

Around the Archives

Collections and Community: An Overview of East Lothian Council Archive Service

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In 2018 East Lothian Archive Service celebrated the 700th anniversary of the granting of a Charter by King Robert the Bruce to the Burgh of Haddington. The Charter, dated 6 December 1318, is a confirmation charter endorsing the town's royal burgh status, and is the oldest document held by the Archive Service (Plate 1).

During our 700th anniversary year celebrations, the Scottish Record Association visited the archives which are housed in the John Gray Centre, Haddington. After a glorious summer the tour took place on a very wet September day, but the rain did not dampen spirits and the group enjoyed a visit to the very beautiful St Mary's Parish Church as well as the archives. Shortly afterwards I was asked to write an overview of East Lothian Archive Service for *Scottish Archives*. Having just completed a very busy year with much of the focus on outreach and promotion, it is a nice opportunity to reflect on how the Archive Service has developed since the John Gray Centre opened in the spring of 2012. The views expressed in this article are entirely my own.

Until recent years there was no proper provision for archives in East Lothian. While some small collections were held by the Museum and Local Studies Services the official council records, which include the records of the former Burgh and the County councils, were held by the National Records of Scotland (NRS), having been transferred in the 1960s for safekeeping until such times as East Lothian could provide proper accommodation and professional staff. Thanks to investment by East Lothian Council, a grant of £1.2 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and some funding from Historic Scotland, a group of listed buildings in Haddington town centre were specially converted. The bulk of the lottery money financed the cost of building archive storage to meet BS 5454 standards.¹ To reduce the risk of damage from flooding from the River Tyne the archive store is on the top floor of the three-storey building.

¹ British Standard 5454:2000 *Recommendations for the Storage and Exhibition of Archival Documents*. This has since been superseded by British Standard PD 5454:2012 *Guide for the Storage and Exhibition of Archival Materials*.

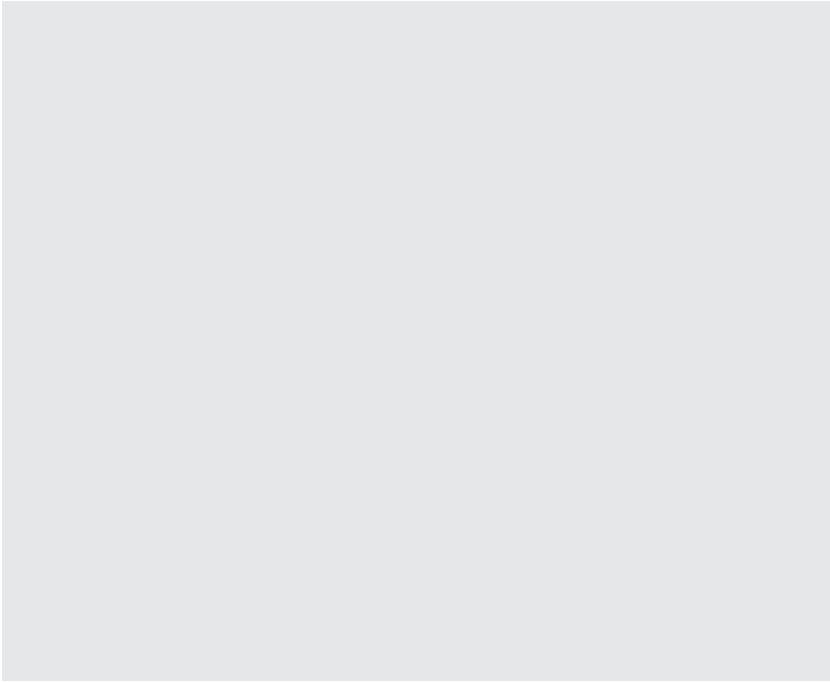


Plate 1 The 1318 Charter by King Robert I to the Burgh of Haddington. The recent Haddington 700 celebrations marked the 700th anniversary of the granting of this Charter.

The part of the building converted for storage is a former nineteenth-century grain store and so provided a large load-bearing space, but still required some adaptations to ensure the building structure could carry the weight of the records.

In addition to the county's archives the John Gray Centre (Plate 2) is home to Haddington Library, a Museum of East Lothian Life and an Archive and Local History Centre. When the Centre opened it was the fruition of a project that had first been proposed in the 1980s to provide a heritage centre and information resource for East Lothian. Initially the Archive and Local History staff included two Archivists, two Local History Officers and two Assistants under the management of the Council's Records Manager. Furthermore, thanks to HLF funding, two Outreach Officers were appointed for a fixed period of five years. One of the goals of the project was to make the collections as accessible as possible and to facilitate this the Centre was open for 37 hours a week including Saturday mornings.

The Centre is named after John Gray, a figure who is perhaps little known outside the county, but who is associated with the Museum, Library and Archive Services. It is thanks to him that one of the earliest public lending libraries in

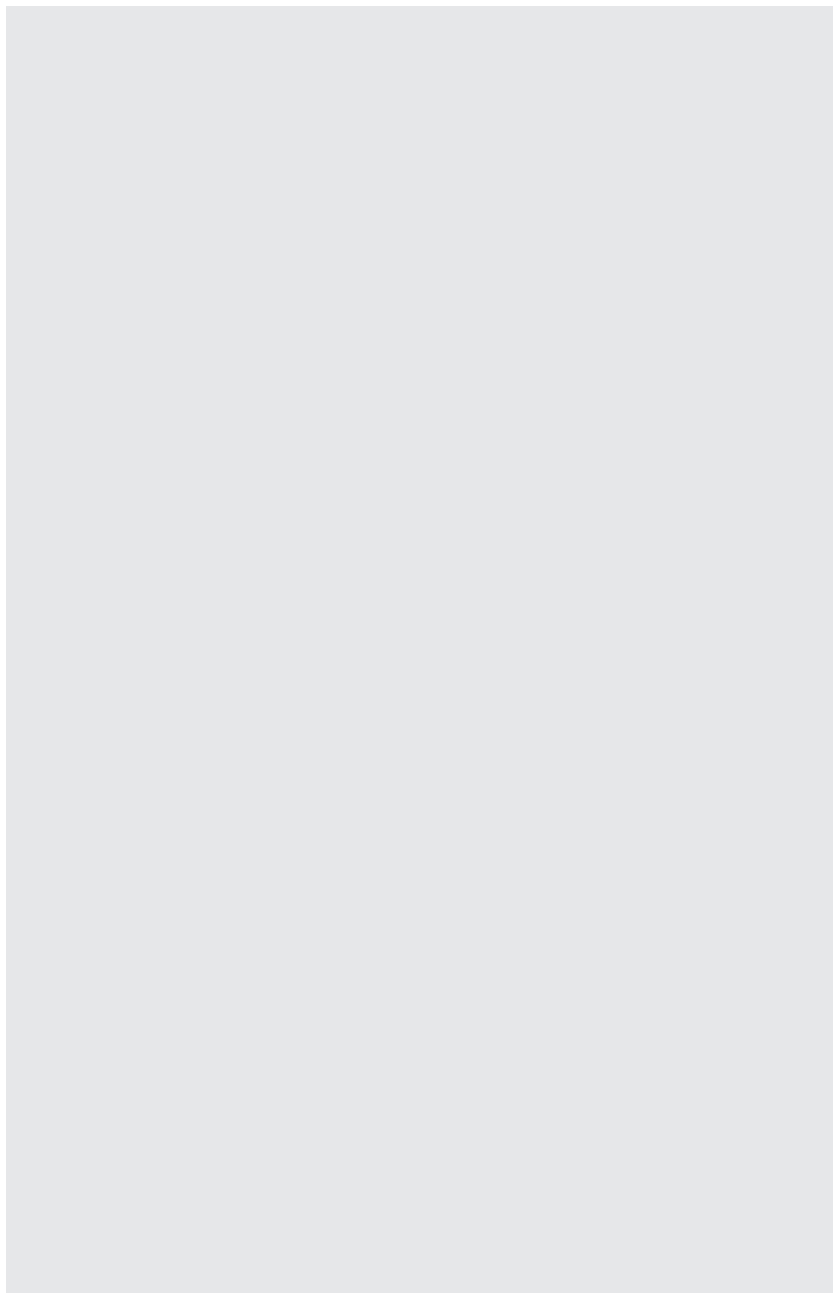


Plate 2 John Gray Centre, building exterior.

Scotland was established in Haddington. John Gray was born in Haddington in 1646 and became minister of Aberlady in the 1680s. An Episcopalian, like many other ministers, John was ousted from the church in 1689 because he refused to take the oath of allegiance to William and Mary. The son of a wealthy merchant, John was a man of substance and he returned to Haddington where he built up a considerable library. During his lifetime he collected over a thousand rare and valuable books, including some of the earliest ever printed. When he died in 1717 he left his library to the people of Haddington, together with a large sum of money ‘for the use and behoofe of the poor of the Toune’. A practical man, John left detailed instructions on how his trust was to be spent. A thousand merks was to be distributed among the poor on his birthday every year – his birthday was the last day in February – and if anyone related to him was among the poor, they were to be given a larger share. Additional sums were to be used to appoint a librarian to mend, repair and buy books.

The John Gray Trust still exists but there is now very little money left. Recognising the value of the library, Haddington Town Council deposited the books with the National Library of Scotland (NLS) for safekeeping in the 1960s. Twenty years later ownership of the collection was transferred and so, while the Centre bears his name, the John Gray book collection is accommodated in Edinburgh.

East Lothian Council’s official records form the nucleus of the collections held in the Centre. These include records of Haddington Burgh (1318–1975), Musselburgh (1560–1975), North Berwick (1539–1975) and Dunbar (1610–1975) as well as the smaller burghs of Cockenzie and Port Seton, East Linton and Prestonpans. East Lothian County Council records date from 1653 and include a wealth of material such as Lunacy Board and Poorhouse minutes, records of the Road Trustees, minutes of the Commissioners of Supply, Lieutenancy and Militia records, Ale Licensing records, School records and Poor Law records, to name a few. Coming right up to date, we look after the records of the former District Councils and the present East Lothian Council. We take records in all formats: our most recent accession of Council Committee Papers was transferred digitally to our server, but it is accurate to say most of our accessions are still paper based.

The bulk of the material described above was transferred to the John Gray Centre from the NRS shortly after the building opened in 2012. One of the main advantages of the records being returned to Haddington is, of course, local access and increased use of the material providing an excellent opportunity for visitors and researchers to discover the wide range of material we hold. One of the ways we do this is to highlight the ‘Treasures of our Collections’. Remote researchers can find out about our treasures online via the John Gray Centre website (<http://www.johngraycentre.org>), but we like to give every opportunity to visitors to come in and see the items if they can. For example, at the time of writing, the film *Mary Queen of Scots* has just been released. Taking advantage of this we have two of our ‘Mary Treasure’ items on display, which include a letter signed by both Mary and Darnley from October 1565 (HAD/4/6/54),

concerning the Chaseabout Raids. The letter excuses Haddington from taking part in these raids provided the town pay £100 to the Crown as a forfeit instead. This was a considerable sum of money and one which the town didn't have – entries in the minutes show that the sum was subsequently borrowed from wealthy merchants. This followed a pattern as the minutes show that the town commonly paid a fine rather than join the royal forces. This letter is particularly special because it is signed 'Marie R' rather than sealed. The second Mary Queen of Scots document we have on display contains an almost perfect example of her great seal. This 1566 Charter under the Great Seal (HAD/1/10), legally transfers some of the church lands to the Burgh of Haddington in the years after the Reformation.

Some of the most colourful stories can be found among the Burgh records – the court books. These are packed full of material about the crimes and misdemeanours of ordinary people. One Haddington volume intriguingly titled the 'Black Book For Recording Criminals' (HAD/7/4/1), reveals that the town was as much concerned with the morals of the townspeople as was the church. The first entry in this book written in January 1732 concerns two women, Agnes Blaik and Elizabeth Golight, who were imprisoned for 'leudness and uncleanness with many different persons'. Agnes Blaik confessed that she had formerly been convicted of such offences and that she was a 'bad woman' but not of late. Both women were accused of entertaining dragoons and the magistrates declared Elizabeth Golight 'a vicious strumpet' and Agnes Blaik a 'vicious leud woman'. They were sentenced to be taken to the cross by the burgh hangman and officers, and to stand with a paper pinned on their breast declaring their crimes. Afterwards they were drummed out of the town and banished forever. Banishment was a punishment frequently meted out by the magistrates because it didn't cost the burgh purse and the perceived wrongdoers became someone else's problem. In fact, both women returned to the town. Agnes Blaik was whipped through the town on her return while Elizabeth Golight was sentenced to two years' hard labour at the House of Correction in Edinburgh along with her mother who had harboured her.

As a collecting archive we collect material relating to East Lothian people, organisations and businesses, and one of the best parts of the job is discovering what people bring in and the stories behind them. In the seven years since the John Gray Centre opened, the most significant accession has to be the papers of the Broun-Lindsay Family of Colstoun, near Haddington. Dating from 1358 these family papers have been loaned to the Centre by the Colstoun Trust. Arrangements were first initiated when Ludovic Broun-Lindsay, who was Provost of East Lothian in 2012, visited the John Gray Centre. He had long been concerned about the storage of the papers which were kept at Colstoun House and was impressed by the facilities at the Centre.

The Colstoun papers were transferred to East Lothian Archive Service on long-term loan and the contents are a fabulous treasure trove. One of the most remarkable documents is a marriage contract that was drawn up by the parents of George Broun and Elizabeth Mackenzie in 1685 (EL568/3/463) (Plate 3).

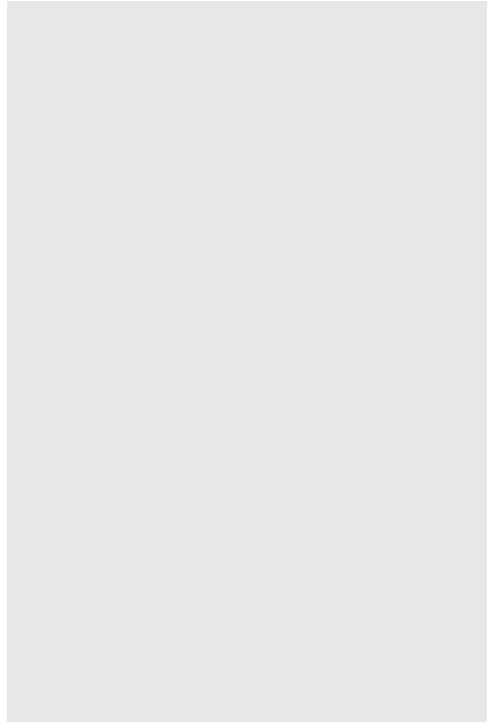


Plate 3 Bill Wilson, Local History Officer, with the marriage contract of George Broun and Elizabeth Mackenzie, 1685, from the Colstoun papers. The contract is at least 20 feet long.

The contract is written on parchment which stretches to nearly 20 feet in length as it sets out every minute detail of the couple's betrothal. It is of particular interest as Elizabeth Mackenzie is the unfortunate bride who, legend says, took a bite out of the famous Colstoun Pear, bringing ruin on her family. The pear is said to have been gifted to the family by Sir Hugo de Gifford, a known sorcerer, with a promise it would bring prosperity if preserved. A pregnant Elizabeth had a craving for the pear, then more than 400 years old and took a bite. It shrivelled into a hard walnut shape and misfortune then struck. Her husband George fell into gambling, losing all the family money and was forced to sell Colstoun House to his brother Robert. The pear is said still to be at Colstoun House, preserved in a silver casket.

When the John Gray Centre first opened, we were fortunate to have two Development Officers in post who created many innovative projects designed to promote the Centre and attract new audiences. Lucy Roscoe, who was Artist in Residence, has written about her experiences of working on a six-month

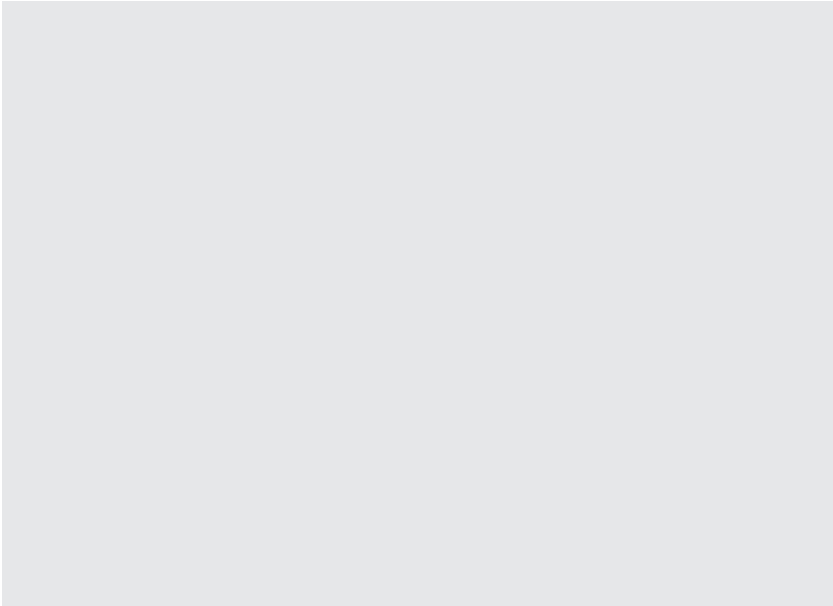


Plate 4 The King, the Queen and the Vicious Strumpet, by Lucy Roscoe. This cartoon features characters from East Lothian Archive Collections – Robert the Bruce, Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth Golight, who was named a ‘vicious strumpet’.

part-time placement in this journal.² Her brief was to find new ways to help audiences engage with the archive collections. One of the main projects that Lucy worked on was a series of cartoons based on a criminal register held in the collections, Haddington Criminal Register, 1894–1901 (COP/1/8). This register is particularly fascinating because it notes particulars of the criminal’s appearance as well as details of the crime. The volume captivates school groups – the children love to see if their names appear in the index – and Lucy’s cartoons are a great way of making the register accessible for them (Plate 4).

During the five years the Development Officers were in post they worked on a variety of projects and activities including website development, music initiatives, school programmes, family history days, oral history recording, art and drama workshops, and exhibitions to name a few. Unfortunately, when the fixed funding finished in 2016, the posts were not extended. Thanks, however, to the enthusiasm of the remaining team, the Centre is still involved in lots of exciting activities often assisted by our volunteers. We always try to find a task which suits the particular talents and interests of volunteers, and their

² Lucy Roscoe, ‘The Illustrator and the Archive’, *Scottish Archives*, 20 (2014), 8–16.

work includes listing, document cleaning, oral history transcription, digitisation (especially of our photograph collections), and research and newspaper indexing. Our largest volunteer project, managed by my colleague Frances Woodrow, is the indexing and part-transcription of our collections relating to the Poor Law.

East Lothian has a particularly fine set of Poor Law records centring on those produced by the Parochial Boards. These bodies were established by the 1845 Poor Law Scotland Act which also gave them powers to raise money by levying a poor rate. Relief was granted by the parish in a variety of ways: money could be given to the pauper either as a regular payment or a one off, or they might be relieved in goods such as clothes or food. In Dunbar the paupers were regularly given rations of whisky! They may also have been given coal and, as a last resort, the poorhouse was offered.

Volunteers are working on digitising, indexing and are partially transcribing the poor law records. These include the Poor Roll which has survived for some parishes, as well as the Parochial Board and Parish Council minutes which exist for every parish. More than 20 volunteers have contributed to the Poor Law project which will create a searchable database where people can find all the information relating to their pauper ancestors held in the archives. The records document pertinent information about each individual such as age, religion, parish of settlement and family information. Sometimes a lot of extra detail was recorded providing more in-depth family information or the opinion of the Inspector was noted, such as, for example, 'a deserving case' or 'a notorious prostitute'. For some individuals, such as Mary Cairns, the records have revealed a detailed picture of her life. Mary was born in East Linton in 1862 and by the age of 26 she was in prison in Haddington where she first appears on the roll in 1888. While most paupers were given a single page in the Poor Roll, Mary's entries stretch to five pages documenting the next fifteen years of her life. A notorious vagrant, East Linton parish received claims from parishes and prisons all over Scotland (she travelled as far north as Thurso), for crimes ranging from deserting her children, to breach of the peace and drunk and disorderly. The tone of the records reveal the Board became increasingly sick of her and considered removing her to East Linton Poorhouse but this was impractical. She disappears from the records but thanks to contact from her great-grandson in Australia we know that she did eventually settle down and by the 1911 census is living with the father of her children.

The case of Mary Cairns highlights the impact making the records accessible has on family history research. However, another outcome of the Poor Law project has been the networks and friendships that have grown among the volunteers working on the records. A John Gray Centre project with a similar outcome is our Active Memories Group for older men. The co-location of Library, Museum and Archive services in the one building gives an opportunity for cross-sector working and the Active Memories Group is run by the Archive and Library services. The group was first set up under the umbrella of the Sporting Memories Network as a twelve-week pilot project to provide a forum for older men to socialise. The group meets weekly to reminisce about sport and

seven years on is still going strong. We have a core group of sixteen gentlemen who range in age from their mid-60s to mid-90s. Following the format of a football match the men meet for 90 minutes and there is a pie and Bovril on offer at half time! Primarily a reminiscence group, we try to offer a varied programme which includes invited speakers and visits to sporting venues or places of interest. In 2016 we published a Memory Book *Jumpers for Goalposts* which documents the interests and achievements of everyone in the group. Sporting interests range from athletics and field sports – one of our founder members was a keen highland games competitor, competing in the caber and shot putt – to cycling, tennis, endurance running, mountaineering and rugby. Unsurprisingly the most popular sport is football and being in the Lothians we have a keen Hearts/Hibs rivalry!

Sadly some of our founder members are no longer with us but our memory book provides a lasting tribute. The group has offered many members a new sense of belonging and purpose at a later stage in life:

What it [Active Memories] has achieved is the good friendship and respect we have for each other and the enjoyment and fun of every Tuesday morning. It doesn't matter what sporting team you support, what background you come from or where you were born, everyone comes together on a Tuesday for some great banter and camaraderie.³

Undoubtedly the biggest project we have undertaken to date is 'Haddington 700' which celebrated the 700th anniversary of the 1318 Bruce Charter mentioned in the introduction. The seventh centenary year came at a particularly challenging time for our Archive Service. In common with every local authority archive our service is under pressure from ever-diminishing budgets. This has resulted in cuts both to our opening hours – reduced from 37 to 21 – and to staff numbers – reduced from eight to four for Archives and Local History⁴ – with only two of these posts being full time. We currently have 1.7 Archivists with responsibilities for records management as well as archives. Finding the resources to meet all the requirements of the service is challenging at a time in which understandably archives and heritage services are perhaps not seen as a priority for council tax payers.

The 700th anniversary of the oldest document in our collections was a not-to-be-missed opportunity to raise the profile of the Archive Service and the John Gray Centre across East Lothian. We started off planning to hold a small exhibition and ended up with a whole year of community events, crowned in the summer by a Big Medieval Day, all this inspired by a single document from our collections, the 1318 Bruce Charter. By 1318 Haddington had been a

³ George Cunningham, 'Introduction', in *Jumpers for Goalposts*, published by Haddington Active Memories Group in 2016.

⁴ No staff have been made redundant. When staff have left, however, their posts have not been filled.

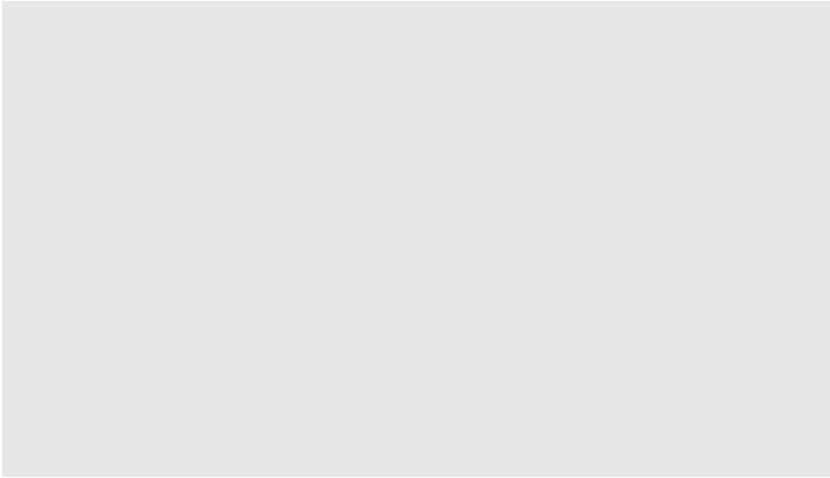


Plate 5 In August 2018 hundreds of people dressed up and took part in a parade through Haddington to celebrate Haddington 700.

Royal Burgh for almost 200 years, but unfortunately its original Charter from King David I has not survived. The 1318 Charter granted under King Robert I confirms the town's rights to hold a market, collect taxes, etc. It was produced at Scone in December 1318 at the same time Parliament was meeting there to discuss the succession to the throne. Robert's brother Edward, the King's main heir, had recently been killed in Ireland. The fact that Robert produced the Charter in the days after the Scone parliament shows that the King was pursuing the basic function of government, a sign that he must have felt reasonably secure at that point in his reign and so the Charter is significant to Scottish as well as local history.⁵

Shortly after launching Haddington 700 a committee was formed to drive the project. In this we had considerable support from East Lothian's Provost John McMillan and the Friends of the John Gray Centre. One of the main priorities was to fundraise because our Haddington 700 idea came with a lot of enthusiasm but no budget! Although money was tight throughout the year we managed to secure enough grants and sponsorship to run an impressive number of events. Our biggest grant came from the Haddington Common Good Committee to be used to run a medieval-themed day for the local community. On 25 August nearly 5,000 people joined us at our Big Medieval Day and hundreds marched from outside the John Gray Centre to take part in the festivities, many in medieval-style dress (Plate 5).

⁵ Information provided by Dr Callum Watson, National Trust for Scotland, Bannockburn.

Throughout 2018 more than 100 events and projects celebrated Haddington 700. We aimed to offer something for everyone and while a lot of the events were about history, many were not. We literally danced in the streets to celebrate our Charter with Slosh 700 – a world record attempt for the largest number of people to dance the Slosh! Unfortunately we didn't quite make the numbers required for the record – it rained heavily. However, we did gain a massive amount of publicity with more than 15,000 hits on our Facebook pages. As archivists, one of the main aims of the project was to publicise the John Gray Centre and our collections, and make them as accessible as possible. We recruited the services of a local storyteller, illustrator and designer who helped us take stories from the archives into schools and community events. We published our very own 'Horrid Haddington' based on the town's gorier past – always appealing to children. We ran a series of lunchtime talks, exhibitions and events which brought more than 6,000 visitors to the John Gray Centre over the course of the year. We worked with new partners – arts and crafts groups, sports organisations, community centres – as well as our Friends Group and Local History societies.

In conclusion, the last seven years has seen East Lothian Council Archive Service grow into a busy community archive, with a real focus on engagement. As archivists we have had to develop many new skills along the way, including event management and even Slosh dancing! One of the most enjoyable things about working in the John Gray Centre is the variety it offers. We now want to build on the success of our projects, but also prioritise our collections management projects, and work towards Archive Service Accreditation. If you would like to contact us, email history@eastlothian.gov.uk. For more information and details of our opening times visit <http://www.johngraycentre.org>.