

A sense of history, a sense of mission: Putting the Religious Archives Support Plan into practice 1 October 2012 – 31 March 2015

**Dr Tim Powell, Independent Archives Team, Archives Sector
Development,
The National Archives**

"Despite the significant extent and intrinsic research value of religious archives in the United Kingdom, they have attracted far less attention, and commanded far fewer resources, than, say, the more 'fashionable' political or literary archives. This is partly perhaps because they are not only overwhelmingly privately owned but, in many cases, still managed by the organisations which created them".

Religious Archives Survey 2010. A survey of the archives of religious bodies within the United Kingdom and of related personal papers

This document reports on the progress made by The National Archives, with particular reference to the work of the Senior Adviser: Religious Archives, in taking forward recommendations of the Religious Archives Survey and implementing objectives of the Religious Archives Support Plan, October 2012-March 2015.

The Religious Archives Survey

A growing recognition of the need for an interest group focused on religious archives – encompassing both religious institutions maintaining archives and archives of religious organisations and individuals held in public, university and other repositories - had resulted in the establishment of the Religious Archives Group in 1989. The work of this group highlighted that there was a knowledge gap about the sector and what was required was an authoritative overview of the religious archives sector. This fitted in well with the role of The National Archives (TNA)'s Archives Sector Development department in gathering information about and supporting archives beyond TNA, and in particular with the consecutive engagement strategy of the Independent Archives Team.

In 2008, after work by a small steering group, an initial proposal for a national collection-level survey of religious archives linked to the National Register of Archives was drafted, with TNA offering logistical support and part-funding of the costs.

In 2010, with support from the Pilgrim Trust and in partnership with the Archives and Records Association and the Religious Archives Group (RAG), TNA undertook a survey of religious archives in the United Kingdom. This was the first comprehensive survey of the field to be undertaken.

The Resource Discovery Officer Claire Muller, assisted by TNA staff from the Private Archives Team, approached almost 2,700 religious and secularist bodies, together with nearly 700 leading religious figures.

The resulting report was launched at London Metropolitan Archives on 24 November 2010 in the presence of the Rt. Rev. Richard Chartres, Bishop of London, John Chambers of the Archives and Records Association, and Oliver Morley, CEO of TNA. It is online at

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/tna-ras-web-17-nov.pdf>

The survey reported that,

‘Religious archives are important both for faith communities and society as a whole in the constituent countries of the United Kingdom. They constitute a crucial element of our national heritage. Not all such collections are equally accessible but it is important that they are preserved, in all their diversity, by their owners or creators, as part of this patrimony. They cover a wide span of subjects and, where they can be made available, serve a range of researchers from academics to genealogists.’

The survey gathered valuable information on locations of religious archives previously not known and a significant number of new entries were added to the TNA’s Discovery resources: the National Register of Archives and ARCHON. It also highlighted weaknesses in the sector and made five principal recommendations:

- The support available for the sustenance of these archival assets ought to be improved and extended. Gaps in the coverage offered by collecting institutions need to be filled. Advice, guidance and resources need to be channelled into the care of archives retained by their creators.
- Encouragement should be given to strengthen the culture of record-keeping among faith communities and religious leaders or opinion-formers where it is less well-established. This is particularly important in a digital age since records which will form the archives of the future need to be carefully managed from the time of their creation. The importance of good record-keeping to good governance also needs to be better understood in the light of current charity law. Where historical records of faith groups largely exist in oral or audio-visual form, appropriate arrangements need to be made to preserve them for posterity.
- High-level advocacy is needed in an age of austerity to raise the profile of religious archives and to bring their needs to the attention of opinion-formers and policy makers within faith communities and the country as a whole. It is important that any action to meet their needs reflects the diversity of faith groups in the United Kingdom today.

- Funding bodies should be encouraged to support and strengthen arrangements for the care and (where appropriate) accessibility of archival collections. This would provide recognition for the centrality of such material to the history of the United Kingdom and its importance to our communal identity.
- The National Archives, the Archives and Records Association, and the Religious Archives Group, together with other bodies which have a continuing interest in the religious archives sector, should seek to provide support and encouragement for its continuing development. Further targeted research and consultation should be undertaken in order that such support is properly focused and rendered more effective.

The Religious Archives Support Plan

In April 2011 TNA, in collaboration with RAG, hosted a Consultative Meeting to discuss the findings and recommendations of the survey. Subsequently a five-year Religious Archives Support Plan was drawn up to take forward the Survey's recommendations, with 30 objectives organised into six broad areas: Advocacy, Documentation and Advice, Training, Collection Development, Virtual Infrastructure, and Funding.

This Support Plan was adopted by TNA to guide its approach to religious archives, and by RAG as its strategy document, and RAG and TNA have been the prime movers in its implementation. In October 2012, TNA appointed Dr Tim Powell to the post of Senior Adviser: Religious Archives within the Independent Archives Team to take forward elements of the Support Plan, in partnership with RAG.

Progress

This section gives reports on the contributions made towards fulfilling the Religious Archives Support Plan's objectives (indicated in the form **RASP ...**), organised under the first five of the Plan's six broad areas: Advocacy, Documentation and Advice, Training, Collection Development and Virtual Infrastructure, although it will be seen there is some overlap between areas. These can be mapped to the responsibilities under the above job description. The National Archives' appointment of a Senior Adviser in this area went towards meeting **RASP objective 27**.

In advancing the Support Plan, the focus has been on achieving sustainable and tangible results within the time-frame of the appointment. Above all it was intended to provide the religious archives sector with resources to enable it to become more self-sustaining. Hence much of our effort was to advance the role and raise the profile of the Religious Archives Group, and is largely in the form of additions to the Group's website.

Advocacy

Liaison and advocacy

The Senior Adviser: Religious Archives spoke at a number of events to make the case for the importance of religious archives, and liaised with a range of other repositories and organisations, including the Catholic Archives Society and the Angus Library at Regent's Park College, Oxford (RASP 8). Particularly fruitful was the continued liaison with the Building on History project on Religion in London, led by Professor John Wolfe of the Open University. This was reflected in a range of events attended: Workshops on Black Majority Churches, the Roman Catholic Church in London; Mosques History in London; lunchtime and evening discussion meetings; and in June 2013, a Workshop on Religious History in Wandsworth at which the Senior Adviser gave a presentation on the use of religious archives

<http://spaa.info/portfolio/histories/>

Through Building on History relationships were renewed and enhanced with the Muslim community (RASP 3). The East London Mosque, which had first received advice in 2008, and was an active participant in the Building on History project, received a National Cataloguing Grant in spring 2013 and was able to appoint Eilís McCarthy as project archivist. The archives project has been enthusiastically promoted within the Muslim community, with illustrated features in the Mosque's Annual Reports and on the Islam Channel (*http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esAuL_wD988*).

This relationship was further developed when Clem Brohier, Acting CEO of The National Archives, visited the Mosque in January 2014. The completion of the cataloguing project was marked by a launch in January 2015, attended by a number of National Archives staff including the new Chief Executive, Jeff James, and Clem Brohier, as well as Simon Hughes MP, Minister of State for Justice, with responsibility for TNA, and the Labour Shadow Lord Chancellor and Shadow Secretary of State for Justice, Sadiq Khan MP.

The launch carried particular significance in the light of the events in Paris in the previous week and this was reflected in the speeches. An account appeared on *<http://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk/news/east-london-mosque-launches-first-ever-british-muslim-archives>* and a short report that appeared on the Islam Channel can be seen on Youtube.

An important aspect of this post dedicated to religious archives has been the ability to initiate and devote time to nurturing contacts with projects outside the archival mainstream. One such is the Everyday Muslim project. We made contact with this innovative project following a visit by Sadiya Ahmed, the project leader, to The National Archives in the spring of 2014. We gave the project some initial archival advice and the Senior Adviser spoke on the uses of religious archives at the hugely successful first symposium of this project, at the Bishopsgate Institute on 31 January 2015. It is hoped this contact will lead to another strand of engagement with archives from the Islamic faith (RASP 2b, RASP 3 and RASP 8). See

<http://www.everydaymuslim.org/#!/symposium-online-2015/cv3a>

Profile-raising

Running through the Religious Archives Support Plan is a concern to raise the profile of religious archives and highlight the resources available to the sector through the RAG website. Acting on **RASP objective 7**, lists of key religious anniversaries for 2013 and 2014-17 have been added to the RAG website. In 2014 the RAG website blog was reactivated with a series on archival guidance from religious bodies worldwide and another focusing on World War One in religious archives.

Apart from its annual conferences, the Religious Archives Group principally functions as a virtual network and online information resource and most interested parties come into contact with it through the internet. However, a need was identified for an introductory leaflet and the Senior Adviser assisted with the compilation of this (**RASP 9**).

Documentation and Advice

Online guidance

Guidance on private papers, including material in digital form, has been provided for the Religious Archives Group website (**RASP objective 11**). It is online at <http://religiousarchivesgroup.org.uk/advice/rag/>

This complements advice prepared by colleagues at The National Archives on the archives of Mosques and Black Majority Churches, subsequently revised (**RASP 12**). The appearance of this guidance allowed us to follow up some of the returns from the personal papers component of the Religious Archives Survey. Many of the respondents had requested advice or further information, with concerns about electronic records being expressed. Although this follow up was some two years after the completion of the Survey, feed-back received suggested the renewed contact and the online advice were welcome.

A frequent request for assistance has been for advice on formulating the policies that guide the development of the archives and inform the preparation of procedures and protocols. We have therefore compiled advice on formulation of archives policies, 'Managing Your Archives. Archives Policies for Small Religious Repositories' for the RAG website, at <http://religiousarchivesgroup.org.uk/advice/rag/>

This broadly follows the Accreditation framework, to which it refers.

Further online guidance, in the form of training material adapted from workshops (see below under Training) has also been added to the RAG website.

Enquiries

The National Archives continues to respond to enquiries relating to religious archives from historians and researchers, archivists and other information professionals, and members of the public (RASP 10). They have been hugely varied. For example in September and October 2013 enquiries included possible sources for a American Presbyterian minister in England in the 1690s, the whereabouts of the twentieth century archives of a religious publishing house, advice on a Cathedral digitisation project, and research into born-digital documents. The work has had an international dimension, with enquiries from the USA, Belgium, Ireland, Germany, South Africa and other countries.

Advisory work

The appointment of the Senior Adviser within the Independent Archives Team entailed assuming some of the advisory work of the Team in respect of religious archives (RASP 10 and RASP 17) and guidance has been offered and visits made accordingly. This has included visits to the Alliance of Religions and Conservation, Downside Abbey, the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, Pusey House in Oxford, Guildford Cathedral, the Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking, the New Testament Church of God, the New Church, Salisbury Cathedral, Wells Cathedral, the Sisters of the Church, the Union Sisters of Mercy and the Theosophical Society of England.

Training

Arising from findings of the Religious Archives Survey, the provision of training for those who find themselves with responsibility for significant religious archives but with little or no professional background or support, has been a particular concern (RASP 14).

We have led work to plan and prepare suitable training. The first training event was held on 26 June 2013 at the offices of Bath Abbey, with contributions from TNA and RAG colleagues. Comments received were positive,

'I came away so motivated that I plunged straight in to following up some of your excellent material which opened up a whole new world for me'.

'It was a very valuable opportunity to familiarise myself with the needs of this new job. If at times it showed how far we are from what we need to achieve it did so with plenty of pointers to the best help and advice to close that gap'.

On 16 November 2013 a training workshop was also provided for the New Testament Church of God and other Black Majority Church archives volunteers, focusing on basic issues of collecting and caring for archives.

It was requested that the papers presented at the training workshops should be made available and the training material, subsequently amended and updated has now been added to the Religious Archives Group website. The material is in the form of seven sections, with an introductory list of contents and further reading. This

represents a major resource for the Religious Archives Group and, together with other online guidance on the RAG website, should be of assistance to the many lone and volunteer archivists working in the sector.

<http://religiousarchivesgroup.org.uk/advice/rag/>

The provision of training is now being investigated within Archives Sector Development as a joint broad programme of volunteer training in association with other bodies.

Collection Development

Web archiving

In April 2013 UK legal deposit was extended to digital publications with the Legal Deposit Libraries (Non-Print Works) Regulations 2013. The British Library and the other UK legal deposit libraries will now be empowered to archive, and make accessible in their reading rooms, the entire UK webspace. Comprehensive web archiving will commence with the .uk domain.

This will run in parallel with the ongoing UK Web Archive (UKWA) which is selective, permissions-based and includes British websites without the .uk suffix. We compiled, with input from Clive Field, a database of principal national-level websites of around 140 UK religious and secularist organisations for additions to the UKWA. This was submitted for incorporation into the British Library's web-archiving strategy ([RASP 20](#)).

Audio-visual resources

In the summer of 2014 a project hosted by the British Library and supported by RAG and The National Archives engaged Clare Canning to undertake a high-level survey of sources of audio-visual materials (excluding photographs) for the study of religion in the UK. Her report and database of repositories, projects and networks has been mounted on the Religious Archives Group website.

Virtual Infrastructure

Online information

The Religious Archives Group website has been enhanced with a Religious Archives Directory.

<http://religiousarchivesgroup.org.uk/welcome/advice/directory/>

This provides extensive information on locations of archive material of religious faiths and denominations ([RASP 23](#)). It complements the information available through The National Archives' Discovery resource.

A key part of the role of Senior Adviser: Religious Archives has been taking on collection information work of the Independent Archives Team and Archives Sector

Development department as it relates to religious archives. This has included contributing to the Annual Accessions to Repositories exercise and to the routine updating of the National Register of Archives (NRA) and ARCHON as new information came to light or was discovered ([RASP 24](#)).

Forward planning

A key factor behind The National Archives' support of the Religious Archives Support Plan and hence the appointment of a Senior Adviser in the area, is to create a more sustainable religious archives sector. The Religious Archives Group will become increasingly important as a focus for religious archives, whether they are held by their creating organisation or are held as one part of the collections of public archive repositories. An important aspect of the post was therefore to advance practical measures to improve the sustainability of the group. One dimension of this has been to prepare the online resources that will endure beyond 2015. However, another dimension was the need to refresh the Religious Archives Support Plan and to look at the structure and operation of the Religious Archives Group itself.

The most significant of these was the revision of the Religious Archives Support Plan. The plan was crucial in guiding our work but it had to be adaptable to reflect achievements to date, the changing needs of the sector, and likely resources and partners available. These revisions were discussed in June 2014 and subsequently accepted into an updated [Religious Archives Support Plan](#).

Achievements

Of the five main recommendations of the Religious Archives Survey, three have been significantly advanced:

- The support available for the sustenance of religious archives has been improved and extended. Advice and guidance have been channelled into the care of archives retained by their creators.
- The culture of record-keeping among faith communities where it is less well-established has been strengthened. In particular, links have been established with Muslim organisations and Black Majority Churches.
- The National Archives in conjunction with the Religious Archives Group has provided support and encouragement for the continuing development of the sector.

However, religious archives are one element of the broader independent archives scene in the UK and therefore the work reported here has to be seen in the wider context of The National Archives' fulfilment of its duties under the Royal Warrant for the Historical Manuscripts Commission and its Government-mandated leadership

role for the archives sector as a whole. Our policies here follow the priorities set out in the five recommendations of *Archives for the Twenty First Century*

- *Developing bigger and better services in partnership - working towards increased sustainability within the sector*

The whole thrust of the project has been to encourage sustainable archives, both within independent religious archives repositories and for the Religious Archives Group itself. Partnerships have been encouraged, and we have looked for the emergence of collecting institutions for cases where an individual organisation can no longer sustain an independent operation.

- *Strengthening leadership and a responsive, skilled workforce*

Advocacy work undertaken should help archivists in religious institutions make the case for archives within their organisations and hence strengthen their position, while the training material and guidance will help provide those working in independent religious archives with the skills they need to develop their archives. Thus the RAG website's guidance on archives policies refers directly to The National Archives' Archive Service Accreditation scheme which sets out good practice and identifies agreed standards, thereby encouraging and supporting development.

- *A coordinated response to the growing challenges of managing digital information so that it is accessible now and remains discoverable in the future*

The National Archives continues to offer advice on electronic records management, archiving email, digitisation and on caring for digital material. There is also online RAG guidance for owners of personal archives that includes basic advice on handling born-digital material.

- *Comprehensive online access for archive discovery through catalogues and to digitised archive content*

The National Archives is always looking to improve the information resources feeding into Discovery and encourages independent religious repositories to make their collections accessible through creating, improving and mounting online their finding aids.

- *Active participation in cultural and learning partnerships promoting a sense of identity and place within the community.*

Our work under the Religious Archives Support Plan has sought to work with and build on existing partnerships and networks.

The future

The post of Senior Adviser: Religious Archives was always envisaged as being a short-term specialist post within The National Archives to assist the Religious Archives Group and its partners advance specific objectives of the Religious Archives Support Plan and this report should be understood in that context. The medium- and longer-term implementation of the (updated) plan remains the responsibility of the Religious Archives Group and its partners, including The National Archives. Therefore The National Archives is not ending its commitment to the Support Plan with the termination of the specialist post. The Support Plan remains central to our religious archives strategy.

The National Archives will continue to be represented on the RAG committee, and the 'business as usual' aspects of the Support Plan in terms of advisory work supporting religious archives, from well-established institutions to emerging repositories, and developing online information through Discovery will continue to be delivered. Relationships established or strengthened with the Religious Archives Group, individual religious archives repositories, and other interested parties will not be lost or allowed to wither

August 2015