



## FORUM ON HISTORICAL MANUSCRIPTS AND ACADEMIC RESEARCH

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- Date:** Monday 24 January 2022
- Time:** 13.00 - 16.00
- Venue:** Virtual Meeting
- Chair:** Sir Geoffrey Vos, Master of the Rolls, Chair
- Minutes:** Isabel Saunders, Senior Governance Coordinator and Secretary to the Advisory Council
- Members:** Professor Leon Litvack (LL), Deputy Chair  
Dr Helen Forde (HF)  
Dr Adele Redhead (AR), Independent Forum Member (Pending reappointment)  
Ms Jenny Shaw (JSh), Independent Forum Member (Pending reappointment)  
Dr Jeannette Strickland (JSt)

**Others in attendance:**

The National Archives (TNA)

Mr Jeff James (JJ) Chief Executive and Keeper (ex officio)  
Dr Valerie Johnson (VJ) Director of Research and Collections  
Ms Elana Kudelka (EK) Governance Coordinator  
Dr Emma Markiewicz (EM) Head of Archives Sector Development  
Mr Sam Whaley (SW) Head of Strategy and CEO's Office  
Digital Development Manager

External Attendees)

Mr John Chambers, Chief Executive of the Archives and Records Association  
Dr William Kilbride, Executive Director of the Digital Preservation Coalition

**1. Welcome, Introductions, Apologies and Declarations of Interest**

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed members and other attendees to the meeting.
- 1.2 The Chair noted Asha Bagayat and Pip Willcox had submitted apologies for absence.
- 1.3 AR noted that she was a lecturer at the University of Glasgow and noted discussions with the University of Glasgow was included as part of the Archives Sector Update report. JSh noted that she was also mentioned as part of the Academic Research Update report.

**2. Minutes, Matters Arising and Action Log**

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2021 and 21 October 2021 were agreed as a correct record subject to amendments proposed at the meeting.

## Matters Arising

- 2.2 Members also agreed the associated Strategic Priorities from the 21 October meeting.
- 2.3 Members asked if there was any further update on the reopening of private archives. EM noted if members had queries regarding particular regions, she would be able to answer these outside of the meeting.
- 2.4 The Deputy Chair provided members with an update on the future of the Manorial Documents Register Advisory Panel.
- 2.5 Members closed items 55, 56, 6, 7 and 8 of the action log.

**Action:** IS to amend and upload the approved minutes and to update the action log.

### **3. Manorial Documents Register Advisory Panel Update**

- 3.1 The Deputy Chair gave a brief summary of his work on the Manorial Documents Register Advisory Panel. He noted the panel's work to finalise the programme for the conference.

### **4. Keeper and Historical Manuscripts Commissioner's (HMC) Update**

- 4.1 JJ introduced the paper and invited questions from members.
- 4.2 Members asked about the number of visitors pre-ordering their documents in advance. JJ noted that currently around 75% of users were ordering their documents in advance, compared to 50% before the pandemic and this had been a positive change for The National Archives.
- 4.3 Members asked about the quarantining of documents after being read. JJ noted The National Archives was no longer quarantining documents after use. VJ stated this decision had been made following updated scientific guidance.
- 4.4 Members noted JJ's visits to archives and asked for his thoughts on the challenges these institution were experiencing. JJ stated the institutions he had dealt with all had their own focuses and challenges. For private archives however, there were issues around competing for interest and publicity and there could also be challenges around the physical space they occupied.

### **5. Archives Sector Update**

- 5.1 EM introduced the report and provided an oral update on the Debenhams archives.
- 5.2 Members asked about the current arrangements for the Debenhams archives whilst a long-term place for them was secured. EM noted the current home for these records was acceptable and the holder was content to look after them in the interim.
- 5.3 Members asked about the long-term plans for the Debenhams archive. EM confirmed The National Archives was still working with the first-choice repository which had been deemed the most appropriate place for the records. Members questioned if thought should be given to the creation of a national business archive.
- 5.4 Members asked about the designation of "provisional accreditation" in the accreditation scheme. EM responded that this was awarded to departments where they still had small

outstanding things to complete before accreditation, but that these should be easily remedied by institutions.

## **6. Update on Research and Academic Engagement**

- 6.1 VJ introduced the paper and invited questions from members.
- 6.2 Members asked about the difficulties of recruiting for technical roles, and asked what tools The National Archives had used to try and recruit to these roles. VJ noted this was an issue not just for The National Archives but also for the whole sector and other sectors. She noted where employees come from an academic background the pay scales they can offer are more attractive to that audience and so energy had been focused on recruiting from there. VJ noted it would be impossible to compete with pay against some of the big technology companies and so instead The National Archives' focus was around the other benefits it could offer. JJ noted the pandemic had helped in being able to offer flexible working to prospective employees, but that this had now expected by potential applicants and so was no longer an advantage.
- 6.3 Members asked for more details on the special issue of *Archives and Records*. VJ responded that this would focus on 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hillary Jenkinson's' book on archival theory.

## **7. Threats to the Sector**

- 7.1 The Deputy Chair introduced the item and invited VJ and EM to give a briefing on The National Archives perspectives on the current threats to the sector.
- 7.2 VJ and EM gave the briefing which covering the key threats to the sector. These focussed around financial and economic threats, digital threats, staffing threats, and concerns for the direction and future of the sector. They noted that some of these threats were not always negative and could instead be seen as positive opportunities. They outlined a number of specific areas of consideration for members; these included:
  - 7.2.1 Long-term, persistent under investment
  - 7.2.2 Supply chain complications and increased costs
  - 7.2.3 Operational issues and restructures
  - 7.2.4 Environmental issues within the physical buildings
  - 7.2.5 Digital skills gaps
  - 7.2.6 Diversity of archive sector workers
  - 7.2.7 Sector responses to cultural movements and the balance between involvement and neutrality
  - 7.2.8 Maintaining links between new and emerging smaller independent archives
  - 7.2.9 Creating leadership training and opportunity
  - 7.2.10 The need to maintain archive importance and prominence
  - 7.2.11 Ensuring the sector meets upcoming opportunities
- 7.3 Mr John Chambers, of the Archives and Records Association (ARA), joined the meeting to discuss threats to the sector based on the views of his membership. He highlighted key threats; these included:
  - 7.3.1 The medium and long-term impacts of the COVID pandemic, including extensive job losses
  - 7.3.2 The dependency of archival success on key champions advocating for archive services within their organisation
  - 7.3.3 The increasing prevalence of private archives ending up at auction and thus potentially leaving the country, leading to a loss of national heritage.
  - 7.3.4 A lack of resourcing for business archives in particular

7.3.5 A general lack of awareness of records in the United Kingdom which are held in private archives.

7.3.6 The importance in large-scale organisations advocating for the sector

7.4 Members asked questioned Mr Chambers further about some of the topics he raised, including the role of advocacy by key champions, and the perception of The National Archives work for private archives, The National Archives role as sector leaders, sector visits by the Historical Manuscripts Commissioner, diversity and inclusion within the sector, and the sector's perception of The National Archives.

7.5 Members thanks Mr Chambers for his thoughts and Mr Chambers left the meeting.

7.6 Members noted it would be useful for The National Archives to consider ways it could better publicise its work to support the sector. Members noted that the website could be improved on to highlight those links with businesses more strongly.

## **8. Digital Skills and Uses for Archives**

8.1 The Deputy Chair introduced the item and invited JP to give a briefing on The National Archives work to help address the digital skills gap in the sector.

8.2 JP gave a briefing covering the reason for the digital skills gap in the sector, including an under-prioritisation of digital work prior to COVID, and a lack of interconnection between archives services and other teams, including information technology and communication teams. He noted:

8.2.1 The solution to the skills gap relied on training up employees already in post, as opposed to relying on recruitment.

8.2.2 Employees needed a diverse portfolio of skills to be most effective.

8.2.3 The National Archives had built up package of online resources to build those digital skills, and had also organised peer mentoring programmes and had been running Digital Archives Learning Exchange sessions on YouTube.

8.2.4 The National Archives was continuing with ongoing experimentation to give people the skills required.

8.2.5 The National Archives would be publishing a refreshed digital strategy in the Spring.

8.2.6 Future focuses for the digital landscape included consideration of the cost and carbon footprint of digital resources and tools.

8.3 Members asked about the role of advocates and of advocacy for digital skills in the sector. JP noted there were difficulties in providing digital support for leaders in the sector because there was such diversity in their roles and responsibilities; instead it had focussed on providing the training to support a bottom up scheme, where practitioners were supported and engaged.

8.4 Members commented on the current burden placed on accredited programmes and noted it was difficult to juggle all the components whilst suitably rewarding digital work. JP noted the hope was the guidance for these programme would be updated to ensure that digital work was weighted equally against traditional work.

8.5 Dr William Kilbride, of the Digital Preservation Coalition, joined the meeting to discuss digital skills in the context of archives. He highlighted:

8.5.1 The role and history of the DPC

8.5.2 The key challenges in the sector, including maintaining access and the usability of digital items

8.5.3 The difference between digital preservation and digitisation

8.5.4 The focus given to preventing media degradation as opposed to developing other skills

- 8.5.5 The balance for archivists between keeping records whilst managing data protection legislation
- 8.5.6 The issue around the digital skills gap was not merely one of training everyone to a set standard, but instead needed to focus on ongoing professional development across the sector.
- 8.5.7 Another key area was archivists being more assertive in their competencies and acknowledging the need to learn flexibly and work collaboratively.

8.6 Members asked questioned Dr Kilbride further about some of the topics he raised, including the risks of focusing too much on solutions to media degradation, the role of collaboration, the ethics of collecting works for an archive, areas of core focus for The National Archives, and the future of digital reading rooms.

8.7 Members thanks Dr Kilbride for his thoughts and Dr Kilbride left the meeting.

8.8 Members agreed to share the minutes of the meeting with JP to feed into the wider digital strategy review.

**Action:** IS to circulate the finalised minutes to JP.

## **9. Any Other Business**

9.1 The Deputy Chair offered his thanks and good wishes to EM who was attending her last meeting before leaving The National Archives.

9.2 The Deputy Chair thanked everyone for attending the meeting and for their work.

There being no further business, the meeting was closed at 15.53pm.

**Date of next meeting:** 13 June 2022