

The National Archives

Surveying historical manuscripts: some guidelines

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In 2003 The National Archives was formed by bringing together the Public Record Office and the Historical Manuscripts Commission. From its inception in 1869, the Commission has been conducting surveys of historical manuscripts. The work was given a new dimension by the creation under its auspices in 1945 of the National Register of Archives (NRA), which continues to collect and disseminate information about all kinds of manuscripts and archive sources relating to the history of the United Kingdom outside the public records. More specialist surveys of non-public records by topic have also been undertaken, particularly through the published series of Guides to sources for British history.

We are in regular contact with a number of other permanent and long-term surveying projects, including those run by the Business Archives Council, the Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine, the National Cataloguing Unit for the Archives of Contemporary Scientists, the Location Register of English Literary Manuscripts and Letters and, in Scotland, the National Register of Archives for Scotland and the Business Archives Council of Scotland. We also endeavour to keep up-to-date information about other surveys in progress, and are always willing to offer guidance to those considering or engaged in new survey work. In doing so our objectives are :

To advise on the best use of the NRA for the purposes of the survey.

- To alert the survey to any apparent overlap or duplication of its proposed effort with the work of other surveys completed or in progress.
- To offer advice on planning the survey, in particular on the likely sources of information and (where applicable) on approaches to private owners.
- In the case of any application for public or private funding, to help to ensure the best value for money in the results of the proposed survey.
- To encourage the eventual deposit of a copy of the results of the survey in the NRA.

The following guidelines are based on our long experience of surveying, both by our own staff and by others.

Preliminary questions and objectives

Can the need for a survey be demonstrated, for example in relation to current or foreseen research trends? How can it be rated in terms of historical importance and originality?

What kind of records is it intended to cover?

Has the constituency of the records to be surveyed been defined, for example by originating person or institution, by subject and/or by genre of records, or by place to which they relate?

Have any geographical or other limits been imposed? For example:

- Will it be confined to records located within the United Kingdom (or some wider or narrower area)?
- Will it include records in private custody?
- Will it be restricted to records of a particular date?
- Will it be confined to bringing together information about records whose existence in record repositories is already known from scattered references
- Will it seek out unknown material?

Groundwork

What is known of the subject already? Has it, or any part of it, been covered in existing surveys? If so, is the information yet in need of up-dating?

The National Archives: Historical Manuscripts Commission has published a select bibliography of Surveys of Historical Manuscripts in the United Kingdom listing under twelve subject headings the principal surveys known to have been completed or to be in progress. Attention should also be paid to any scholarly monographs and postgraduate dissertations within the field of the survey which may have covered similar ground.

The staff of The National Archives will advise of any surveys of more recent origin that are known to them to be in progress.

Redefinition of objectives?

As the groundwork proceeds it may be necessary to redefine the preliminary objectives.

Setting up the project

Scale

In the light of the information now to hand, how large an operation is envisaged?

- How many people?
- For what period of time?
- Are the boundaries of the project so well-defined that a clear time-scale can be set? If not, what further groundwork is required? For example, is a pilot project of shorter duration required to map the ground?

Staff

What kind of person is to lead the survey?

- An established expert with relevant professional or research experience?
- A postgraduate student, tackling the survey as, or towards, a dissertation?
- Other?

Host

Where will the survey officer/team be based? On what terms and conditions and with what status? Will the host institution be expected to contribute overheads and other expenses, or provide specified facilities?

Cost

What will be the likely costs of the project, calculated over its full time scale and, in the case of projects lasting more than one year, making due allowance for inflation, salary increments and any other foreseeable changes from year to year?

Considerations are:

- Salaries
- Travel and subsistence
- Postage, telephone and ISP connection
- Computer software and hardware
- Expendables (stationery etc)
- Clerical assistance
- Overheads

Funding

What, if any, sources of funding are already available, or will need to be considered? For example :

- Research funds from within an institution of higher education, a learned society, professional body or businesses in a field associated with the survey's theme
- The British Academy or the Royal Society
- One or more of the government-funded research councils
- Other grant-making bodies Applying for Grant Aid

The Charities Aid Foundation publishes from time to time a *Directory of Grant Making Trusts* and the *Grant-making Trusts CD-ROM*, £80.00. Available from the Directory of Social Change (DSC), 24 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2DP, Tel: 020 7209 5151, URL: <http://www.dsc.org.uk> which lists many trusts, their objectives (which are sometimes very generally couched), their operating rules, and the scale of their annual grants. It also includes a subject analysis of the kinds of project they have been known to support. Some trusts make grants only to other registered charities.

Many trusts have long waiting lists of applicants and are unable to respond to urgent requests but may be able to give consideration if speed is not of the essence. The importance of a clear, well-presented and well-targeted application cannot be overemphasised.

Local and specialised trusts which may have a particular interest in the subject of study, and some of which may not be included in the Directory, should not be overlooked.

With prior notice, The National Archives is willing to be cited as a referee in applications to grant-making bodies.

Management

- Who will be the overall director of the project?
- Will a steering committee be required?
- How many people?
- Which people?
- Individuals, or representing specified interests?

Method of operation

(a) Gathering the data

If the preliminary stages spelt out above have been carefully approached, survey officers should have a clear idea of their targets and objectives, and the likely or possible whereabouts of information.

The first essential is to establish, through the NRA and other means, what is already known about the targeted group of records. General, catch-all questionnaires addressed to record repositories can be counter-productive.

In the case of records in private custody, whether held by institutions or individuals, researchers should remember that access for the purposes of research can only be granted by the owner who also has the right to deny access. Although many owners are generous with their time and interested in such projects, most have no staff or premises specifically designed to cater for researchers, and a visit may put them to some inconvenience. Prior appointments must always be made before visiting a private owner.

Owners who express a wish to deposit their papers on loan in a record repository may always be referred to The National Archives: Historical Manuscripts Commission, which has long experience of offering independent and impartial advice to owners on this and similar subjects.

(b) Processing the data

Relational databases are the best way to store and process data collected for surveys. Preliminary discussion with some of the surveys in progress or recently completed may offer pointers to suitable hardware and software and to the best means of structuring the data. Before any choice of software is

made, thought should be given to how (if at all), and by whom, the data will be kept up to date once the project is completed. If it is to be transferred to another institution, that institution should be involved in the choice of software, to ensure compatibility and continuity.

(c) Disseminating the data

Decisions will also need to be made at the outset whether the results of the survey will be published, and if so by what means (eg Web based resource, CD ROM, printed publication) and at whose expense.

The National Archives will be glad to receive a copy of all completed surveys for inclusion in the National Register of Archives where the format allows. The National Archives respects any confidentiality attached to the papers themselves, or to information about them which may be contained in the survey reports. This should be drawn to its attention when the reports are sent in for filing.

For further information contact The National Archives: Historical Manuscripts Commission, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU, Telephone 020 8876 3444, Email: enquiry@nationalarchives.gov.uk