

## **RELIGIOUS ARCHIVES GROUP CONFERENCE IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES**

### **THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS ARCHIVES IN THE UK TODAY**

**British Library Conference Centre, 26 March 2007**

The Religious Archives Group (RAG) affiliated to the Society of Archivists and The National Archives joined forces to consider 'The state of religious archives in the UK today' at the British Library on 26 March 2007. The intention was to identify as far as possible the key issues and problems currently faced by religious archives and to look at ways in which they might be tackled. Leading figures from the sector came together at a well-attended and far -ranging event. Participants were welcomed by the Group's chair, Angela Kenney. The Chief Executive of The National Archives, Natalie Ceeney, then introduced the proceedings, together with Rosemary Seton, Secretary of RAG. Natalie Ceeney hoped that the day would help the sector to find a sense of direction. She also chaired the final session, which debated desirable outcomes from the day's proceedings in order to try to map out key action points so that religious archives could move forwards.

The conference began with overviews of the state of Anglican, Roman Catholic and Nonconformist archives, followed by case studies of the Hindu Archive Project at Oxford, the development of Manchester Cathedral Archives, the Christian Brethren Archive at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester and the Westminster Diocesan Archive project.

**Declan Kelly**, Director of Libraries, Archives and Information for the Church of England's national institutions gave an analysis of the 'distributed archive' created at every level from national, provincial and diocesan records, to parish records and those of the many Anglican religious organisations and the issues that they posed. He made the point that in some ways the Church of England, from an archival and organisational point of view, constituted a huge number of independent record-creating bodies. The strengths and weaknesses of this pattern were probed and the history of previous attempts to survey the state of Anglican archives reviewed, from the Pilgrim Trust survey in the late 1940s, and Dorothy Owen's account of 1970 published by the British Records Association, up to Chris Kitching's survey of central church records for the Pilgrim and Radcliffe trusts in 1976. While provision for the archives of central church institutions was fairly good, the situation often became worse as one moved outwards from the centre. The state of capitular archives was very uneven, with patchy provision of on-line catalogues and often limited access by appointment. There was often no obvious place of deposit for the records of religious societies of which a very considerable number were noted in the Church of England Year Book. They faced the familiar problem of many private institutional archives, with limited space for storage and a lack of resources for cataloguing. When they sought to deposit their historical records, they found that they faced further hurdles in terms of falling outside the collecting policies of many repositories whose remit did not encompass them or in being asked for an endowment to contribute to the costs of storage and cataloguing.

The expectations of different groups of record-creating bodies and users were being tackled and managed in a number of different ways. The Church of England website was being re-vamped as a portal with signposts to central collections and also capitular archives and as a focus for guidance and advice including 'Keep or Bin,' the advisory leaflet on the care of parish records. Further advice was also being drawn up about diocesan records and this might be followed by more concerning episcopal material. Access to archives was a key issue as the church attempted to serve the whole nation but this was complicated by the lack of resources and the number of potential access points. Cataloguing was vital to unlock this archival material and lists needed to be placed on-line as users now expected to begin their research at a computer terminal. At the same time this had created a paradox: increased demand for, and use of Anglican records, but fewer people physically coming through the doors of certain central and capitular repositories. The issue was raised finally as to what appropriate support could be given by the central Church of England institutions and TNA to support this growth in user interest, such as guidance on where to find material and gateways to it.

Questions to the speaker ranged over the implementation of parish records inspection schemes, the effect of the Church of England clergy database, the possibility of joint archival provision between religious organisations and the challenges posed by electronic records.

**Margaret Harcourt Williams**, Honorary Secretary of the Catholic Archives Society (CAS), outlined the extent of Catholic archives, who looks after them and the problems faced by these bodies. She emphasised the extensive range of these records and the wide range and number of institutions holding them, extending from the dioceses and archives of religious communities to those of other organisations including many charitable and lay organisations. While there is a central archive in Scotland (the Scottish Catholic Archives, which also advises religious orders), the core of archival provision in England and Wales is that of the dioceses, re-established in England and Wales in 1850. The CAS has a sub-group of diocesan archivists, most of whom are part-time as they are priests who are also running parishes. Many are reliant on laity and volunteers to assist in running their operations, but Westminster has a part-time professional to assist the diocesan archivist. The facilities vary considerably: some dioceses have purpose-built archival accommodation but in others provision is poorer and most suffer from lack of space. Generally, they do not accept the records of other Catholic organisations, but there are some exceptions. Each diocese has a secret or closed archive containing confidential material where access is confined to the bishop. Arrangements for parish records vary. Some diocesan archives accept them, while others refer potential deposits to local record offices or (in Wales) to the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth. Some of the distinctive features of Catholic archives were alluded to, including the return of many exiled religious communities after the French Revolution, the growth in the number of both indigenous and international religious orders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the increasing awareness within Catholic communities of their roots and the significance of their archives. The closure and shrinkage of many Catholic institutions had also focussed attention on such material. Records were also of particular importance in the promotion of a cause for canonisation. Archivists are often expected to serve as historians of their own bodies (particularly

in religious communities) and to make oral history recordings. The range and richness of Catholic archival material includes records of schools, missions and hospitals with extensive charitable and social interaction with the wider community. This material is used for a vast range of activities including internal business functions, genealogy, women's history and social history.

After religious communities, the importance of seminary records was stressed, including the four surviving ones at home and two English Colleges abroad in Rome and Valladolid. Here material is significant because it impinges on local and international history too. Catholic lay societies have important records and many Roman Catholic families have deposited material in local record offices. The question was posed as to why Roman Catholic records should not follow Church of England records into local record offices. It was pointed out however, that the volume, complexity and international nature of the material are barriers and there is no obvious location for many Catholic archives such as those of religious orders and international lay societies. Mention was made of the Douai Archive and Library project as a home of last resort for the records of at least some community material.

The problems faced included the future storage of religious communities' records, where joint provision may offer a way forward, and training for the archivists of such communities which CAS is tackling, although some religious also attend professional archival training courses. Often the problems are common to other small specialist repositories. Access can be a particular difficulty: religious orders' records are seen as essentially 'family' archives. However, some standardisation of search room rules would be helpful.

The role of the CAS was crucial in providing information advice and training and encouraging mutual support. Annual conference proceedings, bulletins and occasional papers were distributed and available on its website. It promoted best practice and also brokered support in order to attract young professionals to work in this area and in assisting lone and unqualified archivists.

Questions from the floor focussed on export, the surprise that some religious archives experienced at the wide interest of material in their care, their importance for local communities and the barriers raised by denominationalism.

**Clive Field**, now a research fellow at Birmingham University, proceeded to provide a survey or 'archival map' of Nonconformist records, whose distribution was complex and consequently confusing to potential users. These followed a number of models, some focussing on central provision and deposit of chapel and meeting records in local record offices (such as Methodists, Baptists, the United Reformed Church and Congregationalists), while other denominations had much more varied provision and some repositories such as Dr Williams' Library had important holdings across a number of the denominations (broadly speaking the records of 'Old Dissent' after the Great Ejection of 1662). It was noted that there was little provision for current records management. He then proceeded to a commentary on the archival map, informed by the results of a questionnaire to some of the key institutions in this sphere. The essential features which emerged were five-fold. (i) There was a lack of strategy among the Nonconformist denominations in caring for their records, with much being left to individual initiative, as historically they had been focussed on mission here and

now rather than on their history, and the power-base of the free Churches had always been the local chapels with no central control over their record-keeping functions. (ii) A huge loss of institutional archives had occurred, partly due to a lack of record-keeping traditions, but also to persecution which made the preservation of records dangerous, the footloose nature of chapels and meeting houses, and the fissiparous nature of Nonconformity. (iii) The complexity of the Nonconformist archival map with multiple models in terms of funding and structures and a heavy reliance on private provision by bodies such as Dr Williams' Library and the retention of many archives by local congregations. (iv) The lack of collaboration between Nonconformist archives owing often to a lack of time, resources and infrastructure for on-line cataloguing and comparatively weak links to the academic community. (v) Lack of overall resources exacerbated by the pressures on the finances of parent organisations and the difficulty of private archives in applying for public funding. There remains a heavy reliance on volunteers and the expanding user base of genealogists has tended to draw staff time away from longer-term work to ensure access through listing and retro-conversion of finding aids. Capital funding has also been scarce to provide the quality and quantity of accommodation needed and to support digitisation.

A ten-point action plan was proposed as a way of making progress in addressing these issues through collaborative action. Dr Field stressed, however, that this did not obviate the need for action by individual denominations. He called for more effective co-operation between relevant repositories to improve information flow, share best practice and facilitate joint planning and working, perhaps on the literary archives network model; stronger advocacy on behalf of Nonconformist archives; concerted action to secure the deposit of non-current chapel records in suitable repositories; a co-ordinated campaign to identify the most influential Nonconformist leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to encourage deposit of their papers in appropriate repositories; an agreement by repositories to create collection-level descriptions for all principal Nonconformist archive collections and to include these in freely-accessible on-line catalogues; a resource creation project for a research-focussed project tapping external funding such as a database of Nonconformist clergy; a family and community based archival project by selected repositories perhaps based on digitisation of photographs; an agreement by selected repositories to seek external funding for an oral history project in conjunction with National Life Stories at the British Library to capture the experience of elites and ordinary people in the pews; more attention on archiving Nonconformist websites in conjunction with the UK Web Archiving Consortium; and consideration of a major event or exhibition in 2012 to mark the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Ejection, often seen as the formal beginning of Nonconformity. The effect of some such plan would be to move forward co-operatively on a wide front tackling old and new style archival formats. It was our obligation to posterity and to our Nonconformist forebears, to try to implement at least some of these proposals.

Follow-up points from the floor involved reference to the Wesley Research Centre at Manchester University which was working with the Nazarene church; the wider appreciation of the use of religious archives for other social, cultural and political research; and the question of disposing of some material outside the current focus of a repository or collecting institution in order to provide for the core collections.

## Case studies

**Shaunaka Rishi Das**, Director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies spoke about the Hindu Archive project, based at the Centre. The Archive had emerged out of research studies which had been undertaken. It had been helped by the fact that the Director is a Hindu priest himself which had opened a number of doors. The idea behind the Archive was to try to develop a sense of history among the Hindu community in Britain. This was a pluralistic community with innumerable denominations. The Centre wanted to get these different groups to work together and funding had been obtained by its Director from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the British Hinduism Oral History project focussing on first generation British Hindus mainly arriving from East Africa in the 1970s. The project had been based on two major temples in Wembley and Birmingham and had involved 300 people. No resources were yet available to put the material on the World Wide Web but it was hoped to do so eventually. The Centre had also surveyed 500 young British people aged 14-21 from the Indian community about their attitudes which had highlighted an overwhelming concern voiced by 81% of the respondents to ensure that their children could be educated about their distinctive culture and to preserve it. This need was not apparent to the wider British community because the Indian community had been so completely integrated.

An outline was also given of other work undertaken by the Centre around the digitisation of sacred Hindu texts. It was explained that in the Hindu tradition, sacred texts were not simply studied but also worshipped, and that this had caused some initial problems with British libraries and archives which held such material but which were unused to meeting this kind of need. Shaunaka Rishi Das described how different denominations of the Swaminarayan tradition had to be consulted and come to agreement over the translation of one of their sacred texts but that this had resulted in the creation of an international website with translations and commentaries financed by the New Opportunities Fund. The tremendous opportunities for research into different ethnic and religious cultures was emphasised which needed to be appreciated if we are to have a truly multi-cultural society. The issue of funding was a crucial one for such a small Centre however. It had sought to create an archival resource in support of its activities and had begun with a small archive room which had been full to overflowing within six months. The room held not only records but 40 Asian newspaper titles and sacred religious images. Problems had been identified with the lack of archivists having any knowledge of Indian languages. Denominational divisions could also prove a hindrance, and the Director hoped that different Christian denominations might work together thereby setting an example to other religious traditions. Help was also needed to train the staff of individual temples to archive their records and then provide on-line access to them. He also hoped that the Hindu Archive might become a model for other non-Christian communities which would also enable them to reflect on their identities.

Questions brought out the possibility of the Hindu Centre eventually acting as a central archive for national Hindu organisations such as the UK Hindu Council and National Association of Hindu Temples and the danger of records from individual temples being lost owing to a lack of appreciation of their interest and significance. The need for more suitably linguistically qualified archivists, for archivists from ethnic

minority communities, and for the collection and preservation of archives to support a sense of identity, was highlighted.

**Christopher Hunwick** then gave a picture of the problems and opportunities presented to him while serving as the professional archivist of a small archive, namely that of Manchester Cathedral. Transformed into a collegiate foundation of priests during the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, the original parochial foundation had been closely linked to Chetham's Library for much of its history, and the partnership was essential now in the provision of invigilated search room facilities for readers which were provided by this adjacent institution. He pointed out the distinctive quality of some of the records, which included important information in the Banns Books about marriages which did not proceed and which was not therefore, duplicated in the series of marriage registers. Amongst other material which was particularly striking he noted the photographic collection and the service sheets and other ephemera which showed something of the flavour of life in a cathedral. An oral history initiative had also been undertaken to capture the experience of cathedral staff and volunteers. The pressure placed on a sole part-time archivist by enquiries and outreach was underlined and the reliance on Chetham's Library to cover the vacant post following his move to another position elsewhere until funding could be found to make another appointment.

**Father Nicholas Schofield**, Westminster Diocesan Archivist, outlined the hopes and frustrations he faced on his appointment as part-time Westminster Diocesan Archivist in 2005 while caring for a parish at the same time. He outlined the range of the material held, including papers of Vicars-Apostolic which covered the whole of the British Empire, and the Old Brotherhood archives going back into the penal period, and the archives of St Edmund's College Ware, together with archives of a random selection of Roman Catholic organisations. The archive was seen as an asset which supported the mission of the church. A real breakthrough had been the appointment of a part-time professional archivist to support him, Tamara Thornhill, who spent the remainder of her time working on records management for the Catholic Bishops' Conference. Fr Schofield paid tribute to advice received from The National Archives, but there were still huge challenges to face not least because of under-resourcing over a long period which had led to a backlog of work in all areas. An advisory committee had now been formed which would help to define the role of the Diocesan Archives and formulate a collecting policy. At the moment there is much material for previous archbishops of Westminster, not all of it worthy of permanent preservation, but little material has been taken in relating to schools and parishes of the diocese. There has been steady progress following the appointment of an assistant archivist in establishing intellectual control over the archive. While it was not yet possible to use CALM software for cataloguing, electronic box listing was under way and material which could more appropriately be kept elsewhere such as diocesan chancery and tribunal records were being removed. This progress was being mirrored elsewhere with the appointment of a part-time archivist at Westminster Cathedral, the creation of a Westminster Diocesan Archives blog and the introduction of school visits. Fr Schofield ended with a plea for standardisation among Catholic archives and for greater co-operation between them.

**Graham Johnson**, the Christian Brethren Archivist at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, outlined the scope of the Christian Brethren archive of which

he was the custodian, and the issues he faced in trying to capture records of a rather elusive group (also known as Plymouth Brethren) which was opposed to having any central structures and which had little in the way of common worship beyond the breaking of bread together, and where individual meetings of Brethren had frequently split. He had found that informal networking particularly through the service organisations supporting the Brethren was much more useful than formal approaches in trying to track down records of its members. Published memoirs and testimony were also important as much of this material was published privately and was not available in the British Library. Other problems faced were the workload and backlog of cataloguing and the need to manage change with the reopening of the John Rylands' Deansgate site in 2007 which would mean the loss of support facilities and staff based temporarily at the University Library's Oxford Road site where the Brethren Archive was based. However, the creation of a purpose-built University Archive and Record Management centre at Oxford Road might offer a solution to many of these difficulties in the future. The other major need was to acquire stable funding for long-term sustainability.

### **Round-up and desirable outcomes**

The final session, chaired by **Natalie Ceeney**, began with a summary by **Norman James**, Principal, Archives Advisory Services, at The National Archives, of the issues and challenges emerging. Some crucial themes had ranged from the key importance of cataloguing and on-line accessibility to the wealth of archival source material that has been created and the ever-increasing appetite for the information contained in religious archives from the expanding user community, particularly genealogists and local historians. There was a real need to guide users through the complex network of distributed religious records and to provide gateways to such material where it was available for research. It had also been pointed out that there was an increasing need to capture digital records and oral history to reflect the wide range of religious and cultural experience in our society, as well as to ensure that paper records and photographs as well as electronic records are properly managed so that they can be exploited in the future.

The key question which speakers constantly returned to was how can we do more with limited resources. Part of the answer might be in working more strategically, as some speakers suggested, and making the most of the archival support networks such as RAG and any common guidance which may be produced in support of religious archives. Perhaps however, there was first a need to decide what can best be done centrally within different religious groupings (e.g. producing their own guidance on care, preservation, and any degree of access allowed), what best can be done in partnership and what must in the end be left to self-help and voluntary effort by individual archives.

In all, what was at stake was really a matter of identities. It was important that we preserved and celebrated the different religious experiences within the UK over time. The conference might begin to open up a debate as to how this could be achieved.

**Natalie Ceeney** then opened the discussion by inviting a panel drawn from the day's speakers (Declan Kelly, Clive Field, Margaret Harcourt Williams and Shaunaka Rishi

Das) to look five years ahead. What would success look like for them in five years time where their religious archive sectors were concerned? She asked each of them to come up with three key points.

**Clive Field** saw a collection-level map of religious archives as vital in order to know what existed, effective action to deal with non-paper records, especially from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, in terms of oral history and the management of digital archives, and profile -raising and advocacy to unlock funding. He believed that a broad spectrum of users should be involved to achieve this higher profile and not just the genealogical constituency.

**Margaret Harcourt Williams** believed that the Roman Catholic hierarchy, funding bodies and others needed to recognise the value of record keeping and to take Catholic archives more seriously. Custodians needed to be aware that they were not alone and should work towards standardisation, particularly where rules on access to private Catholic archives were concerned, while the Catholic Archives Society needed more volunteers to carry forward its work in supporting its archival constituency.

**Declan Kelly** opted for cataloguing, collaboration and advocacy as the three areas for action. He hoped that in five years time we would not be talking about collaboration but would have implemented it and that advocacy would have been successful in achieving recognition of the wider value of archives.

**Shaunaka Rishi Das** wanted a more united front from religious archives based on an agreed national strategy for the sector which would help the Centre for Hindu Studies when approaching individual temples about their records. He considered that such a strategy would help with fundraising and that those who subscribed should not have to go through as many funding hoops. He also wanted to see progress in terms of accessibility and advocacy: getting as much as possible on the Web as quickly as possible.

There followed a lively discussion with delegates raising points for debate. Some placed considerable emphasis on opening up access through the availability of on-line catalogues and digitised material on the Web, while others stressed the private aspect of certain religious archives, such as those of enclosed orders, and their internal administrative use. The need for a National Archival Gateway, to underpin the progress already made through the National Register of Archives was discussed but Natalie Ceeney pointed out that the latest estimate of the cost was £12 million and any progress, which The National Archives was trying to co-ordinate, would need to be incremental over time. There was considerable pressure to at least bring together top (collection) level descriptions of archives, and thereby to minimise the considerable amount of speculative enquiry work which religious archivists have to shoulder from enquirers confused about record-keeping patterns, structures and the collecting policies obtaining in this field. However, other voices pointed to the need for more fundamental work on cataloguing and retrieval before collection-level descriptions were mounted on the Web. There was also a plea for archives to promote their value in support of administrative and business functions to their parent bodies. Clive Field felt that private archives now had a wider user base than the academic one of a generation ago and that this needed to be catered for and

Shaunaka Rishi Das emphasised the broader educational use of archives and that this was important to their survival in his community. Declan Kelly underlined that there was a balance to be struck. The Church Of England Record Centre largely served internal church departments but older records held by it and Lambeth Palace Library were mainly the domain of external users.

One delegate profoundly disagreed with the current situation whereby external funding for religious archives tended to be linked to discernible public benefits where grant-awarding bodies were concerned, while another wondered how more funding could in practice be channelled into religious archives. It was suggested that the Artists' Papers Register might provide a suitable model to map the existence of modern religious leaders' papers. However, the difficulties of obtaining money for cataloguing or surveying from the Heritage Lottery Fund were emphasised.

**Rosemary Seton**, secretary of the Religious Archives Group, asked what RAG could do in order to help its constituency to move forward, to which most of the panel answered by emphasising the need for it to provide training, although Clive Field differed in suggesting it should promote a portfolio of externally-funded projects. He recognised however, that individual institutions would need to take a lead in this area.

Further discussion centred around the theme of family history creating a wider research community, particularly as it broadened into local history and the pressure for more digitisation of material. Natalie Ceeney pointed to the experience of The National Archives with 100 on-line document productions for every one in the reading rooms but that this has only happened through commercial digitisation partnerships. Nevertheless, it had allowed The National Archives to maintain its visibility and credibility with the public and its paymasters. Declan Kelly believed there were huge opportunities here but also huge risks and any money for wider access was not going to come from religious denominations themselves. It was also suggested that RAG could offer guidance on commercial partnerships and the issue of Mormon copying.

Summing up, **Natalie Ceeney** thanked all the speakers for their presentations and pointed to the major challenges which religious archives faced. If progress was to be made in tackling these, she believed that collaboration and incremental progress offered the best way forward. The main priorities which had been identified during the day were collection-level description and the need for guidance in this area; the capture of the future as well as the past in the form of digital records ; profile-raising and advocacy (where RAG could make a real difference); training and guidance, especially for the staff of small repositories; the establishment of national priorities which could form the elements of a national strategy; and an educational programme to show why religious archives were important. It was noted that RAG would convene further discussions to see what action might be undertaken in future.