

WHAT ARE ARCHIVES?*

J. L. Burke and C. M. Shergold

Few people when using the word 'archives' have an accurate conception of what is denoted by it. One might expect that if one asked the proverbial man in the street, 'What are archives?', he would mutter in reply something about old papers and attics. Further questioning may result in a blank look or may even bring the retort of 'Why not burn the stuff?'¹ Similarly, that other pragmatist, the businessman, will say that he is not interested in what happened a hundred years ago, ten years ago, or even yesterday. Likewise, the local councillor may see the maintenance of the council's old records as an unnecessary waste of ratepayers' money. These same people might therefore reasonably be expected to see the professional archivist as a kind of bower bird—instinctively trying to preserve every scrap of evidence of the past even down to the petty cash vouchers.²

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines archives as 'a place in which public records or historic documents are kept; a historical record or document so preserved.' Although this definition includes some important incidental characteristics of archives, namely their historical value, their public origin in some cases and their preservation in a repository, it does not catch their essential nature and would scarcely satisfy a modern archivist.

Etymologically, the word archives is derived from the Greek *archeion* meaning that which belongs to an office. However, in recent times a more precise definition has evolved. The archivist's conception of archives has been stated to be as follows:

The organised body of records created or received by a government agency, institution, organization, family or individual and preserved by that agency, etc., or its legitimate successors as evidence of its organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations or other activities or because of the informational data contained therein.³

It can be seen from this definition that the archivist's conception of archives is narrower than the meaning commonly attached to the word. Popular belief gives archival quality to literally any old papers. Strictly speaking, all documents or records are not archives. In modern terminology, archives is understood to include only non-current records of permanent interest which have been segregated from the current records whether or not they have been transferred to an archive institution. Archives then are records of enduring value no longer required by the creating agency for frequent administrative reference.

Although some facets of archives remain contentious issues among practitioners, the characteristics of archives are well established. The three essential characteristics of archives can be delineated.

**Editor's Note:* This article was written because the authors found while studying for the Diploma of Archives Administration that material on archives written chiefly for the non-archivist, especially in the Australian context, was almost impossible to come by. Although, in one of the authors' words, it scarcely adds to the field of professional knowledge, it is published because it will help to meet a need.

The first of these is the relationship that archives bear to a creating agency. The archives of a particular agency reflect the policies, functions, organizations and transactions of that agency alone, and from this fact is derived the first major principle of archives administration, that the archives of a given creator should in no circumstances be intermingled with those of another creator.

The second characteristic concerns the organic character of archives. As a transaction progresses, records relating to it grow naturally. Each piece in a file is a consequence of some preceding piece or pieces, and the former is explained by the latter. In order to retain their quality of reflecting accurately what has gone before, the original order of records should not be disturbed to conform to some logical pattern as followed in libraries or some fancy pattern to suit the humour of an individual. This sanctity of the original order constitutes the second basic principle of archives administration.

The third characteristic is the official character of archives or, in other words, the fact of their being the product of transactions having legal and administrative effects. From this flows the third major principle of archives administration, that archives must remain in the custody of the creator or his legitimate successor. This is to ensure that they have not been tampered with from outside the agency so that they may be admissible in a court of law as valid evidence.

The distinction between archives and libraries is that the latter do not possess the characteristics outlined above. The differences in outlook and in working methods between the library and the archival professions are caused by the differences in nature and status of the material with which they deal: the way it came (a) into being, and (b) into their custody. This difference between archival and library material has nothing to do with its physical form. As a rule archival institutions hold more written material, and libraries more printed, but this is not crucial. The basic difference lies in the fact that archives grow out of some regular functional activity and that the archival institution is established for the purpose of preserving the archival material produced by the body it serves. Archival institutions are receiving agencies, more often than not with strict geographical or administrative limitations, while libraries are collecting agencies, acquiring their material by purchase or gift from anywhere in the world.

While the librarian evaluates or selects his material as single items, the archivist must judge the value of an item in relation to the entire documentation of the agency that produced it. His selection is usually in relation to function rather than to subject and his efforts are directed to preserving functional evidence of organic bodies. His judgments as to what should be preserved are final; once the unique records have been destroyed they are gone forever.

Another basic difference is the way the material is arranged or classified. The librarian should use one of the proven, pre-determined schemes of subject classification. For archives or records management these systems are unusable and even disastrous. Archival arrangement is dictated by the original circumstances of creation, so the records and archives are grouped according to their origin in a particular source, on the basis of the principle of provenance.⁴

In this context it is perhaps appropriate that archives be placed into historical perspective. The modern concept of archives is of fairly recent origin. However, there is good reason for thinking that it was the necessity for documenting or recording the actions of government, in its widest sense, that led to the invention of writing and writing materials. This need to preserve records of transactions and decisions has existed from the beginning of civilization. In the great river cultures of the Nile, and of the Euphrates and Tigris, with the evolution of society one already finds those basic types of records that are required for administration, whatever the nature of the governmental, religious or economic institutions. These include: laws; administrative procedures; financial and other accounting records; land ownership; taxes; census and business records. It could be said that the keeping of archives constitutes a significant aspect of mankind's experience in organised living; without these archives the story of our past could not be told.⁵

Although the Tabularium—the archives of Republican Rome—showed a tendency to absorb records of various administrative origins, the idea of concentrating in one place the archives of different creators was alien to ancient and medieval times. The ancient world never had the intention of differentiating administratively between current records and those no longer regularly needed for the despatch of business. It was only in the Middle Ages that a discriminating attitude toward the value of records developed and important records were copied and preserved. But ancient institutions and practices lingered on and the concept of archives remained virtually unchanged until the French Revolution.

The French Revolution meant a breakthrough to a new world even in the history of archives. The Revolution laid the foundations for those developments which can be perceived as the characteristics of the modern archives period: the concentration of records in central repositories; emancipation of the archives from being purely administrative objects; opening of the archives to the public; programmes for the retention and destruction of contemporary records produced and the compilation of inventories and finding aids for archival holdings. Archives have continued to evolve along these lines down to the present day.

It is apparent by now that, generally speaking, in the English language, the term archives signifies two distinct things: the records themselves and the buildings which house them. There are various types of archival institutions: governmental, church, business, university, sound and film archives.

Government archives

It is regarded as the duty of every modern government to preserve and make available to the public the records created by its various departments and statutory bodies once the records have ceased to be of administrative use. The level of archives will, of course, be based on the governmental units within each country. In England, for example, there are county archives and the national archives (the Public Record Office in London). In Australia, the records created by the Federal Government become the responsibility of the Australian

Archives which, although based in Canberra, has branches in the various State capitals and other main centres.

Likewise each of the States in Australia has enacted legislation to deal with the records created by its departments and maintains separate archival institutions. The archives of the New South Wales Government, for example, are administered according to the Archives Act of 1960 and are under the control of a statutory body—the Archives Authority of New South Wales.

Only in some Australian States are local government authorities obliged to deposit their records in government archives. Hence, although these records are of immense value to researchers, their preservation is often dependent upon the foresight of the authority itself. Some local government bodies, such as the Sydney City Council, maintain their own collections, others prefer to deposit their non-current records with institutions such as local historical societies, university archives, public libraries or a central institution like the Mitchell Library.

Business archives

In the past few decades, some businesses, especially the larger ones, have come to realise that their records may be tangible assets. Increased efficiency, a perspective on present problems gained through an awareness of past mistakes and decisions, and the value to people other than the firms themselves of their records are some of the reasons advanced for business firms establishing their own archives. For example, most of the banks in Australia have their own archives, usually based in their head office, but with the archivist being responsible for the records of all the branches in the country. Examples of business firms having their own archives are David Jones Ltd, A.W.A. and Ampol.

Church archives

Unfortunately, it is only recently that some churches in Australia, as in other countries, have started to care for their records in a systematic manner. It is difficult to know what damage has been done owing to the neglect of ecclesiastical records. Church records are used by genealogists, historians and often by people simply wanting to establish their date of birth for official reasons. St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney is an instance of a church, in this case a very large one, establishing its own archives and appointing a custodian.

University archives

University archives perform one or both of two functions: firstly, the collection of documents associated with the university itself, and secondly the collection of non-university records which are deemed to be of value to the needs of research scholars. For example, although it might be expected that trade union archives would be held by a body such as the Trades Hall, they are in fact collected by the Archives Unit of the Australian National University and the Melbourne University Archives for use by economic historians and others.

Sound and film archives

Institutions such as the Australian Broadcasting Commission have archival collections of tapes produced by their employees in the

performance of their duties. In Australia, although the National Library has a valuable collection of films, there is no National Film Archives as such.

Archives, by their very nature of being the records created by a body in the performance of administrative functions, consist to a large extent of documentary-type materials. However, it is a fallacy to assume that only book-type materials are to be found in archives. The variety of formats can vary, however, according to the type of archival institution.

In the Archives Office of New South Wales, for example, apart from an abundance of files and documents, holdings also include significant quantities of cards, maps, plans, charts, lithographs, glass negatives, photographs, microfilm reels, xerox copies and computer print-outs. Examples of other diverse items include: tape recordings of debates and proceedings at the Australian Constitution Convention (1973); a silk tapestry bearing congratulatory messages from China on Australia's 150th anniversary; a sound recording of a speech by J. J. Cahill, Minister for Public Works and Local Government (1947); the official seal of the Land Appeal Court of New South Wales which was dissolved in 1921; and the engraved copper plates of Sir Thomas Mitchell's Map of the Nineteen Counties (1834). It is anticipated that these holdings will soon be supplemented by the addition of computer tapes.

Apart from the obvious diversity of physical formats, archives can contain information which extends over the whole range of human activity. Archives are therefore yet another facet of the world-wide information explosion. In a government archives, for example, one would expect to find records of continuous individual and corporate actions with regard to taxation, immigration, property rights, census, elections, social security, transportation, environment, courts, etc. The bulkiness of these records creates difficulties in preservation, processing and reader accessibility which the archivist must overcome if effective use is to be made of the archives.

The end of all archival effort is to preserve valuable records and to make them available for use. Everything an archivist does is concentrated on this dual objective. Because of the informational data they contain, archives constitute an unsurpassed source for research on virtually every aspect of human existence, past and present, regarding which records have been created and maintained. There are times when books, libraries, information centres, learned societies and the like will yield disappointingly small amounts of information. It is this value and this use of archives that bring the archivist into immediate contact with a wide range of other specialists, for instance the solicitor requiring legal records to trace a deed, the civil engineer requiring a map to trace the route of an old road, and the genealogist requiring passenger lists to trace the arrival of his ancestors.

In a repository of archives, the user is bound to be more dependent on the archivist than he is upon the librarian in a library of printed books. The very complexity of the arrangement of archival material means that finding aids cannot be as explicit or definite as library catalogue cards. The archives user is heavily dependent upon these finding aids, which are generally prepared and issued by the archival

institutions to facilitate the use of their holdings. Finding aids can take a variety of forms: guides, inventories, shelf lists and indexes.

Public access to archival material is not without its problems. The following analogy is indicative of the latent friction that exists between the archivist and the user.

The archivist's position may be compared to that of the keeper of a public garden. Ideally the gates of his garden would never be opened—for then the walks would be undisturbed, the lawns untrampled, the flowers unpicked. The garden would indeed blossom as the rose. But as its *raison d'être* is the delectation and refreshment of that many-headed monster, the public, the gates must be opened—and then the gardener's troubles begin. Should he allow the public to walk on his smooth lawns, should he allow them into his famous hothouses, should he label his flowerbeds with the names of the flowers, and, if so, must he put English translations of the Latin names? If everyone behaved alike the problem would not be so acute. But some will want one thing, some another. So the weary custodian, with a longing eye on those iron gates, must decide how best he can serve his two masters—his garden and his public—in such a way that the public may get the maximum enjoyment and benefit from the garden while not in the act of so doing lessen its amenities for those who come after.⁵

It has often been said that a people without archives is a people with no memory. This is true from the historical viewpoint, and is even truer from the practical angle of everyday life. This highlights the importance of modern archives which, apart from their historical value, are, first and foremost, the foundations on which all sound administration is based.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Schellenberg, T. R., *Modern archives: principles and techniques*. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1956, p.1.
 2. Based on Hodson, J. H., *The administration of archives*. Pergamon, Oxford, 1972, p.xiii.
 3. This definition is a modification of that proposed by T. R. Schellenberg, *op. cit.*, p.16.
 4. *Ibid*, pp.17-25.
 5. Posner, E., *Archives in the ancient world*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1972, p.1.
 6. Timings, E. K., 'The archivist and the public', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. ii, No. 5, p.182.
- Acknowledgement:* Mr. Peter Orlovich, and 1975 students of the Diploma in Archives Administration, U.N.S.W.