

## **From Glasgow (SCO) where I am attending the ARA Conference**

... which has many sessions focused on community archiving, outreach directed towards marginalised communities, and re-imagining archival methods accordingly.

### **Community Archives**

The emphasis is on archives dealing with communities and organised by the communities themselves. There was a great panel session presented by -

- Jack Latimer ([Community Sites](#)) who interprets and adapts archival methods for community archives initiatives; showcasing the [Yorkshire Dales History Project](#) in a well-established part of England with long-lived local connections.
- Marion Kenny showcasing the [Qisetna Project](#) amongst the Syrian diaspora using storytelling to capture and preserve memories of the Syrian community spread around the world; something I thought might work for the Palestinians.
- Alan Butler ([Plymouth LGBT Archive](#)) outlining work that draws a formerly marginalised community together, giving a voice to older members of that community, and educating younger ones on how things were (many apparently unbelieving about what went on).

It seems that some of these endeavours are moving through a new phase. Finds in attics, garages, and sheds are becoming rarer and people no longer use letters, photos, and diaries as they once did. Increasingly the raw material is digital and this presents new challenges.

In the second keynote of the programme, which was less to my taste, [Michelle Caswell](#) made a case for what might be called weaponizing community archives.

### **Outreach**

Another enthralling panel, with many cross-overs to community archiving, presented outreach efforts by established “collections” to reach marginalised audiences –

- Suzanne Rose and Anthony McCoubry of the [Mass Observation Archive](#) described their Out of the Box projects including work in prisons (“make sure you budget for biscuits”).
- Stephanie Neild of [Leonard Cheshire Disability](#) showed how their archives are being used by the disabled and visually impaired as well as creating a wider audience for their material.
- Tamsin Bookey of the [Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives](#) told how they are dealing with a community that is demographically 55% black, Asian, or mixed but whose user base is 60% white and not from the borough.

There was insightful commentary on how barriers to access aren’t always what archivists with comfortable middle-class backgrounds first think of (no home address, sight-impaired, can’t read).

### **We have met the enemy, and he is us**

Fascinating presentation from Jenny Bunn (UCL) entitled “Machines make records: the future of archival processing” – an ironic contribution to a conference whose theme is “People Make Records”. Dense and cutting-edge argument that I couldn’t take down fast enough to do justice in a posting like this. Get hold of it if you can. Instead I will put down some thoughts it provoked in me.

Bunn reminded us that at the dawn of our digital dilemmas (when some of us thought that doom was about to be visited on the r/keeping enterprise by an indifferent technology), David Bearman posed two problems:

1. We are too small to have any impact on the IT industry or to justify, in terms of financial return, any R&D into finding solutions to our particular requirements.
2. In any case, we have no clear understanding to communicate of what it is we want to achieve and how we want to achieve it.

R&D has been driven by other sectors (security, health, finance) but they are recordkeeping mammals too. Bunn points out, and I think many will agree, that the IT industry has moved on to the

point that r/keeping (or something very like it) is now a generic requirement and systems capable of effectively supporting it to a large extent already exist. In other words, the IT world is close to annihilating the first of David's problems. It's not about accepting store-bought solutions, however. We still have a ways to go in articulating our special needs but a response can be much more easily incorporated into system design as it has developed – having already come a long, long way towards meeting them.

But what of the second problem? Are we any closer to a shared view of what we want and how we want to do it? The majors in Oz are deploying proprietary software but whether their articulation of our common requirements is any good (or even represents a coherent commonality amongst themselves) is a whole other question which I won't get into here. Outside of the majors, and inside them as well for that matter, my sense is that we are hardly further along than we were when David posed the second of his problems all those years ago. How ironic it will be if our inability to influence and take full advantage of what technology now has to offer arises from our own confusions. If doom does engulf us after all it would not be an uncaring technology but we ourselves who will have visited it upon us.

For smaller players, Bunn raised the question of tool kit vs systems.

### **What Skills Do Archivists Need?**

The last ARA session I attended was called "Let digits flourish: the skills archivists need and how to get them". I feel guilty about posting this because I said nothing. They were having a good time and I didn't want to be a wet blanket. But the real reason is that I'm old and I'm sick and tired of saying the same thing, unheeded, over and over.

It was the wrong question (out of context, anyway). Before asking what skills we need, you have to know what you need the skills for. Substitute "methods" for "skills" and it's the same issue Bearman posed thirty years ago. Many terms were used in this session to describe what we do but recordkeeping wasn't amongst them (at least, I didn't hear it). They seem to think the "theory" is OK. If they mean the theory found in the old text books, it's not. It isn't wrong, but it's not expansive enough. It was devised to support a set of skills that evolved in the pre-digital world. We need a larger theoretical understanding and the post-Bearman thinking that has been done on that is the most important professional development of my generation. That's what appalled me about the ignorance of the young graduates in Washington about David's name and work.

Should we still teach palaeography? This? That? Coding? Something besides? Recordkeeping applies the same knowledge to all formats – mediaeval mss, files and docketts, digital assets, it's all one. How to fit it into a one-year course? If it were me, I'd be designing a course that taught what it means to be a r/keeper. The skills needed to apply that knowledge into an increasingly diverse number of work situations are important and difficult to acquire in the right combination, but that's secondary. What, if anything, is a recordkeeper? Someone who understands about documented evidence of circumstance or action. Who values the importance of context (they knew about that in Glasgow). Who comprehends structure and relationships. Who discriminates on the basis of process and evaluates on the basis of integrity.

The same issue arose (sort of) in Washington about GLAM-orous co-operation. They were burbling on about how and what the obstacles are but it was the museums guy who asked why. We can be something more than r/keepers when we join with librarians and curators in a common cause as truth-tellers. At both conferences, the usual suspects stood up and attacked, with facility and insouciance, our values of objectivity (not neutrality), impartiality (not even-handedness), and accuracy (not abdication). When I hear this, I cringe: professional suicide I think. Yes, these are difficult concepts, in need of nuance and qualification, but they're the values that make us what we

are. How's this for a slogan: guardians for truth. Twenty years ago, I would have said pompous over-reach. Not anymore. In a post-Trump world, it's what we need to assert about ourselves, to champion, and it's something to be proud of.