

THE	
NATIONAL	
ARCHIVES	

A Student's Guide to:

Researching nineteenth century public health at The National Archives

The aim of this guide is to help you to order documents using The National Archives (TNA) online catalogue - Discovery - and to make sense of the documents you order.

In this guide we cover three key record series which are of primary help to the researcher of nineteenth century public health.

These are:

- **MH 13:** General Board of Health and Home Office, Local Government Act Office: Correspondence, 1846-1871.
- **MH 12:** Local Government Board and predecessors: Correspondence with Poor Law Unions and Other Local Authorities, 1834-1900 (ish)
- **MH 15:** Local Government Board and predecessors: Subject Indexes of Correspondence, 1836-1920.

We will run through each series in turn.

What is MH 13?

Some of the documents that have appeared in this lesson on the anti-vaccination movement have come from MH 13. This key records series contains information about public health, sanitation and other matters in the Victorian period. MH 13:

- Is the correspondence between the General Board of Health, the central authority based in London, and a) hundreds of local boards of health across England and Wales, and b) other governmental departments including the Home Office, Foreign Office, Colonial Office etc.
- consists of 272 volumes
- has been “fully catalogued” – this means that TNA have combed through each of the 272 volumes of this material to create a detailed list of entries for each item per volume.
- includes letters, (some draft letters), reports and a range of other materials received by the General Board of Health.
- covers the period 1848 to 1871.

Dive into Discovery!

This is what Discovery looks like from TNA's homepage.



Advanced Search:

The “advanced search” feature is a valuable tool. You can get access to the advanced search feature by clicking on the yellow text seen at the bottom of the image above.

The advanced search function will take you to this page:

A screenshot of the 'Advanced search' page. The page has a light blue header with the title 'Advanced search'. Below the header, there are two tabs: 'Records' (selected) and 'Record creators'. The main content area is titled 'Search' and contains several sections for refining the search. The 'Find words' section includes options for 'All of these words', 'Exact word or phrase', and 'Any of these words', each with a corresponding input field. The 'Don't find words' section includes an option for 'Any of these words' with a corresponding input field. The 'Search for or within references' section includes an option for 'Any of these references' with a corresponding input field. On the right side of the page, there are two buttons: 'Clear form' and 'Search'.

The screenshot shows a search interface with two main sections: 'Date' and 'Held by'. The 'Date' section has two radio buttons: 'Search a date range' (selected) and 'Search a specific date'. Below these are two text boxes labeled 'From' and 'To', both containing 'yyyy'. Underneath are several date range checkboxes: 'Dates unknown', '1 - 999', '1000 - 1099', '1100 - 1199', '1200 - 1299', '1300 - 1399', '1400 - 1499', '1500 - 1599', '1600 - 1699', '1700 - 1799', '1800 - 1899', '1900 - 1924', '1925 - 1949', and '1950+'. The 'Held by' section has a link 'Change selection to see more advanced search options' and three radio buttons: 'Search all' (selected), 'Search The National Archives', and 'Search other archives'. At the bottom right are two buttons: 'Clear form' and 'Search'.

Date

☒ Search a date range ☐ Search a specific date

From To

☐ Dates unknown ☐ 1 - 999 ☐ 1000 - 1099 ☐ 1100 - 1199 ☐ 1200 - 1299 ☐ 1300 - 1399 ☐ 1400 - 1499 ☐ 1500 - 1599 ☐ 1600 - 1699 ☐ 1700 - 1799 ☐ 1800 - 1899 ☐ 1900 - 1924 ☐ 1925 - 1949 ☐ 1950+

Held by

[Change selection to see more advanced search options](#)

☒ Search all ☐ Search The National Archives ☐ Search other archives

[Clear form](#) [Search](#)

Now get searching!

If you are interested in doing further research on vaccination in the Victorian era you could:

- Put "vaccination" into the "all of these words" box.
- Enter "MH 13" in the tab labelled "search for or within references."
- Tick the box for 1800-1899 to narrow your results.
- Tick the bubble for "Search The National Archives."
- Disregard the other boxes that appear on the screen.
- Scroll to the bottom of the page and click "Search" to continue.

This search should give you 95 results. You can either scroll through the hits one by one. Or, you can use some tricks to make the entries easier to use.

Export results:

The screenshot shows the 'Search results for "vaccination"' page on The National Archives website. The header includes the site logo and navigation links. The search bar contains the term 'vaccination'. Below the search bar, there are links for 'Start new search', 'Advanced search', and 'Browse'. The 'Filter results' section on the left shows 'Your filters' with 'The National Archives' and 'mh 13' selected, and '1800 - 1899' as a date range. A 'Refine' button is at the bottom of the filters. The main content area shows 'Records 95' and 'Record creators 0'. It includes a description of the records and a list of results. The first result is 'Folios 311-312. Covering letters forwarding replies to questions about vaccination [not in item] from Munich...'. Below the result is a detailed description of the document. At the bottom, it says 'Held by: The National Archives, Kew - Ministry of Health'.

Take a look at the “export results” tab below the blue records box. Click on the “export results” button.

You can also change the way the documents are listed by using the “Sorted by” tab on the grey horizontal box. Select “date - ascending” to put the documents in chronological order. This can be very helpful to track themes, or changes over time.

You have three options to look at your results: as a spreadsheet, web page or XML file. Let's have a look at the web page.

The screenshot shows the 'Export and download results' dialog box. It has a 'Close' button in the top right corner. The main heading is 'Export and download results'. Below it, there are two radio buttons: 'Export the first 1,000 records' (selected) and 'Export all records as spreadsheet (CSV)'. To the right of the first radio button is a 'Select format' dropdown menu with three options: 'as spreadsheet (CSV)', 'as web page (HTML)' (selected), and 'as XML file (XML)'. Below the radio buttons, there is a message: 'Exporting all of your results is only possible when there are fewer than 10,000 results. Refine the search to reduce the number of results to enable a full export.' At the bottom left, there is a 'Download' button.

The web page will give you a list of the documents and a brief description in an easy-to-use format that looks a bit like this:

Citable Reference	Description	Start Date	End Date	References
MH 13/266/26	General Board of Health and Home Office, Local Government Act Office: Correspondence. Miscellaneous. Correspondence: miscellaneous. Details given at item level. Folio 68. To: James Clift, Secretary to the Small Pox and Vaccination Hospital, Bloomsbury Square,... Folio 68. To: James Clift, Secretary to the Small Pox and Vaccination Hospital, Bloomsbury Square, London. From: The General Board of Health. Subject Matter: Draft letter acknowledging receipt of a letter of the 21 September enclosing certificates of the physicians and architects. The Board request that Clift forward the plans and particulars of the systems of drainage and ventilation that is proposed to be implemented in those buildings. Held by: The National Archives, Kew	03/10/1848	03/10/1848	-
MH 13/256/71	General Board of Health and Home Office, Local Government Act Office: Correspondence. Government Office Correspondence. Foreign Office: correspondence with the Foreign Office; mainly copies of despatches relating to cholera and... Folios 311-312. Covering letters forwarding replies to questions about vaccination [not in item] from Munich... Folios 311-312. Covering letters forwarding replies to questions about vaccination [not in item] from Munich and Berlin. Held by: The National Archives, Kew	01/01/1857	31/01/1857	-
MH 13/256/135	General Board of Health and Home Office, Local Government Act Office: Correspondence. Government Office Correspondence. Foreign Office: correspondence with the Foreign Office; mainly copies of despatches relating to cholera and... Folios 515-516. Draft letter forwarding 28 copies of papers relating to vaccination prepared by the... Folios 515-516. Draft letter forwarding 28 copies of papers relating to vaccination prepared by the Chief Medical Officer of the General Board of Health and asking they be sent to the governments of the listed countries. With a letter of acknowledgement. Held by: The National Archives, Kew	16/07/1857	16/07/1857	-
MH 13/256/72	General Board of Health and Home Office, Local Government Act Office: Correspondence. Government Office Correspondence. Foreign Office: correspondence with the Foreign Office; mainly copies of despatches relating to cholera and... Folio 313. Draft of a letter to the Foreign Office giving thanks for information received... Folio 313. Draft of a letter to the Foreign Office giving thanks for information received on vaccination and requesting that the governments of Prussia, Bavaria and Baden be asked about vaccination in their armies. Held by: The National Archives, Kew	12/01/1857	12/01/1857	-
MH 13/256/114	General Board of Health and Home Office, Local Government Act Office: Correspondence. Government Office Correspondence. Foreign Office: correspondence with the Foreign Office; mainly copies of despatches relating to cholera and... Folio 448. Forwards a copy of a despatch [not in item] from the Chargé d'Affaires... Folio 448. Forwards a copy of a despatch [not in item] from the Chargé d'Affaires at Copenhagen with a report on vaccination. Held by: The National Archives, Kew	16/04/1857	16/04/1857	-
MH 13/256/88	General Board of Health and Home Office, Local Government Act Office: Correspondence. Government Office Correspondence. Foreign Office: correspondence with the Foreign Office; mainly copies of despatches relating to cholera and... Folios 355-356. Forwards a copy of a despatch from Her Majesty's Minister at Vienna enclosing... Folios 355-356. Forwards a copy of a despatch from Her Majesty's Minister at Vienna enclosing a report on vaccination [not in item]. Held by: The National Archives, Kew	25/02/1857	25/02/1857	-
MH 13/256/132	General Board of Health and Home Office, Local Government Act Office: Correspondence. Government Office Correspondence. Foreign Office: correspondence with the Foreign Office; mainly copies of despatches relating to cholera and... Folios 508-509. Forwards a copy of a despatch from Her Majesty's Minister at Stuttgart forwarding... Folios 508-509. Forwards a copy of a despatch from Her Majesty's Minister at Stuttgart forwarding a publication [not in item] against vaccination. Held by: The National Archives, Kew	03/07/1857	03/07/1857	-
MH 13/256/134	General Board of Health and Home Office, Local Government Act Office: Correspondence. Government Office Correspondence. Foreign Office: correspondence with the Foreign Office; mainly copies of despatches relating to cholera and... Folios 512-514. Forwards a copy of a despatch from Her Majesty's Minister at Vienna transmitting... Folios 512-514. Forwards a copy of a despatch from Her Majesty's Minister at Vienna transmitting further papers [not in item] on vaccination. Held by: The National Archives, Kew	14/07/1857	14/07/1857	-
	General Board of Health and Home Office, Local Government Act Office: Correspondence. Government Office Correspondence. Foreign Office: correspondence with			

From here, you can search for “vaccination” or other terms of interest to narrow down your list of possible documents.

Once you've settled on a document (or several) you can if you come to the National Archives to do your research and order it from the public Reading Room.

Decoding document references:

It can also be a bit difficult to understand the way documents are entered in the catalogue. For example, you may see an entry, say for MH 13/256/143 and wonder what that means.

MH: Shorthand for Ministry of Health.

MH 13: Describes which Ministry of Health series the material is in.

256: Specific volume of documents/letters/papers the entry is contained in.

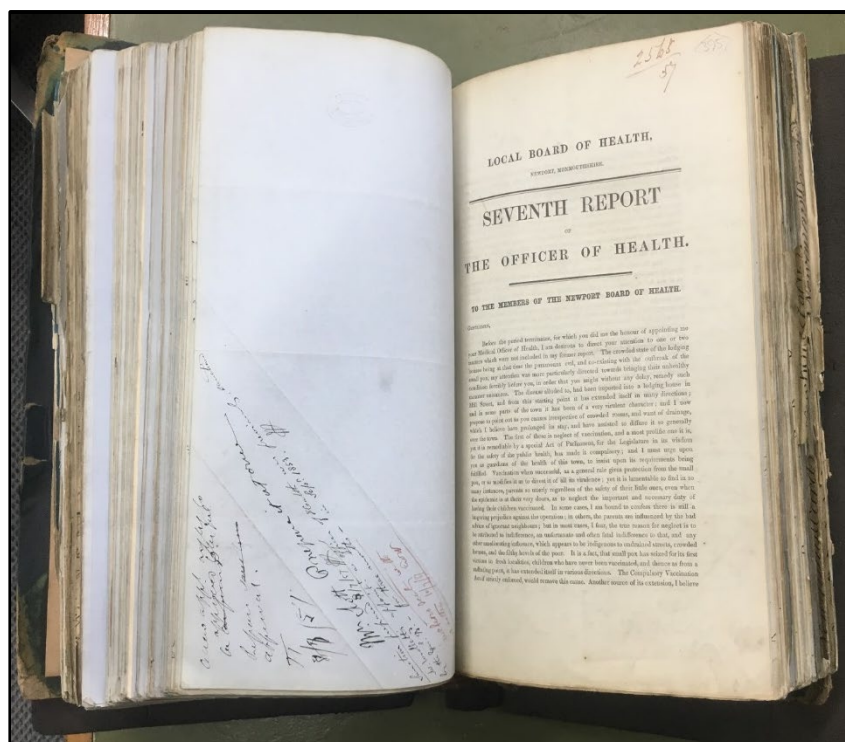
143: Item number.

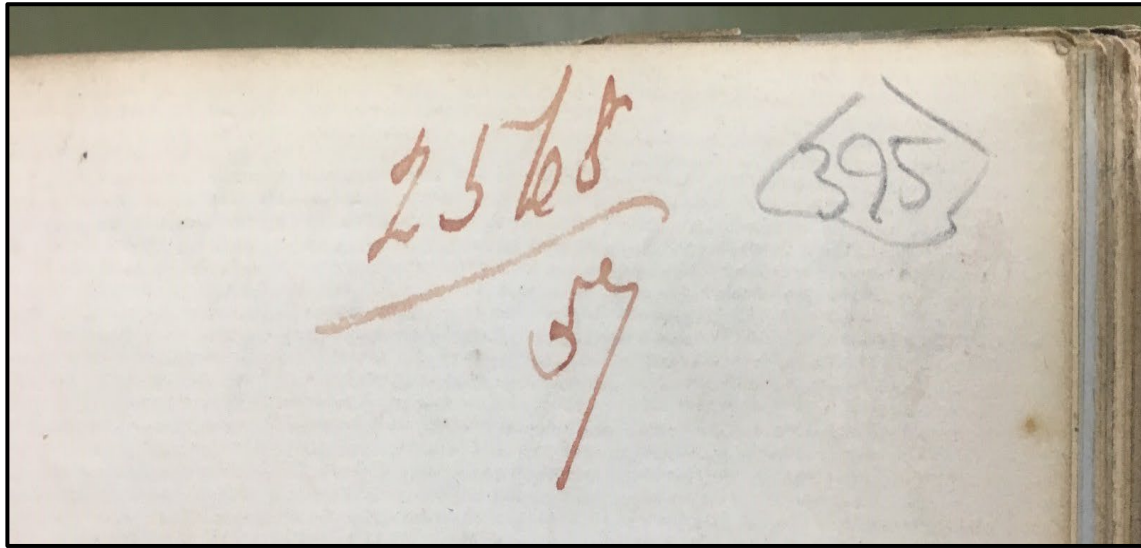
Public Reading room:

Once you have ordered your record, and it has arrived in a box in your designated pigeonhole take out the volume inside. Find by browsing through the volume, the correct folio (essentially the page number for the documents in the volume). You can find the folio number listed in the description in the catalogue for the piece.

The folio number is usually written in pencil on the top right-hand corner of each page.

Lengthy documents can cover several folios like this report:



A close up of the folio number:

You may also notice the red numbers to the left of the folio number. These markings are likely part of the Victorians internal cataloguing system.

This example volume consists of is all of the letters and other material received by the General Board of Health from several urban districts including Newport, Monmouthshire, and Isle of Wight from 1848-1871. It takes time to go through just this one volume!

Also you will find that the volume contains a lot of 'draft' letters. Often, when a letter was received by someone at the General Board of Health, the official would read it, fold the corner of the document over, and draft a response. The draft responses would then have been passed to clerks in the office who would have written them out fully and sent them off to the appropriate recipient.

What are MH 12 and MH 15?

Another key records series is **MH 12**. This series:

- Contains the Poor Law Union correspondence between the Central poor law authorities in London and the local poor law unions across England and Wales.
- covers the period (roughly) between 1834 and 1900.
- contains approximately 16,740 volumes but only about 200 have been fully catalogued (and just over 100 were digitized and are freely available)
- the registers (in which all of the documents would be listed) were destroyed during World War II, but a **partial** set of indexes (known as subject indexes) survives.¹ These indexes are contained in another records series called **MH 15**.

How to use MH15

- The first step is to order those indexes that are relevant to your research question (the records are organized by year).
- The second step is to convert the reference listed in the MH 15 volume to a TNA reference number for the document of interest which will allow you to find the right volume in MH 12.

Use the advanced search to order a document using the MH 15 index:

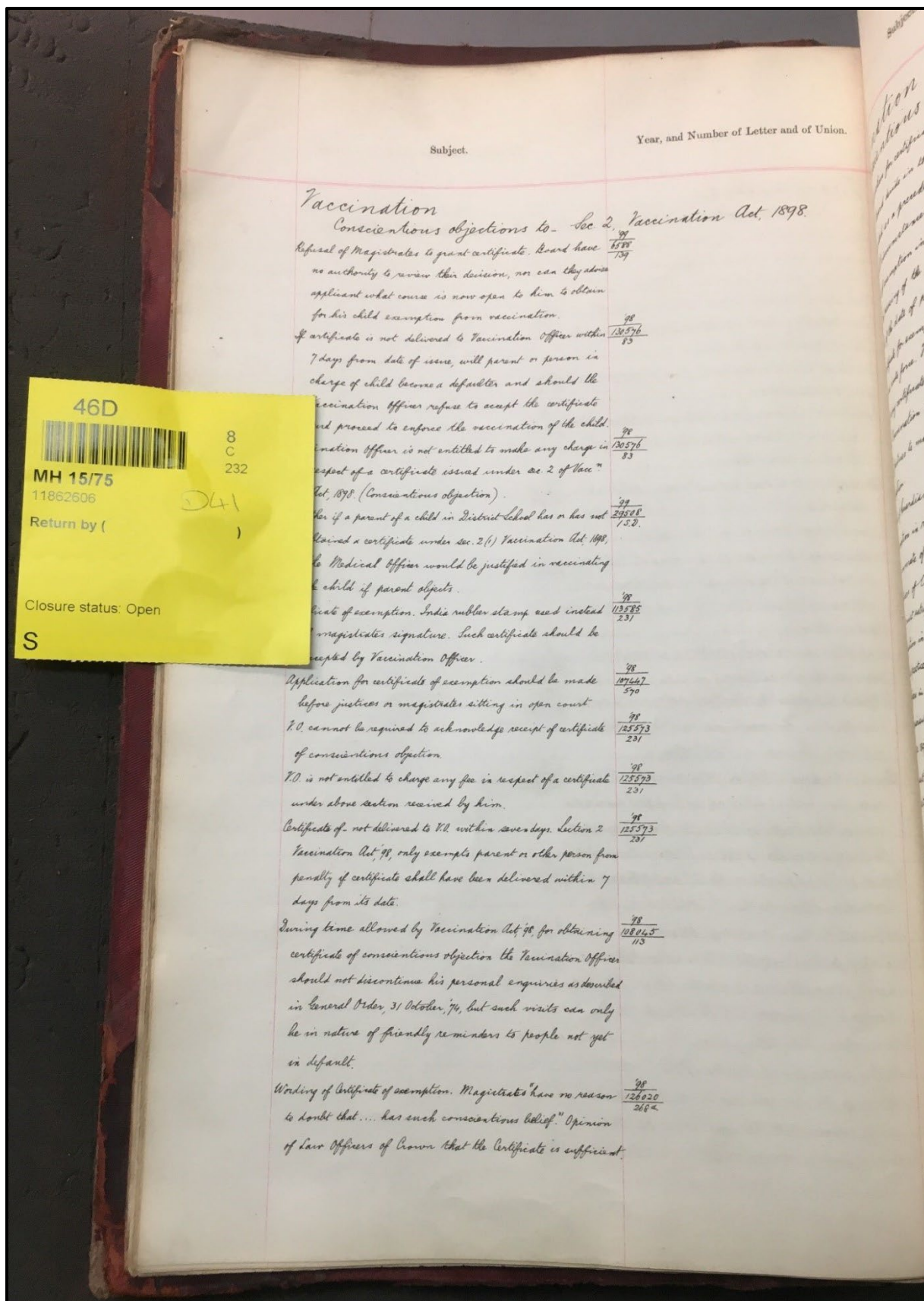
- Enter "*" in the "exact word or phrase" tab.
- Enter "MH 15" in the tab for "any of these references."
- Tick the bubble for "Search The National Archives."
- Change reference order to "date ascending."

The indexes are organized by year and by subject matter. For example, you may see an entry for an index for 1878 from A-D, meaning that the document catalogues the correspondence from 1878 for topics between A and D for a particular Poor Law Union.

DECODING THE INDEX:

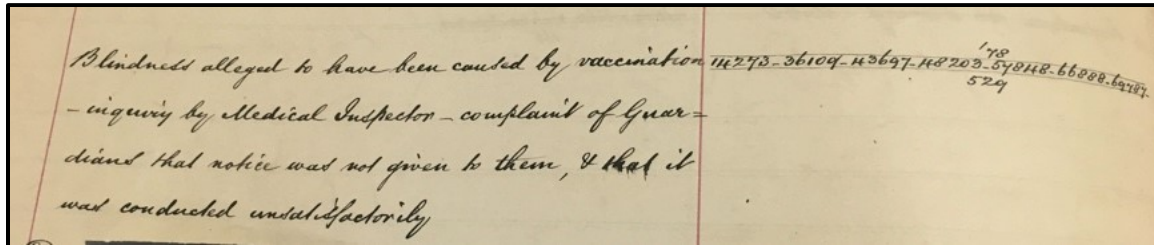
Here is a sample page of an MH 15:

¹ These subject indexes are not an index to the whole of MH 12 (but act as a precedent index)



Closer look

This page from MH 15/46 includes source which links blindness to vaccination.



It is important to understand that the references listed in the indexes do not directly correspond to TNA catalogue references. You must use Discovery to help you find what you need. In the early index volumes where one volume corresponds to one year, you will find one number over another number, the union number. In the multi-year volumes, you will find the year over the paper number over the union number. You need to take note of the year and the union number. In the image above, the year would be '1878' [from '78] and the Poor Law union number below would be '529'.

With this information you can use Discovery to convert this information to a MH 12 reference

- Put the union number into the "exact word or phrase tab"
- Input "MH 12" into "any of these references"
- Tick the bubble for "Search The National Archives."
- Scroll down to the "catalogue level" tab and select "piece." Piece corresponds to the volume.

And finally

Between MH 13, MH 12 and MH 15, you have a wealth of information to aid your research. You have a searchable catalogue for everything in MH 13, and within MH 12, you have a treasure chest of information and your roadmap is contained in MH 15.