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CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN UK LIBRARIES, ARCHIVES AND MUSEUMS

by Nicholas Kingsley, City Archivist, Birmingham



I am most grateful to your association for the invitation to speak about this topic. Having to prepare this paper has given me a reason to arrange my thoughts on a subject which is very much at the forefront of professional debate in the UK at present. I hope that my remarks about the UK experience will both be of interest in themselves, and throw some light on the parallel discussion it seems you are having in Switzerland.

I propose to begin by discussing the development of libraries, archives and museums in the UK, to give you an impression of the structures within which services are provided at present. I shall then discuss the forces promoting and resisting change in these historic patterns, and end by attempting to peer into the future and see where these pressures are likely to lead us.

The oldest libraries in the British Isles are the libraries of our historic universities and their constituent colleges – at Oxford and Cambridge in England; St Andrews and Glasgow in Scotland; and Trinity College Dublin in Ireland, which have historically collected both books and manuscript materials. In the 18th and early 19th century, these were supplemented by the foundation of the British Library and numerous private libraries in the provincial towns and cities. It remained the case, however, that only the relatively well to do could get ready access to libraries; private libraries charged membership fees which the working man could not afford to pay and the university libraries were usually only open to their members or those recommended by members. In the mid 19th century, at a time of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, it was widely realised that Britain needed a more educated workforce. Progressively

greater resources were put into expanding the formal education system so it could cater for the needs of an increasing proportion of the population, and this was supplemented by voluntary adult education programmes to address the needs of those who had passed school age. By the 1840s and 1850s, there was a widespread recognition among working people that they needed more than mere literacy to progress into better paid and more rewarding work. Books were also recognised as possessing a civilizing and spiritual value for the working man. As a result, an Act of Parliament was passed in 1850 allowing town and city councils to provide libraries funded by the rates (as local property taxation is called in England).

The 1850 Act did not oblige local authorities to set up libraries if they did not want to, but the movement rapidly gathered pace. In Birmingham, the act was adopted in 1860, and a central library and a network of suburban libraries was opened over the next few years. There was tremendous popular enthusiasm for the new service, and when the first

Birmingham library opened, for months it was necessary to queue for hours to become a member! The new public libraries were seen as resources for the whole community: “to put at the service of the poorest and most humble in our town, books which the richest man can scarce afford”, as Joseph Chamberlain stated in 1882. There was no state co-ordination of the stock policies of libraries, and many of them soon went beyond books to support the self-improvement of the working man to collect rare books and manuscripts. In Birmingham, a vast collection of material relating to William Shakespeare was formed, and important collections of manuscripts were bought by public subscription in the 1870s.

Public libraries remained an essentially urban phenomenon until the 1920s, when similar powers became available to the county councils in rural areas. The scattered nature of rural populations meant that it was more expensive to provide ready access to libraries for people in the countryside – you needed more service points, and could afford only



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multiple copies of a more limited range of books. As a result, most rural library services did not develop the same specialist collections or manuscript holdings as the earlier city libraries had, and the function of collecting manuscripts was taken up by county record offices instead. The provision of "comprehensive and efficient" public library services became a mandatory function of local authorities in 1964, and many were comparatively well funded in the 1960s and 1970s. The drive of successive British governments since 1979 to reduce the proportion of gross domestic product accounted for by public spending has, however, meant that most library services have been seriously weakened. Since the mid 1990s, there has been renewed government support for the social and economic role of libraries, but this has so far only been translated into limited and targeted additional finance.

Although the county councils which are responsible for local government in the rural areas of Britain came into existence only in 1888, they inherited the surviving archives of more than three centuries of administrative and judicial work by local magistrates. In some counties, these records were quite extensive, and the historical significance of the

material was well known to antiquarians. In some places, therefore, provision was made for the appointment of a records officer to look after and deal with enquiries about, these records. As the number of historical enquiries grew, so the function of these record officers changed from being primarily administrative to being primarily historical, and their remit was gradually extended beyond the county records to other local archives that were deposited in the county's custody. Most importantly, when social and economic changes in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s led to the sale of many landed estates, county record offices were able to collect and preserve the family and estate records accumulated on estates since the middle ages. By the 1960s, every county in England and Wales had a county record office, and most of them have built very extensive collections documenting all aspects of the life of their area.

During the 20th century, and more especially since the 1960s, the university sector has expanded massively; one in three British children now go to University, whereas it was only 1 in 10 thirty years ago. Some of the new universities have followed the pattern of the ancient foundations in building big research collec-

tions of rare books and manuscripts; one thinks of the great collections of the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester, the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds; or Nottingham University Library. Others, and especially those without major private benefactions, have concentrated on meeting their students' curriculum needs. In most cases, archive collections have been built up within the university library, and where separate university archives were established, as at Liverpool University, there has been a recent trend for them to become a part of the

university library. A few universities, like Manchester and Nottingham, have focused on acquiring local manuscript collections, but the majority have tried to build collections that support the research strengths of the teaching staff. Despite a lack of formal co-ordination, there has rarely been any competition between institutions to collect material on the same topic, so that the university sector has gradually developed into a network of subject specialist collections. In this way, archives with a subject rather than a geographical focus can usually be found a home. Examples would be the Sudan Archive at the University of Durham; the agricultural history collections at the University of Reading; or the military history collections at Kings College London. Universities have been the main, but not the only providers, of such subject specialist archives. There are a few operated by private charitable trusts, such as the Centre for Contemporary Medical Archives at the Wellcome Institute in London, and others by professional bodies, such as the Royal Institute of British Architects' archives and drawings collection.

Alongside the archival collections of the county record offices and university libraries, stand the three national

archives, the Public Record Office (founded in 1838), the National Archives of Scotland (1923) and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (1924). It seems likely that these three will be joined by a new Welsh Record Office in the near future. All of these institutions are concerned primarily with the records generated by central government, although the NAS and PRONI also collect private archives. PRONI in particular has from its foundation acted as a county record office for the six counties of Northern Ireland, while the NAS has responded to the failure of many Scottish county councils (many of which have very small populations and budgets) to create county record offices, by accepting on deposit local authority, family and estate records from all over the country.

Both libraries and archives in the UK have something resembling a national pattern of provision. All universities and local authorities provide library services; and *A National Archives Policy for the United Kingdom*, published in 1996, identified very few categories of archives for which appropriate repositories were not available. The same is not true of museums and art galleries. Once again, there are a range of national institutions founded in the 18th and 19th centuries, many of which – like the Victoria & Albert Museum for the fine arts, the Imperial War Museum, the Natural History Museum, the British Museum and the National Gallery – have an international reputation. There are local authority museums, some of them with very fine collections, like the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, but museums have never become a statutory service in the way that public libraries have, and there are many areas without local authority museums. There are university museums, a few of which, like the University Museum and Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, or the Barber Institute at Birmingham University, play a major public role, but the majority are fairly modest in scale and in some cases difficult for the wider public to access. The vast majority of museums in the UK are provided by charitable trusts, and although some, like the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, operate on a large scale, many of them have very limited resources.

I hope I have kept your interest with this fairly lengthy recital of the history of our

cultural institutions, but I think it has been necessary background. You can see, I think, that our history gives us a good many connections between museums, archives and libraries already. There are libraries and archives in many of the big museums, such as the National Art Library at the Victoria & Albert Museum, or the film archive of the Imperial War Museum. There are libraries in most county record offices, and archive services in many city and university libraries. And within this broad national picture, there is much fine detail. In Birmingham, for example, the City Archives has developed out of the manuscripts section of the Central Library. We are still physically located in the Central Library, and form part of the Libraries Division of the Culture & Leisure Department of the City Council. My responsibilities as City Archivist, however, extend to the management of the local studies, history, and geography collections of the central library, and I form part of the management team for the Central Library. There is not a clear separation of professional library and archive responsibilities, and this is increasingly common in the UK.

So what are the pressures for further convergence between the library, archive and museum professions? I think we can identify pressures from three directions; external, institutional and professional pressures, and I shall deal with each of these in turn.

The present British government has been very active in defining an agenda for the cultural sector. I think it would be true to say, however, that its vision is driven not by ambitions for cultural achievements for their own sake, but for their potential to contribute to the Government's broader objectives in relation to education and lifelong learning, social inclusion and economic development. Thus with its interest in fostering a "learning society" in which people continually extend and renew their skills and experience, it has been quick to seize on the significance of libraries, archives and museums as places where people already choose to go for a variety of different kinds of learning experience. It argues that this pattern can be focused, marketed, and extended to the support of its broader objectives, and it offers libraries, archives and museums access

to new resources for programmes of this kind if they are willing to reshape their priorities and practices accordingly.

Although it would be unfair to suggest that the Government does not recognise the difference between libraries, archives and museums, it does see the similarities between them more readily than the differences. It sees institutions which hold collections and provide access to them for a variety of learning purposes; it sees a range of public buildings which to a greater or lesser extent function as public meeting places; it sees institutions which hold large amounts of information of potential economic and social value; it sees three professions all interested in mounting digitised images of their collections and catalogue data on the Internet. It sees crossover patterns of use, which show, for example, that library users are more likely than non library users to visit museums, and it sees that research tends to draw on resources across the professional divides. It also sees in some of the institutions which serve more than one discipline examples of work in exhibitions, publications and digital materials which demonstrates the value of inter-disciplinary approaches.

In the light of this experience, Government is promoting the benefits of collaborative and cross-domain initiatives. It has recently established a single new body, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLAC) to replace the existing national advisory bodies for libraries and museums. MLAC is intended both to promote the interests of libraries, archives and museums inside Government, and to help realise the Government's policy for the cultural sector through encouraging individual institutions to pursue initiatives consistent with that policy. We have a saying in England that you need both a carrot and a stick to make a donkey walk forwards, and in line with this, MLAC will have a budget for funding to support collaborative initiatives and will develop and monitor best practice standards for cultural services to measure their performance.

The second set of pressures for convergence are institutional. As I have said, many institutions have historically been not just libraries or archives or museums but some combination of two or three of these. In Birmingham Central Library,

we have always had manuscripts and printed materials side by side, although the administrative structure within which these have been managed has changed over time. In recent years, however, there has been a far greater tendency to look for the synergies between services, and for ways in which the collections of one service can support, or be jointly marketed with, those of the others. Because of the advantages to our users, we have sought to develop as a “one-stop-shop” for researchers, facilitating access to the full range of materials for our knowledge of the past. In the last few years, and partly in response to the Government’s “carrot and stick” approach, we have been looking increasingly beyond the walls of the library to our sister institution next door, the City Museum & Art Gallery, and extending the idea of collaborative working to include them too. Last year, for example, we developed a joint virtual exhibition, for the City Council’s website, of the library’s collection of historic children’s books, puzzles and games, and the museum’s collection of toys.

We also collaborated on a major exhibition of the photographic collections of the two institutions. The library’s collection is much the larger and more important, being one of the eleven recognised national photographic collections, but the museum also has interesting material and, of course, far better quality display facilities than the library. By working together we were able to achieve a much more impressive exhibition than the library could have mounted alone, to reach a wider audience, and to receive far wider publicity than the library could have generated. The museum benefited from the opportunity to show a wider range of work than its own collections could provide, and the project brought to light for the public some of the important works from the museum’s col-

lection which it might have felt were not worth showing on their own. In professional terms, the museum benefited from the library’s curatorial expertise, while the library benefited from the museum’s display equipment and expertise, and from access to its audience – an audience used to looking at works of art on the wall, unlike our library audience.

There are other institutional pressures too. For many years, public services in the UK have been subject to very tight financial restrictions. In the twenty or so years I have worked for local government, I can remember only two years when we had budget increases beyond the level of inflation, and perhaps five years where we have had a standstill budget. The remaining thirteen years have seen more or less serious budget reductions. In the light of financial pressures like this, there has been an understandable tendency for the governing bodies of cultural institutions to look for ways in which they can achieve economies of scale and reduce overhead costs. This has often taken the form of amalgamating archival and library institutions; more rarely archives and museums. There have been many different models for how such amalgamations take place, but one of the most common has been to make an archive service part of a

library service, and to provide common support functions, such as finance, administration and personnel, for the joint service. Such arrangements have also usually led to reductions in the seniority and salary of the chief archivist, and have sometimes led to other job losses too. Another, and usually happier, model has been to transfer library local history collections to the management of the archivist and to physically bring the collections together. This often has advantages to users, who are able to access printed and manuscript sources side by side, and can avoid the duplication of facilities such as air-conditioned strongrooms and conservation facilities.

Finally, there are professional reasons for convergence, which I have begun to touch on by talking about our photographic exhibition project with the City Museum & Art Gallery. It has always been the case that collections do not reflect the tidy divisions between archivists, librarians and museum curators. Let us take the example of Sir Benjamin Stone, the Conservative Member of Parliament for Sutton Coldfield, who at his death in 1919 bequeathed his collections to Birmingham Central Library. Stone had for many years been an enthusiastic



amateur photographer. His collections included some 20,000 photographs taken over a period of forty years, many of them of local scenes, but also photographs reflecting his appointment as official photographer for the coronation of King Edward VII and as the first man to be allowed to photograph Parliament in session. These were clearly archival. But Stone not only took photographs, he collected them too. A second passion was ethnography, and he accumulated original and published photographs from around the world which he arranged in albums with titles like "The types and races of mankind". He also collected newscuttings on topics of interest to him, and arranged these in similar albums. On their own, these might well be seen as library materials. Finally, his interest in local and parliamentary history led him to collect a number of artefacts, including a series of medieval tally sticks rescued from the fire which destroyed the Palace of Westminster in 1834. These, surely, were first and foremost museum objects. All this material has ended up in the collections of the Central Library, but the unsuitability of most of it for traditional bibliographical description has led to the partial dispersal of the collection and the application of inappropriate cataloguing standards to much of the rest. The greater convergence of library, archive and museum institutions offers the opportunity to ensure that where collections are of very mixed media, the different parts are segregated and appropriately stored and catalogued without the original integrity of the collection being totally lost. In a few institutions, such as the Bodleian Library at Oxford, elements of this practice have long been in place, and collections received as far back as the 17th and 18th centuries are stored in parallel sequences of manuscripts and printed works.

The changing formats in which archives are generated and preserved offer further pressures for convergence too. With film, sound and electronic records archivists increasingly accept that our task is to preserve the information they carry and not the original fragile physical medium. We are content to ensure that in future, a digital version is copied with no or minimal loss of quality from one generation of physical medium to another. It is possible to see acceptance of this position that it is the content not

the carrier which matters as a move away from the archivist's traditional defence of the physical collection into a post-custodial age. If a great deal of our material in future is generated or stored in electronic form, we may find that our notions of a repository in which archives are stored, and to which readers come for access, have to change. We can see the shape of the future already, perhaps, by looking at the UK National Digital Archive of Datasets, where large Government databases are managed on behalf of the Public Record Office by the University of London, and made available directly to the public across the Internet, without charge.

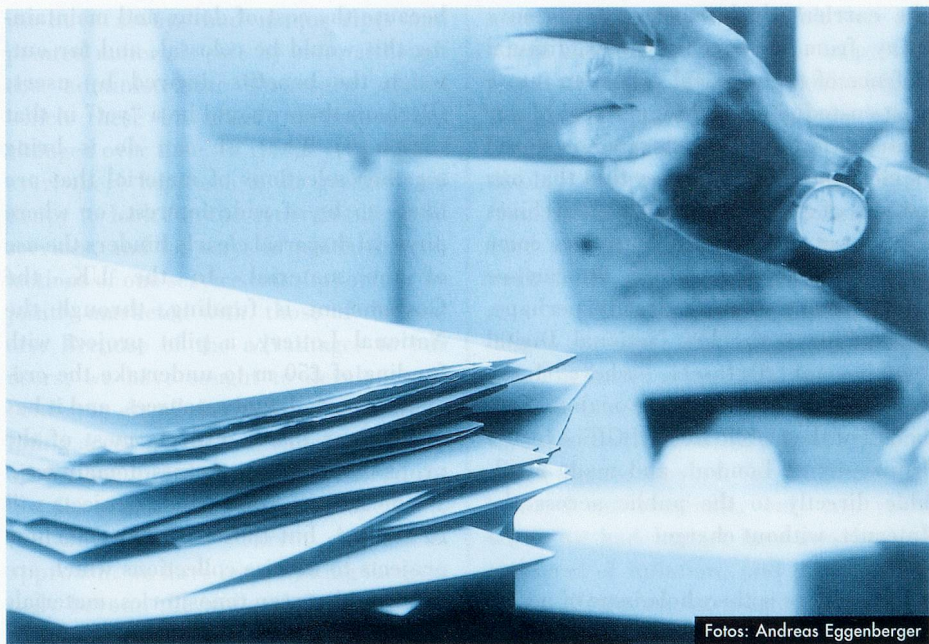
Finally, there is the whole issue of access to information about collections, and to images of traditional material. Librarians, archivists and curators all want to ensure that the public know what they have in their collections, and as the world turns increasingly to the Internet as a source of information, so it becomes increasingly important for those records of holdings to be represented in the digital domain. In the UK, the three professions have all developed parallel projects for ensuring that data which at present exists only in manual form is captured in electronic form and made available over the Internet. We have developed independently because of the complexity of the technology and the importance we have attached to ensuring that professional standards in the description of our materials are adhered to. We are all aware, however, that many researchers will be equally interested in relevant printed and manuscript sources, photographs, film and sound recordings, or objects, and that from their point of view, a cross-domain approach to resource discovery has only advantages. Through work being done on metadata standards, it will soon become possible to perform seamless searches across library, archive and museum databases, and the UK already has an Interoperability Focus which seeks to promote cross-domain resource discovery in the cultural sector.

What the public actually wants to be able to do, of course, is not just to find out where relevant source material is, but to see it without the need to travel around the country. Clearly, we cannot digitise everything and mount it on the web

because the cost of doing and maintaining this would be colossal, and far outweigh the benefits derived by users. (Perhaps there should be a "yet" in that sentence!) What we can do is bring together selections of material that are likely to be of wide interest, or where physical dispersal clearly hinders the use of the material. In the UK, the Government is funding, through the National Lottery, a pilot project with funding of £50 m to undertake the creation of such digital resources, and it has made clear that it expects most of the projects to work in a cross-domain way. We do not yet know which projects will be funded, but those submitted include projects to digitise collections which are scattered between repositories; materials on particular subjects which are found throughout the country; and materials from libraries, archives and museums about a particular area.

From all of the foregoing, it is clear that there are plenty of reasons for the closer joint working of librarians, archivists and museum curators. But is it true that a precise distinction between the roles of archivist, librarian and curator is no longer possible, and that the three professions must gradually become one?

In my opinion, it is possible to overstate the case for convergence. It is clear that there must be far closer collaboration between the three professions and the institutions which house us than has been the case in the past. But I think it is far from clear that the three professions, or even our institutions, necessarily need to merge as a result. There are clear differences of professional ethos and standards between the three groups, and the UK experience to date has shown that where the different professions are yoked together within a single institution, one profession comes to take a leading role and to dominate the others. In the great national museums, for example, archives and library collections have had comparatively slender resources, and archivists have often been unable to enforce professional storage and cataloguing standards; while in university libraries – some of them with major archive collections – the same issues have sometimes been felt. Archivists, as the smallest of the professions, have probably most to lose from an extension of this process, even if (as Matthew Evans, the



Fotos: Andreas Eggenberger

new chairman of the MLAC, recently said) “archives are the glue which holds libraries and museums together”.

The library, archive and museum professions have tended to have very different priorities, based upon professional ethos and standards. These differences are not artificial barriers to cross-domain working, but a proper reflection of the needs and characteristics of the material each profession is working with. Archivists, with the physical and moral defence of their collections at the centre of their concerns, have a prime concern with the environmental and security standards, which they share in large part with museum colleagues but not with the majority of librarians, whose materials are essentially replaceable. And while archivists

and curators may be united in asserting the importance of preservation, the environmental standards required for storing paper and parchment are different to the standards for oil paintings or electronic records.

The importance of security to archivists and curators means that readers are closely supervised and generally prevented from behaving in ways that might damage the collections. When a famous painting like the Mona Lisa in the Louvre is damaged by a vandal, or stolen, like *The Scream*, it makes newspaper headlines across the civilised world. But the same is not true in libraries, where the theft and mutilation of books is an everyday occurrence. Placing library, archive and museum collections together makes it difficult to enforce the appropriate standards of behaviour, and increases the risk of catastrophic damage. For example, in Birmingham the City Archives occupies the top floor of the Central Library. Last year, a young man decided to use a quiet and unsupervised corner of the library to sniff glue and smoke a cigarette. His cigarette ignited his glue and set fire to books on the shelving he was hidden behind. Only prompt action by a vigilant member of staff who noticed the smoke before the blaze was too far advanced enabled the fire to be contained before it became a major incident. Complex institutions serving purposes where different standards of behaviour apply will increase the risks to the preservation of our collections.

There is one final pressure for divergence, which I do not want to press on you too strongly, but which I do not think we can altogether ignore. Over a long period of time (decades if not centuries), libraries are likely to become increasingly dependent upon electronic information accessed over networks: moving from collections to connections, as my library colleagues put it. Some of the stock they presently hold will become available in digital form, and a good deal will simply be superseded. They will be left with a diminishing volume of physical materials not held in electronic form and rare books with an intrinsic financial or research value. Archives may also find that increasingly their acquisitions will consist of electronic records, and that they digitise their existing holdings. But in the case of archives, the existing physical holdings will not be discarded, since they will have values that cannot be conveyed by an electronic copy. Museums will continue to be focused on collections of physical objects, even though they too may be able to take advantage of digital technology to extend the accessibility of their holdings. We may thus find that libraries gradually cease to be collection-based institutions in the same way as archives and museums.

To sum up: UK archivists have been working with librarians, and to a lesser extent with museum curators, for many years, in a wide range of institutional structures. There is clearly now an impetus towards the extension of such joint working. The Government's agenda and the financial pressures on professional institutions are both acting to promote this, as is the impact of modern technology. I would argue, however, that while we should enthusiastically embrace the advantages to be gained from closer joint working, there are readily identifiable risks to the physical and moral defence of archives if we go beyond that into combined institutions and a shared profession.

NICHOLAS KINGSLEY

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