

Areas of Research Interest – The National Archives

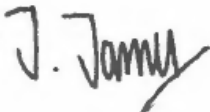
Foreword by Chief Executive and Keeper of The National Archives

Research is at the heart of what we do at The National Archives, informing and enabling the delivery of our core function as the official archive for the UK Government and for England and Wales. Our institution is the only non-ministerial government department that also functions as an Independent Research Organisation (IRO), delivering our own research and receiving UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funding for research projects.

In March 2019, The National Archives launched its new strategic plan for 2019-23. [Archives for Everyone](#) challenges the organisation to strive to become the 21st Century national archive – inclusive, entrepreneurial and disruptive. It reaffirms engagement with the widest possible audience at the heart of our mission, and sets out the radical changes we need to make to our culture and practice, to realise our full potential.

Research will play a critical role in The National Archives delivering [Archives for Everyone](#). We will seek to become flexible and responsive to research opportunities, utilising emerging technologies to rethink practice, meet new challenges, and provide new skills, whilst seeking to build innovation and resilience in archive services across the country.

I hope you find this document useful in better understanding The National Archives' Areas of Research Interest.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. James". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Jeff James, Chief Executive and Keeper of The National Archives

Who we are

The National Archives is a non-ministerial department and the official archive and publisher for the UK Government, and for England and Wales. Its sponsoring department is the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

We are expert advisers in information and records management and are a cultural, academic and heritage organisation. We fulfil a leadership role for the archives sector in England, working in partnership to encourage innovation and sustainability and secure the future of physical and digital records.

As an Independent Research Organisation (IRO), we lead cutting-edge, high quality research which seeks to innovate our practice, unlock the potential of our collections, and respond to opportunities and challenges in the higher education and archive sectors. We are eligible for UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funding across the seven research councils, and are a member of IROC (the IRO Consortium) – a network of museums, galleries, libraries and other UK heritage organisations recognised as research organisations by UKRI.

Our partnerships

We work in partnership with a wide range of organisations, including higher education institutions and research centres, industry partners, and cultural heritage organisations. We have made a significant investment in the thriving research culture at The National Archives where creativity and innovation drive our research. We continue to build networks and collaborate with academic and research communities across different sectors and disciplines, both nationally and internationally.

There are many [benefits to working in collaboration with The National Archives](#) including the breadth of our research interests and expertise, and our unique position as an IRO, government department, leader of the archive sector in England, and major cultural institution in our own right.

Our research

Our research is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing on the skills and expertise of archivists, conservators, historians, computer scientists, digital humanists, and many others. While our research contributes to multiple fields of knowledge, it speaks primarily to the opportunities and challenges we face as an archive.

In 2019 we set out our strategy for the next four years in [Archives for Everyone](#), and outlined our commitment to connect with the biggest and most diverse audience, in the most innovative ways possible. Research at The National Archives is a critical part of achieving this aim and is central to our ability to respond to the challenges facing the sector.

Responding to COVID-19

As a government department, we are part of the wider government response to the COVID-19 crisis. Our statutory and non-statutory duties as the archive of the UK Government and as Official Publisher, and our leadership of the wider archives sector, make us an essential part of that response, both during the crisis and beyond. Our long-term vision, set out in [Archives for Everyone](#) has still greater resonance in the context of this response. Our [strategic response to the COVID-19 crisis](#) highlights the need to meet the demands of a continually changing landscape and our determination to:

- Capture the record and aid legal certainty
- Take the collection to new audiences
- Realise the value of archives through research, innovation and commercial exploitation
- Lead the archives sector to a secure and sustainable future
- Change the way we work

The research we undertake is essential to meeting this goal and to delivering the transformation described in [Archives for Everyone](#). Our core research areas are:

- Analogue and digital recordkeeping, access and preservation
- Archival theory and practice
- Heritage science and conservation
- Data science and applied computer science
- Historical, humanistic and social science scholarship

Within these broad areas, our research aligns closely with our commitment to transform archival practice in disruptive, inclusive and entrepreneurial ways, and maximise the societal benefit of archives.

Core Challenges

We are fundamentally interested in the nature of records, both analogue and digital. Our research explores how records and recordkeeping are evolving, and how we can best carry out our responsibilities towards the records we hold. We are finding ways to unlock the content of analogue records by making them available as aggregated datasets and exploring how artificial intelligence, machine learning, and natural language processing technologies can support digital recordkeeping at scale.

- How can we best preserve and provide access to new record formats?
- How can we utilise emerging and established technologies to improve our recordkeeping practice and what are the ethical implications of this?
- How can we most successfully build digital capacity and resilience in the archives sector?
- How might different disciplines work together to analyse the materiality of the record?

Records and data are being managed, edited and transferred in new ways. We must uncover new technologies and tools to manage the risks of recordkeeping and guarantee the authenticity of the digital record. Our research creates new pathways through our collections, explores how we can ensure the security of the record, and examines how predictive risk modelling can inform the decisions we take on the preservation of our collections.

- How can we effectively deal with ambiguity and uncertainty in and around our collections?
- What new systems and technologies might help us meet the challenges of safeguarding digital records and data?
- How might an analysis through the lens of risk help different types of archive to manage their rights and responsibilities around the record?
- How might we reimagine the economic model for archiving across the archive sector, which is underpinned by the notion of trust as an asset?

We are committed to making our collections widely accessible. We will find innovative ways to present our collections and enable more people to engage with them, seeking to highlight the range of individuals and communities represented in our records. Our research will allow us to respond to the changing needs of our users and the new and emerging skillsets of our researchers.

- How can we design and present online access systems to meet the changing needs and expectations of users?
- How can new techniques such as visualisation and data mining deliver new insights into our records?
- What participation, learning and engagement opportunities can we offer around our collections to reach new audiences?
- How can we create new pathways into our collections and how does this tie into questions of representation, privilege and power?

As the archive of the UK Government and official publisher of UK legislation, we are in a unique position to chart state transformations, sovereignty and social reform over time.

Records enable us to map the evolution of social, legal and political spaces over time, on a truly global scale. At a time when borders and rights are being challenged and reshaped around the world, our records have great relevance for contemporary discourse and international debate.

- What do archives tell us about the evolution of local and national government and the rule of law?
- What agency and voice does the individual have within the records of government or the state?
- How do our records support understanding of processes of centralisation, globalisation and modern diplomatic relations?
- How might legal frameworks adapt to shifts in the way people access the record?

We must find new ways of demonstrating the cultural, social, financial and psychological impact that archives have on people and society. We aim to establish an evidence-based approach to impact for archives to aid sustainability and accountability across the sector. Our research explores how archives can help unearth forgotten pasts, strengthen individual identity and enhance our cultural and national heritage. We will explore new practices and ethics for the socially responsible use of archives, particularly around sensitive records.

- How can we reveal hidden histories and a diversity of subcultures to ensure the greatest possible representation and reach of archives?
- How can the economic, financial and social benefits of archives be quantified?
- How are digital records appraised both for significance and for market valuations?
- What physiological and psychological responses may occur when people access archives and how may this contribute to the development of archival ethics?

Contact Us

If you would like to know more about our [research and academic collaborations](#) or are interested in working with us, please contact our research team: research@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

Follow us on Twitter: [@UkNatArcRes](#).