1 The scope of specialist archives

The word most commonly used to describe the pattern of archive repositories in the UK is 'network'. Its appeal lies in the implicit sense that this is a structured, contrived, almost geometric pattern.

Certainly it is the case that the existence throughout England and Wales of a pattern of local authority-provided archive services allows one to talk of such a network, though the word conceals, as has been discussed before by the Archives Task Force, substantial inequalities of provision and there remain some isolated gaps and disproportionate distribution in geographical coverage, such as in London with its 'multiplicity of archive voices'.¹ In Scotland, the pattern is less complete. In Northern Ireland, there is no equivalent of such a network and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland is the official place of deposit for public records of Northern Ireland, as well as being virtually the only repository for private records.

To this core can be added archives based within universities. These are of two categories: the administrative records of the universities themselves, and archives of wider significance taken in to support research. All universities have the former category of material but by no means do all universities employ an archivist to care for their own administrative records. There is no requirement for universities to collect material of the second kind, but many do so, usually with an archivist to administer the material, sometimes heading up a separate department, but quite commonly operating within the university library or its Special Collections. Such collections are sufficiently widely spread to provide an overlay to the group of local authority archives and thus to weave an added richness to the pattern.

Beyond these, however, lies the hinterland of smaller archives which have come into being for a variety of reasons, which were never designed to form part of a preconceived national structure of care and preservation and which play no structured part in the network, though they nevertheless, by their very existence, add enormously to the sum total of 'the national archival heritage'. They are extremely varied in nature and governance, and they are huge in number, greatly outweighing in number, if not in volume of material held, the pattern of local authority and university repositories. They share little in common other than the fact that they are in receipt of no regular public funding. They may, in some cases, benefit from occasional one-off support (in particular from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, or the Heritage Lottery Fund), though many are precluded from enjoying even this level of support.

Taking the North West region as an example of this pattern, there are 23 local authority record offices and local studies libraries with archival holdings, 26 other archive collections in public libraries, 25 special archives, 17 academic archive collections, 6 business archives, and 48 archives in museums and galleries.²

It is hard, because of their very diversity, to define this group. The archive community tends to refer to them as specialist repositories though, as a recent seminar arranged by the Historical Manuscripts Commission demonstrated, this is an umbrella term

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¹ Out of the Past, Into the Future, London Regional Archive Council, September 2001
beneath which shelters a menagerie so diverse as to make it far easier to find differences than commonalities among them.

The recent report, *The Missing Link*[^1], compiled by the Society of Archivists' Specialist Repositories Group identified a range of types of archives as falling within this broad grouping: businesses; charities; educational; film and sound; historic houses; medical and scientific organisations; museums and galleries (holding archives); national repositories; professional and learned bodies; religious institutions. Many of these serve only their own institution and do not take in anyone else's archives: they are 'repositories' only in the sense that they employ an archivist in order to help make their archives more widely accessible to the public. There are of course countless individuals and organisations with archives, but with no archivist, who are excluded from the reckoning.

### 2 Key questions for the Archives Task Force

Given the large number of these archives it seems important for the Archives Task Force to consider some of the issues surrounding them.

In particular, the Task Force will need to take a view, in considering its recommendations, whether these should embrace this broad hinterland or whether it is preferable and easier simply to make proposals touching the more easily defined core network of the publicly-funded institutions.

It is important to remember that most of the current contents of local authority and university archives were once privately held, and thus formed part of this wider hinterland. If the trend continues, in decades to come, much of the material that is currently still in private ownership will likewise find its way into publicly funded institutions. It is possible, therefore, and not inappropriate to regard this private sector zone as the seedbed from which our national network of collections is developed.

At the same time, it would be wrong to think of them simply as 'the national archive heritage in waiting'. Many of these collections are receiving high standards of care and remain in situ precisely because their owners regard them as being worthy of preservation and of the costs associated with preservation. It should be borne in mind that care provided in this way staves off the day at which they become a charge upon the public purse. Furthermore, the bottom line is that legal ownership of these collections in most cases rests finally and incontestably with the owners. They can choose to do with them as they will and it is to the credit of those owners who are making appropriate provision for their care that they are motivated by a belief that to preserve these historical assets is better than to save the cost and trouble by destroying them once and for all.

The initial questions for the Task Force would seem to be as follows:

- Is the ATF to consider all the specialist archives when formulating its recommendations?
- Should the ATF, in its recommendations, be encouraging the owners of specialist collections into placing their archives in the care of public repositories?

[^1]: *The Missing Link: Specialist Repositories in England: a map of development and funding needs*, Society of Archivists, 2000. This report was a mapping exercise to define priorities and needs of the specialist repositories sector. It used the same methodology as similar mapping for the local authority sector.
• Should they, on the other hand, be seeking to encourage proper care of such collections while they are still in the hands of their owners?

• In either case, what are the mechanisms or inducement that might be recommended?

3 Specific issues for Specialist Archives

The *Missing Link* report identified a range of problems and shortcomings which were widely repeated among specialist repositories. These included matters such as poor standards of accommodation, limited facilities for public access and the difficulty of securing and funding conservation work. Underlying all or most is the fact that, while the host-bodies or owners of these collections are recognising their responsibilities towards the archives in their care, not least by the employment of at least one archivist (who was able to respond to the Missing Link questionnaire), they may not be in a position to or may not have a will to expend the sort of money that would be necessary for them to emulate the standards of a public repository. By those more exacting standards they may be found wanting. On the other hand, in the matter of archive care, 'something is better than nothing'.

The Action Plan under the Government Policy on Archives charges the National Archives (Historical Manuscripts Commission) as lead body to encourage private owners as far as possible to emulate the standards of care applicable in the public sector, and this strategy has long lain at the heart of the Historical Manuscripts Commission's advisory casework.

The Task Force may care to consider how best it can encourage such owners in the belief that they are making a valuable contribution towards the wider heritage while at the same time exposing them to an understanding of current best practice and standards and to the chance of seeing what is possible in terms of output and profile given the opportunity and the investment. At the very least, it would seem desirable that the community of specialist repositories is recognised as a valuable contributing part of the overall pattern of archive care and service provision.

If there is an issue about the profile of archives as a whole, in this part of the community it is at its most pronounced. Often staffed by a single person, often regarded as an ancillary, even abstruse, part of the overall functions of the host organisation, the small specialist repository rarely has the time or the will to pursue the matter of profile. The UK has huge numbers of small, unknown or hardly known archives, staffed loyally by individuals who have few if any opportunities to exchange views with colleagues and little beyond minimal resources.

It is hard to find case-studies to demonstrate progress or best practice in this area, precisely because the repositories are so varied and what works for one may not work for another. Nevertheless, the case of the current development at the Royal Geographical Society, where a new resource centre, bringing together archives, photographic and map collections and library as the core of an educational programme may have interesting lessons to teach. First of all, the issue of critical mass has been overcome by seeing the archive as just one part of a wider educational resource. Secondly the recognition that the archive can play an important part in a key agenda for the host organisation - in this case developing a key national role in lobbying for and demonstrating the relevance of geography - has unlocked its potential. Thirdly, the impetus has come from the top. Without that high-level commitment, nothing would have been started.
There are certainly lessons here that might, to a greater or lesser degree, be applied more widely but the initiative must come from the individual host organisation and from the top, at that. Wide publicity for such vanguard projects but sadly, there is no journal which can paint archive developments interestingly and visually, as can, for example, the *Museums Journal* for museums - another example of the problems of critical mass which beset archives. To some degree, 'missionary work' to explain the potential to the key players in an organisation might help, but that begs the question as to where such championing might come from.

Two opportunities present themselves to offer a measure of support to this community. The Regional Agencies for Museums, Libraries and Archives, supported by the Regional Archive Councils which bring together the archive community as a whole, are in a position, if properly staffed and programmed, to ensure that the broader hinterland is first mapped and then opened up to the possibility of benefiting from wider opportunities. In this way, skills and awareness can be spread to the 'further corners'. Over and above this, the chance to approach and convince key players of the unexplored potential of their resources would be welcome. Even more, should the idea of Regional Centres of Expertise, identified by the Task Force in its discussions on archive structures, be turned into a practical reality, then there would be both a means and an obligation for knowledge, facilities and expertise to be shared with the smaller elements in the picture.

At a national level, the focus might need to be on the issue of the quasi-public, quasi-private nature of many specialist repositories, which often overshadows their ability to participate in or benefit from such opportunities as there are to gain support from external sources.

A basic requirement of many such funding sources is a degree of public access as a measure of public benefit from the application of public funding. This is unlikely to change; nor should it, but a clear acknowledgement and recognition that the private-ownership-with-public access arrangement is an acceptable one for meriting eligibility to the range of available support and incentives would do much to encourage owners to participate and to feel themselves part of the larger whole.

4 **Business records**

A particular sub-set of the specialist archive is the business archive which, because of its setting wholly within an unashamedly profit-orientated sector is often subject to misunderstanding and neglect.

Business organisations use records in the conduct of current business to enable decisions to be made and actions to be taken. Good management of records and information is vital to support accountability. It is true that the past decade has also seen a growing awareness of the importance of business archives as a research resource - for the history of business itself, and equally for a wide range of other disciplines. The Business Archives Council estimates that over the past 25 years the number of archivists employed by businesses has risen from a dozen to around 200, although all too often these positions are extremely vulnerable, and not sustained.

Businesses are subject to a range of external requirements to retain information in the form of records but after these have been complied with, the cost effective route is to destroy them without further ado. Those businesses which exercise the option of retaining records longer do so for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, it is because there is a continual worth vested in the records; an example would be publishing

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4 *These ideas are further explored in Discussion Paper 4a paper Building on Success: Developing Centres of Expertise*
records where there are residual intellectual property rights in author's papers. Sometimes it may be because the brand-image of the company has a historical depth and focus and the evidence of that changing profile is still of continuing marketing import: Coca Cola would be a case in point. Sometimes it is because there is a continuing corporate recognition of the achievements of the company and a recognition that this achievement is best embodied and reflected in the company's archives.

As with many other types of record, business archives are, however, subject to changing policies and attitudes on the part of the creating organisation, but may be more susceptible to swings of policy as management, ownership or economic vitality change. In more enlightened companies, once the decision has been made not to retain and manage a company archive, a home within the broader public sector may be sought in the hope both of keeping together the record of the history of the firm and of providing the opportunity for research into that history.

The significance of business records has in the past been recognised to widely varying degrees in the public archive sector. Some archivists have been quick to recognise the importance of business and commerce as an aspect of the broader social fabric of history and have been at pains to rescue and preserve business records wherever possible. Others have been far less responsive to that claim. Generally, in the local authority sector, the recognition has been greatest in urban conglomerations whose very origins and economy have been dependent on industry. Examples of this would be the substantial gatherings of shipbuilding records in Liverpool and Newcastle and the Scottish Business Archive at Glasgow University.

A particular, and growing problem, however arises with the multinational company or the large-scale national company which has, by acquisition, absorbed other - often many other - companies, themselves frequently of considerable scale. These are precisely the businesses which, by their scale, have, or have had, the largest impact upon society and the national economy. Yet the sheer scale of the records which they produce can prove too massive for a typical university or local authority archive repository to house and preserve. It is not infrequent for such collections to occupy a thousand boxes or more – a challenge to most public repositories. Furthermore, the problem often falls geographically in metropolitan areas where public repositories are modest in scale and therefore limited in both space and time availability.

It is only by chance that we have so far not experienced the destruction of the archive of a major British or multi-national company. Even major public archive repositories which have in the past been ready to offer accommodation for such collections now find themselves increasingly hard put to it to accept anything but very limited collections.

The problem is at its worst at times of economic downturn when business is looking to reduce overheads and when there are casualties in the form of closure, collapse or liquidation. Liquidation presents a particular problem. Experience is varied of attempting to work with liquidators but, on the whole, liquidators can not be counted upon to think of public archive repositories when disposing of records and losses undoubtedly do occur.

5 Possible issues for the Archives Task Force

5.1 Public/Private funding

A simple but important contribution towards the future safeguarding of important business records would be the acknowledgement that business, industry and
commerce form an integral part of the social fabric and that the safeguarding of their history is therefore as important as any other element in that fabric.

Complications often arise from the expectation that the business sector has ready access to larger sums of money than other archive-owners and should therefore be expected to make a substantial contribution, if not underwrite completely, the provision of care for its archives. It is a common practice in local authority archives to ask businesses to make a continuing financial contribution to the care of their records, an expectation which is rarely imposed upon other types of owner. This in itself is not surprising; local authority services are expected to offset costs wherever they can. But it can distort collecting policies and it is not impossible to see situations in which a repository may accept papers of less importance because they come with funding attached, while finding itself unable to accept others which come without funding.

In other countries, there is a different level of acceptance of a public responsibility to reflect the whole social fabric, including business. The Archives Nationales in France, for example, maintain a national centre for the care of business and trade union records, the Centre des Archives du Monde du Travail.

For the Archive Task Force to acknowledge that the issues of business records are ones which can only be solved by an effective partnership between private and public sectors would be valuable.

5.2 A national strategy for business records

In Scotland, where Glasgow University Archives and Business Records Centre already provides a focus, and in Northern Ireland, where PRONI takes in business records alongside other private collections, the problem is perhaps less acute. In England, the idea that there should be a national repository for nationally important business archives is said to date back to at least the 1920s and Eileen Power at the LSE, but it has never borne fruit. Elements of a strategy are in place in that throughout England and Wales local authority, and a number of university repositories do whenever possible take in the archives of local businesses, and there are special collections such as that for employers’ associations and trades unions at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick. There could therefore be significant professional resistance to alternative arrangements which threatened to weaken these local ties. Even so, there are specific and inescapable problems in relation to large business collections suddenly needing a permanent home and for which there is no space in existing repositories. No national strategy yet exists to protect such archives, and it is only a matter of time before a really important body of material is lost or destroyed for lack of a place to store it and make it available.

The National Archives will be looking into the whole question of national ‘disposition’ policies for non-Public Records. It would welcome the views of the Task Force on possible models for future (but probably quite long-term) development with regard to business archives of national significance. Among the issues:

- Is there likely to be a ready market (and ready acceptance) for a centralised business repository on French lines?

- Should we perhaps be exploring regional rather than national solutions, to ensure that where there is a significant local context the archives at least remain within the appropriate region?
Is this, indeed even an issue that can sensibly be considered at all in isolation, or does it form part of a wider longer-term issue of how archives in general can best be stored and managed?

5.3 Incentives for the care of business records in-house

At a meeting arranged by the National Council for Archives in 2000 to discuss the problems of business records, the issue was raised of tax incentives either to encourage business to make proper arrangements for the care of their own historical archives or to place them in public custody. There are, if not parallels, at least approximate analogies in both cases in the shape of the Acceptance in Lieu procedures for works of art which allow tax to be offset in exchange for the transfer of assets to public hands or the granting of public access to assets held in situ.

One suggestion was that a case might be made for tax breaks for companies which take defined steps to care for their own records, as a way of acknowledging and encouraging responsible care and thereby preventing archives becoming a charge on the public purse. In the same way as individuals benefit from Acceptance in Lieu provisions, might not there be some way of offsetting Corporation Tax?

As the Historical Manuscripts Commission has been involved at various times in discussions over taxation incentives, with Resource, the Inland Revenue Capital Taxes Office and the DCMS, it has agreed to take forward within government, on behalf of the NCA, the further discussion of this whole issue. But it fits within a much wider framework of government policy with regard to, on the one hand the tax regime for heritage assets, and on the other the Gift Aid regime to charitable bodies. This also has ramifications well beyond the world of archives (works of art, museum objects, land...) and will require delicate handling if the Treasury is not to be frightened off at the first encounter on the question of affordability. A statement of support by the Task Force for the principle of extending tax incentives to encourage further both private individuals and corporate bodies to make their archives available for study by the public would clearly strengthen the National Archives (HMC)'s hand in this.

Other initiatives are also under consideration, including perhaps guidelines to encourage corporate owners of archives to recognise the public utility of the material, and to take steps such as the creation of charitable trusts for its long-term protection.

5.4. Regions

The Regional Agencies for Museums, Archives and Libraries can play a key role in ensuring that businesses, specialist repositories and private owners and depositors are included when considering archival policies and programmes. They can act as an honest broker fostering partnerships (for example encouraging businesses to become partners in bids under the A2A programme, which can then be led by publicly funded bodies). It is this role of ensuring inclusivity on an opting in model which is crucial to strengthening the archives network.

6 Photographic, film and sound archives

Another sub-set of the specialist archive requiring particular attention is that which deals with non-traditional, non-paper based records.
The role of photography, film and sound archives in recording the history of the last century is one which has often been overlooked or underplayed in analysing the impact of archives. Yet photographs, film and sound speak with an immediacy and authority which transcends social boundaries and impact upon all of us. The public at large see infinitely more of these than they do records in written form. The measurement of the role which archives play in ordinary lives is transformed if these elements are seen as an intrinsic and important part of the archival whole.

Concurrently with the work of the Archive Task Force a U.K.-wide audiovisual archive strategy is being developed as a collaboration between Resource, the British Library National Sound Archive and the Film Archive Forum (which brings together the public sector Moving Image Archives across the U.K. The Strategy is intended to produce a blueprint for audiovisual archival development across the UK. A draft strategy has been produced and the full strategy is due to be launched in Autumn 2003. There are already clear emerging lines of convergence with issues the ATF is considering, such as training and development, sustainability and partnerships, profile and advocacy. Clearly, it would be pointless for the ATF to duplicate the work currently going on, and the Task Force needs to ensure that these strands are brought together in a meaningful way.

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