Training Note 1

What are Archives? How do Museums manage them?

Museums around the country contain archives as part of their holdings. These archives have special needs, different in many respects from those of objects. While larger museums can employ specialist staff to manage these ‘specialist’ collections, smaller and voluntary museums are often unable or unclear how to manage, preserve and access the archives they hold.

In the past collection management approaches to different types of materials within an institution have automatically been determined by the institution’s professional practice; so a library holding archives might have catalogued such documents within its library classification system and an archive holding museum objects might have listed them as part of an archive collection.

We are now increasingly encouraged to adopt a broader approach to museums, libraries and archives and to view these as components of a larger heritage or culture domain. Witness the increasing adoption of cross-sectoral approaches by local authorities in the way that they manage their cultural or heritage services; by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in the way that it promotes agendas like inclusion, access and learning as well as standards across the sector; and by the criteria of funders like Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) which encourages a more generic approach to heritage focused as much on user needs and expectations as on professional criteria. Increasingly such professional distinctions are seen as unhelpful or old fashioned by administrators, funders and users.

Archive definitions

Part of the difficulty is to do with language and terminology. Curators and archivists would agree that they are both involved with ‘collections’ and with ‘preservation’ and ‘access’ but disagree about their understanding of the terms. There are large cultural and professional differences in the way that these things are managed. Yet to the outsider and the user these distinctions are often unimportant; the distinction and the overlaps between the contents of, say, a picture library, a film archive and a museum of photography may be so subtle as to be almost meaningless; nevertheless the differences in professional approach can be huge.
One of the difficulties is the rapidly changing and expanding meaning of the word ‘archive’. All language adapts but arguably there is considerably less of a distinction between the lay and the professional understanding of the word ‘museum’ than there is for that of an ‘archive’. This is a term that has rapidly extended its range of meanings over the last 25 years so that it now occupies a curious position as an increasingly commonplace word (where once it held a very precise, almost technical, meaning) which most people think they understand. Yet those meanings are diverse and imprecise. For example is it a collection, an item, a place, a verb, a software function, a type of research, a computer file or just something old that has been preserved? All such definitions appear valid. It is also acquiring increasingly specific meanings in different fields such as software development, contemporary art, archaeology, publishing and cultural history that move it on from its original sense.

Therefore it will be helpful to first define the original meaning of an archive before going on to discuss what other people and particularly museum curators mean by it. Here are three definitions of a traditional archive:

- ‘Documentary evidence of human activity’
- ‘Records created by organisations and individuals in the course of going about their business’
- ‘Original documents in any medium created and/or accumulated by an individual, a family, a corporate body or institution in the course of its daily life and work....’

Some key additional attributes are that archives

- Contain evidence (legal, administrative) as well as information (historical or other)
- Are able to demonstrate their authenticity
- Were originally unselfconscious accruals rather than proactive collection
- Are permanently preserved

When archives are used

- They continue to be consulted by the organisation that produced them
- They will be used for research that was not anticipated when the records were created
- They are increasingly used for their cultural as much as their original or research values

It is hard to be prescriptive about what sort of materials an archive can contain because it is the creative context rather than the medium or type that defines them. But one can say that archives are not normally:

- Cultural products (such as a published book or an art work)
What are Archives?

- Objects
- Available in multiples
- Artificially collected
- Single items

Equally they are not necessarily

- Two-dimensional
- Paper or parchment
- Manuscript
- Unique
- or even old

Archives in the UK

In the UK most archives are held in record offices (also confusingly known as Archives). The main categories are

- National government (The National Archives, National Library of Wales and National Archives of Scotland)
- Local government (County, city and borough record offices)
- Business and Institutional (e.g. company, university, hospital and institutional archives)

There are also other types of archives that have developed more recently

- Media- specific (film, sound and data archives)
- Cultural archives (e.g. Black Cultural Archives, Hall-Carpenter Archives, Women’s Library)
- Community archives (e.g. locally managed village, housing estate and town archives)

Archive collections in museums

Of course there are also substantial collections of archives in museums across the UK. These include:

- The museum’s own records which are likely to be a mixture of historical records, semi-current records and inherited collections
- Artificial and specialist collections
- Exemplary documents
- Documents that support objects
- Photographs
**Museum's own records**

Depending on the age of your museum these are both a current and/or a future resource. These are the records of your own organisation 'going about its business'; and include, typically, accession records, legal title, history files, catalogues, photos, cuttings and the records and minutes of your governing body. They will be important for a range of administrative purposes like proving that you actually own your collection as well as for current business uses like museum accreditation which requires reconciliation of a museum’s inventory with its collections registers.

Longer established museums are also starting to realise the value of their own historical records for a range of current activities including supporting fund raising applications, for publicity and raising profile or for enabling the (written) history of the institution. Over time these records also become archives of interest to people outside the organisation who may wish to use them for a variety of other research purposes beyond the history of the museum.

**Artificial Collections**

Many archives in museums are actually ‘artificial collections' assembled either by the museum in support of its geographical or subject specialist collecting area or donated by private collectors or local literary & scientific societies or other organisations. These collections often contain archival materials such as letters, deeds, m.s. volumes and other records that have been uncoupled from an original archive and re-assembled by the collector or by the museum.

In that process these records will almost certainly have lost their original provenance. However their new museum provenance may have become just as significant and may itself demonstrate the methods and interests of particular sort of collectors or institutions which are worth documenting.

**Archives that interpret objects**

These can range in scale from the instruction manual or donor correspondence that explains or describes a single object in the collection through to an entire company’s business archive that is seen as supporting the particular subject specialism of, say, an industrial museum.

**Archive or Archival?**

Many of the archive collections that museums hold may not be true archives in the sense that they have been artificially collected for other purposes. Many museums will also hold exemplary archives - documents or records that have been collected and used as objects e.g. photograph albums, the binding of a volume, seal or calligraphy of a manuscript, or ‘personalia’ like ID cards, correspondence and diaries.
Nevertheless archive management criteria will apply in terms of how you preserve, store and provide access to these documents and photographs. This is discussed in more detail in Notes 2 and 3.

**Current Collecting**

A 'local' town or village museum is often seen as a highly appropriate place of deposit for local archives. This is particularly the case in rural areas where a museum can appear a more attractive and relevant home for a collection than a geographically remote County record office which might otherwise expect to hold such material. Equally a subject specialist museum like a railway museum may seem a more appropriate place for a collector to bequeath material, particularly where a collection is defined by subject theme rather than geography.

Potential collecting conflict between museums and archives can exist at almost any level, but is most likely to occur between a museum and a local authority archive which in this country carry out a dual function of collecting not merely their own authority’s records but also acting as a ‘place of deposit’ for any local organisations’ records. That is why County, city and borough record offices also contain church, estate, business, regimental, family, charity and a whole range of other local records. And of course these are also the types of records that many local museums will have been collecting.

If you are a museum collecting archives you will need a policy to attempt to define what you will and will not be collecting. This should be shared with your local record office or with relevant specialist institutions to avoid conflicts of collecting.

You will also need to define the terms on which you accept records and legal conditions of deposit. For example if you do not own collections then you need to anticipate how you deal with documents being withdrawn.

Certain categories of archives are controlled by legislation: The Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1 covers the historic records of local Anglican churches; the Manorial 2 and Tithe 3 documents rules cover local manorial court and Tithe Commissioners’ records; while the Public Records Acts 4 also cover the local records of national government. These records should not be acquired or held by a museum without consulting with The National Archives.

Some records may be subject to the Data Protection Act; for example many local museums hold school records. 5 Local authority-run museums will be subject to the Freedom of Information Act and will need to clarify whether they

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1 [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/policy/other/parochial.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/policy/other/parochial.htm)
2 [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/policy/other/manorial.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/policy/other/manorial.htm)
3 [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/policy/other/tithe.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/policy/other/tithe.htm)
5 [http://www.ico.gov.uk/what_we_cover/data_protection.aspx](http://www.ico.gov.uk/what_we_cover/data_protection.aspx)
are subject to FoI requests to make material available without charge or can exempt themselves by using a Publication Scheme.

Further sources of advice

- The National Archives runs the National Advisory Service for professional guidance. If your museum holds substantial collections of archives they will be interested to know about these and can offer advice [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives/).


- The Standing Conference on Archives & Museums is a partnership representing members of both the archive and museum professions. It has produced a series of downloadable Archive Practice Guidelines for Museums covering: Collections Policy and Management, Listing and Arrangement, Preservation and Conservation, Access and Museum's Administrative Records [http://www.archivesandmuseums.org.uk/scam/home.htm](http://www.archivesandmuseums.org.uk/scam/home.htm).


- The Archives in Museums Subject Specialist network is a membership organisation for professionals in museums working with archive collections [http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/find_a_network/subject_specialists/archives_in_museums](http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/find_a_network/subject_specialists/archives_in_museums).

- The Museums Libraries and Archives Council is the government’s agency for museums, galleries, libraries and archives. Your regional MLA may also be able to advise on standards, initiatives and funding. [http://www.mla.gov.uk/home](http://www.mla.gov.uk/home).

- Your county record office can advise on more local issues.

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