

## Editorial

### Archives and Public History Special Issue

It is now over twenty five years since Raphael Samuels wrote that history was ‘a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance of a thousand different hands’.<sup>1</sup> He identified a growth in manifestations of the past in the late twentieth century, evident in both cultural institutions and in everyday activities, which he traced back to ‘a historicist turn in national life’.<sup>2</sup> The work of constructing and sharing the past as history was increasingly dispersed through all spheres, from popular television to community activism, from family history to heritage tourism. The ‘esoteric form’ of history practised by professional historians, including the ‘fetishization’ of archival research, was being eroded by a tide of public history making.<sup>3</sup> He foregrounded grassroots and community manifestations of the past, contrasting the process driven outputs of historians with more ‘democratic’, personal and localised forms of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Samuels’ argument implied an opposition between ‘democratised’ history work and the use of ‘fetishized’ archives, associating archival research with the perspectives and expertise of a specialist audience. Public history in his schema happened elsewhere, in museums and the media, in community groups and private homes. In eschewing the narrowest definition of history in society he reinforced a definition of archives which underplayed a long history of archival work outside of the academy and outside of archival institutions. Throughout the twentieth century family and local historians had been breaking down hierarchies of historical information, recognising the value of previously neglected material, often local and familial in origin. Family photographs, memories and local folklore were integrated into the pool of archival resources available for history making. At the same time, from the 1960s onwards rights activists and community groups had begun collecting and preserving the records of their movements and places, including ephemera, objects and oral histories in their growing archives. These collections were live and meaningful in the present, tools for making change as well as for reconstructing the past. Archives were also central to the construction of nationalist and societal narratives at large, mobilised by governments, the media and businesses to develop their public identities.

These trends continue, broadened and facilitated by the emergence of digital technologies that allow archival materials to be circulated, reused and interpreted rapidly by more people in multiple contexts. The archive has become more visible through popular television programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?*, used not just as information about the past but as a manifestation of the past itself. In the UK the establishment of the Heritage Lottery Fund in 1994, along with the election of New Labour in 1997, provided a financial and ideological framework to embed new ways of thinking about archives into professional practice. An emphasis on outcomes for communities and for people encouraged organisations and institutions to work with stakeholder and grassroots groups to produce public history activity and projects. The type of ‘fetishized’ archival encounter imagined by Raphael Samuels is only part of the contemporary model of engagement; exhibitions,

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<sup>1</sup> Raphael Samuels, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, 8

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 139

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 160

performances, artistic interventions, digital remixes and shared custody with communities are amongst the alternatives.

This special issue of *Archives and Records* was conceived as an opportunity to explore the roles that archives now play in public history activity. Over the last decade the archival literature has been rich in scholarship about subjects that appear in this volume, including community archives, social justice, political activism and place-making. This special issue gathers papers with complimentary approaches – from artists’ interventions in surveillance archives to the preservation of a digital archive of the conflict and genocide in Syria. However, each asks particularly why and how public history is being made through archival work, situating subjects usually handled through archival theory in new contexts.

Public history is a broad church, and definitions have been contested. The concept is perhaps more familiar to North American than to British audiences, the term having only gained traction in the UK in the last decade or so, with the establishment of half a dozen postgraduate courses. The National Council on Public History suggests it encompasses ‘the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world... it is history that is applied to real-world issues.’<sup>5</sup> While grounded in the methodologies of historical research, it is multi-disciplinary and open to the inclusion of memory or oral traditions. Collaboration between history-making ‘experts’ (academic historians, archivists and curators, for example) and community members or other stakeholders is a prominent feature of public history activity. It sits at the heart of debates about authority, professionalism and ownership of the past, in a space shared and contested by professional practitioners, commercial interests and the public. Alan Newell, former president of the American National Council on Public History, has suggested that it is not so much a discipline as a state of mind, ‘an attitude or perception about the use and value of history.’<sup>6</sup> This includes recognition of the validity of different types of knowing and talking about what happened in the past, with diverse perspectives shaping how history is made. A BBC period drama, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, a flagship exhibition at the British Museum, a student digitisation project, a blue plaque, a re-enactment, a family tree shared on *Ancestry*, a village history day in a local library – all these are examples of public history in action.

Arguably, the theory and ideal of public history is integral to ongoing debate about the relationship between archives practitioners and communities that also create, care for and use archives. The recognition of the validity of different forms of knowledge and history making prompts questions about what constitutes archives and how they are to be managed. Flinn, for example, has advocated for a ‘democratised and participatory archive’ in which all those who have contact with the record ‘can and do affect our understanding and knowledge of that archive.’<sup>7</sup> This echoes the language and approach of public history theorists towards the making and remaking of the past. Community archives, which sit outside of mainstream or traditional archival practice, are defined by ‘the active and ongoing involvement of members of the source community in documenting and making

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<sup>5</sup> National Council on Public History, <http://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>

<sup>6</sup> Hilda Kean, *The Public History Reader*, xvi

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Flinn, *An Attack on Professionalism and Scholarship? Democratising Archives and the Production of Knowledge*

accessible their history on their own terms.’<sup>8</sup> Beel et al. has further argued that the relationship runs in both directions: community archives do not only support the creation of histories but are themselves created during the process of history making. Public history production is ‘bound within the practice of producing archives.’<sup>9</sup> The movement has prompted vital questions: What constitutes the archive? Who decides what should be preserved in it? Who owns it, and where does it belong? How can it be catalogued and described, so as to be meaningful to its creators and users? The answers to these questions have direct impact on the histories that are produced from the resulting archives.

Four of the papers in this issue engage explicitly with community archives. In their article ‘To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise’ Caswell, Migoni, Geraci and Cifor offer a framework for measuring the impact of autonomous archives on communities which have been repeatedly marginalized by mainstream archives’ collecting practices in the United States. Their research with seventeen community archives powerfully demonstrate the value of autonomous own-voice archives in history-making by under-represented communities and the profound damage caused by their ‘symbolic annihilation’ in institutional collections. Eleanor Carter confronts this annihilation in action through her research with housing activist groups in Elephant and Castle. Originally formed to protest against the demolition of housing in central London, these groups have actively sought to generate, preserve and make accessible archives about their local place. Housed online or in community spaces these archives Carter suggests the ways in which these records can be mobilised to produce histories that resist and contest the dominant narratives circulated by local government. The archive becomes both a campaign strategy and a tool to make histories that are useful to the present.

In a very different socio-political and geographic context Fiona Cosson explores how the archives collated by the local history society in Irthlingborough in Northampton have shaped the historical experience of community and belonging in the town. Her research, which embraced personal emotive engagement with the society, also reconsiders the value of such archives for academic researchers of working class and everyday life. Finally, Paul Long’s paper on the affective impact of local music archives reflects on the way communities of interest and identity are formed around histories co-curated and produced by their members.

Public history is founded on the construction of narratives about the past or present in public and on purpose. The purpose may vary widely, from the political and ideological to the practical or entertaining. It may manifest at the microcosmic level of a geographic community, as described here in Elena Carter’s study of housing activist archives in Elephant and Castle, or a national or international level. The silences and omissions in mainstream archives highlighted by both Caswell and Carter demand that we recognise the ways in which the dominant socio-political actors in society have shaped the histories that can be made. Since the 1990s archives practitioners have become increasingly conscious of this effect and developed strategies to diversify their holdings to reflect their communities. There is now broad recognition of the role archives play in self-determination and the ongoing work of social justice, through archival activism by both institutions, communities and individuals. They may become the site of active struggles for social justice in the

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Stevens, Andrew Flinn & Elizabeth Shepherd, *New Frameworks for community engagement in the archives sector: from handing over to handing on*, 60

<sup>9</sup> Beel et al. *The Geographies of Community History Digital Archives in Rural Scotland*, 202

present and for version control over the past. This occurs not just in mainstream archives, where diverse voices may have been silenced, but also in activist and community collections themselves. Within all archives multiple histories strive for visibility and expression. The trans activist interviewed by Caswell et al., for example, describes her experience of the exclusion and misrepresentation of trans-women in the collections of an LGBT community archive.

In some cases the preservation of the archive is a conscious intervention to capture the history of the future in a complex and chaotic present, as described in Saber and Long's article about the creation of a digital archive of lived experience in present-day Syria. They explore how the preservation of video footage and other forms of dynamic media work to document the traumatic and challenging experiences of people in the very recent past in order to challenge the narratives of mainstream media. Set apart from the competitive round of news-making, the Dropbox archive can be approached from multiple perspectives. As Max Evans has argued the information and emotion it contains is 'a non-rival commodity'; it is not depleted by multiple uses.<sup>10</sup> Instead it is strengthened by each new engagement, even when those engagements challenge or contest it.

Kathy Carbone describes the work of two artists exploring with *The Watcher Files*, a collection of police surveillance archives dating from the 1960s to the 1980s in Portland, Oregon. These files contain paperwork and photographs relating to over 500 civil rights and political activists in the city, many of whom are still living. Her article explores how the artists' critical-aesthetic approach to the archives and the artworks they produced provokes feelings and thoughts about the past that are silenced or omitted from the archives themselves. In this way the archives are reconnected to the memories, lived experiences and present feelings of the people and movements they relate to. The history they are capable of producing is transformed.

The final article in this special issue returns to a category of record almost never associated with radical histories, interventions or challenges: the parish register. Veale, Bowen and Endfield return us full circle to the revolution in archival research prompted by the emergence of parish register research in the 1960s and 1970s, both by social historians and family historians. Still a staple of local and family research, they are now increasingly systematized and structured as online databases accessed via search terms. Veale et al. offer an alternative perspective on these ubiquitous records as sources for climate history and community attitudes to the natural environment. They consider how entries relating to extreme weather events help to construct narratives about past weather in the present, while also providing insight into the way weather shaped ideas about community and place in the past.

I hope that you enjoy this special issue on archives and public history, and that you find something in it to carry forward into your own archives and history making practice.

Victoria Hoyle

Guest Editor

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<sup>10</sup> Max J. Evans, *Archives of the People, by the People, for the People*, 396

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