

Viewpoint

Archives Matter

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Archives tell our stories, enrich our lives, connect us with the past and give us a sense of identity. They may be used to provide evidence of our rights as individuals, organisations and communities and, through them, we can hold authorities to account. They can bring families and communities together by telling us who we are and where we come from. Archives come in many forms, written, photographic, audio, visual, film and digital. Their impact – economic, social and cultural – is wide-reaching. They can be used to promote well-being by inculcating a sense of place and belonging. They attract visitors and boost the economy by supporting ancestral tourism. They underpin every aspect of education, science, health, culture, law and the historic environment. Archives inform the future by helping us to learn from the past.

Given their importance as the documented memory of the nation why are archives not afforded the highest possible level of respect and recognition? Over the last fourteen months, since taking on the role of director of the Scottish Council on Archives, I have heard recurring messages from the sector – ‘archivists are not good at selling themselves’; ‘archives matter but the sector is largely ignored or forgotten by decision makers’; ‘archive services are too busy and underresourced to think about the bigger picture’; ‘we are too inward-looking as a profession’. All of this may or may not be true, but it has made me think what might distinguish the archives and records management sector from others. It seems to me that the archive sector in Scotland may not have the kudos it deserves because, in the main, it does not generate the high-profile causes which politicians can engage with as vote-winning issues. Most people cannot see that archives and records are relevant to their daily lives. Because they are not considered as a high priority, archives can be too often overlooked and, increasingly, seen as an easy target for budget cuts. Archives (and archivists?) can be considered harmless but I believe that it is this perceived passivity that makes them vulnerable.

So why aren’t archivists better at blowing their own trumpet? Archivists are sometimes guilty of not taking the time to look up and promote the potential of their collections and most services are overstretched and understaffed. Archival material doesn’t, on the surface, lend itself so fulsomely to public display as, for example, museum artefacts. Much of it is wordy and may be daunting for the inexperienced. Also, the landscape of online archives can be fragmentary, unfamiliar and confusing. The use of terminology, especially acronyms, is

alienating for the casual user. All these reasons, and more, combined with the reality that the sector is small and not very well paid, means that the potential of archives to enhance and transform many elements of civic and private life is not fully explored. Archives are amazing but who really cares?

For the situation to improve, I believe that a number of things have to happen. The different organisations and agencies with responsibility for the custody, use and care of archives and records must find common purpose and more opportunities for collaboration. The end goal should be a vision for archives and records in Scotland. The national bodies, including the National Records of Scotland, the National Library of Scotland and Historic Environment Scotland, leading from the front and working in partnership with other organisations, particularly universities and local authorities, need to collectively make the case for supporting and valuing archives. The Scottish Council on Archives (SCA) is in a unique position to help effect this collaborative approach in its role as an independent development and advocacy body for the sector.

In October 2018, the SCA held the first in a series of events on the theme of 'Why Archives Matter'. The conference, which focused on 'Health, Wellbeing, Community and Young People', featured a range of presentations showing how archival material is used to assist the work of professionals and volunteers in the health sector and engage with diverse communities, old and young. This included a transformative archival adventure for people from Norfolk who live with mental health conditions; combating dementia with screen and sporting memories; sharing stories of local communities through film, photography and oral histories; and encouraging young people to have a voice through connecting with people from the past.

Approximately 60 delegates from a wide range of organisations including mental health, dementia and well-being charities, educators and archivists, attended. Feedback from the conference was very positive and included comments such as: 'I see the connections being built between archives and wider programmes that tackle social exclusion'; 'It has opened my eyes to how archives, particularly visual archives such as photographs, can help to improve well-being in so many different ways'; 'It has confirmed my opinion that archives have an endless number of uses with a very diverse range of potential audiences'; 'We have to think beyond archives being locked away in a cupboard and make them part of our lives'; 'Archives are about not just our past but our present and, most importantly, our future'.¹

The response to the themes explored in the conference has helped me realise what a potentially easy sell archives could and should be. They are rich in stories, human interactions and visual and material that engage and often enthral (Plate 1).

Before I worked for the SCA I was director of the Scottish Civic Trust, a small built environment and placemaking-focused charity based in Glasgow.

¹ *Why Archives Matter*, SCA Conference Report, available from Scottish Council on Archives.

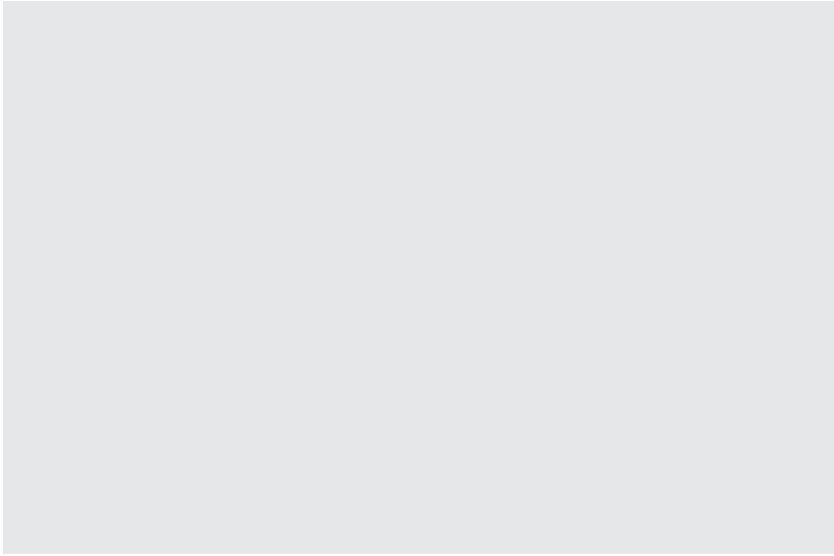


Plate 1 Recording oral history at Glasgow Women's Library, 2010. © Glasgow Women's Library.

Much of my time was spent trying to convince others about the importance of both the historic environment and good design in fostering a general sense of well-being. However, it was challenging to measure this impact over the long term. On the other hand, interaction with archival material can have immediate measurable benefits, particularly as a way of using stories from the past to bring different generations together in a creative environment (Plate 2).

On their website The National Archives (TNA) assert that:

Archives help to build stable and prosperous communities with a strong sense of identity, they encourage well-being, and they provide opportunities for people to learn, explore and interact ... engagement and involvement will help to ensure that people feel they can have a real influence on service planning and delivery ... [and] local services and the community form ongoing relationships to work together to improve lives. In particular, archives have a key role in supporting local democracy and encouraging participation in civic and civil life.²

The SCA's new Strategic Plan, 2019–21 sets out our objectives around supporting and advocating on behalf of the archives and records management sector. Our vision is that Scotland's documented past is valued, understood and

² <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/advice-and-guidance/talking-to-your-community/community-engagement/>.

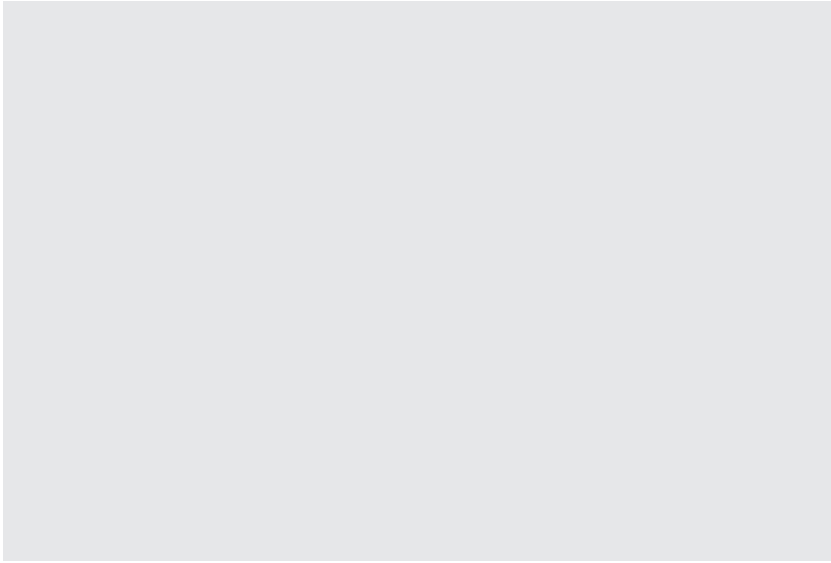


Plate 2 SCA ‘Theatre of Remembrance’ Project, 2018, Mackie Academy pupils and Ruaraidh Wishart, Archivist. © Scottish Council on Archives.

shared with everyone. We will structure our work around six themes: capacity building; education and outreach; access to archives; advocacy; partnership; and governance. We will constantly evaluate our progress towards meeting agreed outcomes. An advocacy working group was set up in 2019 with a view to representing the interests and concerns of the sector to decision makers in national and local government. The primary objective will be to raise awareness of the benefits and positive impact that wider engagement with and use of archives can make to health and well-being, academia, tourism, heritage and culture. We promote the importance of good records management both in terms of compliance with the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011 but also as evidence of good governance and business management. We are currently consulting with members and stakeholders to prioritise key areas for our advocacy work.

The SCA is a small organisation. We build capacity through our programmes and projects. Ultimately, it will be the sector, particularly those professionals working in local government, that will need to be sufficiently equipped and galvanised to make a stronger case for their importance and impact. At the SCA we have adopted an outcomes-led approach to measuring the success of our projects, using tools recommended by Evaluation Support Scotland. We plan to run impact-evaluation workshops in 2020 for our members to help them, and us, build an evidence-based case for supporting archives.

In my time at SCA I have also gained a much better understanding of the obstacles to understanding and engaging with archives. In a digital world

where users expect to access information immediately on any device, it is clear that digitisation and online availability of archive collections is some way behind. Scotland's People³ is an excellent resource. The National Archive's Discovery⁴ is extremely user-friendly, the Archives Hub⁵ goes from strength to strength and there is an ever-increasing number of genealogy-focused sites. However, accessing archives can often be a challenging and confusing process. It requires time, dedication and more than a basic understanding of how to find information online and track down the original source material. Most people who use archives on a regular basis – whether for research, historical or genealogical purposes – recognise that finding what you are looking for can be frustrating as well as rewarding. The journey of discovery has many blind alleys, forks on the road and dead ends.

An important part of my role is to develop a new portal to improve access to Scotland's online archive collections. The resource will be a major development of the existing Scottish Archives Network (SCAN) website.⁶ SCAN was created by the then National Archives of Scotland in the early 2000s as a single online catalogue to the holdings of more than 50 Scottish archives, including those of universities, local authorities and businesses, mostly at collection level. One of the main achievements of SCAN was the digital capture of half a million wills and testaments recorded in Commissary Court and Sheriff Court registers between 1513 and 1901. The site was developed both to help local archives services publish their catalogues online at collection level and to provide information to users on what existed and was accessible. However, the site has not been updated for several years and demand for a new portal has been identified.

Development of the new portal will involve both migrating current collection-level descriptions from the records in the existing SCAN site, currently held within a CALM system, and adding new collections with descriptions from these and other archival institutions at collection and item level where possible. The ability to access item-level descriptions will be a major improvement on what is currently available from the SCAN website. A key element of the project will be a new interface for managers of local collections to export data into the new hub.

As part of the scoping phase, SCA looked at other hubs which allow access to aggregated collections including Discovery and the Archives Hub. Discovery holds more than 32 million descriptions of records held by TNA and more than 2,500 archives across the UK. Over 9 million records are available for download. Discovery offers simple and advanced searching options and contains both collection- and item-level descriptions. Through the Manage Your Collections tool, it also provides a facility to upload archive catalogues. The Archives Hub brings together descriptions of thousands of the UK's archive collections, representing over 330 institutions across the country.

³ <http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk>.

⁴ <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>.

⁵ <http://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk>.

⁶ <http://www.scan.org.uk>.

Family history	41.67%
Local history research	52.78%
Academic research	47.22%
Professional genealogy	16.67%
Legal searches	5.56%
Creative purposes	8.33%
Other	16.67%

Table 1 Source: Scottish Council on Archives archive user consultation report, 2018.

The Scottish portal will improve the level of access to archive collections available to current and potential users, and provide more opportunities for engagement both physically and virtually with archives. The new portal will provide resources for members of the public, historians, researchers and genealogists who wish to interact with and use Scotland's archives collections as well as learning tools for teachers and archivists working with schools and colleges. It will provide help and guidance for local groups holding or developing community archives as well as links to and help on accessing online archives held in and outside Scotland.

In 2018, SCA consulted widely with users of and stakeholders in online archives services. The purpose of this consultation was to assess the need, deliverability, functionality and technical options for creating a new Scottish archives portal. Key findings from the consultation included a recognition that the portal should be easy to use both by users and stakeholders, and that access to item-level records online is desirable but collection-level descriptions, if detailed and consistent, are also valued, particularly if they let users know where a record is kept. Among other questions, users were asked their primary purpose for consulting online archive catalogues and Table 1 shows the responses by percentage.

Current frustrations around using online archives include difficulty in finding out what material is available (online and offline), the fragmentary nature of guides and resources, and the lack of item-level records online. Broken URL links, lack of consistency in descriptions and use of keywords are also frustrating. Participants were asked what would make the process of accessing and using online catalogues simpler, less confusing and more enjoyable. Suggestions included options for: basic and advanced searches; online tutorials; cross-referencing to other archival sources; and a mind map of resources and online catalogues from across the UK. The consultation has revealed that, to the uninitiated, online archive catalogues are not always easy to navigate or understand. Easy-to-use search functionality must be accompanied by guidance material, help on using archives and details of external sources, online and

offline. A new portal could raise awareness within and outside Scotland of the depth and range of archives available and could attract tourists to different places.

A 'one-stop shop' will be beneficial to researchers, both professional and amateur, and could become a powerful advocacy tool for archives as well as increasing the number of people accessing archives. It would also assist in overcoming barriers around geographical spread of archive services and better prepare visitors to repositories by providing the correct catalogue references. However, there is a need for improved keywords and index search terms, and metadata which was often inconsistent. Also, the ability to ascribe authority names has fallen behind and this is important as it gives context to place and names.

Users recognised that most material was not online and, therefore, it was crucial to manage expectations with the new portal. It was deemed more important to be able to raise awareness of the offline and online collections that exist. Collection-level detail was considered very useful, as context is often needed to decipher items. Online catalogues should have the capacity to searching by casual users. If the information/record was not accessible online, the portal should give information about where it can be accessed. Searches are currently limited by the extent of indexing and selection of keywords which are not always intuitive or comprehensive. Limited descriptions and limited contextual information can be very frustrating. Other suggestions to enhance the new portal included:

- A glossary of terms, such as historical and medical words and phrases
- A beginner's guide to palaeography
- Consistency across catalogue descriptions with explanations of gaps, user forums and a facility to report broken links
- Compatibility with any software or tools utilised by disabled users
- Free access
- Links to Google maps
- Community archives section
- Multi-platform access
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS) tagging of user-generated content

As well as providing a new means of accessing national and local archive collections, the portal will also become a unique resource for genealogists, researchers, academics, students, historians and members of the public by providing guidance on understanding, using and accessing archives. SCA expects that the site will become a powerful advocacy tool for archives, showing not just the breadth and depth of collections across Scotland but highlighting the many ways that archives can be used to inform and improve society. The new portal can also bring archivists and online catalogues from across the country closer together by sharing information and knowledge as well as cross-referencing and linking. SCA is also considering how community archives can be incorporated into the new portal as part of its wider remit to assist local communities

running or thinking of setting up an archive with issues such as standardisation, accessibility, copyright and preservation.

Scotland has, in recent years, experienced an upsurge in national pride and a sense of a strong and unique cultural identity. There is recognition by the Scottish Government and its agencies, most notably the National Records of Scotland, that archives have a role to play not only in telling Scotland's story but also in fostering a sense of identity and shared memory. The new portal which the Scottish Council on Archives is developing with a wide range of partners has the potential to become a step change in terms of improving and widening understanding of and access to archives, many of which are not currently accessible, as well as exploiting the potential of collections to generate interest in and respect for Scotland's shared past. For genealogists, but also for everyday users of archives as well as potential new users, this portal will open new channels of research and local history.

In conclusion, despite the challenges, I believe we must start to generate more positivity about the future of archives in Scotland through collaboration and consensus-building around a vision. New technology and the digital revolution are constantly increasing the visibility and accessibility of historical records. People are interested in the past but also in recording their present for future generations. Through social media such as Facebook and Instagram, millions of us have become personal archivists without realising it. There is so much untapped energy held within our archive collections that now, more than ever, is the time to unlock its potential and release it to as many people as possible. They tell the stories of our lives, as individuals and as a nation, and their capacity to engage, inform and enhance is limitless.