

Archives and collaboration

Launch of Beyond 2022

Trinity College Dublin

Thursday 8 February 2018

I'm delighted to be here today in Dublin to mark the launch of Beyond 2022 – a hugely exciting and ambitious project that The National Archives is thrilled to be a part of.

As Helen said, I'm Jeff James, Chief Executive and Keeper of The National Archives, the official archive for the UK Government and for England and Wales.

The National Archives is one of the world's largest working archives. We hold over 11 million physical records on 200 linear kilometres of shelving at our site in Kew and in a salt mine in Cheshire and our collections stretch back 1000 years.

But we are also a digital archive. Digital technologies are opening up our archives like never before, increasing the discoverability of both paper and digital records - locally, nationally and globally.

Our online catalogue, Discovery, holds 34 million descriptions of records, not just at Kew but in archives across the country.

Archives Inspire, our 4-year strategy, explicitly identifies digital as our single biggest challenge, while articulating our ambitions to become a digital archive by instinct and design. Implicitly it recognises that we can't achieve this in isolation. The underlying thread that ties Archives Inspire together is collaboration.

Darwin once said 'In the long history of humankind those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively, have prevailed.'

What really stands out for me about Beyond 2022 is the nature and scale of the collaboration involved and we are proud to be one of the partners in this innovative project. It is a perfect illustration of the kind of innovation and collaboration we are seeing across the sector and that, briefly, is what I'd like to talk about today.

In March 2017 the UK government launched a new co-created Vision for archives. At its heart Archives Unlocked is about digital transformation and collaboration.

Public expectations around access to archival collections are changing rapidly and successful archives are those which are adapting. More and more we talk of the porous nature of archives and the wider ecology within which they not only survive but thrive.

Archives like The Hive in Worcester, which not only houses the county archive but was the UK's first fully integrated public and university library, in a groundbreaking partnership between Worcestershire County Council and the University of Worcester. It's also breaking ground in finding new commercial income opportunities in the face of challenging financial pressures, with its 'Explore the Past' website marketed at the overseas family history market.

Archives +, in the heart of the city of Manchester, is at the heart of the region's cultural offer. A partnership between Manchester City Council, Manchester University, the British Film Institute and several community organizations, Archives + is engaging with communities in innovative and exciting ways, attracting new audiences and enhancing confidence and pride within the communities they serve.

The Keep in West Sussex brings together in one place, record collections spanning 900 years of the region's history, including the special collections of the University of Sussex. The Keep opens its doors and collections to schools, colleges and universities. Like the Hive, it's exploiting new income streams - leasing classroom and lecture spaces, helping to ensure its long term sustainability.

We are seeing more partnership working at the national level too.

Last week I had the privilege of awarding the 100th Archive Service Accreditation to the National Theatre – coincidentally the first theatre archive to be accredited. And later this year we celebrate the 5th birthday of Archive Service Accreditation.

Fundamental to its success is the partnership behind it. We are proud to be one of seven partners; including the Archives and Records Association (UK), Archives and Records Council Wales, National Records of Scotland, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Scottish Council on Archives and the Welsh Government.

ARA is a very natural partner for us. There are clear advantages for the sector leadership body and the professional body to come together for the benefit of our shared sector.

But we are increasingly realizing the benefits of partnering outside the archive sector. Some of you may also be aware of our successful partnership with Research Libraries UK (RLUK; of which Trinity College Library is a member). Libraries and archives share many of the same challenges and opportunities - around funding, resilience, meeting changing public demand, changing expectations around access and - of course - digital.

Together we run the highly regarded Discovering Collections, Discovering Communities conference – an annual platform for people across the libraries, archives, museums and research sectors, to share ideas, develop research opportunities and forge new partnerships across different disciplines.

Another product of our collaboration with RLUK is our joint research, including recently commissioned work on ‘citation capture’ which is helping us understand how researchers use archival collections, with the aim of promoting greater collaboration between researchers in the future.

Finally, I’d like to touch on our developing partnership with Jisc - a membership organisation connecting students, researchers and academics across libraries, archives, colleges and universities around the country.

Amongst other things Jisc run the Archives Hub which includes descriptions from over 300 UK institutions. With over 34 million records on our own Discovery catalogue – of which a third are from the wider sector - there are obvious opportunities for us to open up access to UK archival collections by working together rather than in competition.

These partnerships allow us to pool resources, share expertise and work together to enable the very best possible outcomes for archives and their collections, for the people using them and for our wider cultural heritage.

I’ve talked about collaboration at the local, regional and national levels but the challenges and opportunities we face as a sector are global in nature – especially digital. Our Digital Director describes digital preservation as ‘an international team sport’. The move to digital is a paradigm shift that will require novel approaches that cannot be delivered by any one organisation.

Last year we published our first international strategy – Archives Inspire the World. We want to promote the value of archival collections around the world, develop knowledge networks, support standard setting and pioneer digital preservation solutions.

And we are beginning to see the benefits.

Prize Papers are a collection of global importance. Letters, diaries, poems and artefacts – many of them unopened - captured from ships seized by the Royal Navy from the 17th to the 19th century. Making the collection available to all is a huge and ambitious piece of work, only achievable through partnership.

That's why we've partnered with the University of Oldenburg on a 20-year research project to catalogue, transcribe and digitize this amazingly rich and unexplored collection.

The Arabian Gulf Digital Archive project is a collaboration with the National Archives of the UAE to digitize and place online half a million records of interest not only to the Gulf region but also to academics and researchers around the world.

Finally, I mentioned earlier our collaboration with Jisc and the Archives Hub. At the European level we have joined Archives Portal Europe Foundation, exposing Discovery data to one of the largest international aggregators of archival catalogues and collections - nearly 6,000 institutions across 32 European countries.

There is a paradigm shift in what it means to be an archive, driven by new digital technologies and shaped by a perfect storm of changing public expectations around access and transparency and the need for resilience and sustainability in a challenging financial climate.

In many respects the archive of the future is already here. This is an exciting and challenging time to be an archive. A watershed moment and collaboration is the key.

I am, therefore, delighted that The National Archives is a partner in this really exciting project.

Thank you.