

THE KEEPING ARCHIVES WORKSHOPS PROGRAM

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A report on the Bicentennial project of the Australia Society of Archivists Incorporated Sydney Branch, 1984-1988

This article describes the program of workshops in country centres of New South Wales which was undertaken by members of the ASA Sydney Branch, with financial assistance from the New South Wales Bicentennial Council. It discusses the background of the program and the co-operative nature of its management, as well as the objectives and content of the workshops. Suggestions for future outreach activities by the Branch are also canvassed. Thanks are due to Marie Alcorn, Tim Robinson and Clive Smith for assistance in compiling this article and to Kerrie O'Shea for typing.

Background to the Workshops Program

In mid-1984, the NSW Bicentennial Council, the State Government body responsible for co-ordinating bicentennial activities, announced that grants would be made available for conservation/heritage projects under the Bicentennial Commemorative Programme. The ASA Sydney Branch submitted a grant application, initially for the sum of \$10,000, to fund a program of workshops in country centres of New South Wales. We proposed to visit fifteen regional centres to conduct workshops on archival policies and practices, and to address issues in maintaining local collections of archival material. The workshops were to be undertaken on a voluntary basis, by professional archivists, with expenses such as transport, accommodation and printing being met by grant funds.

Organisations applying for grants were required to describe the geographical coverage of their projects and to supply information about their membership base. The ASA project was designed to reach most non-metropolitan local government areas in the state. The ASA in New South Wales, as an organisation open to membership by the public, had around fifty "active" and one hundred and thirty "supporting" members at the time.

Although the amount eventually granted to the Society was \$18,000, and the program was expanded to include the development of a finding

aids system (in both manual and computer versions), the main features of the project did not change. Our basic goal was to help people in country areas care for their own archival materials, and to provide instruction and advice to enable local materials to be kept in local hands. From the beginning, we hoped to use *Keeping Archives* (in 1984 still in an embryonic stage), as the main source of teaching material for the workshops. The opportunity of receiving a grant enabled the Sydney Branch to extend its activities in the area of archival education. The Branch had been conducting workshops for some years but did not have the resources to organise and run them outside the Sydney metropolitan area.

In early 1985, the ASA Sydney Branch was advised that its application for a grant would be considered in conjunction with several other applications from organisations with project proposals in the conservation area. These were the Regional Galleries Association of New South Wales (RGA), the Museums Association of Australia Inc., New South Wales Branch (MAA), the Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials, Sydney Branch (ICCM) and the New South Wales Branch of the Library Association of Australia (LAA).

The proposals put forward by these organisations involved education and restoration programs and were largely complementary. With the exception of ICCM, they were directed towards providing services in country areas of the state. The ASA submitted a revised application which reiterated the aims of helping people in the community to “properly manage their archival resources and make them available for use”, and listed briefly the topics to be covered in the series of workshops, for example, arrangement and description, copyright and the identification of conservation problems. This time, the cost of the project was estimated at \$23,000 with \$18,000 to come from Bicentennial funds and \$5,000 from the ASA, the latter amount to include money raised from workshop fees. The ASA’s submission was modest in comparison with those of its sister organisations. This was attributable to our inexperience in the area of seeking outside support for ASA activities and perhaps also to our lower expectations as an organisation with small resources and a low public profile.

Under the terms of the Deed of Agreement dated 23 April 1986, between the New South Wales Bicentennial Council and the Australian Society of Archivists Incorporated, we were required to produce a comprehensive program management plan and to schedule stages or “milestones” of progress in the workshops program. The payment of the grant was to be in instalments upon “certification of the achievement of the milestones”. In fact, the two did not always co-ordinate well. The ASA schedule of workshops was prepared well in advance and proceeded with few alterations and the payments often arrived well after, and occasionally before, various stages of our project had been completed.

The overall project was named "Conservation on the Move", in recognition of the mobile conservation laboratory facilities the RGA and MAA developed for this project. The organising committee, composed of one or two representatives from each organisation, was known as the Conservation '88 Committee. The RGA provided administrative support for this Committee and liaised with the New South Wales Bicentennial Council. There was a schedule of visits called "Conservation on the Move comes to Town". This involved the mobile facilities and also the LAA's conservator, Helen Price, whose project was aimed at providing basic conservation advice to people responsible for local history collections in libraries, local historical societies, and other organisations and individuals in country areas. ASA representatives met with colleagues from the other organisations from 1985 to 1988 to present reports, discuss problems, plan schedules and receive feedback on the progress of the whole project.

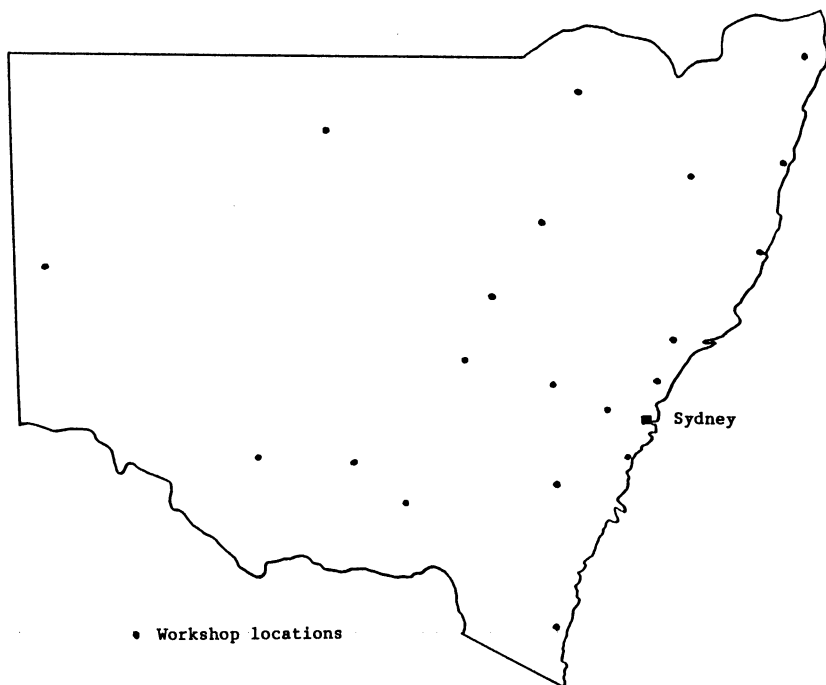
We found the participation with our counterparts in the other organisations to be stimulating and useful. It is to be hoped that we can build on this contact in future co-operative projects. This was another sense in which the Keeping Archives Workshops Program was a first for the ASA—our first experience of working on a project in co-operation with several sister organisations over an extended period of time, as well as our first experience of receiving substantial grant funds.

The Workshops—Facts and Figures

Twenty workshops were held between May 1986 and September 1988, attracting a total of two hundred and twenty-nine people from over one hundred and fifty organisations. Table 1 gives the dates and locations of the workshops, and shows how widely-flung our efforts were.

Table 1
Keeping Archives Workshops Locations

Bathurst	3-4 May 1986	Wollongong	5-6 September 1987
Leeton	20-21 July 1986	Parkes	12-13 March 1988
Coffs Harbour	18-19 October 1986	Armidale	30 April-1 May 1988
Dubbo	9-10 May 1987	Bega	14-15 May 1988
Wagga Wagga	30-31 May 1987	Maitland	21-22 May 1988
Port Macquarie	27-28 June 1987	Hay	18-19 June 1988
Goulburn	25-26 July 1987	Wyong	9-10 July 1988
Broken Hill	8-9 August 1987	Moree	13-14 August 1988
Bourke	29-30 August 1987	Coonabarabran	20-21 August 1988
Lismore	5-6 September 1987	Springwood	17-18 September 1988



Locations for the workshops were chosen by several means—estimation of interest in a given region, based on population size, known interest of the local community, or accessibility of the town or city; response to direct approaches from particular societies or towns; “filling in the gaps” once the program was underway; and co-ordination with “Conservation on the Move comes to Town”. We had originally planned to visit fewer centres and to return to give follow-up sessions some time after the initial workshop. However, we decided that in response to requests from various centres, and in order to reach a wider area of New South Wales, it was preferable to increase the number of locations visited.

The names of the ASA’s voluntary presenters and workshops helpers are listed in Table 2. While Sydney-based archivists made up the majority of the group, they were most grateful to receive the assistance of colleagues who live in Canberra, Wagga Wagga, Armidale and Wollongong in conducting workshops in centres near their homes (and not so near in the case of Bega, Leeton and Hay).

Table 2
Workshop Presenters and Assistants

Baiba Berzins	Russell Kelly	David Roberts
Tam Best	Annabel Lloyd	Tim Robinson
Paul Brunton	Sigrid McCausland	Marie Ryan
Fiona Burn	Angela McGing	Anne-Marie Schwirtlich
Rhona Clement	Ewan Maidment	Judy Seeff
Margaret Chambers	Val Moon	John Shipp
Barbara Dalton	John Murphy	Clive Smith
Robert French	Kathy Oakes	Louise Trott
Helen Hayunga	Michael Organ	Stephen Yorke
Marian Hoy	Michael Piggott	Helen Yoxall
Michael Hoy	Gerry Purkis	
Alan Ives	Barbara Reed	

Jenni Davidson and Debbie Osborn worked on the Workshops Committee but did not attend any workshops. Marie Alcorn assisted at the Parramatta workshop, but did not take part in any of the country workshops.

People attending the workshops came from a variety of backgrounds and interests. The main types of organisations they represented were local history societies, museums, libraries, schools, churches, family history societies, local government authorities, hospitals and non-profit community organisations.

Workshop Format and Content

The emphasis of the content of the workshops was on imparting practical information about archives and how to look after them. A typical program is shown in Table 3. Given the short time available for each workshop, the time spent on introducing and reinforcing archival concepts was limited. However, it was not neglected, as workshops generally began with a short session on what archives are and definitions of key terms to be used during the workshop. Acquisition policies for archives were discussed at a general level, given the fact that in most cases the participants came from a variety of organisations.

The accessioning session dealt with the issues of establishing control over material newly received into the archives, and was supported by a hands-on session. Some case studies were also developed to cover issues which arise at this point—for example, grouping of related materials prior to series identification.

This was followed by a session on arrangement, beginning with the principles of provenance and original order. Where possible, a practical exercise was used here to reinforce the theory. Description was the subject

Table 3
Typical Workshop Program

SATURDAY	SUNDAY
9.15 Registration	10.00 Introduction and summary of the main points of Saturday's presentation
9.30 Introduction	10.15 Arrangement—theory
What are archives?	10.45 Morning tea
Acquisition policies	11.15 Arrangement—practical
Archival policies and ethics	12.15 Lunch
10.30 Morning tea	1.15 Description—theory and practical session
11.00 Accessioning—theory and practical session	2.45 Afternoon tea
12.30 Lunch	3.15 Summary and evaluation
2.00 Accessioning resumé	3.45 Close
Storage and location	
2.30 Afternoon tea	
3.00 Conservation awareness	

The program was deliberately kept flexible, so that sessions could overrun if fruitful discussion demanded, or if travel timetables caused problems. The tea breaks not only permitted some extension to sessions but were also invaluable for one-to-one discussions in which participants could raise their own situations and problems. The program was designed as two "easy" days to enable it to be taken at a relaxed pace and to allow the participants reasonable travel time—some came over 100 kilometres to attend.

of a separate session, which involved the niceties of getting across the ideas that description requires accuracy and attention to detail, while at the same time its goal is to record generalised information about records and their creators.

During the practical sessions, the presenters went from group to group to discuss problems and to see how people were applying their new-found knowledge. Having three people, two presenters and one helper (whose other duties included tea-making, receipt-writing and the like), to circulate and help the participants was a decisive factor in the success of the practical sessions.

The sessions on storage, location control and conservation awareness usually provoked much interest. Basic information about handling archival material and storing it appropriately was received with gratitude. In the sessions that dealt with conservation awareness we tried to stress the importance of the archivist's responsibility towards the physical welfare of the materials under his/her control. Information about conservation materials and box supplies was provided in the folder given to each participant.



Rhona Clement conducting a session at the Parkes workshop (photograph by Tim Robinson)



Rhona Clement with Lex Weaver (Parkes and District Historical Society) at Parkes airport (photograph by Tim Robinson)

Responses to the Workshops

One of the important elements in the workshops' success was the rapport established between the presenters and the participants. The task of explaining our work to a new audience was an enjoyable challenge for presenters. In turn, our approachability and lack of formality were appreciated by participants. Each participant was given an evaluation sheet and they completed them very conscientiously. There were many glowing testimonials, as well as practical suggestions. Some typical comments are reproduced below.

"... extremely practical and tangible . . . well worth the travelling involved."

"I thoroughly enjoyed the workshops, and I learned a lot. I feel confident about setting up a program and suggesting policies."

"It has given me an understanding of the aims of keeping archives. It provided a good introduction to archives for those of us without any prior knowledge."

"Very friendly, informal and informative. Great!"

"Learnt a lot without feeling drained . . . left one feeling refreshed and more importantly enthusiastic."

"Good presentation and rapport."

"Needs to be part of a continuing series of workshops."

"A field officer would be most useful."

The workshop participants expressed their appreciation of the handouts we provided and after the appearance of *Keeping Archives* in June 1987, many availed themselves of the opportunity to purchase a copy of the book at the reduced price of \$25. The Workshops Committee examined the participants' evaluation sheets at its meetings and incorporated their suggestions where practicable.

Management of the Workshops Program

The organisation of the workshops was undertaken by an ad-hoc Workshops Committee which functioned as a sub-committee of the Sydney Branch from late 1985 until the end of 1988. The work of organising the workshops was divided between the members of the Committee. The main duties were transport and accommodation bookings; financial matters; printing; publicity; opening the postbox; establishing contact with local organisations; organising training seminars for presenters; finding presenters and helpers; and attending meetings of the Conservation '88 Committee. The long-term members of the Workshops Committee were Tim Robinson, Paul Brunton, Clive Smith, Marie Alcorn, Tam Best, Judy Seeff, Jenni Davidson, Sigrid McCausland and Debbie Osborn. The Convener of the Committee in 1987 and 1988 was Marie Alcorn, whose leadership and dedication inspired the other members and kept the whole project running efficiently.

Promotion of the workshops was an important activity throughout the workshops program's history. In order to reach the audience which we believed was there and eager to receive our message, we had to establish and develop communications and contacts outside the normal range of city-based archivists. For example, the distribution network offered by the Public Libraries Department of the State Library of New South Wales was used extensively for mail-outs of publicity material and registration packages.

We relied heavily on the local people with whom we established contact in the early planning stage of each workshop. The local contacts assisted us with administrative details such as fixing dates, finding a location for the workshop, distributing posters and leaflets and in producing suitable local archival material for the hands-on sessions (we also had a back-up selection of bring-our-own records for this purpose, by courtesy of Westpac and State Rail Authority Archives). The local contacts also helped arrange radio interviews and publicity in local newspapers. They were often instrumental in boosting attendance numbers by active follow-up work after the standard mail-outs from Sydney had reached the district. In many cases, the local contacts provided transport and tourist guide help for presenters. In others, their generosity in providing refreshments and lunches went well beyond the level of assistance expected by the ASA. Without the local contacts, it would have been extremely difficult to manage all the logistical details for the workshops. Only so much can be achieved from the metropolis, especially by a group of archivists largely unfamiliar with country ways. The ASA has reason to be very grateful to these people whose connections with archives were often remote but whose willingness to give their time and goodwill to help an outside organisation carry out its program was very generous.

The Keeping Archives Workshops Program was also indebted to the support given by various archival employers. Committee meetings, as well (obviously) as the workshops themselves, were held outside working hours but time, telephone calls, photocopying, fax facilities and other sundries were provided by employers. Again, the project and the ASA itself were fortunate to receive this indirect support which enabled the voluntary efforts of professional archivists to be concentrated largely on the teaching element of the workshops.

The Local History Co-ordination Project (now the Community History Program) at the University of New South Wales, itself a Bicentennial initiative, provided another means of informing prospective participants about our program. Their publication, *Locality*, appeared regularly and carried details of forthcoming ASA workshops in its "What's On" column. In October 1986 and December 1987 I contributed brief reports on the aims and progress of the ASA workshops program to *Locality*. On 17 October 1988, I represented the ASA at a seminar entitled "Local History

and the Bicentennial Experience” organised by the Local History Co-ordination Project to report on our experience and to discuss future activities with representatives of the other Sydney-based organisations which had run long-term Bicentennial Projects.

Educational Aspects

One of the important, and it is to be hoped, enduring, aspects of the Keeping Archives Workshops Program, was the opportunity it gave Sydney archivists to extend and refine their skills as educators. The basic format of the workshops and the emphasis on hands-on work were both developed in the early country workshops in Bathurst and Leeton in 1986. In addition, two workshops were held in city locations, Lane Cove (presenters Anne Steel and Robert Lawrie) and Hurstville (presenters Marie Ryan and David Roberts) in 1986. The presenters' experiences and participants' reactions from these workshops were used as feedback for the planning of future workshops.

A major review of the project which focused largely on the question of “are we getting our message across?” was held in October 1987. We decided that our approach was usually quite successful and that we would continue to use the same format for the 1988 workshops. A training session for presenters was held in February 1988, and was attended by virtually all the Sydney-based archivists who had expressed interest in being presenters or helpers for the remainder of the program. We hoped that archivists who had little experience of public speaking or teaching and/or who were of a more retiring nature would “graduate” to the role of presenter, having observed their colleagues and having attended one or more workshops as helpers. This did happen in some cases, while in others archivists who did not eventually present a workshop at least felt that they would be more confident of performing that role in the future.

On a slightly negative note, the Keeping Archives workshops program absorbed the energies of a considerable number of the Branch's most active members for three years, to the detriment of ASA education activities in Sydney. A workshop following the country workshop format was held at the King's School, Parramatta on 20–21 June 1987, in response to local demand. We hope that by the end of 1989 the Sydney Branch will have resumed its local outreach activities.

Future Directions

A 'Future Directions' seminar, attended by twenty-six archivists who took part in the project, was held on 3 December 1988. It provided an opportunity for presenters to pool their experiences of the workshops program and to make suggestions for the future. A small display of publicity material was erected to allow the presenters to see their achievements.

However, the seminar was not an occasion for resting on laurels. It enabled the Committee to thank the presenters as a group, to show them that their reports, their time and their suggestions for modifications in the program had contributed significantly to its success. It also gave the presenters a chance to thank the Committee for its work, especially the Convener, Marie Alcorn.

The discussions held at the seminar dwelt mainly on the question of funding. Most people felt that the goal of Field Officer or Field Archivist was the most appropriate to follow on from the workshops program. It had been suggested some time previously that it would be worthwhile to approach the State Library of NSW to assist in the provision of office space and related services for 1 or 2 field archivists. The Archives Office of New South Wales had indicated that it would be unlikely to be in a situation to give such support. The ASA would have to secure funds to pay for the establishment for the position of Field Archivist. How would this be done? Approaching major archival suppliers such as box manufacturers was one suggestion, but it was pointed out that because archives was a small market, a company would really be getting only philanthropic pleasure and not an increase in sales from any such sponsorship.

Another idea was that organisations pay towards the costs of the archivist's visit on a consultancy basis. This was not a full user-pays approach, as it was felt that revenue received from these workshops should be used to subsidise others where individuals or organisations would not be able to pay full cost rates. It was also suggested that the ASA Sydney Branch co-ordinate with the Royal Australian Historical Society on funding of certain projects or at least to fit in with their schedules of visits.

Many creative ideas for improving the content and running of workshops were put forward. Several presenters felt that on-site workshops in a particular context, e.g. school archives, would strengthen the message and provide more specialised assistance. Others thought that we should develop the content of the workshops, perhaps by trying it with other ASA branches, before launching a "train the trainer" program for local contacts. The ASA could pay interested people to visit Sydney for their training and, at the same time, to inspect archives facilities here. This suggestion also touched on the idea of holding summer or winter schools in conjunction with the School of Librarianship at the University of New South Wales.

The idea of sending an archivist to a country centre, or perhaps to cover several centres within a larger district for an extended period, was widely supported. This would enable the groundwork to be done on site and would give local people the chance to have a professional archivist spend some time examining their collections and giving advice specific

to their problems. This is similar to the field program run by the MAA in New South Wales. The MAA has a significant number of country members, whereas the ASA has yet to develop its membership base outside Sydney.

Conclusion

The original grant application had included \$3,000 earmarked for the development of an audiovisual presentation. At the time, it had been envisaged that the workshop presentations might be reformatted to make an explanatory slide-tape show, or a video, that would explain archival concepts and processes in simple terms. As the program continued, however, it became evident that getting the message across in a simple fashion was not feasible—our experience was that there could be no substitute for face-to-face presentations and hands-on practical sessions. A deciding factor also was our singularly naive underestimate of the costs of a good audiovisual production.

After several workshops, we found that there was a considerable demand for a small archives system suitable for in-house and collecting archives. When it also emerged that quite a number of the participants had access to personal computers, the Workshops Committee decided to experiment in developing a system which would be available as a hard-copy forms package and as a software package.

With the approval of the NSW Bicentennial Council, we were able to use the funds that had been set aside for an audiovisual presentation together with some other remaining funds, to purchase a portable personal computer and dBase IV software. The development of a control system suitable for small archives is now well underway and we hope to be testing it shortly. Appropriate announcements will be made when it is closer to release.

The Keeping Archives Workshop Program enabled the ASA Sydney Branch to serve wide areas of the state of New South Wales, not just its metropolis. It also helped professional archivists develop their training skills and to work in managing a long-term co-operative project outside the usual institutional setting. We are grateful to have received Bicentennial funding, but we are very much aware that if we are to mount similar projects in the future seeking sponsorship will have to be a priority for the Branch. It would be unfortunate if we return to pre-Bicentennial horizons because of our dependence on the voluntary efforts of our own members for our most creative activities. We know that we have a market for outreach programs, and we know that we can deliver a desired product.

The ASA has grown significantly in membership and financial resources since the genesis of the workshops program in 1984. It can also be reasonably asserted that public awareness of archives has been raised since that date. As members, we believe the ASA is the most appropriate

organisation to provide basic archival education to people in the country and the city. But the challenge of securing the resources to do so in future years still remains for us to meet.

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