

## **The National Archives Forty Years at Kew – Looking Ahead**

**21 February 2018**

Thank you Caroline and Paul. I am delighted to see so many familiar faces here tonight to celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary at Kew. Before I begin, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Friends of The National Archives for their unstinting support over the last thirty years and for their continued support today and into the future.

Lord Elwyn-Jones opened this building in November 1977 and I'm delighted that his daughter, Josephine, is here tonight with us, along with some of my predecessors.

As well as being the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kew this year also marks the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Public Record Office, established in 1838 after Sir Henry Cole brandished a rat in Parliament as evidence of the parlous condition of the nation's public records. As many of you will know that infamous rat was accessioned as a public record and has joined us this evening for our celebrations!

I think Sir Henry Cole knew that society needs to have confidence in the integrity and authenticity of archival records, and that government, institutions and individuals can be, and should be, held to account by scrutiny of the record. The world has changed since then; and in times of change, people look for certainty, they look to understand the past so that they can understand their place in the world and plan for the future.

When the Public Records Office moved to Kew in 1977, James Callaghan was Prime Minister; the country celebrated the Queen's Silver Jubilee and punk rock was everywhere. Inflation was at 15% and pay demands topped out at 104%. Callaghan's government held firm at an affordable 10% pay ceiling.

Our records vividly bring to life that period in our history; filling in the gaps, adding colour, and creating a compelling snapshot of the state of the nation during those turbulent times. From Domesday to Shakespeare's Will to Cabinet Minutes and government tweets – our collection is the nation's treasure trove.

Like those before us we continue to work hard to open up access to our collections, both physically and virtually. Digital technology has changed forever how people tell their stories, what it means to preserve their records and how we go about providing access to those records. To quote our Digital Director 'Digital preservation is an international team sport' - so we are working in partnership with bodies across the globe to reinvent what it means to be an archive in a digital world.

As the leadership body for the archive sector we are also developing the digital capacity and skills of the sector, opening up new possibilities for engagement with archives and archival content across the country.

While digital presents huge challenges and opportunities for all archives, we also need to be mindful that archives need to be used if they are to be useful. So alongside the digital challenge we also need to meet the needs of our existing

audiences and develop new audiences by finding creative ways to shine a light on the, sometimes contentious, stories in our collection, inviting interpretation, debate and challenge.

Our public engagement programme is crucial to this. In the past year alone we have showcased our records – and the expertise behind them – on the Tudors, Jane Austen, the First World War, LGBT history and most recently, Suffrage.

We also need to engage the next generation of researchers if we are to thrive for the next 40-years. Our award winning education programme brings our records to life for children of all ages, wherever they live. That's why, to mark the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta, we partnered with Discovery Education to deliver a live broadcast to over a quarter of a million students in 20 countries across the globe. We've also reached out to communities in new ways with outreach projects - most recently to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Partition.

But we know we need to do more still. We want to put The National Archives at the heart of the nation's collective memory. We need to build meaningful and life-long relationships with our audiences, enriching lives and strengthening our country's cultural heritage.

To do this we plan to deliver an ambitious transformation programme that will see us not only become a 'digital archive by instinct and design' but also expand our visitor offer here at Kew; welcoming a wider audience than ever before. So, our public space programme is reimagining our Kew site to create flexible and comfortable spaces for visitors and researchers to engage with our collection, while putting learning at the heart of the transformation.

This Events Space is part of that transformation. Since opening last June, we have hosted nearly 100 events here - from international academic conferences to mummy unwrapping during Archives at Night. But this is just the beginning. We also have plans for a major new gallery space to showcase our records in innovative and immersive ways, enabling visitors to experience a personal connection with our collection.

To deliver this transformation at pace we have to look at new ways of funding and that is why we are setting up a charitable arm. This will us to focus on our core responsibilities while also giving us the flexibility to meet our ambitions, so that we can truly change the way that people think about archives.

I think Sir Henry Cole would be happy with what we have achieved to date, and would wholeheartedly support our ambitions for the future. No celebration, especially an archival celebration, would be complete without a cake so I'd like to invite the past Keepers to come down and help me cut the cake.

Jeff James