



Six things you should know about archives

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Introduction

Attempting to summarise, in such a necessarily brief talk, some of the essential issues involved in managing archives, is ambitious and risky. (Think how you might do that for librarianship or theology.) I will limit myself to 6 sets of points, the last directing attention to good sources of further reading, I apologise to those for whom this repeats what you already know, for covering the subject in general rather than theological terms, and for the Australian bias.

1. There's no money in archives!

While possibly not what you expected as the opening point, this reality can not be over emphasised. Managing archives is particularly resource intensive if you aspire to meet correct professional standards - or put another way, if you seriously want to preserve important materials across hundreds of years. By far the most costly item will be a secure storage facility with an environment controlled and monitored 24 hours per day, and (ideally) incorporating compactus to maximise space use (1). Obtaining acid free containers for your paper records and properly providing for a/v materials adds further to the bottom line. Finally, little archival work can be automated; processing collections, operating a supervised reading room and negotiating with depositors are all quite labour intensive activities.

Regardless of the sector (commercial, public, non-government, religious), archives rarely attract generous government funding, philanthropy, or corporate sponsorship, and convincing internal resource allocators is no easier! In the broad arts-culture heritage sector, the dominant funding priority descends from sport to opera, then art galleries followed by museums, libraries and finally archives. Other sectors or interests which archives can readily be aligned with, namely accountability, risk management, business efficiency, FOI and privacy, technology and the networked society, equally have limited potential for leveraging appropriate funding. Popular images of archives as dusty ancient documents stored in dank basements or forgotten attics compounds the challenge, as does the idea that an archivists is just the in-house omniscient research assistant rather than a collection management specialist and preserver of the physical and intellectual integrity of important records.

There is no simply single answer to our funding problems, especially in the non government sector. Make everything you do a form of promotion and education. Be ever vigilant for opportunities to attract bequests, historical research grants and partnerships (including internal alliances with library and records management colleagues) and take advantage of satisfied users, disasters, legal cases and anniversaries. Use volunteer and friends' groups judiciously and strongly encourage depositors to accept some continuing responsibility in 'their' collections.

2. Most people don't know what archives are, and what archivists do

One reason why it is difficult to attract support for archives is that most people don't know what archives are and why they are important. Some think it's just a sub-discipline of librarianship, a kind of special material like ephemera or audiovisual. Confusion is compounded via the term's use, or variants such as 'archive' and 'archiving' by film and sound librarians, literary theorists, and the IT industry, and because sometimes archivists do optional extras (e.g. oral history) or end up performing the multiple roles of records manager, museum curator and historical researcher! It is not unknown for librarians to find themselves simply challenged.

Archivists themselves debate definitions, but at the heart of all explanations are two key ideas:

- *archives* come from *records* (hence bodies known as the Public Record Office and related disciplines such as 'records management'); records are evidence of personal and corporate administrative and memorialising activity, deliberately created 'for the record' or as a memento or aide-memoir; at the personal level, think of letters and e-mails you have received and kept, and copies of letters you've sent and kept; of a file of finance papers for your tax return; of your precious photo albums, school papers, diaries, passport, certificates and other documentation you have decided are significant enough to keep.
- *archives* are a class of record, namely those judged as special; thus it is quite common to hear the phrase 'archival records'; unlike records, most of which have transitory value, they are special because they have 'continuing' value and need to be preserved across time.

To quickly clear up one source of confusion, the term 'archives' can also mean the building they are stored in and made available from, and can also mean the organisation which manages the material in the building. There are two classic types of archival organisations, *in-house archives*, operating within and for a parent body such as a church or business or government or university, and focussed on just that body's records and those of any predecessors; and *collecting archives*, typically operating in a library, university or historical society and focussed on gathering important records from a variety of bodies and people broadly relating to a particular theme, region or activity.

3. Archives are fundamentally different from typical library materials

To make a point, it is time to stress differences over similarities, for obvious reasons using libraries as the counterfoil, though we share so many common concerns. At a different conference, it might have been museums or oral history recordings. This does not mean that libraries can't or shouldn't operate an archives department (any more than a large archives wouldn't operate a technical library), simply that archives principles and methods should be followed. Often in such situations the adjective 'manuscripts' will be employed to describe the library staff and department and material. In the latter case, 'personal papers' or 'private archives' are also popular.

Records (and thus archives) are unique, unlike typical library materials; if damaged or lost one can't simply buy or download another copy of an original archival document. Their 'documentary form' is typically paper based, though now at the top of the archives food chain records are increasingly being created electronically. But archives cover the entire format spectrum.....including art works and objects! This might seem puzzling until you note that official artists with, say, an army unit at war or a 19th century exploration party were deliberately commissioned to create visual records, and the Wedgwood archives of course retains a master set of its product lines for their records.

Records (and thus archives) are not published, though eventually selections may be. They come into being through and as part of the activities of people and organisations - certainly not to inform and entertain as with so much of library material. The process of deciding which records will be archived has a corollary, in which the non archival records are discarded or, more bluntly, culled or deleted. This is especially the case with government and other 'in house' archives. By contrast, a library collection is not what remains from a book burning!

4. There are some key differences between archives and library principles and methods

Archival principles and methods have been developed over the past two centuries to ensure archives' physical, evidential and historical integrity is preserved. Some key features of existing principles and methods illustrating this are as followings, but be aware each is being re-examined afresh because of the challenge from electronic records:

- because archives are unique and often of very poor quality components, archival methods show great concern for preservation and security; thus there is no borrowing allowed; there are strict reading room rules; at times even handling the original documents will be refused; and there should be no direct access allowed for browsing along the storage shelves;
- use is also sometimes constrained by special access rules, because of privacy and confidentiality issues; all archives should have policies covering public and other non-official research requests;
- 'appraisal' i.e. deciding which records are archives, requires judgement and research of the functions and activities of the person who and/or body which created the records, and unavoidably also involves prediction, consultation and risk management; as noted above, records not selected as archives often end up destroyed, as very very few archives are in a position to keep everything even if they wished to (hence archivists use terms such as 'disposal', 'disposal and retention schedules' and 'sentencing');
- archivists' equivalents of classifying, cataloguing and indexing are often called 'arrangement and description', listing and compiling finding aids; the focus is rarely on so minute an entity as a book and author, but rather collection level units such as the 'creator agency', 'fonds' and 'record series'; our objective here is not only to enable access to information but to document and correctly attribute recordkeeping systems to records and relationships between records creators, records and their natural groupings through observing the principles of provenance and original order; like the archaeologist and crime scene detective, we believe the context and custody of our material is crucial to preserving its meaning as historical evidence; if this makes no sense, think how much more meaningful a photo is with its original date and caption, a diary signed by A. Hitler once we know its custodial history, one Russian doll is reunited with its companions, an undated letter is with its franked envelope, disordered files are matched up with the original indexes, and any kind of certificate familiar to a genealogist once the registration system is fully understood.

5. The interconnection between archives and records is critical

Given that archives are a special class of records, the connection between what have been traditionally known as archives administration and records management is critical. It makes logical sense too. As a famous American archivist once put it, the archivist who ignores records management is like a boxer with one arm tied behind the back, although food chains and supply lines are also good analogies. In recent years, partly stimulated by the challenge of preserving electronic records, a new philosophy

which unifies and incorporates the central mission of archivists and record managers has emerged under the banner of records continuum (2).

All of this may seem quite remote from your day-to-day concerns, particularly if you are a part-time, under resourced, reluctant archivist whose main responsibility is the library and you have charge of only some historical documents which seem to have very little connection with their recordkeeping origins. If you are still unsure, ask yourself where have the documents in your care come from, who is currently creating similar documents including e-mail, and are you happy to wait passively until a basement fills up or your organisation's computer system is being upgraded and you are told you have one day to take what is needed 'for posterity'!

6. The best starting point to learn more is the relevant professional organisation

Underlining my earlier points about archives being a distinct discipline is the existence of archives and records organisations separate from librarianship. At the global level there is the International Council on Archives (<http://www.ica.org/>), on Archives (<http://www.ica.org/>). In Australia there is the Australian Society of Archivists (<http://www.archivists.org.au/>) and the Records Management Association of Australia (<http://www.rmaa.com.au/>), while in New Zealand, the main body is the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand. Such bodies have their own membership rules, codes of ethics, activities and publications, and contribute to many areas of concern including legislation, education and training, descriptive standards and funding. The ASA and ARANZ also have religious archives special interest groups, and there is at least one formal association in Australia specifically for Catholic archivists.

To learn more, ideally you should obtain formal post graduate qualifications in archives and records. A more practical first step would be to join and participate in the ASA and RMAA or ARANZ, particularly any conferences or workshops they run. There are also useful journals and newsletters, and their Web based listservs. As for additional instructional literature, I would recommend three starting points:

- Judith Ellis, (ed.) *Keeping Archives*. Thorpe & Australian Society of Archivists, 1993.
- Jay Kennedy and Cheryl Schauder. *Records management: a guide to corporate record keeping*. Longman, 1998; and
- *Practical Archivist* (a periodical produced 4 times a year by Anne Cooke and Jo Birkland available for A\$12 pa from the editors at 11 Hipwood Street North Sydney NSW 2060)

(1) For practical advice if not generously funded, see Ted Ling, *Solid, safe, secure: building archives repositories in Australia*. National Archives of Australia, 1998, esp. chapter 8 "The lone archivist", and Colin Pearson and Steve King, "Passive environmental control for small cultural institutions in Australia", *AARL*, 31 (2), June 2000, pp 69-78.

(2) For a convenient explanation of this concept, see <http://www.sims.monash.edu.au/rcrg/publications/recordscontinuum/smckp2.html>

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