

AN ARCHIVES FOR GUILDFORD

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“The establishment and continuation of an Archives can only succeed when some gets excited about it.” This was a comment made in Perth recently, at a course for archivists, and it expresses one of the basic requirements. Excitement, motivation, desire: all are vital, especially where government departments are not involved and where there is no public purse to rely upon for largess. Schools and small organisations must *want* their own archives for them to succeed. If they are only a “good idea”, or perhaps an extension of something else, or even a part-time hobby, they will seldom become worthwhile establishments. At Guildford Grammar School we are fortunate.

At its meeting in November 1987, the School Council decided that for the centenary of the school in 1996 it would be fitting and desirable to produce several publications to mark the occasion. One would be a formal and scholarly history of the school; the second, a more light-hearted anecdotal history; the third, a register of the school’s pupils, its staff and their achievements over the 100 years; and finally, a photographic capsule of the school as it is (will be) in 1996.

At that time, I was completing a term of 11 years as housemaster of one of the school’s five boarding houses, with a view to taking early retirement from the staff in mid 1989. However, early in 1988, in one of our discussions concerning my future, the headmaster, Mr. John Woody, suggested that perhaps I would consider compiling the register which the Council had envisaged. I looked blank, having never seen a register, and protested vigorously that I was not the right person! Even then I realised that an archives was needed to provide the necessary information, and our school archives were housed in two metal filing cabinets and a cupboard! What the school needed, I said, was a professional archivist, not an aging schoolmaster.

Needless to say that after the headmaster had produced a copy of the *King’s School Register*, and after much thought, I took a nervous plunge, and embarked on what has become a new career for me. Much has happened since those early months of 1988, and my role as archivist has evolved in an exciting way.

The first thing I needed to do was to find out what this rash move entailed and so, like all good pilgrims, I journeyed to "Mecca". It was in Sydney that I was able to discover what a "proper" school archives looked like, what this mystical register was, and how a school like Guildford could start on the road to attain both. Happily, Peter Yeend, at The King's School Parramatta, in collusion with his headmaster, Mr. Jonathon Wickham (an Old Boy of Guildford) drew up an itinerary for me to visit three schools — King's, St. Ignatious' College and Sydney Grammar School. It was this visit, during which I not only met and made most valuable contacts with Sydney colleagues, but gained their advice and support, which provided the impetus for the establishment of our own archives. A vital discovery which I made at that time was to learn of the existence of a book called *Keeping Archives* edited by a certain Ann Pederson, a tome which has had an almost biblical impact on me since.

When I returned to Guildford, my report to the school council and the headmaster served as the basis for our planning, and my excitement rekindled their own, which had started the whole process anyway. My first task was to draw up a list of "urgent" and "desirable" requirements, which with the support of the council, headmaster and bursar, have all been met — some immediately, others in a development plan. Our most historic room, "Big School", became a spacious and pleasant, though temporary, headquarters, and for the time being the school's museum has become its archives. A temporary wall and shelving were thrown up to house the mountain of files discovered in a storage shed, a work table constructed, and filing cabinets purchased. Most importantly, the archives was equipped with its own "hardware" — a 60 Mb hard disk personal computer, a photocopier, a paper shredder and a microfiche reader.

One primary source of information for both histories and the register is, inevitably, the school magazine *The Swan*, which has been published since 1904. At Sydney Grammar I learnt of the value that an index to this material would provide, and so one of our first moves was to offer this gargantuan task, on contract, to a member of the school community. It took some 15 months for one of the parents, working on average 20 hours a week, to complete this, and now we have a subject and name index covering the whole period 1904-1989. In the meantime, still as a member of the teaching staff, my timetable had to be adjusted so that I could become a half-time archivist for the remainder of 1988, and then completely full-time from the beginning of 1989. At first I was provided with a part-time assistant, who has now become full-time (actually two ladies job-share the position) and I am not sure how we could have coped on a part-time or restricted basis.

The labour of building an archives almost from scratch had begun, with the full backing of the school's governance and administration.

The problem was that the builders had very little experience. It was at this stage that *Keeping Archives* became so important to our work, and with its guidance I compiled an archives policy and an acquisition policy. Then the headmaster and I reviewed both documents in working sessions, refining them where necessary. It may be that now, after only two years, they should be reviewed again. To Ann Pederson's book we turned again and again for guidance — on accessioning, arrangement and description. In fact, it became our constant and indispensable companion. This, with valuable assistance from Ms Diane Foster whom the school has retained on a number of occasions as contractual archival adviser, has enabled us to proceed along more or less conventional lines, to knock into shape the great wealth of material that had accumulated over the years.

In order to meet our needs as a specialised collecting archives and to simplify the acquisition of material, I divided the school community into nineteen collecting agencies which cover all aspects of school life. Each was given a set of item-span numbers, and by negotiation, each was encouraged to set up its own collecting process and method.

The tasks that have been completed in one and half busy years are: entering an index for *The Swan* onto computer file; preparing for permanent storage a large number of the boys' personal files on acid-free paper; and accessioning the great volume of documents which had been collected over many years and had been roughly classified and stored in large, used, envelopes. To accession, classify and store the vast number of photographs which have accumulated over almost 90 years is the next daunting task which looms. By that time we will be ready to deal with the flood from the collecting agencies and make a start on compiling the register. And so it goes on; there is a mountain of material to process, and with more and more arriving most days, there are not enough hands and too few hours ever, it seems, to reduce the number of jobs needing to be done: a problem common to us all.

The excitement I spoke of earlier has, however, been maintained and the school council is planning even now to provide for Guildford an archive building and facility which the school will be very proud of. Today's excitement and vision will provide a fitting home for our heritage, and quite recently steps have been taken to set this in motion. The scheme is to restore a small colonial cottage to house administrative, research and work space and to construct a free-standing repository for the storage of all archival material. The cost will be considerable, probably in the region of \$200,000, but the preservation of this heritage is now seen as a fitting project for the School Foundation's backing and support. Initial discussions were followed by a report to the council by Ms Foster outlining possible ways of approaching the project. In it she suggested how best to use the existing space and how to proceed towards constructing a purpose-

built fire proof repository to contain 10 bay units of compactus shelving, 3 metres high, a map cabinet, vertical filing cabinets and a work/holding bench, and to be maintained at 18-20 degrees Celsius with a relative humidity of 45-50%.

Because we here in Western Australia are almost completely isolated from archival educational programs and because so little has been done to promote "professional" archives in schools here, the headmaster has been most supportive in encouraging us to take opportunities to learn when they occur. I have been fortunate to attend several short courses run by the Australian Society of Archivists while my assistants have also attended archival seminars. In addition, as mentioned earlier, I have been sent on two fact-finding visits to Sydney to observe the work done in nine schools, and have received much useful advice and help from as many very able and professional archivists. This first-hand contact has been of great assistance in setting up the school's archives and the headmaster has always been quick to give support in this way.

I began by emphasising commitment: I hope I have shown how that has been demonstrated. I conclude by underlining again its importance at all levels.