



Records at Risk

A Report on the BRA Survey of Risks
to Historical Records in the East of
England and London Regions

Summary and Recommendations



FOREWORD

I am delighted to introduce the summary and recommendations of the British Records Association's report about records at risk. In 2010 the Association commissioned a major survey of two English regions, the East of England and London. The research, analysis and reporting was carried out by The Archives Skills Consultancy Ltd between July and December 2010 while the preparation of the report for publication was subsequently undertaken by members of the Association, notably Mr Stephen Freeth. We believe that the interest of the report goes beyond the two regions surveyed and we hope that its findings will seem more generally relevant and useful.

The British Records Association is most grateful to the following for their sponsorship and support: the UK Data Archive (UKDA), University of Essex; the East of England Regional Archives Council (EERAC); Archives for London (AfL); the Charlotte Bonham-Carter Trust; the Mercers' Company; and the estate of the late Nancy Briggs, formerly of Essex Record Office. We are also grateful to everyone who participated in the initial survey and to everyone who has helpfully commented on aspects of the report and findings at various times.

The full report, including analytical appendices containing extensive supporting evidence, may be found on our website at www.britishrecordsassociation.org.uk

Dr Anthony Smith
Chairman
5 November 2012

SUMMARY

Readers familiar with HM Government's Archives for the 21st Century (CM 7744, 2009), and the subsequent Archives for the 21st Century in action (The National Archives /Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2010; refreshed and reissued, August 2012) will find much to recognise in this report. In particular, we agree on the need for bigger, better, more sustainable archive services, perhaps through collaboration and networking, and on the risks to digital archives.

In 2010, when our report was commissioned, it was apparent that a worsening financial climate and the proliferation of new forms of record keeping were having a dramatic effect on archives in Great Britain. Since then the archival landscape has changed further. Most notably, the abolition of the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), the assumption of its strategic archival functions by The National Archives (TNA), and the development of an Archive Accreditation scheme across the UK, are highly relevant to our own findings. The latest draft (as at September 2012) of the Archive Accreditation scheme addresses issues we too have raised. We hope that our independent findings will inform and encourage further work.

The archives profession seeks to care for records of the past, to make them available to users, and to take notice of the records of the present, so that those of value are preserved for the future. Yet despite a multitude of record repositories, large and small, and many local examples of excellent practice, there remain major risks to the records of both the present and the past. The principal risks identified in our report are stated below, though not in any particular order of significance.

Such risks are structural, part of the way in which the profession is organised and trained. They apply irrespective of budget cuts, though these certainly make things worse. They apply whether or not records are held in an archive repository. They place records at risk despite the vocation of every archivist to preserve records for the future.

The chief current risks may be summarised as follows:

- there is at present an unwillingness or incapacity to take in archives in non-traditional formats, especially digital, but also film and sound
- most repositories lack the skills to look after such formats properly, even if they take them in
- there is no national oversight of the collecting practices of individual repositories, to ensure comprehensive and consistent provision. Records can fall through the gaps
- there is no accessible central register of repositories' collecting policies, to advise both public and professionals when records need a good home
- almost 40% of repositories appear not to have a written collecting policy at all

- only 25% of repositories are aware of records at risk within their territorial or subject area
- 75% of repositories, including several London borough repositories, are unable actively to survey undeposited records within their collecting area
- many archivists work in isolation in small repositories, without professional peers. Not all are professionally qualified. They would welcome – and need - the opportunity of shared resources and collaborative projects
- most record repositories will run out of space for new accessions within ten years. Commercial storage is not currently popular as a solution
- despite lack of space, there is often embarrassment and inertia about rationalising holdings which are unwanted
- only 50% of repositories appear to have a disaster plan
- very few repositories have any regional disaster provision, for access to local assistance in a crisis
- very few repositories are planning an exit strategy in case cuts in funding are so severe that total or partial closure is unavoidable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

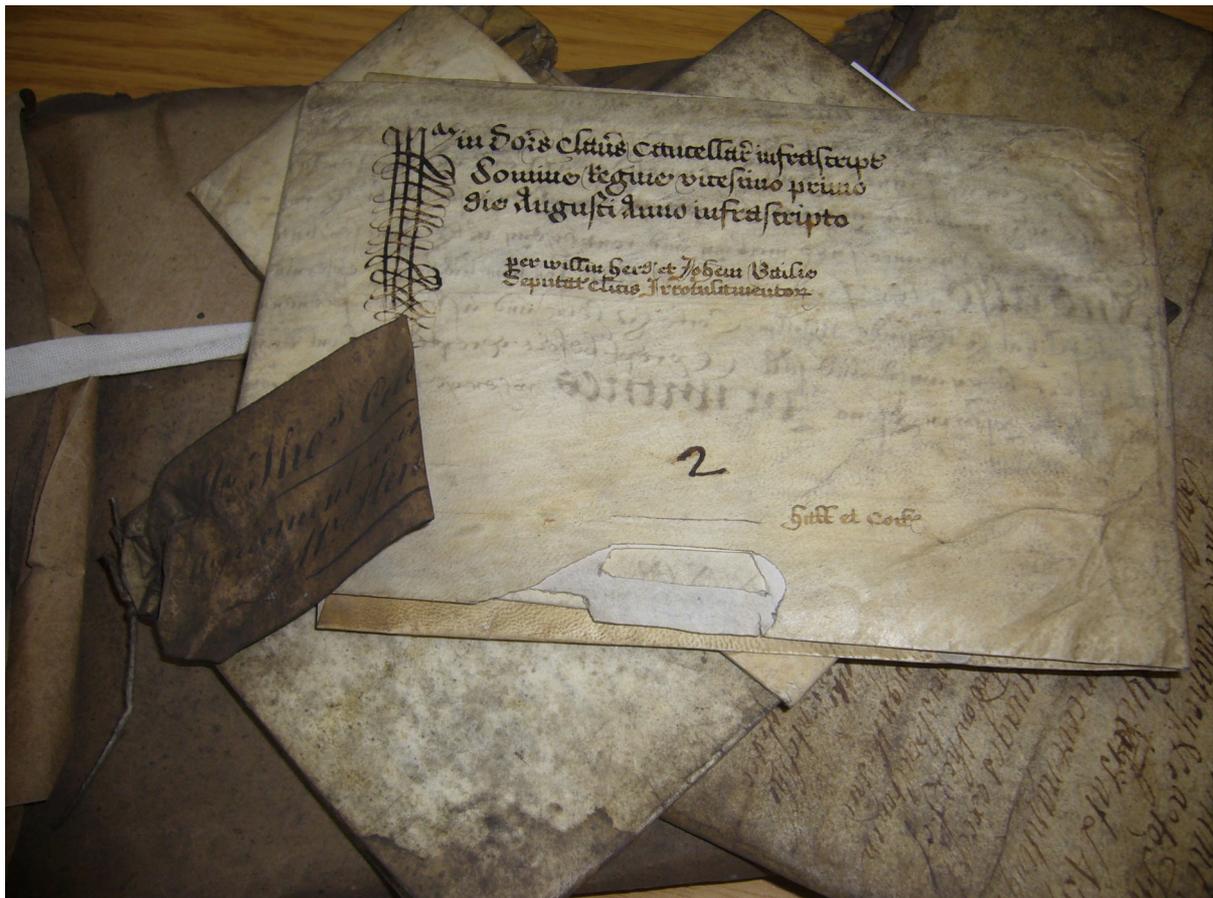
Our report contains over thirty recommendations to tackle this situation, which are summarised below, again not in any particular order of importance. Where appropriate, we have made suggestions as to who might lead on particular activities:

- the current emphasis on preserving digital archives should be continued and reinforced, as the message is not “getting through”. Additional support in this area is needed, including active encouragement of the formation of partnerships to share good practice. TNA would be ideally placed to provide leadership here, and ensure that digital preservation is built into the final Archive Accreditation scheme
- the expertise and assistance of TNA in helping to develop digital capacity should be available beyond the public sector. TNA should examine ways in which this can be achieved, in the longer term through the Archive Accreditation scheme and in the short term through continued training and support
- the feasibility of regional provision both for the maintenance of digital archives over time, and for film and sound archives, should be thoroughly assessed, perhaps through research by the Archives & Records Association (ARA). There is also a need for a brokering role to support partnerships along the lines of the Digital Preservation Consortium of the Archives and Records Council Wales; TNA could play a key role in developing partnerships of this kind in England
- a co-ordinated approach is needed, nationally or regionally, so that all information about archives at risk and potential repositories feeds into a central resource. Ideally this should be managed by TNA
- a “collecting policy initiative” is needed, to encourage all repositories to develop and maintain a collecting policy. TNA has already done work on this, and would be a natural candidate to lead this initiative
- collecting policies should be used as a basis for proactive work in surveying and collecting undeposited archives. With the limitations of smaller repositories in mind, TNA should seek to ensure that there is capacity for surveying in each region, and that there are no significant subject gaps at a national level, so that collections are not at risk through gaps in the archival collecting map
- national, sectoral and regional surveys of undeposited archives are also to be encouraged where possible. TNA has undertaken admirable initiatives of this nature on business and religious archives, and is well placed to give a lead on this, but should seek partners amongst interested bodies, including specialist archival institutions, the BRA, the Business Archives Council (BAC) and also regional archival bodies, where they survive

- more collaboration is needed between repositories, especially London borough repositories, to reduce costs and professional isolation, and raise standards. Closer working between archive services is one of the goals of *Archives for the 21st Century*, and there is a role for the ARA, TNA and regional archive bodies to encourage the formation of partnerships and shared working arrangements. The Religious Archives Support Plan offers a sector-based model for how this might be tackled. We also believe that the establishment of the Business Archives Crisis Management Team, co-ordinated by TNA, has been a welcome and useful development
- continued investment is required in new storage facilities, together with low-cost space-saving solutions such as reshelving and reboxing by shape and size rather than by collection
- every repository should have a disaster plan, to include an exit strategy. TNA should ensure that this forms part of the final Archive Accreditation scheme
- regional — or at least collaborative — disaster provision would be helpful, especially for small repositories with limited capacity. Some provision for ensuring suitable measures are in place should form part of the final Archive Accreditation scheme
- the importance of identifying and rescuing undeposited archives should be reaffirmed as a core part of the training of every archivist
- archivists should also be trained to be more confident about disposing responsibly of low-grade or inappropriate material already held, after proper evaluation. The ARA could liaise with the providers of archival diploma courses to develop suitable training content
- sharing of staff (and volunteers) within organisations should be encouraged, wherever this is appropriate. The ARA could undertake further research on flexible deployment of staff and volunteers in the archive sector
- digitisation of records with high public interest through commercial digitisation services (e.g. Ancestry) can help generate income for archives services, and archivists need more advice and support for such projects. TNA and the ARA, building on their experience of developing model contracts and project programmes, will be well placed to offer wider support and advice through their websites and training courses.

WHAT NEXT?

The full report is available on the website of the British Records Association, and we hope it will be widely read. We are intending to discuss some of the issues raised with colleagues at The National Archives, the Archives and Records Association and more widely in the archive sector and we expect to hold a meeting in the spring of 2013 at which the issues raised can be further considered.



British Records Association

Founded in 1932, the British Records Association aims to encourage and assist with the preservation, care, use and publication of historical records

Records hold the nation's memory; they reveal how we became what we are and they are our best guide to the future. The BRA seeks to add to our understanding of records, to advise on their custody and care and to direct 'homeless' documents to the most appropriate repository

The BRA's main function is to rescue documents in danger of loss or destruction. We are open to anyone interested in records, including amateur users as well as professionals, owners of collections large and small and archivists, librarians and others with records in their care.

For more information about the British Records Association, please open the website link below.

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