

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Tools for 20<sup>th</sup> Century History: Electronic Archival Resources

Amanda Hill, Archives Hub, University of Manchester

In this paper I aim to give an overview of the various archival networking projects which are currently under way in the United Kingdom, with an explanation of their scope and demonstrations of the projects themselves.

As researchers we have become used to being able to search library catalogues over the internet, perhaps using telnet to begin with, but increasingly through web interfaces. It has generally been the case that archive repositories have been slower to deliver up their information in the same way. There are a number of reasons for this, the main one being the complexity of archival catalogues, which are usually hierarchical in arrangement and may be very large. There has also been a wide variation in form and style between the finding aids of different institutions (and even between different archivists within the same institution). One consequence of these problems was that, for a long time, there were few software systems available that could cope with archival catalogues.

In the 1990s things began to change. In 1994 the International Standard for Archival Description was adopted by the International Council on Archives<sup>1</sup>. This standard defines the elements that should be included in any description of archival materials. For the first time, the archive community had an international standard: some 30 years after the library community had adopted MARC. Adoption of the archival standard has since been widespread. A second edition was published in 2000<sup>2</sup>.

The National Register of Archives<sup>3</sup> (NRA) has been a valued resource for the research community since 1945 by acting as a repository of archive catalogues for the UK and by maintaining indexes of individuals, families, and organisations. In 1990 remote access to the indexes was established, allowing researchers to quickly discover the location of papers for a particular individual or organisation. The full catalogues have not been digitised, however, and subject access to the indexes is limited to general guides.

New software products became available during the 1990s, which allowed the hierarchical structure of archive descriptions to be preserved in an electronic form. New ways of delivering that content were also being developed. In the UK, the election of a Labour government heralded a new emphasis on lifelong learning, social inclusion and electronic access to services. This translated into funding opportunities, allowing archive repositories to convert their paper catalogues into electronic form, using the new standards and technologies.

New Initiatives: 1998

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ica.org](http://www.ica.org)

<sup>2</sup> [www.ica.org/biblio/cds/isad\\_g\\_2e.pdf](http://www.ica.org/biblio/cds/isad_g_2e.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [www.hmc.gov.uk/nra/nra2.htm](http://www.hmc.gov.uk/nra/nra2.htm)

In 1998 the National Council on Archives published *Archives Online*<sup>4</sup>, a vision of a National Archives Network which would contain detailed catalogues of all of the archives available in the United Kingdom. The network would be free at the point of use.

In the same year, the higher education community was looking at ways of providing access to the many archive catalogues which had been created as a result of so-called 'Follett Funding'. A consortium of university, national, specialist and local record offices provided data to the National Network Demonstrator Project, to investigate the feasibility of making archival descriptions available online using the Z39.50 search and retrieval protocol. In only 9 months, the project showed the potential for such a service and focussed the minds and activities of participating archivists in realising the amount of conformance to standards that would be necessary in order to get such a project to work. The project also demonstrated the willingness and enthusiasm of the archivists involved.

#### New Initiatives: 1999

In the following year, funding from the Research Support Libraries Programme was used for a variety of projects whose aim was to improve access to archival information. These included AIM25<sup>5</sup>, GASHE<sup>6</sup> and NAHSTE<sup>7</sup>. AIM25 covers HE and learned institutions in the Greater London area, with descriptions at 'collection level', i.e. summary information about each archive, without detailed information on files and items. GASHE (Gateway to Archives of Scottish Higher Education) describes the institutional archives of ten Scottish HE institutions. NAHSTE (Navigational Aids for the History of Science, Technology and the Environment) concentrates on scientific collections in the universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Heriot Watt.

In Scotland, a nationwide project called the Scottish Archive Network (SCAN) was established, with the aim of gathering a description for each collection and creating online access to those descriptions. The SCAN website<sup>8</sup> also provides access to online exhibitions and an index to the wills of Scots from 1500 to 1875.

The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) funded a pilot project called the Higher Education Archives Hub for the academic year 1999-2000. The aim was to build on the experiences of the NNDP. 15 universities took part, describing over 3,000 archives, mostly at the summary collection level.

#### New Initiatives: 2000 onwards

In 2000 the Access to Archives (A2A)<sup>9</sup> programme began in England. This provides access to full catalogues of archives held in more than 251 record offices throughout

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.archives.org.uk/publications/archivesonline/aolintro.asp>

<sup>5</sup> [www.aim25.ac.uk](http://www.aim25.ac.uk)

<sup>6</sup> [www.gashe.archives.gla.ac.uk](http://www.gashe.archives.gla.ac.uk)

<sup>7</sup> [www.nahste.ac.uk](http://www.nahste.ac.uk)

<sup>8</sup> [www.scan.org.uk](http://www.scan.org.uk)

<sup>9</sup> [www.a2a.pro.gov.uk](http://www.a2a.pro.gov.uk)

England. Repositories have been able to apply to the Heritage Lottery Fund for money to convert their paper catalogues into an electronic form. This has resulted in the creation of a vast and valuable resource of detailed information, with millions of catalogue entries.

The Archives Hub<sup>10</sup> pilot became a service in 2000 and now provides information about over 60 university and college repositories throughout the United Kingdom and over 12,000 archives.

Work has now started on the creation of an Archive Network for Wales, which will be similar in scale to the Scottish Archive Network described above.

#### Future developments

Separate funding streams have created a situation where a researcher must consult a number of sites to be sure of making an exhaustive search. Each of the 'strands' of the UK network are now working to ensure that common standards are complimented by systems that can 'talk' to each other, allowing cross-searching of many resources from one interface. The National Register of Archives (currently maintained by the Historical Manuscripts Commission) is already providing links to some of the online catalogues from its indexes, while each of the networks has links back to the HMC for the repository contact details which are maintained in the ARCHON service.

Incorporation of digital images is another area which will become increasingly important, as users take online catalogues for granted and demand the logical next step of access to the materials themselves.

The 1998 vision of a comprehensive National Archives Network has not yet been achieved, but I hope that I have shown that progress toward it has been extremely rapid and is likely to be sustained into the future.

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<sup>10</sup> [www.archiveshub.ac.uk](http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk)