This sheet will explain:

- What the Internet is.

- What you can find on websites.

- What a web address (URL) is.

- How to input web addresses.

- How to use a search engine to find information on the world wide web.

How do I use the Internet?

What is the Internet?

Put simply, the Internet is millions of computers around the world connected to each other. It was originally developed to connect laboratories engaged in government research, but now millions of people every day use it for anything from sending Valentines to selling cereal. When you're on the Internet, your computer is connected to others by a mixture of telephone wires, cables and satellites. This allows people to exchange large amounts of information, pictures, video and audio quickly. The Internet is easy to use and offers you the chance to research and share news, views and information with people across the world.

Websites

An important part of the Internet is the World Wide Web (WWW). This comprises millions of pages containing information on almost any subject you can think of. A group of interlinked pages is known as a 'website'. You will be able to find websites about subjects as diverse as the Houses of Parliament, Leicester City FC, or Englebert Humperdinck.

To get to a website you either need to know its address or look for it using a 'search engine'.

One good place for historians to start using the internet is the Internet for Historians site which you can find by typing http://www.humbul.ac.uk/vts/history/ into the address box of your browser (see over).

Web addresses

Usually, but not always, a web address (sometimes known as a URL – Uniform Resource Locator) will look like this: http://www.le.ac.uk (the address for the University of Leicester).

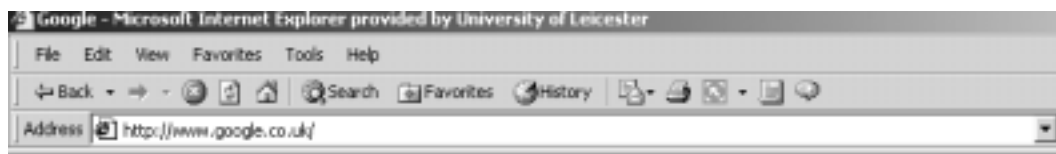It is very important to observe the placing of the full stops and forward slashes in these addresses.

Search engines

Below is the address for the search engine 'Google' as seen in the 'address' box of a typical Microsoft screen:

Search engines are websites which find things for you when you give them a 'key' word or words to look for. An example of a search engine is 'Google', which is shown below (this is the UK version):

Search tips

As shown in the Google picture, you enter 'key' words – such as 'oral history' – and press 'Enter' or 'Google Search'. The Internet is dominated by the USA and you may need to specify that it is the UK you are interested in when searching for something. Also, different search engines produce different results, and some generally seem to be better than others. It often pays to do the same search using several engines.

The first two results of a search for 'oral history' using Google and ticking the 'pages from the UK' option. You can go to either of these sites by clicking on the underlined title of the site.

A direct approach – searching for 'Oral history in England' for instance – will provide useful results but will not pick up all instances of oral history in England which are on the web. Being more specific will help, and be prepared to modify your 'key' words e.g. searching for childhood memories could be done using the words 'child', 'children', 'kids', 'memories', 'reminiscences', 'recollections', 'histories' etc. Using a bit of imagination in your search will provide better results.

You will soon find out that a site may come up on your search just because the words 'oral' and 'history' appear in the same sentence somewhere on that site (dentistry comes to mind!). However, search engines do provide information on how to 'refine' your search. As with most things, practice will improve your skills.