacement for historical judgement. Users should be aware of the following.

- **Interpretive bias.** The AI follows the hierarchy provided in the prompt, but it cannot feel the nuance of a seventeenth-century manuscript in the way a historian can. It processes text logically, not intuitively.
- **The silo effect.** The system only knows what has been uploaded. If a crucial diocesan record or local diary is missing from the archive, the AI will produce a confident-sounding answer that is actually incomplete.
- **Linguistic nuance.** AI may occasionally struggle with archaic spellings or Latin phrases common in older church records. Always use the Fact Check feature to read the original transcription.
- **The hallucination risk.** Despite being grounded in the uploaded sources, an AI may occasionally bridge a gap in information with a logical but incorrect guess. If a claim seems exceptional or lacks a clear citation number, it must be verified.