

Viewpoint

An Ancient Researcher Laments

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When some forty years ago I first started as a postgraduate to work in and with archives, it was a quite different world. We were not trained in how to research; we mostly learnt on the job. Once a research topic was identified, you hopefully got some suggestions from your supervisor, and if there was relevant reading in your subject area you raked through the footnotes for leads. That may not have taken long: it has to be remembered how little was actually published in the pre-Smout and Campbell era in Scottish social and economic history. And then you were turned loose. It was a world where one learnt to forage – the researcher was a hunter-gatherer. Those that developed a nose for it, succeeded; the lazy or luckless did not. There were obvious places to start: the Scottish Record Office and the National Library of Scotland for two, staffed by professionals and organised, but beyond those lay a whole complex of hunting grounds, some known, others to be discovered, and of course a lot was still held in private or company hands. There were also the university libraries, and their special collections; public libraries and their local studies departments; specialist places such as the Medical Colleges. If you wanted newspapers, that required either visits to the publishers where you found mouldering volumes stowed away in a back room, or coped with microfilm of very varying quality. You used your initiative, which in my case was incredibly well rewarded. The British Linen Bank allowed me down to their vaults where metres of leather ledgers awaited me; all the letter books back to 1745. Free photocopying and free lunches made this a young researcher's paradise.

The calibre of the curator and the service or support varied immensely, and if one visited a location it was pretty much pot luck as to how well informed or professional the person in charge was. With private collections it was either the owner or an honorary archivist, an interested amateur, who looked after the papers, and they tended to know what was where. Others appeared to have no qualifications or indeed qualities at all. I paid a memorable visit to one company, now defunct, where the first minute book was in the care of a superannuated family member of the board to give him something to do before the first of his many lunchtime gins. The hardest things were to find what might be relevant where, and of then getting access; once in, you were then left pretty much to your own devices. There were still in some places what one might term 'gentlemen scholars' who used their position to get on with their own research, and saw researchers only as a distraction; the more you were prepared to look

for, read and return, without bothering them, the better. You were given free access, and somewhere to work which might be an elegant library desk, as at the Signet Library, or a place in the old kitchen with a single-bar radiator, as at Abbotsford House. You had to be prepared quite literally to get your hands dirty. And the canny acquired a boiler suit and a face-mask to cope with the sand and dirt off the ledgers and letters. There were no health and safety concerns in those days; postgrads were expendable. A prime exception was the then Scottish Record Office, to which all of us turned. It had catalogues of its holdings, and some subject summary lists. The kindness and knowledge of the staff was invaluable in pointing you to what was held – the late Ian Grant, for example, walked me through legal resources, and notably the unextracted processes, from which so much could be quarried. They were helpful, almost too much so. The National Register of Archives for Scotland (NRAS) was a regular lottery, with new accession lists eagerly awaited, which at least gave a flavour of what might be in a collection. Detailed cataloguing tended to lag behind, and you could be privileged by being allowed access to unsorted papers down in the basement, or given whole bundles of documents to search through. Finding was an essential part of the research experience. And then, of course, making sense of it in context. It is no accident that lawyers used often to do a degree in history first: you need to be able to gauge the reliability of your sources and then assemble a narrative which fits the evidence, which is inevitably incomplete. You need to look behind what is there.

Clearly the present world is very different. The IT revolution has reached us all. We now have online catalogues for many centres with research holdings, which can be accessed externally. So much more is available in summary and there is a wide range of subject guides to help you find your way to what you want so that you make the best use of your research time. Catalogues are online, instead of on card or fiche. Visits can be targeted. And, thanks to pre-ordering, the stuff can be there when you arrive, even if it has to come from a distant store. Or indeed, thanks to the scanner, certain types of key information are now available on disk; how much joy access to the census brings researchers, as it does for other classes of public record. And especially for those who do not have the mobility or the time or the money to travel – the archive comes to you. All gain, is it not? No one surely would want to turn the clock back, any more than to return to the world of fiche and microfilm. Technology has made a lot of material much more accessible, more easily found. Yet one can have some reservations and regrets.

We have lost the fun of locating material, of rummaging, as it is disparagingly described. In some instances you are allowed access only to the known, where now single documents are issued rather than a bundle. One understands that bitter experience has shown the need for close security where material is issued as there have, sadly, been light-fingered researchers. But the effect is unfortunate. Browsing is out. You see only what has been seen. The system controls what is seen, how much is issued and how quickly. It used to be that the seasoned researcher could enhance the service to them by a judicious

lunchtime pint to one of the search-room attendants in the hostelry next to the SRO. But no longer. The system has the power; the researcher is powerless. Of course, there is an absolute responsibility to care and protect what has been deposited. And only material in a fit state should be issued. Only the other day on TV, an owner was proudly showing some letters in very poor condition with flakes falling off right and left. That is wrong. Collections have to be protected. And scanning does protect for all time.

The restrictions on freedom run across the board. University libraries no longer allow access to that great concealed resource – the annex or compactus – in which the surplus reserve stock and unfashionable has come to rest. What has been lost has been the excitement of that moment when you open a letter or a file or a ledger and find a missing key, or new idea: of the unexpected. But then there are more subtle losses. What is accessible online draws all the attention; people go to those sources which are most accessible because they have been catalogued and inventoried, and that tends to mean to the bigger and better-funded places. Local studies and smaller collections which are not publicised simply are ignored or overlooked. There is also the question of how collections are short listed. You cannot assume that keyword headings can catch all that is in a document. Cataloguers have to be selective, to highlight what seem to them to be the salient issues. There is still a case for reading and reading, learning if need be to speed-read for the nuggets, a skill which has very wide application – try all university mission statements. Some of real research is slog with no short cut – there is a need to plough through the irrelevant to learn what is relevant, to focus and select, to put the particular in context.

Searching, sifting, assessing, looking behind the surface – are these skills still so important as more and more ‘information’ is served up? The art of cooking is lost; we are into ready-made meals.