A Pepys into the Future

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This article is a consideration of the value of diary keeping as an archival record, and the implications of a technique such as shorthand on the form of records.

Many is the reader who must have shared the experience that goes something like: picking up a box of floppy disks (your own or the organisation's) to find each with no label or perhaps a faded one stating something as meaningful as 'New Report', 'Backup', 'Revised Reorganisation Proposal' and then wondering 'What on earth is on these?'. And knowing at the same time your computer no longer has a floppy drive. And then having the melancholy realisation that you probably never will know the answer: the imperative is just not there to chase down the needed hardware (if not the software as well). You then put the box back on the shelf – avoiding the final appraisal.

Accessibility problems in an archival context usually are enumerated in terms of the hardware and software problems for access to relatively recent electronic format records or to the physical condition for paper records. In this context, we may less occasionally contemplate what the accessibility position will be like in a decade and our perception for that

time is possibly: worse; far worse; far, far worse; or do I hear 'solved' from anyone? But – as a variant – what if record content is accessible physically but just not intellectually? And I do not mean the problem of bad handwriting.

The *London Review of Books* (4 December 2008) has an entertaining article by Leah Price on the rise in the 1800s and fall in recent times of shorthand and related recording methodologies. The boom time for shorthand was the nineteenth century; expertise was, for example, seen as pathway to social rise if not fame and fortune. This is where Charles Dickens started: his learning shorthand led to journalism and journalism to the fiction. The popularity of shorthand was due to many causes. Two I would mention are: business need due to the increase in the complexity and volume of activities as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution; and the increasing democratisation of political activities. It became accepted that voters (if not citizens) had a right of access to parliamentary proceedings and that only shorthand (Hansard) could provide the basis. One consequence of the boom was for networks to develop of specialist shorthand users as occurs with the Internet today except these users relied on the postal service and specialist publications. Shorthand users shared tips, provided assistance to each other on finer points, and 'gratuitous correctors' helped the novice learn the basic skills (not to forget that 'gratuitous' today has quite a different emphasis if not meaning).

The popular nineteenth-century shorthand systems such as Pitman's and Gregg's were by no means the only such systems – they were just the most commercially successful. Shorthand systems had first developed in classical times and more sophisticated systems were developed in the Renaissance, largely for specialised purposes in areas such as the law and for private recordkeeping activities such as diary keeping.

Diary keeping as a human activity has a history far too complex than can be summarised in any meaningful way. The reasons for keeping a diary in the first place range from the truly personal, such as a record for spiritual purposes, to the truly secular, the politician's diary written with an eye to publication and edited so as to place the writer in the best light. The value of a diary as direct testimony is equally difficult to summarise as it depends very much on the context in which it is written and the extent to which it can be judged as being self-serving on the part of the writer.[1] Which brings us to Pepys.

Perhaps the most famous diary of all was written in a variant of shorthand. I am, of course, referring to Pepys's diary. The diary describes Samuel Pepys's life as a civil servant with the English Navy in the seventeenth century and his personal affairs - in all senses. Pepys was not of the inner-circle around King Charles but whilst not privy to the decision-making process his position could be described as being one of those who are the first to know what was happening. As a recorder of events, Pepys's long description of the Great Fire of London in 1666 and its aftermath is still the most quoted eyewitness account and, as social recorder, he is the first (so far as I am aware) to mention the beginning of tea drinking in England. No serious history of Charles II or his times can be written without reference to Pepys.[2] The diary only covers the years 1660–1669 but at 1.25 million words if it would not defeat a blogger on length then it would win hands down in terms of quality access to contemporary events and vividness of the account. And the diary can at points be as equally 'breathless' as any blog.

Pepys's diary today, for all its intrinsic interest, makes in some aspects for curious if not difficult reading. While Pepys as a character is similar to someone you could meet today, and with problems and challenges that are comprehensible to us, much of the sense of place and times is lost to us. The dirt and mud in the streets, the disease, the sudden death and plague, the darkness, and the smells (if Pepys mentions a smell then you know it must have been bad). Pepys is not a novelist writing for us but writing for himself: it is his own record. That is to say, for instance, when a name is mentioned by Pepys, he does not explain who that person is or describe their physical or personal character. You, as reader, have to do the work.

But what the diary as a diary exhibits in particular is that it is a record written by a man interested in everything, not just in his own narrow concerns. As mentioned, Pepys was a bureaucrat and, as such, much of the activity recorded in his diary is concerned with meetings, note-taking, memoranda - and recordkeeping to protect himself.[3] More significantly, it was written by someone who did not write with an eye to history and their place in it (though he did actively preserve the record by having the pages properly bound). From the pages of his diary, Pepys can be seen as: ambitious, grasping, envious, open to a bribe, sentimental, generous, unkind, insightful, God-fearing, lecherous, hardworking, conscientious, and with a deep love of music. He did not mind showing us that he could

be wrong, conscience-stricken, hypocritical, and personally highly conflicted. For example, on occasions he could be extremely jealous of his wife at the same time knowing there was no foundation to his suspicion.[4] Few if any diarists have been as frank about success and failure as Pepys. That is to say, he was conscious of self rather than being self-conscious.

The diary is written largely in a personal version of Shelton's shorthand system. This use of shorthand by Pepys was for various reasons: for speed (he was a very busy man and days could pass between putting down events); to prevent any prying into his activities by his wife or servants if somehow they found the diary; and for his own security in case the diary fell into the hands of his enemies. On Pepys's death in 1703, the diary along with his library (we would more properly describe it as an 'archive' given the range of its contents) passed to his old college at Cambridge where it lay untouched for a century.

The potential value of the diary was finally recognised but first it had to be properly understood. In the 1820s, a project began with the aim of publishing at least part of the diary. The first editor, John Smith, spent many grinding years on the project. His means of intellectual access was one document in Pepys's papers that was written by Pepys in two versions: in his 'code' and in longhand English (this process of translation involved a similar role to that of the Rosetta Stone in the understanding of ancient Egyptian).[5] Sadly, Smith did not realise the diary was predominately in a shorthand still in use such that he could have found an easy key to much of the diary on a bookshop shelf. To add more than insult to the poverty-stricken Smith, his patron on the project put his own name on the first published edition and eventually wrote Smith out of the project completely – neglecting even to mention Smith in the foreword. Many editions and abridgements of the diary have been published since Smith's version. The most comprehensive (and unexpurgated) is the edition by Robert Latham and William Mathews published in the 1970s. This edition is in 11 volumes including an index and an invaluable companion of names and relationships, and general background to Pepys's times and institutions.[6]

The central point is that without shorthand there was no way that Pepys could have written so frankly and so copiously. For that matter, the record would not have survived if it had been readily accessible to his contemporaries given what was in it. Times have changed: few today

learn shorthand. Shorthand, as mentioned earlier, provides a means of recording events as they happen and for a fast personal means of recording information from a written source. Now we have micro voice recorders, video recorders, voice recognition software, and the like, alongside the older stand-by of the photocopier. We now have the detail to the point where we drown in it: the public record is all round (fast-forward to Google). What we have now I could argue is the quantitative 'more' at the cost of the qualitative 'less'; we have de-skilled in a way and to our cultural detriment. But the arguments on these issues are too complex to be reduced to, shall we say, shorthand.

As for diaries as such, those who write a diary with a Pepys-like model of frankness and detail can never truly be Pepysian: the writer expects it all to become public if not now then at some time later. And this foreseen accessibility distorts what is or can be said because the diary is written with the driver of the wider world in mind. That is to say the writer's public image, revenge, the point-scoring potential, and the like are always in the consciousness of the writer. It could of course be argued: what is the point of personal writing if the writer cannot share it immediately with the world? Public writing (and associated images) can bring celebrity and associated benefits and many writers obviously settle for notoriety. Not to forget that with a blog or a product like Facebook we also can have the salutary if not chastening experience of creating a public record and contemplating afterwards just what it was that we wrote or was in the image that we put up.[7]

As for shorthand as such, to quote Price:

> What's left of shorthand? Most concretely, a stockpile of corporate and personal records, many of which have never been transcribed and never will be. On shorthand-themed list serves, the most poignant postings ask for help decoding a grandmother's or aunt's diary. That these requests are answered suggests that the spirit of 'gratuitous correction' remains alive on the net.[8]

Will this kind of plea for help be made by archivists in 10 or 20 years, if not for shorthand then for electronic format records? And what will be the response? I do not know but I would with reasonable confidence suggest there will never be another Pepys – or one to be stumbled across in the archives for that matter.

Endnotes

[1] The indirect or evidential value of a diary which is unrecognised by the writer is equally fascinating. For example, country diarists in Britain in the past would mention the everyday or mundane, and with a regularity which gives value: the date each year the village pond first froze in Winter or the date particular plants blossomed. From such stuff a year-by-year surrogate climate record can be constructed extending back centuries.

[2] Sadly, Pepys stopped writing his diary in 1669 when he thought (incorrectly) that it was sending him blind. Unfortunately, because his most important Crown appointments were held after this time.

[3] 'He was as a rule a superb organizer, able to see the importance of getting the details right, and then looking beyond them to a larger vision. He prided himself on his orderliness and efficient running of his office. He was the first to keep written records of both officers and ships, and you can still admire the tidily ruled and written lists turned out by his clerks. When he wanted to prove a point – say, about the costliness of buying shipbuilding supplies on credit – he could ask one of the clerks to produce the evidence.' Claire Tomalin, *Samuel Pepys: the unequalled self,* London, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 147.

[4] The following quote perhaps says it all: '... and so, well pleased, home – where I find it almost night and my wife and the Dancing Master alone, above, not dancing but walking. Now, so deadly full of jealousy I am, that my heart and head did so cast about and fret I could not do any business possibly, but went out to my office; and anon late home again ... [I] could hardly sleep, yet durst not say anything ... it is a deadly folly and plague I bring on myself for being so jealous; and by giving myself such an occasion, more than my wife desired, of giving her another month's dancing ...', entry of 15 May 1663, Robert Latham and William Mathews (eds), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys,* London, G Bell and Sons Ltd, 1970.

[5] This 'Rosetta' document was of a verbal account given to Pepys in 1680 by King Charles concerning his escape from Cromwell's forces after the Battle of Worcester in September 1651.

[6] Latham and Mathews, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys.*

[7] In poetic terms, archivally the sentiment – and reality – applicable in the age of the Internet is 'The Moving Finger writes; and having writ, / Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit / Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, / Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.' Edward FitzGerald, *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam,* 1879.

[8] Leah Price, *London Review of Books,* 4 December 2009, p. 43.