January 1983

Archives and the Child: Educational Services in Great Britain and Ireland

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One of the most significant features of post-World War II archival development has been the tremendous increase in the number and variety of researchers. Archives users are no longer an elite clientele, the scholar involved with traditional areas of historical research—political, economic, and military history. Within the discipline of history itself, there are now a wide variety of researchers, working in many different areas, who avail themselves of the resources of archival institutions. Other scholars, including sociologists, economists, geographers and even scientists, are now using archival sources to support their research projects.

This interest in the potential of archives has extended outside the scholarly world to embrace the community at large. This diverse range of nonspecialized users—journalists, genealogists, university students, and teachers—has had a significant effect upon the archival world and has led to changes in the organization of archives and the services that they provide. The advent of the new type of researcher has encouraged archival repositories to develop new services in order to meet the needs of the new community of users.

Since the 1950s in Great Britain and Ireland, a number of archives have developed sophisticated educational programs designed to encourage the use of archival materials at the primary and secondary

*The author thanks the Winthrop Research Council for its support of this project.
school level. There have been a number of reasons for this rapid growth and interest in promoting educational service. Local history teacher associations have sprung up which have actively encouraged the use of archival sources in the classroom. There has been a growth in local historical societies whose main purpose has been to publish documents relating to local history. Teaching methods have changed, and many teachers want to extend beyond the traditional textbook approach to education. The importance of local studies has grown as country record offices have been organized to preserve the records of their areas. Many archivists have come to the conclusion that for archives to survive as viable institutions in these tough economic times, they must broaden their base of support and their clientele to include services and users outside the scholarly world.

Not all archivists and teachers in Great Britain and Ireland are sold on the educational value of using documents in teaching. Critics argue that children lack the maturity and intellectual development to use archival sources. These critics look at the introduction of archival documents in the primary and secondary schools as the "gaudy wrappings of the 1970s with which the teacher tries to disguise the bitter pill of history." They further point out that many teachers themselves are incapable of using archival sources intelligently. Some teachers are set in their ways and do not really want to try new techniques; others are overburdened by administrative duties; and some are beset by the problem of distance from an appropriate repository.

The proponents of using archival documents in education argue that the use of archival material in the classroom is compatible with trends in the educational curricula in which children do things for themselves rather than being taught by the "chalk and talk" method. Accompanying this trend in education is a general assault on the whole textbook method to teaching history whereby subject matter becomes dry and dull, student interest is stifled, and second-hand
views of history are regurgitated. The proponents argue that using archival sources in the classroom can stimulate student interest by forming the basis for the most direct form of contact with the past, more true than any textbook can hope to be. Many teachers and archivists also believe that the use of documents in the classroom gives children historical perspective and is the only real way of introducing the student to history so that he can learn what history is all about and what the work of the historian is really like.

Those who see the educational value of the classroom use of archival sources realize that different types of material have to be selected for different age groups. One archivist who has done research on the topic has found that—for children under fourteen—the younger the child, the less likely that he will be able to relate several pieces of information. Single documents, especially ones rich in illustrations, appear more appropriate for this age group. Students over fourteen tend to study a subject in more depth and to appear more interested in intricate detail.

Age also appears to be no barrier. Some teachers who have experimented with the use of archival sources in the classroom claim that by nine or ten children are at the right level of intellectual development and can be stimulated by exposing them to documents which relate to their own locale. Children become excited and enamored with the possibility of being "real historians" by researching their own localities.

In the 1960s, many European archivists and school teachers began to realize the potential of archival sources and decided that more should be done than merely looking at the material. A period of experimentation began, with the services provided by a particular type of repository depending on the resources, staff, and financial capabilities of the archives and the interest of school officials. Some repositories appointed archivists whose sole responsibility was to develop an educational program. Their services included organizing whole or half day
sessions at the archives, providing instruction on research methods to high school students in order to prepare them for the university, assembling educational facsimiles based on archival sources and mobile exhibits which could be sent to schools upon request, and establishing training programs for school teachers.

Educational programs in Great Britain and Ireland have evolved into four main areas of activity: services provided at the archives, services organized in the schools, publications, and in-service training programs for teachers. The type of programs adopted by various county archives varies and depends upon a number of factors, including staffing, space, finances, and interest.

Many archivists prefer to have the services at the archives rather than at the schools, since the pupils handle the documents under supervision, thereby insuring the security and preservation of the repository's resources. Teachers may also prefer to have the educational programs organized at the archives where the original material can be used without the difficulties associated with transporting them to the classroom and where enough space is provided to handle the usually large classes.

A special feature of services at the archives is a separate room where the children and their teachers can be accommodated without distracting the repository's regular clientele. Ideally, the room is soundproof, and since the usual archival accommodations are not suitable for handling groups of children, special equipment—moveable furniture, display equipment, lightweight and portable screens—is provided. Traditional finding aids have also proved inadequate, and many archivists have developed special types of indexes, forms, and narrative finding aids for both the pupil and the teacher.

When the class arrives at the archives, the teacher works with an archivist who has been designated the repository's educational officer. A number of projects may be undertaken, depending upon
the legibility of the material and its suitability for the course of study. Slide shows can be organized and have proven particularly effective when they have incorporated colorful, illustrative material such as postcards, prints and posters. Other types of projects might include writing essays; talks by the teacher and archivist, illustrated by documents and followed by class discussion; and creation of scrapbooks which consist of photocopies of archival sources. Many projects are designed to foster a professional attitude on the part of the child toward his assignment, and some teachers even require that students keep a record of the sources consulted.

Whether the setting is the archives or the classroom, many British and Irish archivists strongly favor having the students handle original documents, believing that this is as important to the learning process as the reading of documents. One archivist who has observed the interaction of children with archival sources has said that "there is something special about the idiosyncratic shape of early forms of handwriting, which is lost when photocopies are employed." Some repositories—the Essex County Records Office in England, for example—encourage bringing original materials into the classroom, provided proper care is taken to insure security and preservation.

However, these repositories are the exception, and most archivists confine their services in the schools to mobile exhibits centered around a subject that children are studying in class. Archivists experienced in assembling mobile exhibits believe this important because an unrelated exhibit is "merely a form of publicity for the archives and not an educational program." In addition to a relevant theme, other factors are important for mobile exhibitions. Special upright panels to facilitate mobility and the display of items are needed; photocopies of documents and not the originals, of course, are used; and concise, legible notes are required to explain the exhibit's theme and to clarify any of its
Publications for the classroom usually take the form of photocopies of archival sources put together, usually in folders, and accompanied by some explanatory material. These packets are known as archival teaching units (ATUs) and are the most popular method of bringing the archives to the classroom. Each packet consists of twenty to thirty documents. The copies must be fairly legible, with the handwriting reproduced clearly enough so that young school children can read them. Transcripts may be used for documents that do not reproduce well. Some repositories, such as the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, produce packets consisting of facsimile reproductions on one side and a printed transcript on the other.

The ATUs center around a distinct theme (e.g., emigration, shipping in the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution, or the great Irish famine of the 1840s), and it is important that the documents selected for the units be not only informative but also visually appealing to capture the students' interest. Basic information is provided about the records in the archives, the relationship of records to each other, the context of the records, and why the records were chosen, along with a glossary. These notes are not, however, an effort to explain the documents completely. As one archivist has pointed out, "If the notes become too important a part of the unit, they may make it difficult for the teacher to use the text the way he wants, and it may create a situation where the teacher ends up doing more work with the unit than if he had devised his own."

The ATUs are used in a variety of ways, either supporting the traditional methods of teaching or serving as a classroom aid to stimulate and make possible new approaches. Many teachers have written about the practical value of the archival teaching unit. One has said that after the unit has been assembled it can be used for different classes and that the use of the packet has turned out to be an academically satisfying occupation for the teacher. Its use in the classroom maximizes the pupil's independent...
thought and work, and it is versatile enough to be used at all levels of the secondary school curriculum. Many archivists believe it is more worthwhile to spend time assembling ATUs than trying to accommodate the students in the records offices while grappling with the problems of space and security.

Both approaches stress the importance of working together: the teacher because of his understanding of the classroom potential of archival sources and the archivist because of his knowledge of his collections. To facilitate the classroom use of archival materials, something more is needed than merely putting documents in the hands of children and expecting enthusiasm and interest to be aroused. Unimaginative use of archival materials can be less productive than unimaginative use of textbooks and notes. As one teacher has pointed out, "At least most pupils know what to do with the latter." Many British and Irish teachers, like their American counterparts, have never set foot inside an archive or have ever had the opportunity to work with archival materials. Since the early 1970s, several archives have established in-service training programs to educate teachers in how to make a more critical and wiser selection of sources and to provide an opportunity for teachers to get to know archival sources and their potential, as well as the facilities of the records office.

There are two types of in-service training programs—the teacher can either be permanently attached to the records office or take a leave of absence from regular duties and spend a lengthy period of time (usually a year) at the records office. In the first program, teachers are allocated to the county records office and conduct the services for the schools from the repository, staying for a long period of time and virtually becoming members of the archives staff. They perform an important role in organizing and developing the educational services for the repository. This can be very useful for many county archives. Few can afford a full-time educational officer, as education constitutes just one of many areas.
of archival activity. Also, since the teacher is the one who must use the archival sources, he knows best how the needs of the student can be filled through the use of archival sources.

There may be one drawback when teachers become permanently attached to the archives: they can become outsiders to the educational system. Many archivists, therefore, prefer to see a turnover of teachers, thus creating a situation whereby a greater number are made aware of the possibilities of archival sources for teaching purposes and the wide range of sources available in the archives.²¹

One of the most successful of the second type of in-service training programs is that at the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). PRONI gives a high priority to education services and has one professional archivist who spends a great deal of his time developing the educational program of the archives. He is responsible for handling educational inquiries from teachers, students, local historians, and the public and for organizing traveling exhibits for schools and teacher centers. He also acts as an adviser to a wide range of curriculum development projects throughout Northern Ireland, such as the use of the computer in teaching history; supervises the archives' in-service training program; and guides and helps teachers in the selection and use of documentation for instructional purposes.²²

The educational program began in the mid-1960s, soon after the new archives building had been completed. Although the building cost several million pounds, the number of people using the resources of the repository was quite small. In order to justify the cost of the new building and the money that was needed to equip and maintain it, PRONI concluded that it had to "educate a new public."²³ The program began slowly, with members of the staff becoming involved with such projects as developing facsimile kits of archival sources for primary and secondary schools and leading short courses on the use of historical records for teaching. The administration of PRONI believes that, after several years, its educational program has
stimulated a public demand and interest in its resources and services. The archives has now "withdrawn to the proper functions of archives administration; that is, servicing that demand."

The in-service training program for teachers at PRONI began in 1975 as a short secondment of approximately four months. A few months later it was decided that this was too short a time period, and the program was extended to a full year. The secondments are advertised and paid for by the Northern Ireland Department of Education. The department supports over one hundred secondments, covering a wide range of subject areas and available to a wide variety of institutions. Eight secondments have been offered to libraries, archives, and museums in Northern Ireland, and PRONI must compete with four other institutions for the secondments.

Prior to 1982, the selection of the seconded teachers was solely in the hands of PRONI; but now the selection is made by government civil servants, and the archives role is limited to supplying criteria for the type of applicants the repository seeks. The competition for the available positions is quite stiff.

Interviews with the director of PRONI, its educational officer, and two of the teachers on secondment indicate that all involved believe that the in-service training program has been very successful. The administration of PRONI credits the program with developing a pool of expertise in the country which will not only make use of the repository's resources but will also promote and encourage the use of archival sources throughout the province. Secondment will foster not just more and more use of archival sources but also "more expert use." The staff at PRONI sees the secondment program as helping to overcome the fear that teachers normally have of archival sources. The teachers come to see documents as resources that can be used like any other resource, depending upon the classroom situation.

For the teacher, in-service training helps to overcome two of their biggest problems: the
inconvenient hours of service in the archives and the distance. PRONI is the only viable archives in Northern Ireland and is responsible for collecting a wide range of material from private papers to official government records. Consequently, archival sources in Northern Ireland are centralized in Belfast. PRONI's normal hours of service are similar to many American archival institutions: 9:00 A.M.-5:00 P.M., Monday through Friday. Consequently, it is difficult for teachers from outlying areas to get to the archives and use its resources. Secondment enables selected teachers to serve as resource persons, helps them develop expertise about the archival resources of PRONI, and gives them the opportunity to serve as an advisor to history projects based on archival sources. In addition, teachers have photocopying privileges during their secondment, and this allows them to build collections of archival documents which they can take back to their home area. During their secondment at PRONI, they may be contacted by other teachers who desire certain types of material for their classrooms.

If an American archivist is interested in establishing an education program for children, what are the factors to be considered, based on the experience of British and Irish archivists? First, there is the intangible element of confidence—confidence that the program is worthwhile and confidence that, with time, the program will succeed. Brian Trainor, the director of PRONI, has said that it took approximately ten years to gain the confidence of the educators and the history inspectors, the people archivists must convince to introduce the necessary changes in the curriculum.

Trevor Parkhill, educational officer at PRONI, also pointed out that the matter of confidence may begin with the archives' own staff. The archivist will have to convince other archivists that establishing such a program is a legitimate archival function. Archivists, caught up with huge backlogs of material and a busy search room, may not think
that time spent developing services for children—a nontraditional user group—is worth the effort. This may result in lukewarm support and internal resistance to the development of the educational program. 30

American archives embarking upon educational programs for children will also need special rooms, money, and equipment to get the program going. An area of the archives should be set aside which can be used to accommodate a large, active, and, perhaps, noisy class of children. There should be adequate financial support for travel, if the educational program involves visits to the schools; for special equipment (mobile exhibit stands, lightweight and moveable furniture and screens, if slides are to be shown); and for material for facsimile kits. A photocopier should be purchased and made available to teachers who want to duplicate material for classroom use. This is essential for archives which do not have the staff or the resources to stay open during hours which are convenient for teachers.

Most important for the archives is to have a staff willing to work with children and their teachers. Whoever is responsible for developing the educational program "must not take a superior attitude to the school teacher who comes through the door and wants to explore the possibility of doing a local studies project. Otherwise, the teacher may never return." 31 The archives will need an archivist who has some teaching background to nurture the teacher and persuade him that it is worthwhile to try to introduce the use of archival materials into the classroom. Eventually, enough teachers will be trained who have experience with archival sources and who will get on decision-making panels and create pressure to make changes in the curriculum which will suit the demands of teaching history through archival sources.

NOTES

1 See Iva Borsa, "The Expanding Archival Clientele


4 Great Britain, Department of Education and Science, Archives and Education, Pamphlet no. 52, 1979, p. 4.


8 See J. Fines, "Archives in the Schools," History 53 (1968): 348-356, for a description of the variety of projects undertaken by local history associations, archival repositories, and educational institutes in Great Britain.


10 See Hugh Taylor, "Local History: An Experiment with Slides and Tapes," Archives 5 (1962): 142-144.