

Chapter 1

From the Archivist's Cardigan to the Very Dead Sheep: What are Archives? What are Archivists? What do They Do?

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Introduction¹

The first chapter in this collection of essays introduces the reader to notions of change and continuity in the world of the archivist. It looks at five specific areas which have experienced transformation or significant development in the past ten or so years. It explores the nature and impact of these developments and asks what, if anything, the archival profession might do in response.

Walk into a record office today and what do you notice? How busy it is! Computer terminals, microfilm readers, racks of popular historical journals, posters and notices for all kinds of societies and activities, 'email here', signs to the café, the local history room and the shop; but most of all, it's the sheer number of visitors and the buzz of activity which surrounds them which is striking.

In Britain today, the general functions of a record office might be said to be those of custodianship and storage of records which have been selected for permanent preservation, together with the provision of a public service. These general functions of course incorporate all those specialized ones of helping the public find what they want, cataloguing and the creation of finding aids, preservation and conservation, and the wider outreach roles of developing education, supporting local history and reaching new audiences. Like the theory which governs our profession, these functions are very much rooted in the second half of the twentieth century.

Compare the professional certainties of those decades with the developments of recent years which have affected archivists, archives and record offices in profound ways: technological advances and the popular use of the Internet; developments in the cultural and heritage sectors; a media profile which has made 'archives' a household

1 In this chapter, 'archives' refers to archives, record offices and manuscript libraries of the public sector, open to all; 'record' is used in its widest sense to incorporate documents, manuscripts, films, digitized documents and records of all kinds; and 'archivists' and 'record managers' refer to all those individuals working in archives, record offices and manuscript libraries.

word; electronic records whose usage is assured by a *Modernising Government* (Cm 4310 1999) agenda; and just becoming visible and audible are some debates in the academic world of an multidisciplinary nature which perceive archives in a wholly different way.

Technological Change

Firstly then, technological changes have brought new archives and led to a new way of thinking about archives. Whilst it is not quite true to say that everything has changed because of the Internet and Google, almost everything has: the Internet has changed what we do, what we talk about, how we go about finding things; it has changed our way of thinking and it has changed everyone's expectations. In a wider context, we now look on a world in which theories of knowledge and ownership of knowledge have irrevocably shifted. The individual and the community, not the organization or the government, are the significant units now: our world and our place in it changed beyond all expectation since the coming of the World Wide Web.

Other contributions to this book address specific aspects of the changes which new technology, community software and social software have brought, and some of the challenges of electronic records are discussed later in this chapter. Here, then, I want to look in a general way at the changes which those technological advances have made to the record office itself and to the demands upon the archivist.

For the archivist, in a purely practical sense, all these developments in cyberspace mean that an online catalogue and a website are now standard requirements of every record office, and an Internet connection is expected. It means that the archivist now needs to be skilled in old and new techniques, familiar on the one hand with medieval diplomatic documents and on the other with the requirements of searching for genealogical and historical information on the Web. What we noted above about the ambience of the record office brings its own pressures on record office staff: sheer numbers of visitors with huge expectations. Shifts in post-war demographic patterns and the huge growth in pension provision in the last three decades of the twentieth century mean that the majority of visitors to record offices in Britain (actual or virtual) are over 60, with leisure time to pursue meaningful activities. These meaningful activities are mainly educational, probably family history or local history, and overwhelmingly of a wider heritage and cultural nature.

Changes in the Context of Heritage and Culture

The notion that archives are about identity, heritage and culture is certainly a prominent one: it is shared by government, by policy makers, by funding bodies and by umbrella archival organizations in the UK. The report of the Archives Task Force (ATF) *Listening to the Past, Speaking to the Future* (2004) and the report of the Mayor's Commission on African and Asian Heritage (MCAAH) *Delivering Shared Heritage* (2005) both made specific recommendations to help archivists develop and present their collections in ways synonymous with a diverse, vibrant and thriving multicultural Britain.

Underpinning the re-thinking of archive collections in this context is CASBAH² (Caribbean Studies for Black and Asian History) which identified sources for black and Asian history in archives, libraries and media collections in the UK (Fig. 1.1). The CASBAH Project was funded by the Research Sector for Libraries Programme (RSLP) and was active in the years 2000-2002.

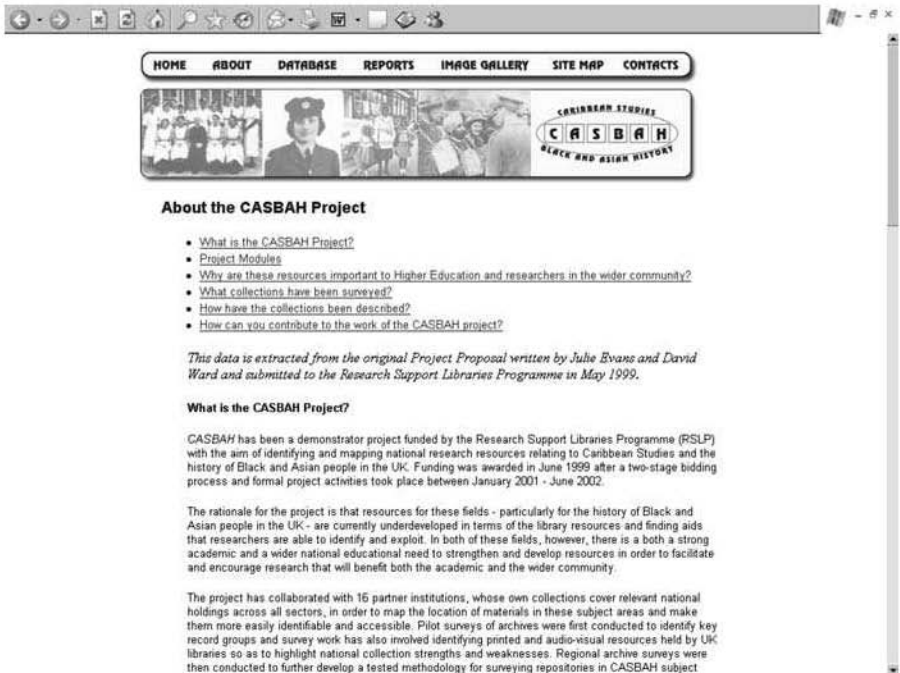


Figure 1.1 Homepage for the CASBAH website (by courtesy of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies)

A major outcome of the CASBAH project was its *Survey Tool* which advocated the *revisiting* of collections already catalogued to find sources of relevance to black and Asian studies (CASBAH 2002, Aims 2). Research underlying the *Survey Tool* led to the conclusion that there were indeed a great many sources for black and Asian history in the archives and libraries surveyed for the project, sources which might not at first glance appear to be relevant. Family and estate collections, for example, were found in many cases to reveal a great deal about landholding in the West Indies, about the ownership of slaves and about trade. These findings have been taken forward recently by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in a pilot project called *Revisiting Archive Collections* which is aimed at developing a methodology for capturing and incorporating new and hidden information into archive catalogues (Newman and Reilly 2007). This in itself signals a significant

² <<http://www.casbah.ac.uk>> accessed February 2008.

departure in archival theory and practice: though the *Revisiting Archive Collections* project is in its early stages, its very existence indicates a recognition that the role of the archivist is changing. The study of archives, like the study of history, is coming to be recognized as a dialogue between the present and the past. In the same way, then, as the historian undertakes revisionist research of topics previously investigated, the archivist will uncover and present new views of archival collections in response to critical issues which shape today's cultural landscape.

Outside the confines of this specific project, and as part and parcel of the developing awareness of archives as a resource for diverse cultures and heritage, archivists have been urged by funding bodies, by government and by their own parent organizations to develop audiences in the light of the identity, heritage and culture of potential user communities.³ However, it is not altogether clear what this means. Take the concept of identity, for example: it is not at all evident that archivists have a shared understanding of what the concept means in relation to archives. In 2006, research carried out at the School for Library, Archive and Information Studies (SLAIS) at the University of London showed that there had been little work done on archives and identity overall (Flinn et al. 2006); and two research seminars held in 2007 have not yet changed these circumstances.⁴ Moreover, the education of archivists in Britain today does not really equip them with a knowledge or understanding of identity in any detailed or specific sense. Indeed, different definitions of identity are to be found in the chapters below. It might help here if we try to define terms: what after all is *identity* about and what does it really mean? Though the ATF report and that of the Mayor's Commission are both very helpful in defining heritage and culture for archivists, identity remains a difficult concept: topical, contentious, problematic. It seems that we may need to look to other disciplines for guidance.

For the sociologist Steven Miles, identity is about consumption (1996). For Anthony Easthope in *Englishness and National Culture* (1999), identity is about language (see his preface); for J.E. Toews in *Cultural Reference and Public Memory* identity is about memory and the built environment (2004). For some, of course, identity is perceived to be a political tool (Anderson 1983; Mann 2005; Arel and Ruble 2006). For the historian Jacques Le Goff, identity is about memory and the past (1992) whilst Stuart Hall, writing about the meaning of identity to members of the West Indian community, talks about a process of negotiation with dialogues of post-colonialism (Hall 1990, 225). By contrast, for the archivist Jeannette Allis Bastian, identity is about collective memory and history (Bastian 2003, 3). Others feel that identity is about place; a sense of place being fundamental to personal identity and health, bestowing psychological well-being (Young 1992, 15; Etherton 2006, 227).

3 See for example, Cm 4516 (1999); Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) (2000), *Audience Development Plans; Helping your Application*; HLF's project (2005), *Remembering Slavery in 2007*.

4 ARMRen's *Archives and Access* incorporated presentations on identity by Andy Flinn and the author, September 2007; *Witness Seminar on Identity* was hosted by the National Trust Scotland, October 2007.

Clearly, no general consensus as to the meaning of identity emerges. Perhaps colleagues in other sectors of the heritage and culture domain can help. Andrew Newman, lecturer in Museum Studies at the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, found in his recent research on identity that an individual's identity is constructed and multifaceted, and that it changes in response to information, experience and circumstance (Newman 2006). He examined the use of museums in addressing problems of social exclusion and found that museums contribute to social inclusion through their key role in facilitating identity construction. And he found that the way in which exhibitions are themselves constructed can exclude or include individuals.⁵ In his research Newman used a standard circuit of culture model based on representation, production, consumption, regulation and identity, developed by Paul Du Gay (Du Gay et al. 1997, 3).

Du Gay's work is central to any understanding of the significance of culture and the cultural, and explains to us why the study of culture has come to occupy a much enhanced role, not only in the social sciences but in the economy and in society in the UK in general. No longer seen as an inferior to, and merely reflective of, economic and political processes, cultural processes are recognized to be constitutive of the social world in general and, most significantly, to be the producer of social meanings. These social meanings regulate the functioning of all social practices we see around us; an understanding of the cultural conditions of all social practices is recognized to be essential to inform any understanding of how culture and society work. The study of culture is thus crucial for understanding all forms of production and consumption, as well as of the media, of film, of narratives of every kind, of all cultural and heritage institutions, of museums and of archives.

Newman's research and Du Gay's methodology are not generally known in the archives sector but their application to archives is immediately useful in generating questions like: do archive exhibitions and events facilitate or inhibit identity construction in the same way? If so, what might we do about this? Does this mean that an exhibition of, let's say, any kind of archival document, *excludes* as well as *includes* visitors? and so on.

Decades of research into critical aspects of the role of museums in society and the perception and use of museums by members of the public have established the museums sector in the UK at the forefront of knowledge and understanding of the country's heritage and culture. As a result, museum professionals have a great deal to tell the archival profession in the UK and archivists have a great deal to learn.

The Report from the Mayor's Commission on African and Asian Heritage (MCAAH) made only too clear the crucial role which archives play in lending understanding and intelligibility to the UK's shared heritage. In this context, the archival profession needs to think about how it can collaborate with other heritage professionals, how it can gain an understanding of those crucially important cultural concepts, and how that understanding might shape practice enabling it to deliver audience development in the light of identity, heritage and culture.

5 See also Shimamura-Wilcocks 2007.

Archives and the Academic Context

The acid test of any theoretical innovation is the question ‘What new fields and types of action does the theory open up to us that we did not or could not see before?’ (Bennet 1987, 64)

In recent decades, the UK’s archives sector has not been noted for its academic research. The historian-archivist of the mid-twentieth century has disappeared: chased away by Jenkinsonian notions that passive archivists are good archivists on the one hand, and by increasing practical demands from access, use, collection development and management on the other. By contrast, the discussion of, and discourses about, archives in other academic disciplines have attained a new profile in recent years.

Recommendations of the MCAAH Archives Diversification Subcommittee concerning academic research in the archives sector, together with the established research centre at the School of Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute (HATII) at the University of Glasgow, the recently developed Archives and Records Management Research Network (ARMReN) at SLAIS and that taking shape at the Centre for Archive and Information Studies at the University of Dundee, indicate that change is on the way, but it might be useful here to consider briefly the debates around archives within other academic disciplines.

Archives and Archaeologists

Record-keeping has long been recognized as an indicator of the development of civilization by archaeologists and anthropologists. David Keightley has shown us in astonishing detail the use of oracle bones as records in Bronze Age China (Keightley 1978). At the end of the nineteenth century J.P. Mahaffy explained to us the archive activities of the ancient Greeks (Mahaffy 1877, 391, 395). More recently, new techniques of epigraphical analysis have brought greater understanding of archive functions of late Roman and Byzantine inscriptions (Roueché 1989).

Archives and Historians

Historians have of course discussed documents, sources and archives from the foundation of their discipline. Recent *Unleashing the Archives* conferences have given new ideas about archives a prominence amongst some historians: we see how archives may be presented as evidence, as myth, as personal statement, as construction and manipulation.⁶ Many historians, though, prefer to discuss

⁶ *Unleashing the Archives Conferences* held by the School of Advanced Studies in collaboration with the National Archives and the Institute of Historical Research in November 2004 and 2005 incorporated the following areas. *Archives as epic*: Alan Thacker, ‘Bede and the Creation of an English Epic’; Louise Craven, ‘Epic, Group Identity and the Archive in the Modern World. *Archives as evidence*: ‘*The Bloody Sunday Enquiry*’: Paul Bew, ‘The Historian’s View’; Richard Norton Taylor, ‘The Journalist’s View’; Cathryn McGahey, ‘The Lawyer’s View’. *Archives as personal exploration*: Katrina Dean, ‘Biographical Actors’; and Andrea Levy, ‘Archives, Fiction and Autobiography’. *Archives as constructions and*

archives in a routine sources-and-methods sort of way, which has been standard down the decades. A theoretical analysis of 'what is history' accompanied by 'how to do historical research' for undergraduate and post-graduate students has been a recognized historiographical contribution from the great historians of very different persuasions since Sir Herbert Butterfield's *Whig Interpretation of History* in 1931. R.G. Collingwood's *The Idea of History* (1946), E.H. Carr's *What is History?* (1961), Sir Geoffrey Elton's *The Practice of History* (1967) and Richard Evans's *In Defence of History* (1997, 2004) are noted landmarks in this long historiographical tradition.

Ian Anderson's work on academic users of archives (Anderson 2004) is of a different order, engaging with archivists to better provide historians and other academics with what they need: this dialogue is unusual, for historians' discussion of sources has traditionally been detached from archivists.

Recently, the archive has also been at the centre of a lively discussion between social historians and cultural historians in debate about theories, methods and perceptions. It is to this discussion that the cultural historian Carolyn Steedman refers when she talks about the new politics of the archive (2002, 2–3), of which more below.

Archives and Literature

Records and archives are intertwined through the narratives of modern English and European literature like a golden thread. Records are found in Chaucer's 'Prologue' to *The Canterbury Tales* and in Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 2*; archivists are described in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and archives by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*. Patents generate Swift's *Drapier's Letters*; wills and deeds determine fate in Dickens's *Bleak House* and Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White*, while muster rolls appear in Kipling's *Kim*. A demon archivist and librarian emerges in Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*, one with ulterior motives in Martha Cooley's eponymous novel, and perhaps the first to realize the power of the archivist in Jose Saramago's *All the Names*. The archivist is insane in Sebastian Faulks's *Human Traces* and the archivist in Travis Holland's *The Archivist's Story* in 2007 is a man tortured by both conscience and the Soviet regime.⁷ There are of course many more such examples.

This whole area, the presentation and representation of the archivist in literature through the ages, would seem an excellent context for research: it informs our understanding of the central place which archives have held historically and continue to hold in our culture today.

manipulations: Charlotte Rouche, 'The Ancient World: the Concept of the Archive Wall'; and Richard Cox, 'The Modern World'. See also Albie Sachs (2005), <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/news/events/previousevents/unleashing_the_archive.a> accessed February 2008.

7 Chaucer (2003) 11; Henry VI Pt 2 (2000) IV vii, 16–17; Cervantes (2000) 475; Sterne (2003) 35; Swift (1935) 4, lines 20–24; Fielding (1966) 25; Dickens (2000) 4, 11, 126, 546–60; Collins (1868) 74; Kipling (1995) 175; Peake (1992) 375; Cooley (1998); Saramago (1997) 3; Faulks (2006) 184, 254; Holland (2007).

Archives and Other Disciplines in the Humanities

In philosophy, politics, psychology, sociology and language, a more critical theoretical view of archives as a whole has developed, reflecting a concern with the importance of archives to society, rather than with archives as simply holders of historical sources. This interpretation, given currency by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in the 1960s, was developed by the semiotician and post-structuralist Jacques Derrida in the later decades of the twentieth century. Derrida is perhaps most well known in this context for *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression*, published in 1996. Derrida's writing has stimulated new ways of thinking about archives amongst archival theorists in the UK, the Netherlands, North America, Australia and South Africa (see, for example, Ketellar 1999; Harris 2002; McKemmish 1994; Nesmith 2002; Moss 2006; Tyacke 2002; van Zyl 2002).

For both Foucault and Derrida, interest in archives stemmed from an interest in language, texts and meaning. For Foucault, 'the archive is the first law of what can be said; the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events' (1966, 79–131); for Derrida, the archive was the beginning of modes of thought and events (1996, 1). From both, a new perception of archives is presented, one which understands archives to be the source of power and control, the shaper of language, the determinant of a new way of seeing society.

One of Derrida's major contributions to the philosophy of archives is, of course, about meaning. It was in this context that Derrida described what it is that the archivist actually *does*: the archivist's defining role lies in the relationship to context and the creation of meaning. 'Context gives the archivist credibility.' The archivist also gives title and order: '... there could be no archive without titles ... and without the criteria of classification ... of hierarchization ... of order' (1996, 4).

The strand of philosophical enquiry concerning archives and texts, language and meaning has been continued in France and the UK by post-structuralists and postmodernists, by literary and film critics and by those involved in cultural theory and cultural studies. Deconstruction of the text – mainly literary and philosophical texts – is significant to all strands, not simply to understand the bourgeois nature of the text (as deconstruction was initially intended) but rather as it has become more popularly known, to uncover the *other* meanings of the text. In the postmodernist world, one text can have many meanings and many readings.

As new philosophical schools have developed, archives have been treated by some academics in the same way as other disciplines: as architecture, history, literature and so on have been dealt with by the linguistic turn, so have archives. The 'linguistic turn' is understood as being the notion or realization (depending on which view you take) that written and spoken language can only relate to itself, not to any higher truth; so there is no *correct* interpretation of anything, only lots of interpretations.

The cultural historian Carolyn Steedman develops some of these philosophical strands in *Dust* (2002). Her book is about historical perceptions of the nineteenth century, it is about narrative structures in the text, and it is a response to Derrida. Steedman's work is relevant to the archival profession today because her approach is

so different from that of other writers about archives, her interpretation and comments are illuminating, and some of her assertions invite a response from archivists.

At the outset we are presented with a very different Archive Fever: not the abstruse Derridean psychoanalytical searching for a moment of inception to be recovered, but a pressured almost frantic feeling brought on by too many records in the archive and not enough time (2002, 27–19). Steedman's continuing dialogue with Derrida goes on to shape the early part of the book. The view that the founding of national archives in various countries in Europe in the early nineteenth century was part of the development of the nation state is not new, nor is the understanding that different legal systems enable the writing of certain kinds of histories because they require different types of records to be kept, but both are placed in a new Derridean context (2002, 38–67).

Steedman's developing central theme, the close examination of the texts of nineteenth-century novels, demonstrates that the use which authors made of documents as background to their writings had crucial implications for the novels themselves, for the novels' critical interpretation, and for today's popular understanding of nineteenth-century social history (2002, 89–111). It also suggests a new area in archive studies: archives as source and resource, not just for history, but for literature and cultural studies.

Dust also brings to light the work of other cultural historians whose findings are more than relevant to archives today. Writing about the emerging bourgeois society in the West Midlands in the mid-nineteenth century, Donald Lowe comments that 'Bourgeois society tried to consume the past in order to attenuate somewhat for its estrangement to the ... present' (Lowe 1982, 40–41). Is that what we are seeing around us on the Internet and in record offices across the country today?

Leading on from this then, we might ask if the archive profession has anything to learn from these new perspectives. The impact of Derrida has already been noted. Heather MacNeil has demonstrated elsewhere the value which techniques of literary criticism can bring to the understanding of a finding aid (MacNeil 2007) and Terry Cook and Tom Nesmith, amongst others, have considered postmodernism in the specific contexts of archival theory and the education of archivists (Cook 2001, 14–25; Nesmith 2002). These examples suggest that ideas from different disciplines can be very valuable in the archival context.

In record offices today we are experiencing a vast surge in popularity led by family historians. Media coverage boosts this hugely, but the growth in genealogy and interest in personal history had begun long before the TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?*. Archivists, however, still know little about the users of archives and record offices: little about why records *fascinate*. Following these examples then, let us see if any new perspectives on use and users can be elicited from these wider philosophical trends. Would a postmodernist view of the archival text, with understanding drawn from literary criticism, cast any new light on our perception of users?

Readings and Meanings

Let us take a death certificate,⁸ a nineteenth-century attestation form for enlistment into the militia⁹ and a twentieth-century Cabinet minute¹⁰ as representative of archival documents, and see if these have many readings and many meanings; and, if so, whether findings here anticipate any explanation of the recent huge surge in demand.

The family historian looking for her great-great-grandfather, the statistician looking for deaths from pneumonia, and the local historian interested in mortality and urbanization, all find different things in a death certificate. The political historian looking for the shaping of policy over Northern Ireland, the postgraduate student interested in environmental issues and the economist looking for evidence of the first oil crisis, all find different things in the Cabinet minute. The social historian looking for the physical details of men joining the militia in the 1830s, the family historian seeking to piece together a picture of his or her ancestor, and the military historian looking for the statistics of enlistment from the Home Counties, all find different things in the attestation papers. Clearly then there can be many readings and many meanings of an archival text.

In a way, archivists always known this – in this much they are, like Laurence Sterne, among the first post-modernists – but they have not stated this, nor have they employed any kind of multidisciplinary theoretical framework or language in which these interpretations can be examined, and within which further questions might be generated.

The notion of the text having an identity of its own is in a sense axiomatic with certain kinds of archival documents. We have seen above that different individuals all take different things from an archival document, but many archival documents also have an administrative and legal meaning of their own: a will, a contract, a deed. Letters perhaps do not fall into this category: in the 1980s, the literary critic Terry Eagleton noted that the letter was at once the most intimate and the most treacherous of all archival documents because it is open to so many interpretations (1982, 54–5). Literary critics would call this administrative or legal meaning the ‘authorial meaning’ of the text. Debates around the ‘authorial meaning of the text’ and indeed whether a text can have an authorial meaning at all have engaged literary critics for some years (Culler 1986, 3, 4) though this is not something which has previously concerned archivists.

Let us just think for a moment about what it is that actually happens when an individual experiences an archival document. We have said above that because different people are looking for different things, that the archival text then *means* different things to different people. But we do not know what ‘meaning’ is in this context. Some years ago, the literary critic S. Pradhan (Pradhan 1986, 67) developed

8 Certificate: <<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/deaths/obtainingdeathcertificates/index.asp>> accessed 10 October 2007.

9 TNA WO 96: War Office: Militia Attestation papers 1806–1914.

10 <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/download.asp?T=1111480&S=I/07/01081019H&E=PRO%5F1111480>> accessed 10 October 2007.

the notion that a reader's understanding of the meaning of a text could be equated with its use; that is, the use a reader makes of the information. This notion of the meaning in the text has been taken much further recently by the cultural psychologist Urs Fuhrer in *Cultivating Minds: Identity as Meaning Making Practice* (2004).

Cultural psychologists are concerned with processes not entities, with the mediational processes through which subject and world mutually create each other, and with the analysis of those processes. Fuhrer sees identity and culture as processes through which individuals can experience themselves as agents of their own meaning making activities. Fuhrer then equates meaning with identity and defines identity as a process through which the self continually constructs or reconstructs meaning and identity through social and or cultural mediation (Fuhrer 2004, preface, 171–255). In the archive then, an individual finds meaning in an archival document because the document means something to him and, at the same time, because of that individual's cultural or community identity the individual finds other meaning, other things to identify with. Over time then, identity as meaning making is perpetually constructed and reconstructed through the experience of archival documents.

This certainly has resonance with Andrew Newman's findings about identity in museums which we discussed above. More importantly for archivists, it provides new insights into the experience of users of archival documents, and enables archivists to hypothesize that, for example, the demand for archival documents will simply continue over the years to come as documents are continually becoming different things to different people. Based on these insights, archivists might also choose to make assumptions about further use; these assumptions might then inform policies about users and audiences.

We asked earlier if archivists had anything to learn from advances in other disciplines: the answer is an overwhelming yes.

Archives in a Media Context

Running parallel with these developments are those in the media context – that colossal surge of interest in genealogy and family history referred to above which is boosted by television programmes like *Who Do You Think You Are?*¹¹ Archives are now a household word. The series has invested genealogy with celebrity status, enabled topics which once were rarely discussed in society and never in the family (such as incest and illegitimacy) to be aired, encouraged a re-thinking of poverty and hardship and given new meaning to the phrase 'an accident of birth'.

Alongside *Who Do You Think You Are?*, the History Channel and historical documentaries all add to a general raising of the profile of history and of archives, as do the popular serial publications – *Family History*, *Local Historian*, *Ancestors* – which despite fierce competition from other sources have maintained their circulation in recent years.¹²

11 <<http://www.bbcwhodoyouthinkyouare.com/>> accessed 10 October 2007.

12 Figures from *Ancestors* 2006 and 2007 indicate a monthly purchase and subscription rate of about 5,000 and 1,000 respectively. I am grateful to Simon Fowler, editor of *Ancestors*, for this information.

What has this huge popularity done to archives? Firstly, it has made genealogical research seem easy, which sadly it is not. Secondly, it has boosted the demand for access to archives both onsite and online. At the National Archives (TNA) this demand was the main reason for the launching of the DocumentsOnline site which enables people to view actual documents and, if they so wish, to purchase a copy (digitized image) of the document (Fig. 1.2).¹³

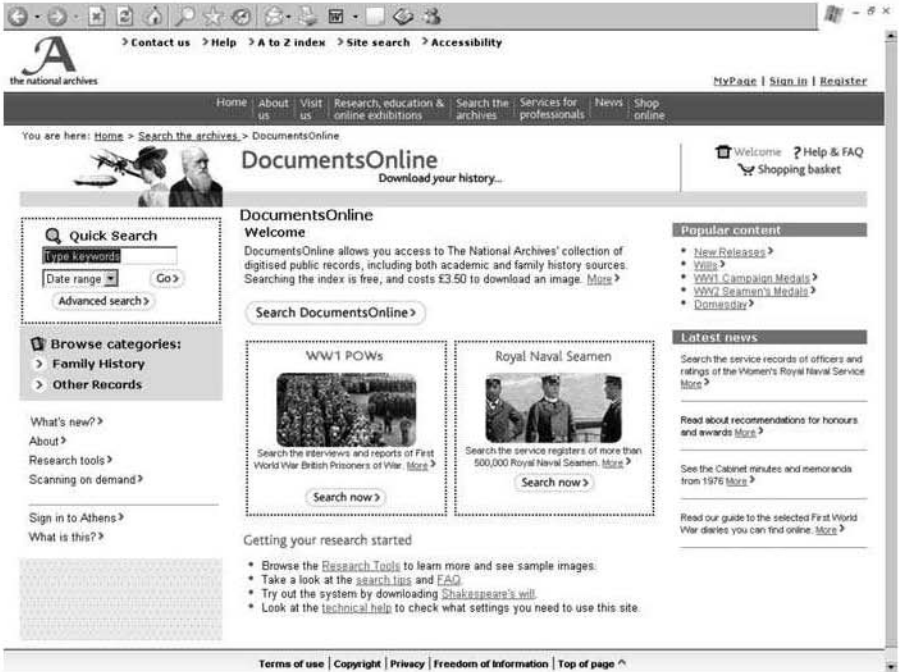


Figure 1.2 Homepage for DocumentsOnline, on the website of The National Archives (by courtesy of The National Archives)

DocumentsOnline is hugely popular and, not surprisingly, it is the documents which tell about people which are the most sought after. Wills, medal rolls from the First World War, seamen's medal rolls from the Second World War and Victorian prisoners' photographs are the documents most frequently ordered in the years since online documents were first made available.¹⁴

Currently there is little empirical evidence as to the impact of archival images available on the Internet, but the figures alone are staggering: since digitized

¹³ Digitized images of some very popular/iconic docs (like Shakespeare's will) are available free and the service is free on site.

¹⁴ Wills can be found in PROB 11; campaign medals (First World War) and seamen's medals (Second World War) can be found in a number of War Office series (WO); Victorian prisoners' photographs are from PCOM 2.

images of documents were first made available in 2004, there have been 66 million downloads from online sources of TNA documents.¹⁵ Consider for a moment what this availability might mean for an individual: what is it that happens when a person experiences an archival document on the Internet?

At the record office or archive there's a ritual to be followed: a procedure of finding out how to find, of getting the reference, then ordering and waiting; then the thrill of the document arriving bound up in a bundle and having to search for it, the excitement of touching the paper and seeing the handwriting, then discovery: 'there it is! ... there is what I was looking for!' – the meaning and identification we talked of above.

The experience online is quite different. The relationship between an individual and the digitized image here seems to be more like that experienced by a person watching a film: visual and intimate, as described by Thomas Elsaesser (1981, 271): 'pressured by time ... marked off very clearly by lights down and lights up ... giving a sense of enclosure ... more radical than television, play or music', and in which the online text, as we understand from our earlier discussion, is like Colin McCabe's classic realistic text, in which a hierarchy of discourses compose the text (McCabe 1981, 217).

Both in the record office and online, there is the excitement of finding what you have been searching for; or not finding it but finding something else of relevance, of meaning to you. In *The Long Revolution* (1961), one of the founding texts of cultural studies in Britain, Raymond Williams described what happens when a reader reads a book: 'a structure of feeling' develops between the reader and the text (Williams 1961, 64–88). That 'structure of feeling' depended with each individual on his or her own experience and culture; that is, what he/she brought to the text and the meaning in the text. This seems to have much relevance to the archival context: the 'structure of feeling' surrounds the reader with understanding, identification, almost with enlightenment. This certainly has a resonance with the experiences of volunteers at TNA who have been working on the Southwell Workhouse Project (Fig. 1.3). One volunteer said, 'It has given a remarkable insight into the activities ... lives and minds of those associated with the workhouse ...' and another, '... a buzz knowing that you ... are finding some new aspects of history not always understood before'.¹⁶ 'A structure of feeling' between record and reader does seem an appropriate description of these experiences.

To return then to our viewer of online documents: having found a meaningful document, he or she has purchased and downloaded a copy, in the process of which the document may itself have acquired a new quality, one which might affect both provenance and context. It is clear that some users of archival documents are quite fascinated by archival context: they want to understand the archival context and provenance because it gives historical accuracy and authenticity to the document they have found. But many are *not* fascinated by archival context at all: they are concerned only with the document *itself*, with the information it provides about their

15 TNA Chief Executive's Office, September 2007.

16 'Living in the Shadow of the Workhouse': Comments from Southwell Workhouse Research Group, TNA2007: <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/partnerprojects/workhouse/default.htm>> accessed 10 October 2007.

The Southwell (Nottinghamshire) Experience

In 2001 The National Archives and the National Trust agreed to work together to make the Southwell Poor Law Union correspondence more accessible to students, local historians, academics and indeed everyone with an interest in the National Trusts' (then) latest acquisition, The Southwell Poor Law Union Workhouse.

The National Archives have 11 large volumes of bound correspondence (letters, reports, memos etc.) of the Southwell Workhouse covering 1834 to 1871 and this represents an indispensable source for historians interested in how poor relief was 'managed' during this period within the 60 or so parishes within the Southwell Poor Law Union.

The National Archives would provide

- microfilm copies of the original material
- film readers on which they could be examined
- expert (continual) advice on the records themselves
- high quality digitised images of all of the 1834 to 1871 records for free via their website (making visits to London to view the material unnecessary).

The National Trust would provide:

- A work room
- Computers
- The necessary infrastructure (IT servers etc.)

The local National Trust team at the workhouse then approached local people to act as volunteer editors who would then carry out the initial cataloguing work. The National Archives staff working on the project would provide initial training for the volunteer editors as well as providing regular support throughout the period of the project.

The volunteer editors would read through the correspondence, noting who the letters etc. were from and to and what information was contained (reports on individual paupers, conditions in the workhouse, details of various staff, corruption and fraud by staff, information on local crime, etc. This information was then typed by the volunteer editors into specially provided (and easy to use) Word documents. Once finished the volunteers work was checked and edited by staff at The National Archives.

Currently the volunteer editors have finished the volumes for 1834 to 1871 and the final editing and checking is taking place now at The National Archives. Once this is done the catalogue entries for the thousands and thousands of individual letters etc. will be word searchable for all. Local historians in the Southwell area will have a fantastic resource at their finger-tips; historians of the neighbouring poor law unions of Newark, Worksop, East Retford and Mansfield will also find materials of interest as poor law union matters often overlapped locally. Of course other nineteenth century researchers and historians will also find much of interest in how the Victorian Poor law operated.

In mid-May 2007 the information will be in The National Archives catalogue and the images will be freely available to view and download. Local historians in the Southwell area will have fully word searchable catalogue entries to

Figure 1.3 Homepage for **The Southwell (Nottinghamshire) Experience**, on the website of **The National Archives** (by courtesy of **The National Archives**)

own family and with the *meaning* it gives to their own lives. In purchasing a copy of a will, say, the reader may feel that it has been removed from its archival context and that it is being placed and owned in its family context, where it really belongs: here then, *the content has become the context*. And this shift of context, from the archive to the individual, is of course re-emphasized and reinforced by programmes like *Who Do You Think You Are?*

This shift also has echoes of ideas in archive theory concerning provenance and users put forward most recently by Tom Nesmith. Nesmith endorses the more flexible view of provenance endorsed by Sue McKemish which presents a re-conceived view of the 'logical, virtual and multiple relationships between records and their contexts of creation' (McKemish 1994, 193). It is this view of provenance which Nesmith has taken further in a post-modernist interpretation, stating that 'multiple creators become but the beginning of [a record's] history, as the actions taken by an archives, and those *who use* records therein, are also part of the creation process'. In Nesmith's view, records 'become active agents in creating what we perceive and are not passive carriers of objective facts ...' and 'those who make, transmit, keep, classify, destroy, archive and *use records* ... are co-creators of the records and thus of the knowledge they shape' (Nesmith, 2007, 3-4). This shift, which incorporates the context of the user, marks a real development in the meaning of provenance and

generates new questions about the popular context of the archival text and about the political and social legacy of archives.

The Challenge of Electronic Records

‘The trouble with archivists is that they have electronic records but paper minds ...’.
(Overheard at a conference, 2006)

Of all the challenges which the archival profession is experiencing today, that from electronic records is perhaps the most enduring. The fundamental distinction to be drawn between paper records and electronic records is this: with paper records, the *paper* (or parchment or vellum) must be preserved, for this is the authentic record; with electronic records, it is the *information* which must be preserved, for that is the authentic record.

It follows from this that almost everything from the functions of a record office to the foundations of archival practice are significantly changed by electronic records. Immediately, though, it is the sheer scale of electronic document creation and of the resources required for digital preservation which astound: the Digital Preservation Coalition, the body which is taking forward digital preservation, is international in membership and global in outlook.¹⁷ Work on this scale is necessary because it is recognized that the challenges of digital preservation are too large and diverse to be resolved by any single organization or country.

Many of the major issues arising from electronic records have already been discussed elsewhere: custodianship and storage (Cook 1992, 38; Tough 2006, 20–22); the appraisal of electronic records (for example Hosker and Richmond 2006); risks posed to future information and knowledge (Duranti and MacNeil 1996; Ross 2000, 3); the challenges to traditional archival principles of arrangement and original order (Duff 2006, 109–10, and quoting Bearman 1993, Headstrom 1993 and Wallace 1995); and privacy, security and ethics in the digitized world (MacNeil 2002; Currall 2006; Lemeix 2007). In what follows, those issues of archival practice and archival theory which have not been discussed so fully are touched on.

Archival Practice in the Electronic World

As the electronic environment has completely transformed the material with which the archivist works, it seems reasonable to ask whether cataloguing and the production of finding aids are any longer really necessary, given powerful search engines, digitized records and automatic indexing. This question is particularly relevant because elsewhere in the digital world, online catalogues have been identified as barriers to the constructive use of digital resources (Lynch 2003, 210), and traditional archival finding aids have been seen to *inhibit* users’ access (Menne-Haritz 2001).

Catalogue descriptions, or metadata, are defined in the paper world by the *International Standard for Archival Description (ISAD (G))* (2000)¹⁸ and this

17 <<http://www.dpconline.org/graphics/index.html>> accessed 8 October 2007.

18 <<http://www.ica.org/en/node/30000>> accessed 8 October 2007.

will continue to be needed to provide authority and context, to give information about related materials and to help the user navigate the vast amount of archival material now available online. It is likely, however, that the cataloguing metadata accompanying electronic records will change to incorporate technical metadata and additional metadata added at instances of migration, and that the standard will undergo continual revision over the coming years. During this period it will also become clear whether automatic means of gathering and presenting metadata, like the collection of website titles from HTTP headers now being developed by Heritrix and by the International Internet Preservation Consortium (IIPC), prove worthwhile (Brown 2006, 78).

In some ways, electronic records need cataloguing metadata for survival and use. This is firstly because paper records have a set of ‘signs’ which we absorb automatically: just as typefaces tell us things about the meaning of the words they convey, the outward form of paper records tells us about the significance and authority of the content within. A book bound in red leather says ‘I’m important!’, the way documents are folded in a bundle, the format of a pipe roll, the use of treasury tags, ties and legal pink tape: these are all ways of telling us about the documents before we look at them. Secondly, the archivist’s intervention here – putting the documents in order, describing them and producing finding aids – simply reinforces this notion of importance, and gives the user an indication of what to look at and where to start. Signs of conservation are similarly significant: ‘ooh, this has been repaired: it must be valuable!’. Electronic records have no such signs, no way of saying ‘I’m important!’. Moreover, in the digital context, characterized by the automatic transfer from an electronic records management system (ERMS) to an archive’s digital storage and online presentation system, rearrangement and description by an archivist is unlikely. Without metadata and good titles then which identify records as valuable to administrative, business, research and historical contexts, and which enable a search engine to grab both title and reference, they might sink without trace, simply unnoticed by the user.

New Forms and Formats

New forms of records in the digital world – websites, blogs, wikis – pose interesting new challenges to archival theory. Adrian Brown points out that a fundamental challenge arises from the structural, temporal and informational qualities of the Web, which render it ‘almost impossible, in terms of interconnectedness ... to define any given website in terms of absolute boundaries’. As a result, it ‘may be more helpful to regard a website as a conceptual grouping of information experienced by a user, rather than as an artefact with any coherent physical existence’. Moreover, the similarity of websites to any paper archive collection breaks down when ‘the paper paradigm of discrete, enumerable and physically locatable information objects is rapidly rendered obsolete’ and ‘the nature of much of the informational content of the Web defines traditional categorisation: “publication”, “record”, “artefact” become meaningless’ (Brown 2006, 26).

Websites may be created by a number of people and updated by still more: the archival principles of ‘creator’ and ‘provenance’ are not altogether easily defined

in this context. Websites may be dynamic rather than static – or be a mixture of both. This has brought new kinds of archiving possibilities: ‘snapshots’ over time and a variety of new techniques based on the differing selection methods (that is, unselective, thematic or transactional) based on what has actually been used. For the archivist, however, describing an object which is still *dynamic* is an unprecedented departure from traditional archival practice and theory.

The organic nature of websites is a feature shared with other new record formats: blogs and wikis are also typified by collaborative authorship and by regular updating which mean they exhibit the lack of boundaries characteristic of websites. All share the problem that when these new formats are archived, links to other sites no longer function: a quality which at best irritates, and which at worst – and much more significantly – can erode the original function of the record.

Records of new forms and formats do then present new issues to both digital preservation and presentation; they also posit fundamental questions and challenges to traditional archival theory and archival practice.

Professional Status

As the foundations of traditional archival theory are being challenged by the digital context, the archivist’s role in that context has also generated debate amongst archivists. Some see it as essential that archivists have a more active role in the creation of records than ever before. The need for this is simple and urgent: electronic records just cannot be managed without highly visible archiving from the outset (Bearman 1994; Duff 1996; Duranti and MacNeil 1996; Nesmith 2002). An alternative view is put forward below by Michael Moss, who identifies involvement with the creation of digital records as undermining the fiduciary responsibility of the archivist.¹⁹ At the same time another change in the archivist’s professional activities and status can be identified. In 2006, Helen Tibbo and Wendy Duff emphasized the merits of collaboration with technical specialists (Tibbo 2006, 28–30; Duff 2006, 110) – a collaboration which they saw working fruitfully and equitably. Whilst the archivist works with IT specialists, IT specialists for their part seek the archival perspective to their work. In practice this works, and in reality this collaboration has been growing since the first archival website was developed. Perhaps less expectedly, other changes brought by the needs of digital preservation have generated a different balance between archivists and other technical specialists. Whilst appraisal and selection remain functions of the records manager or archivist, the transfer of electronic records to the archives, the process of ingest, and the handling of those records for preservation and presentation do not. These activities, nationally and internationally, are carried out by experts in digital preservation (Ross 2006, 115–153). Whilst this is proper and essential, it does mean that what was once the preserve of the archivist is no longer so.

Whilst the archivist’s role in records creation is still a matter of much healthy debate, ownership and control over the processes through which records pass to the archives has, by contrast almost silently, already shifted to technical colleagues.

19 See Chapter 4 in this volume.

Overall, it may be too early to say what the full impact of the development of electronic records will be on the archive profession both nationally and internationally. It can be said with certainty, however, that the change from paper and parchment to born-digital has not been one of degree but of kind: a paradigm shift which has brought profound changes and challenges to every aspect of the theory and practice in the profession in the UK.

Concluding Thoughts

The first chapter in this collection has looked at the impact upon archives and archivists of technological advances, at developments in the heritage and cultural context, at new discourses about archives in academic disciplines, at archives in the popular context and at the specific phenomenon of electronic records. Other chapters will address in detail certain of the issues already raised. Here then, at the outset, what can we conclude about the implications of these changes and emergent new perspectives for the archival profession in the UK?

There seems to be the need for re-thinking archival policy and practice in four areas: in relation to other heritage and cultural professions; in response to academic debate; in terms of archival theory; and in education and training.

Other Heritage Professions

The archival profession in the UK needs to know more about both the knowledge and practice of other heritage professionals. Archivists need to develop and establish both a long-term dialogue and collaborative work with colleagues from the wider heritage sector. The archival profession needs to be proactive in this area and needs to do this now.

The Academic Context

Recent developments in a number of academic disciplines based on human society – politics, sociology, philosophy, archaeology, history, linguistics – demonstrate an understanding of the importance of archives to all societies. As significantly, perceptions, perspectives and ideas in those disciplines give valuable insights into questions raised in the archival profession today. Archivists need to develop a forum for the discussion of these ideas with colleagues from different disciplines; and archivists need to initiate as well as contribute to these discussions through transdisciplinary conferences and interdisciplinary publications.

Archival Theory

We have seen that the MLA's pilot project, *Revisiting Archive Collections*, is changing some aspects of archival theory and practice. Electronic records meanwhile are posing a number of challenges to other fundamental principles underlying traditional theory. In a quite different context, Derridean ideas, postmodernist interpretations

and the insights provided by literary criticism are presenting new concepts and new discourses about archives. Within the professional archive community itself, some theorists are turning the notion of provenance on its head. These philosophical concerns, challenges to theory and emerging discourses about archives together indicate that some reconsideration of archival principles is already under way and suggest that a review of archival theory as a whole would be timely.

Education and Training

Over ten years ago Terry Eastwood, Tom Nesmith and Carol Couture called for a reformed archival curriculum to meet contemporary needs and asked ‘What will the archivist need to know in the twenty-first century?’ (see their respective contributions to *Archivaria*, 1996). In the intervening decade, when archivists everywhere have witnessed a colossal shift in almost every aspect of their profession and of the world around them, have we in the UK done enough to prepare the archivist for the challenges of the twenty-first century?

Postgraduate archive courses in the UK have indeed made changes to incorporate the demands of access and management and to accommodate some of the technical requirements of digitization. But critical analysis of what archives actually are and what an archivist actually does, in a philosophical sense, remains patchy: enthusiastically embraced by some courses, completely passed over by others. At the same time, there is little recognition within the wider profession that any post-diploma development would be beneficial – little opportunity then during an archivist’s career to develop any detailed understanding of the why, rather than the how, of being an archivist.

The profession in the UK is focused on practice and process: it is pragmatic and long has been. But now we need to think about how we might change this. We need to think about the establishment of a discipline which will incorporate archives and the activity of archiving as a whole, and the study of how archives have been understood throughout history, of how views and understanding of archives have changed and are changing – an archive-ography if you like (that we have no word for this – unlike our colleagues in museums – speaks volumes), a body of knowledge and activity which will allow us to contribute to and to initiate new thinking about archives. We need to think about how we can incorporate this into archival courses and into continuing professional education in the UK.

At present we are asking and expecting archivists to become skilled in old and new technologies and to make decisions on cultural and heritage grounds without giving them the knowledge and skills they need to do so. Most crucially, we are not enabling would-be archivists to gain the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to develop as culturally informed, technically able archivists, with historical understanding, which is what is needed in the early years of the twenty-first century.

In the record office, where we began, we noted the pressures and demands on today’s archivists: we need now to address both the requirements of the present and the challenges of the future.

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