

All Party Parliamentary Group on Archives and
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Archives and the National Library of Wales: current issues

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Many thanks, Chair, for this invitation to address members of the All Parliamentary Group on Archives and History on the challenges and successes of the National Library of Wales's stewardship of its archives.

I'll divide what I have to say into three sections:

- o the National Library as the de facto national archive of Wales
- o how we give access to archives and encourage their use
- o the challenges of born-digital and screen and sound archives

with a brief coda on archives in higher education institutions.

1 The National Library of Wales as an archive

The National Library has always been more than a library. To simplify, at its foundation in 1907 it was given the job of collecting all kinds of material in two dimensions, while the National Museum, established on the same day, concentrated on three-dimensional objects. It isn't a public record office for Wales, a place of deposit of government archives – that function is performed by The National Archives – but in every other respect it acts as the national record repository for Wales.

We estimate that we hold 15km of unique archives on paper. Paper, incidentally, of all kinds: the Welsh language poet, communist and dentist T.E. Nicholas (Niclas y Glais) wrote on toilet paper when he was the guest of His Majesty in Swansea and Brixton prisons! Many unpublished items also lie in the National Screen and Sound Archive, which is part of the Library. Archives range in date from medieval times to the present day. Some are institutional, like the records of the National Eisteddfod, the Welsh National Opera or the South Wales Coal Owners Association, others are those of individuals, like Lloyd George, Sir Kyffin Williams or Dylan Thomas. There are particular strengths in land records, wills, legal and religious records, and in literary, artistic and musical archives; since 1983

we've made a special effort to collect papers for the Welsh Political Archive.

I said The National Archives, not the Library, receives governmental, 'public records' from Wales. However, the Government of Wales Act 2006 created a class of archives called 'Welsh public records' - archives of the Welsh Government, the Welsh Office, and some national bodies (though not those of the National Assembly for Wales after 2007) - and it allowed the Lord Chancellor to transfer the duty to manage them to Welsh Ministers.

This has not yet happened - in part, I suspect, because it has suited successive governments in Cardiff Bay that The National Archives pays for the care of Welsh government records. There are, though, a number of good reasons why the records should be, so to speak, repatriated. First, researchers in Wales should not have to travel to Kew to see the records of their own government. Second, Welsh archivists might approach the task of selecting archives for retention rather differently. And third, transfer of responsibilities could lead the way to other benefits, such as proper provision for the archives of bodies currently excluded from the definition of 'Welsh public records' and the introduction of services on a Wales basis, including advice provision, standards inspection, grant funding and advocacy. The National Library would be a possible, even an obvious, locus for all these duties. Such a change would bring Wales into line with Scotland and Northern Ireland.

I should add that the National Library works very closely with other archives in Wales, especially through the Archives and Records Council Wales, the representative body for institutions and organisations from all parts of Wales involved with the administration of archives.

2 Giving access, encouraging use

In the 14 years I've been Librarian there's been a sea change in how our archives are presented and used.

To begin with, it's much easier to find out what we have. You can now look online for descriptions of collections, as well as more detailed handlists, in one single, simple search. So, a search for the artist and poet David Jones will reveal his archives and papers, his publications, his paintings and inscriptions, his library, as well as works about him: books, articles, films and television and radio programmes. The user can then choose to restrict the results to, say, archives alone.

Sorting and cataloguing paper archives are stubbornly labour-intensive activities. At a time of declining resources one of the main

challenges facing the National Library – probably all archives – is how to avoid accumulating collections that remain uncatalogued and are therefore invisible to users. (Remember too that nowadays catalogues and indexes that may exist on paper but are not available online also consign their collections to effective invisibility.)

We use all kinds of methods not just to open our doors to archives but to encourage their use and demonstrate their relevance to people's interests. We have eight exhibition spaces in the building, many of them featuring archives: a major show about to open, 'Dot Dash Dash', which tells the story of communications in Wales, draws heavily on screen and sound material. Over the summer in 'Hengwrt', our special space for exhibiting 'treasures', we displayed the so-called 'Boston Manuscript' of the Laws of Hywel Dda, recently bought at auction with the help of generous grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Friends of the National Libraries.

Our education staff work with schools throughout Wales and make a point of exposing children to the immediacy and impact of unique documents. We take our archives, in surrogate form, outside the Library to other parts of Wales: if you visit Whitland in Carmarthenshire to see the gardens celebrating the Laws of Hywel Dda you'll see panels reproducing the text and illustrations of Peniarth 28, the earliest source for the Laws. We created a faithful facsimile of the Black Book of Carmarthen, the volume containing some of the earliest Welsh poetry, and took it to Carmarthen so that its local people could see how the poems were written down there, in St John's Priory.

But the most influential means of sharing our archives with the world has been through digitisation. For nearly 15 years the Library has had a continuous digitisation programme, and archives have been an important part of it. To give two examples: 190,000 historic wills in our collections dating to before the introduction of civil probate in 1858 are available free online; and we're currently scanning 30,000 pages of archives, some of them very little used by researchers, on Wales during the First World War. It's worth making two general points. First, we've always treated digitisation as a mainstream part of the Library's work, using our regular funds and developing our own internal facilities, services and expert staff, rather than depending opportunistically on externally-financed projects. And second, we insist that wherever possible the results of digitisation are available online, free, for everyone – a policy consistent with our strong belief in reducing barriers between people and the knowledge they seek.

We're now moving on to engaging some of our archive users in a more active way, by encouraging them to contribute directly

themselves to the store of knowledge we hold in trust. As part of our volunteer programme we'll be inviting people to transcribe the wills we've digitised, so that future researchers will be able to search and analyse their content in new ways.

We're also interested in supporting commercial aspects of this work. An ERDF-funded project, 'DigiDo', aims to encourage small and medium-sized companies in the less advantaged parts of Wales to take commercial advantage of some of what we've digitised.

Much of this activity benefits from the presence on the staff of the National Library of Prof. Lorna Hughes. She holds the University of Wales Chair of Digital Collections, as far as I know a unique post, and she acts as a critical link between the Library and its digital collections on the one hand and the needs and projects of academic and other researchers on the other.

3 Born-digital and screen & sound archives

If I had to say what was the single most pressing challenge facing us as an archive I'd have no hesitation in saying it was how we should respond to the proliferation of archives in digital form.

One of the consequences of the digital information revolution has been to modify the boundary between archival or unpublished material and publications. For example, what would in the past have been a private diary or notebook is quite likely to be a networked blog today, while the contemporary equivalent of the private paper correspondence of the past is probably a public exchange on Facebook or Twitter. Governments now publish much more online than they ever did in print (the National Assembly for Wales has been thoroughly electronic since its establishment in 1999). All this reflects, of course, a fundamental social shift towards institutional disclosure and personal self-revelation.

The relevance of this in our context is the imminent implementation, after a regrettable delay of ten years, of the Legal Deposit Libraries Act 2003, which will enable the National Library and the other legal deposit libraries to collect, preserve and give limited access to most UK electronic publications, including websites. The Regulations giving effect to the Act, when they come into force, probably in April 2013, will represent a huge step forward for the libraries.

To come now to electronic archives, the shift from analogue to digital has arguably already taken place in the case of corporate deposits. For example, the Arts Council of Wales used to give us its archives exclusively in paper form; it now does so only digitally. Elsewhere, especially with individuals as opposed to bodies, we'll need to expect a hybrid deposit, partly paper, partly digital. For us

the 'type site' for a hybrid collection is the Brith Gof archive, a remarkable collection that documents in huge detail the work of the radical performance company Brith Gof in the 1990s. It contains papers, photographs and slides, audio tapes, plans and drawings, production notes, scenarios, floppy disks, zip drives, SyQuest cartridges, MacBooks and much more!

We face serious challenges at every stage of the digital archiving process. First, collection is more complex: a National Library project to investigate literary archives concluded that contact with depositing authors needed to be made at a very early stage in the relationship, and completely new systems, procedures and workflows needed to be in place.

Then, how users gain information about digital archives, and access to the archives themselves are also complicated questions. It's likely that metadata will be gleaned from the material itself and then made available to the enquirer, rather than being hand-crafted by the archivist - but we are far from achieving standardised methods yet.

And finally, as you can easily imagine from the Brith Gof example, the preservation of digital archives - how to ensure effective access for future users - perhaps provides the most difficult challenges, given the rapidity of technological obsolescence of all kinds. Many organisations are grappling with the issues. In the National Library we have a small-scale laboratory called MabLab, but what we're now beginning to plan for is a fully fledged National Conservation Centre, that will include and build on our existing strengths in conserving paper-based materials but will also greatly enlarge our capacity and expertise in preserving digital objects of all kinds. The Centre will not just serve the National Library's needs: it will offer an external service to other institutions in Wales, and possibly beyond.

Sound and screen archives provide a different set of challenges. The National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales, formed within the Library in 2001 through an amalgamation of an existing internal collection with the external Wales Film and Television Archive, collects all kinds of published and unpublished audiovisual materials: films and videos, music, sound recordings and radio and television programmes and productions. The addition this summer of almost the entire archive of commercial television in Wales since 1958 has doubled its size.

Collecting this material, especially in a digital environment, can be less than systematic, and there is a strong case, in my view, in favour of Parliament's extending the law of legal deposit to embrace sound and moving image material that is made publicly available.

Preservation of sound and moving image is doubly difficult: conservation of film and other analogue items is costly in terms of labour, and digital preservation, as we've said, is a young science.

4 Archives in higher education institutions

So far you have heard about archives in national institutions, but it's worth bearing in mind that local institutions also hold archival collections of national and regional significance. Many of these are located in universities and other higher education institutions.

Over the last year Research Libraries UK, which represents the most significant research libraries in the UK and Ireland, has been conducting the first comprehensive study of what it terms 'unique and distinctive collections'. The report, which will incorporate the results of a large-scale survey, will be published in 2013 and will offer a valuable overview of the state of the collections and the issues facing their custodians.

Thank you for listening.