ARTISTS IN THE ARCHIVES
A TOOLKIT FOR BEST PRACTICE

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1. Your Visit to the Archives

How do I use the Archive Catalogues?

Given the volume of archives held (many thousands, even millions, of individual items in some cases,) it’s not possible to browse an archive to see what it contains.

So the Archivist creates a written catalogue describing the archive.

What you do:

- Check the catalogue for your search term (e.g. suffragette)
- Identify the item you want to see
- Order it using a manual or computerised ordering system, a bit like the Argos catalogue
- Wait for it to be brought to you
- Ask staff if you wish to photograph it or have it copied (for a fee)
- Return to staff when you’ve finished with it

A staff member will:

- Bring you the document
- Leave you to use it
- Put it away again

If in doubt: Ask the Archivist

How do I search the catalogues?

Ask the Archivist for the best way to search

- Search within a specific dataset rather than simply googling
- Go to the catalogue homepage for the repository in question, or multiple repositories e.g. discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk
- Search the relevant fields shown
- Try not to make your search too specific
- Start broad and narrow it down
- Try free text searching
- Think laterally about search terms e.g. to research prostitution in Victorian England search related terms: venereal disease, crime and punishment, policing.
1. Your Visit to the Archives cont.

**TOP TIP**

Archives are catalogued in a hierarchical structure of related material reflecting the relationship between the documents, a bit like a family tree.

Because of this hierarchical nature of archival cataloguing, some of the information needed to help interpret documents may be found higher up the structure. You might have to look at an individual item in the context of its overall series and collection in order to understand it.

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**Is every topic indexed?**

No, because:

- Not everything is online
- Old catalogues are only available in typescript or index card
- Collections not catalogued won’t appear in searches
- The records may not survive

*If in doubt: Ask the Archivist*

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**Language Alert!!!!!**

The language used in catalogue descriptions reflects that in the original documents and the values of the society at the time so you may find terms which are now considered derogatory such as imbecile or idiot, which had a precise medical meaning in the 19th century.

Because language is constantly changing and evolving, it's impractical for Archivists to police this, though they do try to be sensitive particularly where catalogues relate to living people.
2. Frequently Asked Questions

**Why use the archives for creative projects?**

Archives contain hidden personal and public stories and materials and can be a rich source of inspiration for artists.

**What are Archives?**

Archives are repositories for private and public historical documents and materials. An archive is also the name of a record which has been selected for permanent preservation by archivists. Archives can therefore be hundreds of years old or be right up to date.

**Where is the Wiltshire Archive?**

Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre
Cocklebury Road
Chippenham
SN15 3QN
Tel: 01249 705500

**What do Archivists do?**

Archivists are highly qualified professionals who research, find, catalogue, store, retrieve, preserve and make available documents, photographs and other historical materials. (Restoration is carried out by skilled conservation staff.)

**Where do Archivists work?**

Archivists work in regional and national networks and have strong connections with specialist societies and organisations. There are archivists working for national and local government, private business, charities, schools and universities, and large landed estates.

See [http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/find-an-archive](http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/find-an-archive) for a directory of archives in the UK.

**How can an Archivist help?**

Archivists have specialist knowledge about the collections they look after and can help you find detailed information and materials.

**Do I need to contact one or several Archivists?**

Sometimes material relating to one place or subject may overlap several archives so you may need to contact several Archivists.

**Do all archives use the same systems?**

Each archive has its own system of reference numbers for finding individual documents.

**Is photography and photocopying permitted?**

This will vary depending on the individual repository and is subject to copyright – please ask the archivist for the repository you are interested in, for more details.

**What inspires Artists?**

- Seeing the world through the eyes of others
- Immersion within societies and groups
- Language
- Viewpoints
- Visuals, textures, colours, shapes
- Characters
- Stories
- You, your work, your career
- A chance remark

**What do Artists want?**

- They may not know
- Inspiration
- Detail
- Characters
- Visual material
- Tactile material
- A reading list or suggested further reading

This toolkit aims to support artists wishing to use and/or develop projects from the archives.
3. First Date

Artists and Archivists

- Explain your working methods and why you work the way you do
- Write it down
- Have a mutual jargon exchange
- Explain what you hope to gain from the project

Artists

- Discuss project with archivist before submitting funding bid to make sure they have the time and resources you need
- Make a project plan
- Ask the Archivist questions
- Be prepared to do your own research
- Describe what you’re looking for even if vague

Archivists

- Help the Artist make a project plan
- Ask the Artist questions
- Be prepared to give time to work with the Artist

4. Explore

Artists and Archivists

- Explore the intention of the work and how the public might respond to it
- Identify key milestones
- Agree what’s important: output and outcomes

Artists

- Ask how your work will be seen by the public
- Tell the Archivist:
  » what you find
  » how you plan to use it
  » what you’re trying to do
  » what you think the archives are telling you
- Preserve the ambiguities that you need to allow for creativity
- Explain why you are requesting access to groups or individuals
- Ask how your work will be seen by the public

Archivists

- Challenge what the Artist is proposing
- Ask the Artist:
  » what they’ve found
  » how they plan to use it
- Address your concerns over ambiguity
- Be prepared to share your knowledge
- Provide access to appropriate resources including details of catalogues and indexes
5. Agree

Artists and Archivists
Is the project artist led following inspiration?
Or funding and stakeholder led?
Or a mix of these?

- Agree who is making artistic decisions
- Agree who is making editorial decisions
- Agree how decisions will be made
- Agree who is responsible for selecting work for presentation or display
- Agree who is leading the project
- Agree if specific work has to be delivered

6. Outcomes vs Output

Outcomes might be to:
- Engage the community
- Reduce isolation
- Increase confidence

Outputs might be:
- An art exhibition
- A publication of poetry
- A short film

Whereas the intended outcome of a project might be to engage a community in using the archive, the selected output of the project may actually prevent their engagement by, for example, making sensitive material public. At this point it’s important to reassess the project and agree how to resolve this conflict of interests.
7. Legal Issues

**Artists**
- Your project may engage with subjects, archival materials or communities which require a high degree of sensitivity
- Ask about legal considerations when collecting archival material and using existing personal information

**Archivists**
- Be clear whether there is a legal or moral issue with an archive. Explain defamation re living people. Need to avoid causing substantial damage or distress. (Data Protection)
- Tell the Artist about statutory requirements for the use and retention of personal information
- Explain copyright

8. Project Management

**Artists and Archivists**
Who’s doing what, why, when, where, how?

**Archivists**
- Write a letter of support for the artist summarising mutual commitment time and in-kind support

**Artists**
- Write a letter of agreement to the Archivist outlining the project details which includes:
  » Summary of the project
  » Key milestones
  » Resources needed
  » End result of the project
  » Who is doing what
  » Method of project evaluations

- If you have external funding, you must:
  » Be confident that you can deliver the requirements of the funder
  » Agree details
  » Confirm with a letter of appointment
- If you have no external funding, the Letter of Agreement should include same as Letter of Appointment plus:
  » Commitment of time
  » In-kind support such as rooms, equipment

Agree who will:
- Arrange regular meetings
- Send E-mail updates
- Communicate with the public:
  » Social media
  » Exhibitions
  » Performance
  » Catalogues
9. Artists

- Are used to working collaboratively
- Have a deep understanding of their art
- Have a working method unique to themselves
- Artists’ methods may vary between projects and even within the stages of a project
- Are often happy to allow ambiguity to persist throughout the project as this allows for change, chance and originality
- Have specialist knowledge about specific subjects
- Can find inspiration in the smallest detail or remark
- Can help you see materials afresh

10. Archivists

- Are used to working collaboratively
- Have a deep understanding of the relevance of their collections
- Know how to explore the whole
- Know other people who have researched relevant areas
- Have specialist thematic knowledge eg agricultural history
- Have specialist temporal knowledge eg a particular century
- Can help you find little used materials
11. Case Studies

Storybox

Storybox was one of the first projects at the History Centre to encourage artists to explore the archive. Forty artists found inspiration to develop their arts practice including writers and playwrights responding to documents on people’s lives and visual artists responding to the textures and physical nature of the archive.

Richard Conlon – The Cleave Project

Richard Conlon’s (freelance playwright and theatre-maker) Cleave project focused on the rich vein of stories in the archives and from the lives and experience of staff and volunteers, which he used to create and perform verbatim theatre pieces at the History Centre. Performances were followed by lively facilitated audience and cast discussions.

Music and Alfred Williams - Full English project

The History centre holds the Alfred Williams collection of folk songs. These were celebrated at an English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS) event at the History Centre in May 2014 to promote the Full English project, a nationwide digital archive and learning project resulting in the largest online collection of English folk manuscripts. West Wiltshire based Building Bridges Choir opened the event with traditional songs that they had been recording within the living memory of people from West Wiltshire’s diverse communities. The event enabled the History Centre to connect projects that are about people and a sense of place.

Dusty Feet – Katherina Radeva and Alister Lownie

Dusty Feet was a Wiltshire Council Creative Libraries project, led by theatre company Two Destination Language. The name Dusty Feet is a translation of the name of a Marlborough court where cases about a group of bakers were heard in 1543. This archive was exhibited in Salisbury along with treasure troves found in various museums. The project focused on signs and meanings, particularly on marks of ownership and provenance, and in objects whose existence has meanings, whether obvious or hidden.
Semantic Archive

The Semantic Archive, led by artist Julie Smith, invited artists to create artworks using a 2B pencil (the soft pencil used by archivists) in response to 16 documents chosen by the History Centre’s archive staff. The historic context and the reasons for their selection were withheld and the 14 participating artists were left to formulate their own understanding. The Semantic Archive allowed for a dialogue to emerge over time between the staff and the artists.

Just as an archivist searches for the truth of the past, the artists looked for and recorded their own observations, which were translated to the creation of drawings in The Semantic Archive artist-made book. The book has been donated to the archive, was shown at an exhibition at the Young Gallery, Salisbury in October/November 2014 and is also available digitally. The exhibition included a wider range of artworks charting the progression of the project and the artist's thoughts through visual responses and text.

Virtual Landscapes project

The Virtual Landscapes project enabled young people to explore the heritage of Wiltshire’s iconic and unique landscape, including the eight famous chalk hill white horses and a collection of military badges. Participants visited the historic landscape and were introduced to historical investigation, archaeology skills and the History Centre’s archives to research the history of these chalk hill figures.

The National Archives (TNA) initiative Archiving the Arts aims to preserve artists’ own materials as future archives. The TNA arts team works to ensure that records of the arts are well cared for, accessible and recognised as valuable by those who look after them and the wider public, so that more material survives and is collected for the future.

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Further information:

Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre,
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Wiltshire, SN15 3QN.

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