2019 Conference
Suburbia revealed through records

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Ode to an archive

The National Theatre’s recent front-of-house exhibition celebrated the NT Archive’s 25th anniversary. Theatre-makers, playwrights and researchers were invited to choose an object from the archive and to respond to it. The poem here was written by Jesc Bunyard in response to the prompt script of the first NT production, written by Jesc Bunyard in response to the prompt script of the first NT production, here was written by Jesc Bunyard in response to the prompt script of the first NT production, written by Jesc Bunyard in response to the prompt script of the first NT production.

An archive is a place where the jewels of history are kept, not locked away.

They contain a thousand voices whispering secrets, ideas, plans and lost loves.

Delving through an archive is a romantic endeavour.

To use an archive is to engage in an act of seduction.

Ask the right questions and they will lie before you and reveal their secrets.

An archive is a guardian of history ensuring that each moment is secure for the next seeker of knowledge.

Each visitor carves their story in relation to each piece they discover.

They make their own mark on the archive by their interaction with it.

Each single piece of treasure within an archive contains a thousand stories.

Sit within the archive and these pieces will tell their lives to you.

History will unfold before you, drama will spring to life and dance across the database.

Poem reproduced with the kind permission of writer and artist Jesc Bunyard.

A chance to visit Southill Park and its archive

BRA members are invited to attend a visit to Southill Park, Bedfordshire on Thursday 6 June. Southill has been home to the Whitbread family since 1795 and was rebuilt by Henry Holland. The house looks much as it did when Holland died, with decoration and furniture designed by him still in situ.

Charles Whitbread, the present incumbent, and James Collett-White, archivist at the house, will be giving the party a tour of some of the rooms, and items from the archive will also be on display.

The Whitbreads have been Presidents of the Bedfordshire Record Centre; Jessica Scantlebury from the University of Sussex, and Sally Gilbert from Merchant Taylors’ School.

BRA Chair Julia Sheppard declared: ‘It was a very informative, successful and well-attended day – with excellent illustrated talks on a wide range of topics and stimulating animated discussion in the lunch and coffee breaks.’

Reflecting on the conference, one delegate tweeted afterwards: ‘Interesting subject, great speakers and debate, and I found out things that I didn’t know before. Well done to the organisers!’

A full report will appear in the next Newsletter and some of the papers will be published in a future issue of Archives.

SAVE THE DATE

This year’s AGM and Maurice Bond Lecture will take place on 19 November. The lecture, ‘Access to information in turbulent times’, will be given by Gill Bull, Director of Compliance and Compliance at the Information Commissioner’s Office.

The Whitbreads have been a figure in the BRA.

Tickets for the house tour cost £15 for BRA members, £18 for non-members. For more info visit the BRA website. Booking will be via Eventbrite, or email us at info@britishrecordsassociation.org.uk.
Vassall: a victim of his time?

In 1962, while at the British Embassy in Moscow, homosexual civil servant John Vassall was caught in a honey-trap set by the Soviet Secret Service and blackmailed into passing them secrets before eventually being discovered, tried and imprisoned.

On 25 April as part of TNA’s Cold War Season, contemporary principal records specialist Mark Dunton delivered a talk at TNA where he examined some of the issues raised by Vassall’s situation, in particular that of widespread prejudice.

Vassall/Phillips pictured in 1984
writing a book, although he gave no hint of what it might be about. He took a week’s holiday during that week his book Vassall: The Autobiography of a Spy was published.

‘The first I knew of it was seeing his picture on the front page of newspaper being read by a fellow commuter! He returned to work as if nothing had happened.

TNA’s Cold War Season runs until 9 November and includes a one-day course in archives and records management (Building Blocks of Records Management; Basic Archive Skills; Archival Arrangement and Description Explained; Managing Photographs in the Archives) delivered by the Archive-Skills Consultancy Ltd. For more information: www.archive-skills.com/training/index.php.

13 June University of Leeds
27 June University of Birmingham
Come Together: Developing collaboration between archives services and Higher Education, aimed at academics from all disciplines, funded by MALD/TNA/History UK. Admission free; book at www.eventbrite.co.uk.

11 September, Ordnance Survey Head Office, Southampton. Annual Workshop of the Map Curators’ Group of the British Cartographic Society (BSC). Map collection development: dispersal, disposal and digital transition. For more information, contact: MCG Convener Paula Williams at p.williams@nls.uk.

Obituary: Alan Kucia
(14 June 1958–30 November 2018)

The BRA is sad to report the death of Alan Kucia. Alan (right) trained on the Liverpool Archive Course, 1983–84, and spent most of his career in the University archives sector. His first job was at Trinity College, Cambridge where he spent nearly seven years. He then moved to be senior archivist at his beloved Churchill College, Cambridge until May 2000, during which time he oversaw the deposit of the Thatcher Papers.

His only venture outside Cambridge was just over four years spent at King’s College London, as Senior Archives Services Manager. After that he worked at the RAF Duxford Museum Film and Video Archive. Another four years were spent as Senior Cataloguer for the Tower Project.

Cambridge Science Festival, now in its 25th year, is a major regional opportunity for all-comers to hear about cutting-edge science from cutting-edge scientists. But if anyone thought archives an arts-side irrelevance, this year’s programme surely prompted them to think again.

At Churchill College, Madelin Evans brought together archivists from across the University to show off and explain collections from Darwin to Sir Fred Hoyle, polar exploration to JFK, cockroaches to the recreation of scientific correspondence networks through the ambitious Epsilon project (see www.epsilon.ac.uk).

At the University Library, Katrina Dean bravely organised ‘What to do with my archive?’, how scientists and administrators need to work with archivists to build for the future. Four speakers took us from the selection of ‘stuff’ at the Whipple Museum through the continuing growth of the university archive (www.repository.cam.ac.uk), the preservation and sharing, digitally, of research and research data sets, and guidance on the preservation of personal digital archives, including advice to use properly managed earth-bound hard drives rather than risk cloud storage. The event was surely worth repeating and a model to emulate.

A warning to read the terms and conditions of cloud storage was vividly exemplified by a Europe-wide distribution map of cats, each one capable of being zoomed to full view without their or their owner’s knowledge. (My cat Tischendorf now pesters for at least his photographs to be shared worldwide in this way, convinced as he rightly is of his beauty.)
Records at risk

Penny Baker outlines the progress made by the steering group in the past few months

by TNA for the autumn as part of its Higher Education Archive programme as the ‘final’ event in the celebration of the Historical Manuscripts Commission 150th anniversary celebrations.

Helping others

The BRA is working on a title deeds project with the Family History Federation and has been approached for advice on organising archives of private and charity organisations. We had a table at the British Academy day in March on Voluntary Organisations, Archives and Records and spoke to several small charities concerned about their record-keeping. We are helping our neighbours in Cowcross Street with their records, notably the Public Monuments and Sculpture Association, and continue to finalise deposits of material left over from the FPS.

Alison Cassidy has finished lists of the BRA records deposited in April 2017 and is working on the BRA archives previously deposited at London Metropolitan Archives, improving descriptions so we can merge the archive lists and make all our archives available for research. There is already academic interest in our work on salvage during World War II and we have received some requests about deposits made as far back as the 1930s, including a new owner of a property wishing to reclaim their deeds, so it is important that we have our own archives in order!

Archives

Archives is the peer-reviewed journal of the British Records Association, whose aims and objectives it seeks to promote.

Published twice-yearly by Liverpool University Press, it contains essays, case studies and reports on all aspects of archives. The next issue will be mailed to members in summer.

We welcome submissions and are always keen to receive work by early-career scholars.

✦ There is no upper limit on length of submissions, but 8,000 words including notes is suggested.

✦ Submissions must be the original work of the author(s) and must not have been published previously, or be about to be.

For more information, please contact Dr Ruth Paley: editor@britishrecordsassociation.org.uk.

Nine services get scoping grants

Nine archive services have recently each received scoping grants of up to £3,000 from the Archives Revealed funding programme. The grants fund an expert assessment that enables archive services to gain a better understanding of the needs, content and significance of their collection and plan for improved collections management and the future development of the archive.

The nine services are: the Lighthouse Archive, the Royal Society of Sculptors, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, Wheal Martyn China Clay Museum, the British Deaf History Society, Scottish Opera, Coventry Cathedral, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, and the Theatres Trust. Archives Revealed is a partnership programme between The National Archives and The Pilgrim Trust, supported by The Wolfson Foundation.

More archives accredited

TNA has awarded accredited status to Rotherham Archives and Local Studies Service; Royal College of Physicians of London Archive; Suffolk Record Office; the Postal Museum: the Royal Mail Archive, and Wirral Archives Service. The accreditation acknowledges the continuing development of their service around the management, care and access to their collections.

Visual treasures now online

New College Library and Archives, Oxford has set up a new online Archives Gallery, featuring some of the fascinating and beautiful items in its extensive collection, including some stunning manuscripts and early printed books and rare books. Some of the college’s most important documents date back to the 11th century. The galleries are available to view on three web pages: new.ox.ac.uk/archives-gallery, new.ox.ac.uk/manuscripts and new.ox.ac.uk/antiquarian-gallery.

Archives news

The Motorway Archive Trust collection, held by Glamorgan Archives, is this year’s winner of the John Armstrong Award for Transport Archives. The award, which is a one-off cataloguing grant of £8,000 jointly funded by the Business Archives Council and the late John Armstrong, will enable the Trust to catalogue its collection material related to the building of the M4 and A55.

The records date from 1939 to 2010 and include reports, correspondence, contracts, photographs and plans. The project will be completed by August 2019.

Box of delights

Dundee Archive’s first donation of 2019 arrived posthumously after a friend of Isabell Phil, who died in October 2018 aged 98, found a note left by her to ‘please offer [this box] to Dundee City Archives or the Nine Trades archivist’. The box contained many items of historical interest including World War II medals, a 1953 ration book, letters and old family photographs.
Iris Murdoch Centenary Conference
13–15 July 2019
St Anne’s College, Oxford
Dame Iris Murdoch (right), born on 15 July 1919, read Greats at Somerville College, Oxford in 1938 before going on to have a renowned career as a fiction writer and philosopher, which included returning to Oxford as Philosophy Fellow at St Anne’s in 1948.

The Iris Murdoch Research Centre at the University of Chichester will be holding a centenary conference in association with St Anne’s, which is providing the main venue, and Somerville, which is hosting an exhibition of major items connected with Murdoch.

The conference will be preceded by a public lecture at the Bodleian Library on 12 July by Professor Peter Garrard of St George’s Medical School, London. For more information email francis.white@chi.ac.uk.

BAC Grants open for applications
The Business Archives Council (BAC) is welcoming applications for the Cataloguing Grant for Business Archives and a new grant for Business Archives related to Sports, which replaces the previous Arts grant.

The grants are for £4,000 each and are aimed at funding the cataloguing of business archives in the private or public sector and to provide financial support for institutions or businesses that manage business archives; reach collections that have not yet been prioritised but have potential academic or socio-historical value; create opportunities for archivists, para-professionals or volunteers to gain experience in listing collections, and increase access to business collections.

For more information visit businessarchivescouncil.org.uk. Deadlines for applications for the grants are 25 June and 26 July 2019 respectively. Previous applicants are welcome to reapply but the BAC will not award a grant to the same institution within three years.

HMC at TNA
To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the creation of the Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC) in 1869 by Royal warrant, a one-day conference is being held on 12 June at TNA with a focus on reflecting on the history and achievements of HMC through series of dialogues between external and TNA speakers.

GSHQ revealed
10 July 2019–23 February 2020
Science Museum, London
Coinciding with the 100th anniversary of GCHQ, this exhibition explores more than a century’s worth of communications intelligence through hand-written documents, declassified files and previously unseen artefacts from the Science Museum Group’s and GCHQ’s historic collections.

Admission free; advance booking required: www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/see-and-do/top-secret.

Other events
20–22 May The Catholic Archives Society Conference, Ushaw College, Durham
Tickets: £185 members; £195 non-members. More info from www.catholicarchivesociety.org or email jonathan.bush@duhar.co.uk.

31 May London History Day 2019: The Past is Yet to Come, 10.30am–4pm at London Metropolitan Archives, London EC1R OHL
Admission free: register at www.eventbrite.co.uk.

5–6 July Annual Conference of the Oral History Society, Singleton Campus, Swansea University: tickets from £70 www.ohs.org.uk/conferences/conference-2019/

How well are we at work?
Janet Foster and Jessamy Harvey report on Archives: Wellbeing Impact Seminar

Representatives of the archives sector – mainly local authority archivists, as well as those linked to specialist repositories including business and consultants – came together in Birmingham in March to discuss ways to measure wellbeing in relation to archives, with specific mention of impact and the National Lottery Heritage Fund bids (formerly HLF).

The morning presentation was given by Ingrid Abreu Scherer from What Works Centre for Wellbeing, an independent centre supported by the Economic and Social Research Centre and partners to produce evidence of wellbeing in specific areas, such as culture and communities. The centre defines wellbeing as ‘how we experience life’, including quality of life, health and belonging, and translates published research into effective interventions. In March it published a report on Heritage and Wellbeing based on 3,500 papers and reports, of which 75 were included although none were directly related to archives. It appears there is a lack of body of evidence within the archives sector that can feed into these reports.

A key aspect of wellbeing, as measured by the centre, is based on life satisfaction – not happiness but a balance between pleasure and purpose. We were introduced to several frameworks, such as ONS4 and WEMWBS among others, but the participants generally thought that these were not useful to the sector. An exception was the UCL Wellbeing Measures Umbrella.

After lunch, we worked in groups in response to set questions from TNA to provide data towards designing a toolkit for measuring wellbeing impact of interactions with archives. (Some participants had understood that the seminar would be reviewing an existing toolkit rather than working towards developing one – no such thing as a free lunch!) The discussion tended to focus on impact and volunteers, which excluded discussion around the wellbeing of archivists, some of whom are working in difficult circumstances, and users.

The examples provided to kick-start discussion were not adequate in the context of archives, but after some brainstorming each group delivered notes about what we understood wellbeing to be, why we were curious about it and whose wellbeing we were interested in, with some suggestions as to how this could be measured. We await the TNA write-up towards an archive specific Wellbeing Impact Toolkit.

Janet Foster is an archives and records management consultant and Treasurer of the British Records Association. Dr Jessamy Harvey is a researcher and archives assistant.

Further information and resources
* Change Minds, a joint project between Norfolk Record Office, the Restoration Trust and Together for Mental Wellbeing: changeminds.org.uk.
* https://whatworkswellbeing.org.uk
Susan Bennett traces the history of the archives of the Royal Society of Arts

In 1778 a Mr James Dunn was appointed to assist the Secretary with the task of indexing the correspondence and papers that had been sent into the Society of Arts (founded in 1754 and granted the title ‘Royal’ in 1808). He found a ‘confused heap of papers’ and, despite his ‘best endeavours and strictest care’ over a period of 18 months, it had proved impossible to put the papers in strict chronological order.

He came across small bundles of different dates and years mixed in with larger groupings of correspondence, drawings and samples which had been submitted for the Society’s awards. From this heap he filled 12 folio volumes covering the period 1754 to 1766 and produced an index for these Guard Books.

Further attempts appear to have been made to formally catalogue or index the rest of these loose archives until the RSA, the third oldest national learned society, approached its bicentenary. In the 1950s they appointed history graduate David G.C. Allan to carry out an evaluation of the archive. The Society took an active interest in agricultural, artistic, economic, educational and scientific progress by awarding monetary and medallic awards. The rise of new and specialised societies together with the restriction on patents led to a decline in submissions by the mid-19th century. Prince Albert’s acceptance of the Presidency saw the Society lay the groundwork for the Great Exhibition of 1851, and it continued to support national and international exhibitions. The RSA turned from awarding premiums to a lecture-based programme to inform its work as well as establishing an examinations system.

Allan unearthed correspondence, papers and drawings scattered around the RSA’s headquarters building, which it had occupied since 1774, including tea-leafs full of letters dating from the mid-1800s which had been stored in the coal cellars. The original organisation of the material had been lost. He indexed the early material in relation to the relevant premium committees but whereas he had identified the authors of these early papers, much of the correspondence dating from the 1840s onwards was put into a loose alphabetical sequence for later cataloguing.

However, in surveying this material he came across a letter from Karl Marx, dated 28 May 1869, accepting membership of the Society. Culls of this later material have taken place on several occasions but there are still discoveries to be made, such as a letter dated 30 May 1908, on ‘Votes for Women’ letterhead, in which Mrs Pankhurst asked her assistant to enquire about the availability of the RSA’s meeting room for use by the National Women’s Social and Political Union.

As well as correspondence and papers the archive holds the Society’s Minute Books, committee minutes, including those for the Committee of Correspondence and Papers and the Committee of Miscellaneous Matters which, Allan reported, are the most useful sources for studying the Society’s treatment of its early archives. The collection also contains drawings, including a dog drawn by an 11-year-old Edwin Landseer, and trial paintings submitted for the Society’s ‘Polite Arts’ premiums, the remnants of the Early Library and 19th-century exhibition catalogues.

In 1997 the RSA received a substantial grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund to ensure the future accessibility of the Society’s archive. A Project Archivist was appointed to oversee over two years the creation of secure archival strong rooms and the establishment of a conservation programme for fragile items, such as the Guard Books with their samples of dyes, textiles and other items. He also chose CALM to re-catalogue the early archive for online searches (calmview2.eu/RSA/CalmViewA).

The current RSA Archivist Eve Watson, has initiated a scanning programme to provide more online accessibility. Email her at evelyn.watson@rsa.org.uk to arrange to see the archives. Susan Bennett is Honorary Secretary of the William Shipley Group for RSA History, founded in 2004 to build on the work of the former RSA History Study Group set up by Dr Allan.

Manual for Survival by Kate Brown

Allen Lane, £20 hardback

The official death toll of the 1986 Chernobyl accident is 54 and stories today suggest that nature is thriving there, but historian Kate Brown, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, uncovers a more disturbing story. Based on a decade of archival and on-the-ground research, Manual for Survival is a gripping account of the consequences of nuclear radiation in the wake of Chernobyl and the plot by international organisations to cover it up.
Fascinated by foundlings

Helen Berry, Professor of British History at Newcastle University, talks about her latest book *Orphans of Empire*

You’ve written extensively on Georgian Britain – what’s the attraction for you?

So few people learn about the Georgian period at school, which is a shame. Many of the themes that preoccupy our society today – how to live well in an urban environment, how to deal with unprecedented social change and what solutions could be found to problems such as poverty, environmental degradation, the expansion of global empires and astonishing technological advances – took off in the 18th century. It’s endlessly fascinating.

What led you to write about the London Foundling Hospital?

For my last book, I’d done some research on the composer Handel using records held in the Gerald Coke Collection at the Foundling Museum. Handel was a tremendous philanthropist whose work benefited the Foundling Hospital, and it led me to look at their main archives at the London Metropolitan Archives. They’re fascinating – unique insights into how the poorest members of London society lived – and they make for wonderful and terrible reading.

How long did the book take to write?

About five years.

What were the most enjoyable aspects of writing it?

Probably the sections which deal with the first-hand experiences of the children raised at the Foundling Hospital. The diary of George King, which runs throughout the book, was pure gold. It’s the only detailed diary by a foundling born in the 18th century, and it includes his eyewitness account from below decks of the Battle of Trafalgar.

How hard was it to build a picture of the lives of children at the Foundling Hospital?

Many historians have already looked at what happened to the children while they were at the Hospital; I was interested in what happened to them when they went out into the world. I had to start with the register of apprenticeship records and then try to link the various kinds of evidence. There were just under 6,000 entries on first apprenticeship. I had tremendous help from archivists, a team of researchers, and colleagues. With researcher help, we compiled a database that enabled me to make nominal linkages with other sources. That approach can be a nightmare if you have too many ‘John Smiths’ but fortunately the Foundling Hospital Governors were fond of giving the children distinctive names, so that helped a bit.

What were the most surprising discoveries you made?

The main surprise was that so few foundling boys became soldiers or sailors. A huge number in fact went to work in traditional small-scale industries and retailing, or in the new factory systems or agricultural labour.

What’s your next project?

I’m exploring two ideas – one on wellbeing and old age, and another on how we could look again at the history of industrialisation from the perspective of climate change. These are the big issues of our time, and historians must get involved with the discussion.

Interview by Sarah Hart

*Orphans of Empire* by Helen Berry is published by Oxford University Press, ISBN 9780198758488 (£25 hardback)