CHANGING THE FUTURE OF OUR PAST
Cover illustration

Front: A 15th century drawing depicting King William I presenting a charter to Count Alan of Brittany, from the Register of the Honour of Richmond (British Library, Cotton MS. Faustina B.vii. f.72v)
Archives are too often the Cinderella of the cultural services. They are seen as lacking the mass appeal of Museums, the community penetration and social relevance of Libraries, or the broad educational value of either. These are myths founded on popular stereotypes and a failure to perceive the different means by which Society derives value from different types of cultural institution. In fact, archives contribute to our national life in an astonishing diversity of different ways, examined in the pages which follow. A world without archives would be a world seized by a paralysing collective amnesia, incapable of sustaining the complexity of modern society.

Thirty years ago, archives were a quiet and comfortable corner of the British establishment, but that has changed out of all recognition. Archives have seized the opportunities presented by new technology, expanding collections and rising public demand, driving change forward and responding to shifting user needs. In combination with decades of barely stable core funding and the development of a bidding culture for project-based funding, these demands have now created a tempo of work in the profession unknown anywhere in the public sector a generation ago.

To whip the archival spinning top still faster, the Government has paid unprecedented attention to archives in the last five years. New legislation, such as the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the proposed National Archives Bill, will change the face of record-keeping in the public sector. Broad Government policy in areas such as electronic government, education and learning, partnership working and social inclusion, is being translated into new objectives for archives, museums and libraries by Resource, which has announced its intention of undertaking a wide ranging review of archival services and funding in 2002.

If Archives are to grapple successfully with the cocktail of growing workloads, new technology, and changing expectations, it is imperative that they shake off inappropriate public perceptions. Archives are not a joke or an irrelevance or an optional extra. They are a fundamental bulwark of our democracy, our culture, our community and personal identity. They are our public and corporate memory, a fragile and often beautiful legacy from the past to the future, which it is our duty and our privilege to protect and enhance for the generations to come. Archivists must play a leading role in shaping a more appropriate image for archives, but we cannot do it alone; we need politicians and opinion-formers to share, shape, fund and help to promulgate our vision.

Nicholas Kingsley
Chairman, National Council on Archives
April 2002
Decorative frontispiece from the earliest parish register of Haresfield, Gloucestershire, 1599
(Gloucestershire Record Office, P163 IN 1/1)

The death warrant of King Charles I, 1649 (House of Lords Record Office)
Archives are the records generated by a family, an individual, a business or an institution in the course of its daily activities, which have been consciously selected for preservation, either because of their importance to the organisation, or for their broader historical value. British archives are among the richest and most comprehensive in the world. They sustain research from Anglo-Saxon times to the present, in every branch of knowledge for which an historical perspective is helpful, whether in the arts, the humanities, or the sciences. They are the cornerstone of our legal system, founded on precedent and evidence, and enshrine the public memory of the nation. They are not ‘just paper with writing’, but also include some printed matter, literary and musical works, sketches and drawings, maps and plans, photographs, films, videos, sound recordings and electronic records.

The majority of archives are preserved in publicly-funded institutions including the Public Record Office, the National Archives of Scotland, and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland; local Record Offices provided by County or Unitary authorities; university libraries and archives; and the archive departments of other libraries and museums, such as the British Library or the Victoria & Albert Museum. Some businesses and charities, like the Royal Bank of Scotland, BP or the Wellcome Foundation, continue to look after and provide public access to their own archives.

Many archives are things of beauty in their own right, or offer a thrilling immediacy of contact with historical events. Documents such as architectural elevations and perspectives; pedigrees; drawings and watercolours; maps and plans; and advertising posters are all frequently works of art, and merit being exhibited in that context. Films and photographs can capture historical events and present them with a reality and immediacy that nothing else can convey. Who fails to remember the footage of President Kennedy’s assassination or the suppression of democratic protest in Tiananmen Square? Other documents send a shiver down the spine when one catches the great figures of history in private and off guard, or senses a tangible contact with momentous events.

Who can fail to be moved by the scribbled love-notes passed between Queen Elizabeth I and the Earl of Essex at a dance; or by the execution warrant of King Charles I?
Archives are already widely recognised as the single most important source of evidence for our national history and for the understanding of who we are today. Documents like Domesday Book and Magna Carta, held at the Public Record Office, have an almost iconic status and are familiar to every schoolchild, while literary treasures such as the Beowulf manuscript or the Lindisfarne Gospels from the British Library are almost equally familiar. Without the great mass of documentary evidence surviving from the past - over 100 shelf-miles in the Public Record Office alone - historians could not reconstruct our national story in the rich detail with which we are familiar. And because of Britain’s colonial past, British archives tell not just our story but that of countless other nations too. For example, there is great interest in the Gulf states in historic British maps of the area to inform debate about international boundaries and current political issues.

Archives of national importance are not confined to the great national institutions in London. Equally, if not more important for the different parts of the UK, are their national repositories: the National Archives of Scotland, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, and the National Library of Wales. And the papers of individuals who have shaped our history and culture are found in local and university repositories throughout the country: for example, the papers of James Watt in Birmingham City Archives, of the 1st Duke of Wellington at Southampton University Archives, and of Sir Winston Churchill at Churchill College, Cambridge.

History is not, of course, just the story of kings and governments. For the study of social and economic history, the myriad of local archives must be studied.
and evaluated, so that a regional and national picture can be built up from the varying experiences of different communities, estates and businesses. Records such as wills, diaries and letters may not have the instant familiarity of Domesday, or the beauty of the Lindisfarne Gospels, but they are an equally vital source, without which our knowledge of the past would be sadly incomplete.

An understanding of our history and culture is critical to effective political decision-making and is also an important component of our national sense of identity, as the Scots have shown in their determined pursuit of devolution in recent decades. Our national history is also immensely popular, as the demand for historical television programmes, books, newspaper and magazine articles shows. Through the medium of such works, historians and journalists bring archives to a far wider and more interested public than the visitor figures for archives might suggest. Many physical visits to archives ultimately generate work which is shared with others through these media.

“Archives, which contain the primary record of our past, are the very essence of our heritage”
Viscount St. Davids, House of Lords, 1993

“A nation must be judged on how it conserves its archives. Our future depends on our past and we must make sure that it is always available.”
Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, House of Lords, 1994

“It might be said that the British inheritance is marked out not so much by events, but by documents whose impact resonates down the ages. The way in which the Norman Conquest turned upside down many aspects of English life is expressed most powerfully in the two monumental volumes of Domesday Book. The grant of liberties in Magna Carta... established the principle that the power of a king could be limited by a written grant, and came to be regarded as a cornerstone of democracy... The Bill of Rights of 1689 remains the nearest thing to a British constitution, and is a fundamental document in the development of the concept of human rights.”
Elizabeth Hallam & Andrew Prescott, The British Inheritance, 1999

“The whole story of our country as a state, the reputations of her famous men, the motives of her policy, the secret springs and wheels by which her power, from age to age, has been brought into action, are gradually being laid bare, as though we were digging open a Pompeii of literature.”
The Standard, 1870, on the publication of the 1st Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts

“When we speak thus of “history”, we mean not only the story of the great affairs of State, but also of every side of society. It is the story of life on the land and in the mill, and everywhere else: and the story of every kind of activity, of art and of science, of business and of games and all the rest. The study of all these is enriched by recourse to the papers of those who took part in them. Not only the papers of those who have been for centuries dead, but also those who have only just left us.”
Lord Denning, foreword to Manuscripts and Men, 1969

The ‘Declaration of Arbroath’, by which the earls and barons of Scotland (whose seals are attached) appealed to Pope John XXII to persuade King Edward II to recognise Scottish independence, 1320 (National Archives of Scotland, SP13/7)
Archives matter not only because they tell the national story, but also because they tell the story of our local communities. A sense of continuity with the past is important to people’s sense of belonging in a particular place, and across the country one of the most popular ways in which communities celebrated the Millennium was the publication of a history, or the assembly of archival materials to document their history. Valuing the local heritage in this way is not the concern of an antiquarian minority: at Didmarton in Gloucestershire, the publication party for the Millennium village history in September 2001 was attended by more than two-thirds of the adult population. Nor is it only a rural phenomenon: a MORI poll conducted for Birmingham City Council in 1998 showed that one-third of a random selection of citizens participated in local history.

Communities may be cultural rather than geographical. Recent years have seen a growing desire by Black communities in Britain to preserve both elements of their culture derived from the culture of their country of origin, and evidence of their life experience in this country. For some within these communities, these matters are so important that they

Little on the ground now suggests the medieval past of the Aston district of Birmingham, but these medieval deeds, collected by the 18th century antiquarian, William Hamper and stored in boxes he made for them, are a prime source of evidence about this vanished past. (Birmingham City Archives, JWP C5/23, 24)
want to create showcases for their heritage distinct from the archives of the rest of the people of Britain.

Archives provide a framework for our understanding of the past: how our forbears thought and behaved; what life was like for them; how they worked and played; the social, religious and political context of their lives. At the level of the local community they can help to explain how a building, a street, a village or a town, or for that matter a business or an organisation, took shape and why it is as it is today.

They can hold the answer to particular puzzles of local history. For example, at Winkle Street on the Isle of Wight a stone structure impedes the flow of the stream running through the hamlet. What was this and why is it there? A plaque nearby supplies the answer: the survey of the manor of Swaynton in 1640 and the tithe map of 1842 show that it was a sheepwash.

“The work of Derek Keene and others has shown how evidence assembled systematically from title deeds and the like can build up a history of site occupancy for whole streets and towns in our ancient cities such as Winchester and London, which can then be used to complement archeological evidence. Historical geographers too are combing records for evidence of historical land use, settlement patterns and the development of placenames.”

C. Kitching, Archives: the very essence of our heritage, 1996

“In July 1938 many of the people of Birmingham had their first experience of what we now call ‘living history’. For two short weeks the fields around Aston Hall rang with the sound of prehistoric monsters, medieval knights and Georgian rioters. The occasion was the 100th anniversary of the city’s Borough Charter and, in one of the largest pieces of community drama ever seen, over 6,000 Brummies re-enacted their city’s history from the Druids (not very historical) to Queen Victoria’s visit (almost living memory).

C. Upton, A history of Birmingham, 1993

“I am indebted to all those whose work in the past has provided the foundation of my study, to those families who have preserved their papers and made them available to the public and to those who now care for these historical sources. In particular I must express my gratitude to those who were responsible for providing the new Records and Research Centre at Shrewsbury, where a wonderful collection of documents is now available to the public in an excellent environment, and to those who staff it and provide such an efficient and friendly service.”

A. Ruscoe, Landed estates and the gentry: an historical study of the landed estates of north-east Shropshire, 2nd edn, 1999

“I remember I arrived on the 12th of February 1962, a very cold morning. Mist on the river. I went to bed around four o’clock that afternoon and I didn’t never get up until three o’clock the next day, because of tiredness, and the place looked so dark... It give you the feeling: “What are you letting yourself in for?”

The most common single purpose for which members of the public visit British archives is the quest to understand the historical dimension of their personal identity. For the majority, this is a matter of using written records to extend their knowledge of the lives and character of their forbears back beyond the reach of living memory. They want to know who their ancestors were; where they lived and when; what their lives were like; and if possible, something of their personality. At one level, family history makes aspects of the wider history of the country more immediate and relevant, because more personal: “my grandfather fought in Burma” or “my family emigrated from Scotland to Canada, but came back”. At another level, it supports individuals’ sense of having a place in the world, of having roots that link them to specific places and cultural traditions.

For a minority, their quest for personal identity is far more urgent and immediate. People seeking proof of age or status to qualify for a pension or a passport; people who have been adopted, trying to trace their natural parents; those from dispersed families, trying to trace siblings they can only dimly remember; and parted friends or lovers seeking reunion or reconciliation after forty or fifty years. For all these, the existence of relevant archives can change their lives; perhaps even affect their mental health. From time to time heartwarming - and heartbreaking - stories along these lines appear in the press, but seldom are the archives that lie behind them acknowledged for providing the route map that brought people together.

Recorded oral history provides a means by which the lives, loves and experiences of the British people can be preserved for posterity. Although clearly subjective, such sound or video recordings can give immensely powerful insights into just those areas of life, such as feelings and beliefs, that are least well recorded by traditional archives. Increasingly, British archives are collecting oral history recordings resulting both from programmes they run themselves and from community projects.

One of more than 10,000 poignant pictures taken by a Birmingham photographic studio between 1950 and 1980, reflecting the images of success which recent immigrants wished to send home. (Birmingham City Archives, Dyche Collection)

This pedigree roll of the Gwyn family of Llansannor, Glamorganshire, was compiled in 1615, and depicts their armigerous descent over many generations. The modern concern with family history is nothing new! (Glamorgan Record Office, D/DXW)
"I did quite a lot of work in Hertfordshire for adopted people tracing their birth parents, especially older people adopted in the 1940s or before, including searching County Council archives and children's home records...certainly one of the most satisfying things that ever happened to me professionally was being rung up by an elderly lady saying that she had met for the first time in her life a sibling (brother I think) from whom she was separated at birth, and thanking me for bringing them together."

GS, formerly of Hertfordshire Record Office

AB wrote to the Hampshire Record Office seeking information about his father. He had grown up in a children’s home, believing himself to be an orphan. He recently started exploring his history and, with the help of social workers, found his father was actually living when he was in the home. His father’s surname was completely different from his own. His father had been in Winchester Prison, amongst others, and had written three letters to his son in 1948, which the nuns who ran the children’s home had suppressed. His father died a few years after the enquirer left the home, so he never had a chance to meet him. He approached the Record Office for information about why his father was imprisoned, which they were able to supply. Writing to thank them, he said "Well no matter what he did. Still my Dad. Nothing against him...I want to say thank you for doing what you have done for me. At least it has put my mind at rest for a bit."

Information from Hampshire Record Office

"Members of my grandparents’ generation in my family used during my childhood to describe to me their world of the old aristocracy. My sense of loss when they did so was doubly poignant. For what they had lost was not only the old world, but some of their foothold in it, due to our great financial tragedy at the end of the last century when our estates were alienated from us.... If here in this there was a ghost, I had to ask myself whether it was to be laid or raised. Probably, most heirs in my position would lay it. The era before I came of age in 1960 was one of looking forward instead of back... I decided, however, to go down the other path, and to raise the ghost of my inheritance."

Lord Sudeley, The Sudeleys - Lords of Toddington, 1987

Charles Parker (1919-80) was a BBC radio producer in Birmingham from 1954-72. He was a pioneer of oral history recordings and programmes who came to believe passionately in the importance of the testimony of working people. He made programmes with blind people, Irish labourers, workers in China in 1972, Asian teenagers in Britain, Vietnam war protestors in America, and many others traditionally denied a voice on the air in historical records. The archive of his work is now in Birmingham City Archives.

"and when I heard these programmes, they shocked me into realising that I, as an overall-wearing member of the working class, had a history and a culture and an identity far more valid than that which has been beaped upon me by the State education system. They made me realise that the job I did, that the life I led, that my very existence as a member of the human race, were things possessed of intrinsic value, and that the same goes for every other member of the humanity [sic]. That is not something any school book taught me."

Feedback from user, quoted in National Council on Archives, Taking Part: an audit of social inclusion work in archives, 2001

London Metropolitan Archives holds some 160,000 adoption case files for the London area dating from the 1930s to the 1960s, and has developed a joint access service with its Social Services Department to help enquirers in their search. These files can be fundamental to a person’s understanding of their early life, but are often extremely sensitive and reflect the language and practice of earlier traditions of child care. The co-operative approach of archive and social service professionals has led to a mature and creative mediation of information and the development of policy in response to complex access and privacy issues, particularly where enquiries come from family members and not the case subject themselves. Responses can range from delight to anger and frustration:

“tears of joy, my mum and family were real to me”
“I was so upset after reading it all, as money seemed to be the sole reason for taking me in”

The majority of archives are created in the ordinary course of the daily life of a person or organisation, and are preserved in the first instance because the creator thinks they may be needed for future reference. In large organisations, this process is often formalised into a records management scheme, designed to make cost and efficiency savings by preserving only those records which continue to be useful and to ensure that they remain readily accessible. Ultimately, a tiny proportion of the total volume of records created (typically 1-2%) will be selected for permanent preservation as archives.

These records and archives form the corporate memory of a family or organisation, capable of being preserved indefinitely while human memories fade and pass away. Collectively, and especially where the archives of many families and organisations have been gathered together in an archive repository, they provide a public memory, that can be accessed for practical as well as historical purposes by all members of society. The Freedom of Information Act 2000 lays a statutory duty on public bodies to ensure that their key records are preserved as archives. In this way, archives have a part to play in ensuring the long-term accountability of public bodies for their actions; their past decisions are in the public domain.

The practical uses of archives are almost unlimited. They have been used by mineworkers pursuing compensation claims for industrial injuries, by individuals contesting boundary disputes or trying to locate their drains, and to resolve disputes about the status of rights of way in the countryside. Architectural and engineering drawings produced when buildings are erected are commonly referred to again when they are to be altered, restored or demolished, whether by the original owner or some unrelated successor. Access to the original drawings of a steel frame building clad in concrete that is to be demolished or altered can save thousands of pounds in structural survey fees.

Individuals and organisations have also used records to assert long-neglected rights and duties. A number of farmers and landowners have made headlines in recent years after finding themselves plunged into debt by a liability for the repair of the chancel of their parish church, incident upon an association of their property with the rectorial rights in the church.

Archives have often also played a role in the detection of crime. In recent years many record offices have provided help to the police investigating crimes alleged to have taken place many years ago, including a large number of child abuse investigations and murder cases.

The Treaty of London, signed in 1839, which guaranteed Belgian neutrality. This is the famous ‘scrap of paper’ torn up by the Germans when they invaded Belgium in August 1914. (Public Record Office, FO 93/14/4)
Through acquisition of the records of the National Union of Mineworkers in Derbyshire, the Record Office has been able to help trace the changing work patterns of former pitmen who are making compensation claims for ill health such as lung disease and vibration injuries. Tracing the records enables the men to prove they worked underground for at least 20 years. 

"It is fair to say that they [the staff of Derbyshire Record Office] have helped our ex-members to win hundreds of thousands of pounds".


"Oxford Prison was bought by the Magistrates at Quarter Sessions from Christ Church [College] in 1785, and subsequently sold on to the Home Office. The magistrates put in a clause that they had the right to buy it back at a price to be computed by a laid-down formula in the event of the building no longer being required as a prison. As the role of Quarter Sessions was taken over by Oxfordshire County Council, the deed ended up in their archive. When the Government closed down Oxford Prison, we dug it out and took it to the County Solicitor, with the result that the County Council acquired a prime site with buildings of historic interest in the centre of Oxford for £9,000."

Information from Oxfordshire Record Office

"It is often said that archives throw light on the past and thus the present. This is literally true in the case of a 1704 deed seen by a researcher studying the history of a house in Bradford-on-Avon. He has used the design of an elaborately drawn initial letter to make a stained glass window for the front door of the house; surely one of the most original and unusual uses of archives.”

From the Wiltshire & Swindon Record Office newsletter, Past Matters, 1999-2001

"We received an enquiry from an elderly former merchant seaman. He lives in Liverpool but was born in Norway. During the Second World War he joined the British merchant navy. Off Sierra Leone he developed malaria and was in a coma when his ship was torpedoed. After two weeks in an open life boat, and several more on a destroyer, he was in very poor health when put ashore ‘somewhere in the Clyde estuary’. He told us he thought he had been treated in the Southern General Hospital in 1942, but after a bit of to-ing and fro-ing we eventually found his records as a patient in Mearnskirk Hospital, where the Royal Navy had several wards. As a result, he was able to claim the Norwegian war pension to which he was entitled.”

Information from the NHS Greater Glasgow Archive.

"I remember assisting with a 40 year old murder enquiry after human remains were discovered beneath a concrete floor in a building being demolished in Hammersmith. The CID officers concerned came several times to look at building plans, voters lists and rate books for the properties that formerly stood there.”

Information from former Borough Archivist of Hammersmith.
Learning is no longer seen simply as being at the receiving end of the transmission of knowledge and information; rather, it describes an active process which people engage with in a variety of different ways and at all stages in their lives. Informal learning has a key role to play in broadening people’s understanding and awareness, and providing them with a first step on a learning journey.

Archives provide learning opportunities for people of all ages. Through the interpretation of their collections and the provision of services, they can offer a variety of approaches to teaching and learning, meeting the needs of many different types of learner, and digitisation of their collections can broaden access to people all over the world. 79% of archive users say that it is a useful and enjoyable learning experience, and 30% feel that their abilities, skills and confidence have increased through using an archive.

Almost every archive user is there because they choose to be, and learning in this context is often informal and experimental. It may impact as much on feelings and attitudes as on the acquisition of knowledge, but it has the great advantage that people are doing it because they want to, not because they have to pass an exam or secure a benefit. Best practice has shown that, for many people, learning is a mediated process; people need support if they are to engage effectively with collections in order to enhance their learning and enjoyment. Archives respond to this need by providing exhibitions, publications, catalogues, enquiry advice sessions, workshop sessions and talks, tours and introductory videos.

The learning power of archives can be used to help draw in socially excluded groups, and the NCA report Taking Part: an audit of social inclusion work in archives describes a number of innovative projects where, often in partnership with other agencies, archives have made a real difference to people’s lives.
Cambridgeshire ACRE aims to support the social and economic welfare of communities by helping people to help themselves. In response to identified local need, ACRE and the County Council provided support to enable local groups to develop their own interpretation and events to celebrate local monuments of their choice. Part of this involved helping local residents to access archive material about the monuments. The project involved large groups of very diverse people in active community work and generated a great deal of interest in the communities including a real feel good factor and the desire to carry on further work independently.

"Everybody was really enjoying themselves. People came who wouldn’t normally come to things and everybody was very eager to participate. We had a lovely time" [Resident of Great Stoughton]


In 1996, the North-West Film Archive was approached by the Halle Orchestra education unit to help provide material to stimulate musical compositions amongst a group of people on remand at Risley Remand Centre, Manchester. The Archive selected a group of silent black and white films that were produced on video for use by the people on remand. Working with a small group of the Orchestra’s musicians, they composed a short piece in direct response to the film archive. The resultant track was edited onto the film. Feedback from those who took part showed that the project was a success in raising self-esteem through the creative process of making music for a film.


The Access to Archives (A2A) programme forms part of the effort to retrospectively convert the paper catalogues of UK archive services into electronic resources available to all users online. By April 2002, in the first phase of the project, 400,000 pages of catalogues will have been made available as a searchable database on the project’s website, making available a vast amount of information about the contents of archives in England. A second phase, to be completed by April 2004, will add a further 300,000 pages. It is rich content like this that will give meaning and value to the public networking projects like the Public Libraries network.

Information from A2A project.
http://www.a2a.pro.gov.uk

The Powys County Archive Service Digital History project places archival and other heritage material online with interpretative commentaries so that those who might find it hard to understand the original historical material can learn about the history of their communities in an engaging way. The project uses themes to guide users through the histories of six local communities in the heart of rural Wales. The project is now concentrating on supporting Victorian Britain Key Stage 2 through themes of everyday life in 18 local communities and the Crime & Punishment Key Stage 3 of the National Curriculum by drawing from the stories contained in Quarter Sessions records.

“If only every Record Office in the country could have [a website] like this!” [Feedback from Powys Digital History website].


Under the Public Record Office-led “Moving Here” digitisation project, funded by the New Opportunities Fund, about thirty archives, museums and libraries will supply digital images of material relating to the migration of Asian, Caribbean, Jewish and Irish people into England. There will be stories and themes to draw people into studying the material, and they will be able to explore it further through the catalogue entries.

Information from the British Library.

Participants in the Swavesey Art, Archaeology and Archives Project explore the village’s documentary heritage (photo: Cambridgeshire County Council)
There are about 1.5 million visitors each year to archive services in England alone. Local authorities, higher and further education institutions, schools, hospitals, businesses and many others provide these services. Added to this figure are the virtual visits; telephone, postal and e-mail enquiries; and the indirect users who - often without realising it - make use of the research that others have published or broadcast.

The Public Record Office at Kew is Britain’s largest archive repository, storing over 100 shelf-miles of records. (photo: Public Record Office)

Some 2,000 bodies in the UK are known to hold archives, but only about 300 of these actively collect archives and make them accessible to the public; the rest hold only their own records and may or may not provide public access.

The Film Council provides funding to support a network of regional film archives in England to rescue and protect our audio-visual heritage.

England’s archive services secured nearly £20m of Heritage Lottery funding in 2000-01. This paid for a wide variety of projects, including capital funding for new buildings; the preparation of catalogues; the conservation of archives; and the conversion of catalogues to electronic form for inclusion in web-based projects.

The Public Record Office at Kew is Britain’s largest archive repository, storing over 100 shelf-miles of records. (photo: Public Record Office)

The Shropshire Records & Research Centre is a good example of Britain’s local authority run archive services. The purpose-built new building is set unobtrusively yet centrally on a vacant site in historic Shrewsbury. (photo: Shropshire Record Office)
82% of archive users believe archives contribute to preserving our culture and 72% that they help towards strengthening family and community identity. 66% of users feel that archives provide opportunities for learning.

99% of users find staff friendly and helpful and 98% say they are knowledgeable.

50% of visitors to archive services live within 20km of the archive, but another 25% come from a distance, and eat out and stay overnight in the vicinity.

Almost half of all users are over 60, whereas only 3% of users are under 24. Only 2% of visits currently made to archives are by people from ethnic minorities.

The total volume of archives held by county record offices in England and Wales rose from 23,466 cubic metres in 1991 to 30,072 cubic metres in 2000, an increase of 28%. However total staff rose by only 10% and the number of professional archivists and conservators actually fell.

The number of readers in county record offices rose from 277,000 in 1990/91 to 422,000 in 1999/2000, a rise of 52% in 10 years.

County record office total income generation rose by 337% between 1991/92 and 2000/01; but total expenditure rose by only 62%.
The first half of this brochure has looked at what archives are, and why they are important to society. This section looks at the challenges facing them if they are to deliver their full potential to benefit society. There are perhaps a total of 4,000 people employed in archive services across the United Kingdom, many working on their own or in very small teams. Much has been achieved with these resources, and with powerfully catalytic investment by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Higher Education Funding Councils, in recent years. However, the Government Policy on Archives and the Historical Manuscripts Commission’s wide-ranging review, Archives at the Millennium, demonstrate how much remains to be done and how inconsistently different archival services, especially in local government, are resourced to undertake similar tasks.

Creating Sustainable Services

One of the long-standing objectives of archive services has been to ensure that between them, they provide a home for every archive worthy of preservation and document all aspects of society; but that they avoid overlap and competition as far as possible. Archive services are seen as a network; but it is a net with fraying strands that require constant mending and which seems to feel less robust as time passes; it is also a net with some visible holes.

To move away from metaphor, it will be apparent that archives, as organisations which are in the business of collecting and preserving the records of the past in perpetuity, must themselves possess stability and viability. While archives need to remain open to change and adaptable to circumstances, the integrity and continuity of their collections is critical to their success. Without stability and viability, they will not be trusted with archives, and will not be able to build collections; users will not be able to rely on the accessibility of archives; and archives may even be put at risk of dispersal or destruction.

Three things need to be in place to ensure the stability and viability of archive services: a strong statutory framework for public sector provision; commitment by governing bodies to their long-term support; and adequate funding streams to sustain levels of activity commensurate with their responsibilities and public demand.

The statutory framework for archive services badly needs strengthening. The Public Records Acts do not even cover all the records of central government; provision by local authorities is dependent upon weak statements in the Local Government Act 1972 and permissive legislation; provision by universities on powers alone. Recent Data Protection and Freedom of Information legislation has increased the responsibilities of public bodies without making the role of archive services in delivering such legislation clear. In recognition of these issues and of deficiencies in the public records legislation, the Lord Chancellor has asked the Keeper of Public Records to draw up proposals for a National Archives Bill, and this is expected within the lifetime of this Parliament.

Local authority archive services are a key part of the archival network, and recent reports have demonstrated graphically the strength of some and the weakness of others, due very largely to the degree of commitment and levels of resourcing provided by their parent bodies. Following local government reorganisation, many services are now provided by partnerships between authorities, and these arrangements tend to impose short-term horizons and make capital programmes and growth in revenue funding difficult to achieve. Similarly inconsistent relationships between responsibilities and resources are observable in the higher education sector. A strengthening of the statutory framework may encourage more consistency, but archive services clearly need more resources and more effective advocacy if the network of provision is to become more even. To this end, Resource: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries has committed itself to undertake a Needs Assessment Review this year to make recommendations, from the user perspective, about the future priorities and funding of archive services, and to bring their rich potential into the open.

The final challenge is the need to sustain a supply of talented, skilled and motivated staff to provide and develop archive services in the future. Recent years have seen growing difficulties in recruitment and reported shortages of both traditional and new skills. To establish the causes of these problems, and propose solutions, the National Council on Archives has been funded by Resource to undertake a major review of archival recruitment and training, which will feed into the Needs Assessment Review and create a blueprint for priority action.
Without a stable, coherent network of archive services, records of great historical importance like these from a Hampshire solicitor’s practice, are at risk of destruction. The material shown here was rescued by the Hampshire Record Office (photo: Hampshire Archives Trust)

“The sector has achieved a great deal with only modest resources and minimal legislative protection. There is a nation-wide network of archive provision which has comparatively few major gaps. Some archives are centres of excellence of national and international renown, with first-class public access, ICT facilities and records storage. Innovation flourishes at a local level, producing best practice solutions which are then applied elsewhere…”

**Inter-departmental Archives Committee, Government Policy on Archives, 1999 [Cm. 4516]**

“The United Kingdom’s universities are ... key players ... in the overall strategy for protecting the nation’s heritage. Yet they receive no dedicated government funding in recognition of this fact and, because archives tend to have such a low profile generally, we suspect that many of their senior officers and decision-making bodies remain largely unaware of the importance and implications of this quasi-national role, as well as unable to commit the regular funds necessary to sustain it. Equally... potential readers are often unaware of the nature and accessibility of university special collections for research: they need more promotion if they are to serve a wider public.”

**Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, Archives at the Millennium, 1999, p.46**

“Under section 224 of the Local Government Act 1972 local authorities have a statutory duty to make ‘proper arrangements’ for the care of their own records and other records in their custody... There is no similar requirement... to provide an archive service of a more general kind to take in material of local interest by gift, purchase and deposit on loan. Nevertheless, principal authorities are empowered to do this, by the Local Government (Records) Act 1962... Happily the great majority of them have indeed made such provision, either jointly or severally, thereby showing themselves willing... to invest resources above and beyond their statutory obligations.”

**Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, Archives at the Millennium, 1999, pp.36-37.**

“The evidence of this report leads inescapably to the conclusion that local authority archives continue to have significant investment needs. The detailed findings which follow demonstrate only limited change and improvement since... 1997... A major concern is continued lack of space to store new accessions. A quarter of all services report that they are now full; nearly 80% will be full in five years or less.”


“This [Needs Assessment] Review will critically assess archives from the user perspective. It will be a means to raise the public profile of archives amongst politicians, decision-makers and the public. Having looked at the whole complex and piecemeal way in which archives have developed in the UK, having seen the many constraints under which archives have laboured, we have come to the conclusion that the moment is ripe for such a review - a close and detailed look, with the highest possible level of support and which brings out into the open the rich potential of archives.”

At the core of the functions of our archives is the duty of stewardship: protecting the national archival heritage and transmitting it safely to future generations, appropriately enhanced by the records of our own time. The duty of stewardship thus underlies three of the key activities of archive services: preservation, conservation and acquisition. The value of investment in the future of the collections is maximised by innovative access programmes to ensure that the treasures which are preserved are accessible to all.

Preservation is achieved principally through the provision of storage accommodation affording an environment conducive to the survival of archival materials, which naturally tend to decay over time. British Standards define the ideal conditions for the storage of different materials, and a large archive service will need storage facilities offering a range of environments. Providing sufficient space for archival storage, with capacity for future growth, and offering the right selection of environments, is therefore critical to the mission of archive services. It also requires capital investment, to ensure that the capacity and type of accommodation remains adequate to the needs of the service. Recent years have seen many archives improve their accommodation, but much remains to be done to meet the standards everywhere. The gap between the best archive services and the weakest has been steadily widening.

Conservation is the process of physical intervention to halt or reverse the processes of decay. Much effort is devoted by archive services today to ‘preventive conservation’, which seeks to limit the potential for future damage by ensuring that documents are packaged in a way that minimises damage from handling and isolates incompatible materials from one another. Preventive conservation is very cost-effective; but the concentration on this approach means that only a tiny fraction of the need for ‘remedial conservation’ (in which physical repairs are carried out to damaged documents) is currently met, and most services have vast backlogs of this work.

Almost all archive services contrive to continue the acquisition of documents, despite acute shortages of storage space. But relatively few services are able to be proactive about their acquisition policies, seeking out collections that fill gaps in their holdings (such as ethnic minority archives) or add depth to their areas of strength. A key shortcoming that has been identified is in the acquisition of electronic records, which were almost unknown 20 years ago and have become vital to the contemporary historical record. The facilities for the long-term preservation of electronic records are simply not available outside central government, and significant investment is needed urgently, perhaps on a collaborative regional or national basis, to provide services for the management and preservation of electronic records.

Recent legislation has significantly increased the duties of public bodies in relation to the management of the records and other information which they hold, in the interests of promoting good governance and accountability. The records management services that many archives provide to their parent body will play an important part in enabling organisations to meet their new statutory obligations. The non-statutory nature of records management services has, however, held back their development in the past, and many public bodies will need to significantly strengthen their provision for
records management if these services are to be able to cope with the new demands placed upon them. It is also important that the close linkages between records management and archival functions are maintained, so that the risk of important records not being recognised and preserved is minimised.

“The Lancashire Quarter Sessions records, repackaged during 2000 to prevent continuing wear and tear, with the assistance of the Heritage Lottery Fund

(photo: Lancashire Record Office)

“Over half of all local authority archive collections continue to be housed in poor or fairly poor accommodation... Some 70% of record offices report no change in their main storage since 1997. The need to improve or totally refurbish or rebuild is clearly a priority for most services. The situation has improved slightly since 1997, with the number of collections held in good accommodation nearly doubling, up 5% to 12%. This ... reflects the impact of funding streams such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, which has provided for a small number of new buildings and building improvements. However, it is notable that most recent significant new building schemes have been funded entirely through capital investment by the parent authorities or public/private initiatives.


“Hull has an astonishing array of archives, manuscripts and associated local studies collections currently housed in a variety of libraries and archives around the city. In what is thought to be a unique development, the major local custodians - Hull City Council ... , the University of Hull ... , and Hull College ... - have come together with a view to establishing a joint centre. A feasibility study is currently in progress, and it is expected that an appropriate city-centre site will be selected very shortly.”


“Technological change has transformed the task facing records managers. Most archives are now ‘born digital’, and it is appropriate that they should also be held electronically if their original characteristics are to be maintained. The management and maintenance of electronic records will only be successful if the systems which create the records are designed appropriately. Work on this task ... is already well advanced in central government but this issue requires greater attention from organisations across the public and private sector if reliable records are to be created for current and future use.”

Inter-departmental Committee on Archives, Government Policy on Archives, 1999

“Records management is central to the use of current records and the wellbeing of future archives: today’s modern record is tomorrow’s historic document. Not only does the application of good records management practices allow for efficient access to a wide range of administrative and organisational information, but it also contributes to the successful appraisal, retention and disposition of records which will form the basis of tomorrow’s collective memory. Good record keeping is at the very core of democratic accountability, in allowing individuals the freedom of access to the information they require, both about themselves and the society in which they live.”

North-West Regional Archive Council, Forward Together, 2001
There would be little point in the stewardship of our archival heritage if we did not also provide access to it for research, learning, entertainment and practical purposes. Unlike the experience of our sister cultural institutions, libraries and museums, the numbers of users coming to archive services has been rising steadily for decades, as have the number of enquiries received by post, telephone and e-mail. This growth in use has been substantially, but not wholly, driven by the growing interest in family history: the search for personal identity in a changing world. Rising attendances and enquiries bring pressures on reading room space and staff resources, and unless they are reflected in increased resources, provide a real disincentive to encouraging further growth in use, or seeking out ways of reaching new audiences.

The use of archives calls for language and palaeography skills, and for an understanding of historical context, which changes in educational priorities mean that fewer people possess today than formerly. Archival staff therefore have to give users more help with the use of their collections than they once did, at a time when growing numbers of users mean the ‘contact time’ between staff and user is going down. In response, archive services have developed innovative new ways of communicating basic information about services and collections, such as the use of video training tools and the provision of catalogues and other information on websites.

Catalogues of the archives, and indexes to them, are the fundamental tools which enable services to make their collections accessible. Without them, users would be unable to navigate through the millions of documents in each archive to find items of relevance to their enquiry. It is therefore a matter of grave concern that despite the use of project funding to address this problem, 15-20% (in some cases a much higher proportion) of the holdings of archives remain uncatalogued, and that cataloguing backlogs are generally rising. Significant further investment in core staffing is needed if this trend is to be first stabilised, and then reversed.

In 1998 the National Council on Archives published a report, *Archives Online*, which established the vision of making all the catalogues of UK archives available online, and searchable from a single point of access. The vision has been widely taken up across the profession, and a series of projects are attempting to capture in electronic form existing catalogue data for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, the higher education sector and English regions. The largest of these, the Access to Archives project, will have mounted more than 400,000 pages of catalogues on its website by the end of April 2002. Following the success of this first phase, a second programme will follow and make a further 300,000 pages available by the spring of 2004. Further investment by Government is needed, however, to provide the components of the network that link up projects developed in the home countries and funding sectors, and to make the network sustainable in the longer term.
“Archives are almost unique in the cultural sector in experiencing increasing user numbers... An archive searchroom must provide an environment in which users and staff can work comfortably and efficiently, whilst ensuring that the well-being of archival material is not compromised... 88% of services reported little... change in searchroom facilities since 1997, despite user numbers increasing. Many record offices are operating at full capacity... There is an understandable conflict between drives to attract new audiences and increase user numbers and to manage this increase within existing physical constraints.”

**Public Record Office, Our shared past: developing 21st century archive services, 2001**

“Special provision for new researchers might include the provision of introductory materials, welcoming procedures, video presentations, induction events and access to specialist advisors to advise on research methods and sources. Finding aids, document reference systems, correct handling techniques and production procedures should be explained ... A member of staff should be on hand to provide clarification.”

**Public Services Quality Group, Draft standard for access to archives, 1999**

“We run a scheme each year in conjunction with St. Helens College. As an introduction to history but also as a method of learning general research skills students attend ten sessions in the Search Room where they learn the methodology of research. Many students who would otherwise consider archives as being ‘uncool’ are introduced almost by default and in many ways can be good ambassadors for the service.”

**Quoted in North-West Regional Archives Council, Forward Together, 2001**

“On average, 15% of the total collections held by... local authority archive services is unlisted and unusable... The problem is more acute in some areas with metropolitan archives tending to have greater backlogs than shire county record offices. Many respondents quoted pressure on front-line services as having an adverse impact on cataloguing and collection management, with staff diverted to public duties.”

**Public Record Office, Our shared past: developing 21st century archive services, 2001**

“A key priority should be to provide accurate general and specific descriptions of all historical archives as quickly as possible on the emerging information networks, so that a wider public is made aware of their existence. Archivists should take full account of public demand for access to particular collections in planning programmes for the detailed cataloguing of their holdings. The necessarily gradual process of producing electronic versions of existing paper catalogues should not hold back cataloguing of unrecorded material, using ICT and modern standards. It is of crucial importance to the archive sector as a whole to establish a framework or infrastructure, both national and regional, to permit the development of remote, on-line access to catalogues of holdings.”

**Inter-departmental Archives Committee, Government Policy on Archives, 1999**
WIDENING ACCESS FOR ALL

The wide diversity of people who benefit from archives has already been noted. Archives have the potential, however, to enrich the lives of a far larger audience than at present through the development of online access to images of archives, the development of community engagement programmes and social inclusion projects, and unlocking the learning potential of archives.

Archives have been significant beneficiaries of the £50m distributed by the New Opportunities Fund for content creation on the public networks, and by 2004 it should be clear from the exemplar projects funded by this programme just how rich a resource can be opened up for formal and self-directed learning through digitisation. While it is unrealistic to think that everything in the national distributed collection can ever be made accessible on-line, there are real opportunities to develop exciting learning and discovery resources, and to provide ‘digitise on demand’ services; but further and very substantial investment will be necessary to deliver these.

The social relevance of archive services has been demonstrated in the first section of this pamphlet, and the National Council on Archives has published Taking Part: an audit of social inclusion work in archives, 2001 to demonstrate the range of different initiatives that archives are already undertaking. These projects are a response to the dawning recognition by archive services that Society’s priorities for them are changing. Regardless of how central to the mission of archive services such projects become, however, they must always be carried out in addition to, and not instead of, the core functions of stewardship and providing access. We must avoid throwing open the doors of the archive to reveal either documents decayed beyond salvation or collections in indescribable confusion. Outreach and audience development activities can only thrive where adequate resources are available for the core functions.

Hackney Archives hold an open day when all comers are welcome. Local advertising produces a good response, frequently filling the premises to bursting point. (photo: London Borough of Hackney)

Plate 24: Schoolchildren, participating in a re-enactment event staged by the Essex Record Office at Cressing Temple (photo: Essex Record Office)
“Digitised images of the most popular records should proceed in tandem with the production of on-line catalogue information, because potential new users will experience archives for the first time through ready access to these digitised images... Access to archives should also be enhanced through the participation of archives in educational programmes both on-line and on-site at all levels and outreach work should be targeted at social groups which have not hitherto used archives. This work should be accompanied by digitisation programmes of material of use to particular sectors in schools, in colleges and in libraries, and via television and other channels to maximise the utility of archives for the country and the world.”

Inter-departmental Archives Committee, *Government Policy on Archives*, 1999

“The advantages to users in being able to conduct searches remotely by consultation of digitised images via the Internet are obvious. Coupled with the added preservation benefits, well-managed and sustainable projects of this nature are worthy of investment and funding support. 37% of offices reported that they are currently using... document imaging..., which represents an increase in this area of activity since 1997. There are innovative projects underway at individual, local and regional level, involving... the production of CD-ROMs targeted for educational use and the genealogical market. However... there is a large untapped resource awaiting ‘discovery’ and packaging for new audiences and markets. Reasons for slow penetration into this area include a lack of funding, lack of necessary technical skills, lack of staff time for research, and the fact that smaller offices do not have the capacity to enter into such work.”


“The Gloucestershire Record Office worked with a local museum in Tewkesbury and a company of historical re-enactors to recreate life in a Tudor cloth-merchant’s house on the basis of a probate inventory of the 1580s. The recreation was so successful with primary children studying the Tudors that funding is now being sought for a more permanent project.”

Information from James Turtle, Archives Education Officer, Gloucestershire Record Office

“Funding from the Millennium Commission enabled Nottinghamshire Archives and Libraries to give grants to individuals and groups to record experiences and points of view that might easily not have been captured in traditional records (photo: Nottinghamshire Libraries, Archives and Information).

“The West Yorkshire Archive Service in Calderdale joined together with Calderdale’s children’s librarian on an education project for 9-11 year olds entitled ‘Information Building’. Topics included schools, the Halifax Piece Hall, the Borough Market, and Victorian life in Halifax, and involved carefully selected source material, both documentary and oral history”

Yorkshire Archives Council, *Yorkshire Archives Forward*, 2001

“We operated a successful partnership with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers who engage unemployed people. The scheme involved a certain amount of archeological work supported by research undertaken in [the Archives]... many participants were able to progress to full-time employment after a particular project terminated as obviously sound work resulted in a good reference.”

Quoted in North-West Regional Archive Council, *Forward Together*, 2001
In 1999, the National Council on Archives established a network of Regional Archives Councils at the request of the Government, so as to provide bodies at regional level which could help to shape the future of archive provision. With funding from Resource, the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, the Regional Archives Councils produced regional archives strategies during 2001, which highlight the developmental and capacity issues outlined above. The National Council on Archives has published an overview of the strategies, Archives in the Regions, which calls for an immediate pump-priming investment of £2m to address the most urgent service development issues.

The Government has made clear in the last five years that it wants to see artificial boundaries between cultural institutions removed, to allow users to benefit from closer co-operation between museums, archives and libraries. Archives are quite literally central to this agenda, since they have more in common with libraries and museums than libraries and museums do with each other. The creation of Resource in 2000, and the move to bring together regional museum, archive and library bodies as single regional agencies between 2002 and 2004, is giving exciting new opportunities to explore these relationships. The more open thinking which is resulting is providing opportunities to promote stewardship in libraries; research access in museums; and new types of use in archives.

Collaborative approaches at national and regional level should influence the relationship between museum, archive and library professionals at local level and lead to more collaborative projects. There is the potential for regional initiatives to lead to the creation of more sustainable services through linkages across traditional barriers. For example, archive services in four West Midlands boroughs are considering the possibility of amalgamating to achieve economies of scale and provide a more effective service, while in Hull discussions are taking place between the City Council and the University about the provision of a joint service. Library, archive and museum services from local authorities, higher education, and national government are working together on joint digitisation projects funded by the New Opportunities Fund.
“Libraries, museums and archives have inherited enormous overlaps of collections: all domains hold archives, books, newspapers, photographs, prints, watercolours and drawings, recordings and maps. It is largely historical accident where a historic photograph, a run of local newspapers, or a Victorian print reside. There is, however, a general view among librarians, archivists and museum workers that it is safer to leave things where they are, and to concentrate on ensuring public access. Thus major projects are underway to digitise historic photographs from library, museum and archive collections. Such projects do not, however, address the problem of varying standards of stewardship. At present standards of care vary quite considerably between different institutions. There are two problems: there are no standards of collections care agreed between the three sectors... and the three sectors make no effort to use each others’ expertise.”
Crispin Paine, Cross-Domain Working in the South-West Region, 2001

“The Millennibrum Project began in January 2000. Its aim has been to involve the people of the city [of Birmingham] in creating a record of their experiences, beliefs, contributions to the community and hopes for the future. We have focused on the year 2000, but have also collected evidence from 1945 onwards. Several organisations have participated in planning and financing the project. They include Birmingham City Council, the Birmingham Post & Mail Group, the Millennium Festival Fund and the University of Central England. There have been creative writing projects with Tindal Street Press and Birmingham Education Services, work with schools helped by the University of the First Age, exhibitions, roadshows to collect objects for the Museum, a photography competition and interviews to record the experiences of Birmingham people on video and by oral history. An archive is being created to provide a multimedia resource for present and future generations. This aims to reflect the lives of people from all age groups, classes, cultures and religions.”
www.millennibrum.org/outline.html

“It is vital that museums, galleries and archives work in close co-operation with local authority/government services and the voluntary sector to develop and deliver social inclusion policies. Local authorities can provide information on socially excluded groups, and museums, galleries and archives can offer facilities and services to enhance what is already happening, as well as developing their own specific programmes. Partnerships should also be forged with other cultural and learning organisations, to help deliver more comprehensive and better targeted programmes of activity.”
Department for Culture, Media & Sport, Centres of social change: museums, galleries and archives for all, 2000

“The regional structures for archives need to be able to influence cultural strategies and the allocation of resources at regional level. The aim should be to increase the participation of archives in cross-sectoral programmes with libraries, museums and other cultural organisations, and at the same time to enhance the legal and administrative role played by archives in the efficient keeping of records, both paper and digital.”
Inter-departmental Archives Committee, Government Policy on Archives, 1999

“Local authority archive services are thinking beyond traditional partners, and looking to the wider community for new opportunities. At the heart of such partnerships must be a strong commitment to improve the experience of those who use our archives and those who will do so in the future. This does not mean abandoning commitment to good stewardship, scholarship or research, but rather means working creatively to build upon some of the exciting developments that are already taking place.”
Public Record Office, Our shared past: developing 21st century archive services, 2001
In 2002, archive services in the UK stand at a crossroads in their development. Recent surveys have made clearer than ever before the deficiencies of existing provision, and the growing needs of services if they are to meet the needs of their stakeholders. On the other hand, the financial climate of recent years has been generally helpful, with stable core funding and new opportunities for project funding. The development of regional and cross-domain agendas for museums, archives and libraries have opened up new opportunities for joint working and broadened the range of service objectives, but have not yet delivered new funding to match these.

Archivists have a much clearer sense of the role they can and should play in society than ever before, but need to be equipped to deliver it. With determination, archive services have a real opportunity to gain the recognition they have long sought and deserved. If they are to be successful, however, the advocacy of those who share an understanding of why archives are important and what they can achieve will be critical. It is for this reason that the National Council on Archives invites you to share the task of changing the future of our past.

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CONTACTS

National Council on Archives
Chair: Nicholas Kingsley
Website: http://nca.archives.org.uk
Contact: nkingsle@gloscc.gov.uk

Resource: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries
Chair: Lord Evans of Temple Guiting
Website: http://www.resource.gov.uk
Contact: info@resource.gov.uk

Public Record Office
Keeper of Public Records: Sarah Tyacke
Website: http://www.pro.gov.uk
Contact: Press Officer,
robert.smith@pro.gov.uk

Society of Archivists
Chair: Aideen Ireland
Website: http://www.archives.org.uk
Contact: info@archives.org.uk

Historical Manuscripts Commission
Chair: Lord Bingham of Cornhill
Website: http://www.hmc.gov.uk
Contact: nra@hmc.gov.uk
REGIONAL ARCHIVE COUNCILS

North East Regional Archive Council
Chair: Elizabeth Rees
Contact: North East Archive Development Officer, jill.dixon@nemlac.co.uk

North West Regional Archive Council
Chair: Jim Grisenthwaite
Website: http://www.northwestarchives.org.uk
Contact: North West Archive Development Officer, janicet@nwms.demon.co.uk

Yorkshire Archive Council
Chair: Keith Sweetmore
Website: http://www.yarc.org.uk
Contact: Yorkshire Archive Development Officer, karen.dodwell@yhmc.org.uk

West Midlands Regional Archive Council
Chair: Roger Vaughan
Website: http://www.westmidlandsarchives.org.uk
Contact: West Midlands Archive Development Officer, kiberd@wm-museums.co.uk

East Midlands Regional Archive Council
Chair: Carl Harrison
Website: http://www.eastmidlandsarchives.org.uk
Contact: charrison@leics.gov.uk

East of England Regional Archive Council
Chair: John Alban
Contact: jr.alban.nro@norfolk.gov.uk

South West Regional Archive Council
Chair: Paul Brough
Website: http://www.southwestarchives.org
Contact: South West Archive Development Officer, dtritton@cornwall.gov.uk

South East Regional Archive Council
Chair: Richard Childs
Contact: rchilds@westsussex.gov.uk

London Archive Regional Council
Chair: David Mander
Website: http://www.llng.org.uk/larc/
Contact: London Archive Development Officer, emma.halsall@londonmuseums.org
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