

Dark Archivist: meeting the needs of non-users

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There now seems little doubt that personal visits to English County Record Offices are falling. After a long, slow rise through the twentieth century, visits seem to have peaked around the Millennium and are now declining. The phenomenon appears to affect the network of local government offices specifically; private and specialist repositories are still seeing growth, possibly because it has taken some time for users – particularly family historians – to spot their potential. However, the tide is turning and the inescapable question faces us: as public funding becomes increasingly dependent on demonstrable takeup of the service offered, how can Record Offices justify continued investment by their parent authorities?

That question begs another: why are visitor numbers falling in the first place? A survey carried out by Oxfordshire Record Office came up with the not-entirely-surprising conclusion that too many researchers are dazzled by the Internet, and believe that all the

information they could possibly require must already be found somewhere in its coils – an odd viewpoint considering the time they spend demanding that we digitize all our documents and mount the images on our website.

However, this is merely one aspect of the soundbite generation. Quite simply, an ethos of instant gratification is emerging in which research itself, let alone visiting a Record Office to do it, is seen as too slow and too much trouble. Family historians used to regard the painstaking sifting through original records as part of the fun; now a new class of family historians has evolved who simply post queries on message boards and who regard failure to get a response as a dead end, not an invitation to get their own hands dirty. The number of enquiries received by Record Offices continues to grow, often from people who would have no difficulty visiting the Office themselves but prefer to pay for someone else to do the work. As for more general history, that is deemed to be the province of the professional; history is what you watch on a half hour television programme, not what you look out for yourself.

There will always be those who believe in intelligent first-hand research, but they are a minority and in an increasingly populist culture only too easy for the fund-holders to dismiss. In 2004 Oxfordshire Record Office brought together a group of non-users to ask why they had no interest in the service, whether they considered it important, and how it might attract them. The result shocked us out of any complacency; they could see no circumstances under which they might visit the Office, and regarded its very existence as a waste of the money they paid in taxes. In line with populist thinking, they could see no reason why they should underwrite the interests of

a minority group within society. But perhaps most disturbing, they seemed unable to grasp any connection between the history they enjoyed on television and the original documents from which it came.

All of which drove us back to reconsider the function of a Record Office and what it is we exist to do. The beginnings of the archive network in Britain do not make this easy. Record Offices hold historic documents; at no point has anyone formally suggested why they might want to do this. Because someone has to preserve those documents? If so, why? Intrinsic value? Or do they only have value if someone uses them? And if so, are we facilitating use by researchers, or using them ourselves?

Both Central Government and our employers expect us to contribute to a number of agendas: education, lifelong learning, social inclusion. The stress is on the practical value of archives; their ability to link individuals into the society around them, to create a community in an increasingly fragmented world. We are expected to promote this use of the material in our care, to encourage those who would benefit to take advantage of it. But if they have no interest in taking advantage?

The time has come to review our delivery systems. Even if by default, the way we make the information our holdings contain available has always been key to our function. In the early days of the service, we were preservers and cataloguers of documents; we made no attempt to encourage people to use our holdings but merely reacted when they asked to do so. As too few people took up this proactive stance

to justify our existence, we developed into promoters of our holdings, encouraging people to visit and make use of them. Now that the number of people willing to make direct use of the documents is falling, we have to find a new way of delivering the informational content.

Partly this must involve digitized images of archival material put out on the Web. However, this is expensive and still fails to tackle the key issue of the growing number of those with an interest in history but a strong reluctance to spend time carrying out research, however the documents are provided for them. If we are to connect the public with the documents in our care to meet current agendas, we need to take on some of the research function ourselves; to extend the interpretation of the documents from the introductions to our catalogues into actual snapshots of historical events and issues, provided in a user-friendly, easily-digestible way.

From this emerged the concept of the Dark Archivist. Our objective was to create a website containing fragments of Oxfordshire's past; interesting or entertaining stories drawn from the records we hold which might catch public attention and thus give the inhabitants of the county some idea of the past around them and a link to the generations which went before them. The decision was taken to aim the site at young people in the 12 to 16 age range. Partly this was because experience suggested this was the time when many people lost a taste for history, seeing it as one more boring examination subject; partly because the sort of interactive, games-based site appropriate for that age range often attracts people from a far broader area.

DARK ARCHIVIST

The site needed a theme which could overturn the traditional perception of archives as staid and boring, the “dusty old documents” cliché beloved of every media report on the subject. The site would be portrayed as the home of the Dark Archivist, an animated cartoon character who was the reverse of the supposedly typical archivist – more like a sinister rock musician. From his lair – a surreal representation of the converted church which houses Oxfordshire Record Office – he provided the route to a variety of interactive activities based on the documents held in the Record Office:

- An interactive tour of Oxford. The user steers a tiny Dark Archivist figure along the streets of Loggan’s C17th map of the city. Whenever the figure hits a hotspot, a drop-down text tells the story of some violent or macabre event which took place there at some point in history.
- The time machine. The user is taken back in time to various key points in Oxfordshire’s history, faced with a real and dangerous situation, and given various options to choose from in order to escape. Choosing the correct way out (that is, the one which actually happened) each time gives them a certificate as a qualified time traveler. The wrong options are often wrong because they’re historically impossible – calling the police before a police force existed, or escaping in a punt

before punting came to Oxford – so that getting it wrong still teaches something.

- Don't trust the evidence. Various stories are built up stage by stage from the documents in the Office – but each successive document pushes the story in a different direction. An object lesson in understanding that the evidence provided by any document may be drastically modified by a subsequent one.
- Newspapers. Images of original documents are transformed by an animated magnifying glass into a modern tabloid newspaper, telling the story the way the modern media might report it.
- Old remedies. The user is shown various illnesses, and invited to click on them to find out how they would have been treated in the C18th, based on an old remedy book in the Record Office.

The Record Office did not possess the IT skills to create this, so brought in the London-based web designers Reading Room. The budget was severely limited, with a ceiling of £10,000 – not a great deal in IT terms – and some original objectives of the site had to be sacrificed along the way. Accessibility was key to the project; Reading Room has a proven track record in meeting disability guidelines, one of the reasons we chose them. But even so, Government rules on public service websites seriously hampered the project. The guidelines they maintain – straightforward factual information without distracting images or text manipulation – are appropriate for most of the services provided by local government, which people access to find out specific pieces of knowledge. Unfortunately they work directly against an enticing site intended to compete with the commercial sector. The final solution was that Dark Archivist would not be

created as an integral part of the Record Office webpages on the County Council's website, but as a free-standing minisite, hosted in the first instance by Reading Room themselves with links from our existing web presence. It can be found at www.darkarchivist.com.



READINGROOM 

The site has been a considerable success, with thousands of hits in the first week alone. At present it covers the Record Office's holdings alone, but it is hoped that both the Museums and local studies

services will soon add items from their own collections. There remains some confusion in heritage circles, however, as to its exact purpose. Many people have asked if there is any evidence that it is encouraging more people to visit the Record Office in person, which rather misses the point. Yes, a few people have visited saying that they came across us through Dark Archivist, which is a bonus. But the site was always intended to be an alternative to visiting the service in person. Its target group was those who would never dream of researching in person – at least at this stage in their lives – but to whom we felt a responsibility: either in purely financial terms (they or their parents are taxpayers and thus deserve something from the service they fund) or in the broader sense that our remit is to provide access to the past for them.

Dark Archivist is not an advertisement or a taster for the Record Office. It takes as its basis the contention that our purpose is to link the people of Oxfordshire with the past of their society, and that we must develop the way we approach this in accordance with the way that society functions in the present. Neither is it a replacement for traditional research techniques. Rather it reflects the plurality of the present age, attempting to multiply the ways in which people can access the information we hold and thereby make archives fundamental to the way society perceives itself.