

Report on 'Meet the Chief Executive Officer day' at Kew, 18 November 2008

Type of issue	Issue raised by readers	Our response
<i>Finding resources</i>	What are you doing to make searching the catalogue easier?	<p>We are planning a long-term redevelopment of the catalogue which will address many current issues.</p> <p>We are exploring the use of Google to search the catalogue either in addition to, or instead of our current search tool. This needs further work and evaluation of the outcome before we make any decisions.</p>
	How do I find out about new releases on the catalogue?	<p>It is possible to search for new releases by using the catalogue Build a Query function. A 'How To' guide that explains setting up such a search is available from the Research Enquiries desk and in the Help section of the Catalogue.</p> <p>Our staff are happy to demonstrate to readers how to search the catalogue using the advanced and basic features, as appropriate for the enquiry.</p>
	Since the A2A service has moved to a new platform, I'm finding it harder to use.	<p>We are sorry that some users have encountered problems with searching the new A2A database. The A2A database is eight years old, and the technology used in the database is fast becoming obsolete. We were becoming concerned that, should anything go wrong with the database, we would be unable to receive the support needed to rectify any problems.</p> <p>We decided to use an Autonomy search engine as the new search option for A2A because it is search technology that we already use for Global Search. It is a powerful tool and provides the possibility of advanced searching. However, because the unit being searched by Global Search is the record, not the catalogue, this results in many more hits than before. We recognise the limitations of the Autonomy search engine, and we are working on a number of ways of allowing users to search the new A2A more effectively. We are working on some Help pages which we hope will provide assistance on searching A2A. We will also be looking to refine the search results pages over the coming months to allow users to filter the results more easily. For the future, we are working with Google to enable their search engine to search the A2A data directly.</p>

	<p>I've created some resources myself. Are they any use to you?</p>	<p>Your work might be appropriate to add to the <i>Your Archives</i> area of The National Archives website. http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/</p> <p><i>Your Archives</i> is a site created for and by The National Archives' users. You are encouraged to submit articles about historical records held by The National Archives or elsewhere. One way you could contribute is by expanding a Catalogue entry, or you could publish a transcription of one of the documents available in DocumentsOnline, or submit further information about individuals, businesses or organisations found on the National Register of Archives. You could contribute to the research guidance available to users by expanding and updating one of The National Archives' Research Guides. The <i>Your Archives</i> site explains how you can go about adding material, but we are happy to help and to discuss your project with you.</p>
	<p>What is The National Archives doing to make its older records more discoverable? Some of the old catalogue descriptions are really poor.</p>	<p>We know that not all of our catalogue descriptions are particularly good. However, recataloguing all of our content to the level we want would take thousands of years even if we devoted hundreds of staff to it! Therefore we do a variety of things:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have a small team focused on cataloguing particularly hard to find material (they are currently putting the card indexes online) • We try and get commercial partnerships to digitise records, which also gives us searchable indexes or even transcriptions • We have a team of volunteers helping us • We have set up 'Your Archives' http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ to help researchers to post what they know to help us • We work on projects with local history societies and other groups to try and create more catalogue references <p>Details of our catalogue improvement</p>

		programme may be found on our website at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/operate/meetings/catboard/catprog.htm
	What are our priorities for cataloguing?	<p>This is a very complicated issue but key factors are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have very little money for cataloguing and rely on outside funding through bids for grants and through our Licensed Internet Associateship (LIA) programme, which enables commercial partners to provide online access to material from our collections. • Demand for particular record series <p>An explanation of how we evaluate proposals for catalogue improvements and a list of cataloguing projects may be seen at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/operate/meetings/catboard/catprog.htm</p>
<i>Environment/ the estate</i>	What is the timescale for the planned refurbishment of the Map and Large Document reading room?	We are currently consulting with readers about the changes that need to be made. We will then schedule the refurbishment work at a time that causes minimal disruption to readers, which is likely to be Christmas period 2009/10.
	In the Cyber Café, when the sun shines the screens are unreadable. Can we please put up blinds?	We are currently investigating the viability and associated costs of installing blinds in this area. One major issue is whether it is possible to attach blinds to the window frames in that area.
	The lighting in the microfilm area is really bright, making it hard to see the screens. Is there anything you can do?	We have dimmed the lights in the area as much as the system will allow.
	Where have the clocks in the large document room gone? There were quite a few before the refurbishment, and they all seem to have disappeared!	We have ordered two clocks for the Map and Large Document Room
	Is The National Archives planning to charge readers for parking?	We have no plans at present to charge for using the car park. We have installed the barriers because we are aware that the car park at The National Archives can often become crowded during busy periods. As we anticipate that demand for spaces will continue to rise, we must look at all the options available to us to manage use of the car park actively. It is particularly important we ensure that the car park is used solely

		for the benefit of visitors to The National Archives and that there is capacity for those who need it. In view of this, over the next 12 months, we will continue to monitor use of the car park and investigate a number of measures to encourage the use of alternative modes of transport.
Specific records queries/issues	The MoD has been conducting a review on when they plan to release historical service files (and particularly the WW2 military records). When are we likely to hear the outcome?	The Ministry of Defence (MOD) undertook a public consultation about the transfer of historical service personnel records to The National Archives between July and September 2008. Following this consultation MOD has decided to go ahead with the plans to transfer to The National Archives as outlined in the consultation proposals. MOD will post an announcement to this effect on their website in the next few days. MOD and The National Archives will now work together to prepare these records for transfer, which will include looking for a commercial partner to scan and index the records so they can be made available online. It is anticipated that the first batch to be processed will be the Second World War Home Guard Papers. The timing of the transfer of these records is contingent on finding a suitable commercial partner to scan them first, but it is estimated that they should start to be available from mid 2010 onwards.
	The Communist Party of GB files appear to stop in the 1950s (the KV series). I've struggled to find out if there are more, and where they are located. Can someone help me?	These records are still held by the Security Service, and will, where selected for permanent preservation, in due course be transferred into The National Archives. The Service operates what is essentially a 50-year cut off for releasing its records into The National Archives. The reason for this is that it could not release younger material without either compromising current operations (e.g. by revealing sources of information who are still living, thereby discouraging present day sources from co-operating with the Service), or involving so much redaction work to make the files releasable that the end result would be highly unsatisfactory (i.e. just a few anodyne open pages and large numbers of retained folios). The practical effect of this 50-year rule is that in some Service cases, which began more than 50 years ago but where live investigations continued on to less than 50 years ago, then the whole record is not released until the later parts are more than

		50 years old. Where practical, the Service does split records and release files on a single subject or topic in more than one tranche.
Reading room service issues	The document delivery times seem to have got a tiny bit slower recently....	Our statistics indicate that over the last five months we have achieved an average document production time of 27 minutes per record, which is well within the current target time. We are actively looking at methods to give documents better protection during the delivery process and to improve general preservation of the records, without impacting on service delivery targets.
	Why can you not keep out records for longer than one week for me?	While a document is reserved for one particular reader it is not available for other readers to use. In fairness to all readers we try not to keep documents out of circulation for long periods.
	Your catalogue sometimes has errors. How can I get them corrected?	We are grateful for feedback about the Catalogue. Please report any errors to the Catalogue helpdesk Catalogue@nationalarchives.gov.uk You will find a link to feedback and support on the Catalogue front page.
	Sometimes the bar codes on the reader tickets do not work in the swipe boxes and it is no longer possible to type in a reader ticket number when this happens.	Occasionally readers have difficulty with the bar codes on reader tickets or copycards. We will always replace the cards free of charge if there is a problem. We rely on the swipe system because we realised that there was potential for a member of the public to type in the wrong reader ticket number accidentally and access another reader's account. This would be a breach of the Data Protection Act. Similarly, the copycard numbers could be miskeyed and the copies charged to the wrong card.
	Can The National Archives please relabel the 'quiet' area in the Document reading room 'silent' (as in the map room)? People are interpreting quiet as 'a good place to have a chat!' And can the silent area remind people that camera shutter noises need to be turned off? And disable the flash.	We apologise if the level of noise in the Quiet Area has been greater than it ought to be. It is not practical to enforce complete silence in the reading room, which is why we now use the term quiet, rather than silent. However, readers should not be 'having a chat' or allowing their equipment to make noises that disturb other readers. The division into social and quiet areas should help people to find a seat in an area that suits their style of working. Our staff will intervene if a reader is causing a nuisance to others in any way, including making too much noise. We will try to be more vigilant in enforcing the rules on noise levels,

		<p>including noise generated by equipment. We would also encourage readers who find they are being disturbed to speak to a member of staff.</p>
	<p>Why are merchant seamen records (containing sensitive information – BT 372 and 382) expensive to copy and why are they copied in colour?</p>	<p>The BT 372 and BT 382 series of records became subject to Data Protection issues after it was highlighted that personal information about people who might still be alive could inadvertently be released, such as National Insurance numbers and fingerprints.</p> <p>As a result of this visitors to our reading rooms no longer have direct access to the original records for either of these series, and in order to fulfill our requirements to provide free access to onsite users we make colour digital scans of requested documents and redact any sensitive information.</p> <p>When off site users of our copy services place orders for these items, we also provide a redacted colour scan. This copy process requires higher staff skills and more sophisticated scanning equipment than we used previously, thereby increasing the cost. We charge the price given in our statutory instrument for A3 size colour digital scans i.e. £5.00 per page. A minimum of 2 pages are needed to copy both sides of each item in the pouch so we send an estimate for £10.00 in these cases. Having operated the system for a number of months and analysed use, we have concluded that we can reduce the overall cost of making copies by supplying monochrome prints which would cost £2.80 per page and will therefore reduce an estimate to £5.60 (not including postage charges).</p>
	<p>Please can we have back the book scanner that used to be in the Library? It was complex to use, but as it had no glass plate it allowed you to take a copy without damaging the book spine.</p>	<p>The scanner was disposed of because it was no longer in working order. The new scanner is more straightforward to use and we have removed the glass plate so that the books are not crushed.</p>

	<p>The 'readers forums' have shifted over the last few years from being just forums for those readers who used the service regularly, through to anyone. Can we have an additional mechanism for considering the issues raised by regular readers (the independent research community?)</p>	<p>The National Archives' users forum is open to <u>all</u> interested users of The National Archives services, whether onsite, online or remotely. It is important that management seek the views of all users to ensure that the forum is representative, including professional researchers, academic historians and those interested in family history. Indeed, approximately 30% of our user base are first time visitors and they too have a voice. Over the past year the forum has expanded its reach and we now attract a larger number of visitors with a broader spectrum of experience and needs. Whilst we do not have the resources to establish an additional forum for the independent research community other forums do already exist to address specific needs, some of which are listed in the terms of reference (See http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/tna-user-forum-terms-of-reference.pdf). Nevertheless The National Archives management are always happy to meet with our users on an <i>ad hoc</i> basis to discuss specific issues and members of the public service management team are always on hand to discuss any such issues.</p>
	<p>Why does The National Archives charge for copyright on old documents where copyright no longer applies?</p>	<p>The fees that are charged by the Image Library are reproduction fees, applied under contract law, rather than copyright fees under copyright law. OPSI's 'Guide to Copyright in Public Records' explains that a waiver of copyright is applied to the data within public records, so that the content can be reproduced by transcription. However, this waiver does not apply to the direct reproduction of images of the documents themselves. These fall within the scope of Tradeable Information, for which formal licensing and payment of fees apply, under contract law, and as delegated by HMSO. A sliding scale of charges applies, depending on the usage criteria, so that The National Archives is seen to be applying fees fairly within the commercial sector. However, fees are usually discounted or waived in the case of very low run publications, charitable causes, The National Archives' projects and co-productions, and educational works.</p>

	<p>At certain times of day there are queues for the enquiry desks and staff are helping people with simple things that could be dealt with by self help instructions.</p>	<p>We appreciate that there are times when we are very busy. We respond as quickly as we can and readers are welcome to sit on the soft seating while they are waiting. We provide a large range of self help guides for readers, but there is a limit to how many notices we can display before they become clutter and a nuisance themselves. Many first time users understandably prefer to be shown how to operate systems and equipment, so we try to be sympathetic to the needs of all our users. Unfortunately there are times when the balance might tip more in favour of one group than another.</p>
	<p>Please can you reinstate the National Register of Archives paper records in the reading rooms.</p>	<p>Most of the paper records of the National Register of Archives are available on open access at the back of the Library. A small number of the bound volumes are not on open access but these can be retrieved quickly on request. The Library has already given up 250 metres of book space to accommodate the National Register of Archives. As a result we have sent low use Library material to the off-site repository in Cheshire. This has not been popular with regular Library users, who would prefer to have the whole of the Library collection together on open access at Kew. Although it is true that some of the books in our Library can be found elsewhere like the British Library or Institute of Historical Research, we regularly receive feedback from academic users, about the ease and joy of using The National Archives' Library because it is on open access. Also the majority of our users are not academic and they would not find it easy to access library collections in academic institutions. Clearly we have to find a balance between the needs of different users but at the moment we are unlikely to remove any more of the Library collection from open access.</p>
<p>Catering</p>	<p>The catering service is not good – the prices are higher than they should be, there is often only two choices of meal, and the sizes are small.</p>	<p>The food offered on a daily basis includes a hot main meat, fish or vegetarian course. Additionally there is a 'specials' board of hot dishes, as well as salads, paninis, toasted sandwiches and a choice of 13 different sandwiches fillings. During the summer The National Archives carried out a survey and value for money was rated by most questioned to be good or very good. The catering manager is willing to speak personally to anyone who feels that their</p>

		portion size is not adequate.
	The food is not hot.	The hot plate and associated lights have been checked and found to be working within the proper temperature range. Food temperature is checked approximately every 15 minutes during service.
	The National Archives could add a sign to the gates by the towpath advertising the new café. It's the only café for mile around (if you are walking the towpath) but if it isn't advertised, no-one will know.	<p>The cafe is here primarily for the benefit of visitors to The National Archives and users of our facilities. Whilst we welcome other members of the public we have to ensure that those who are specifically visiting to use our services are able to access catering facilities without excessive delays. There is therefore a balancing act that needs to be maintained to provide cost effective and efficient facilities for our researchers without deterring casual clientele.</p> <p>We restrict advertising to the immediate vicinity of the Kew building. However, a sign has now been placed just inside the gate to the towpath. We are not able to place a sign on the towpath itself, which is not National Archives property. Working together with our partners, Yes Dining, the position on advertising is kept under constant scrutiny and review.</p>
Digitisation	Can we have digitised resources in colour please?	The 1911 census, which is currently being digitised and is being released in 2009, is going to be in colour. Wherever possible, we do encourage our partners to digitise in colour where we believe it will enhance the image quality. However, it does add cost, so is not always viable. There are no plans to redigitise previously digitised material, as we prefer to focus the scarce resources we have on making more content available, rather than enhancing existing content.
	Why does The National Archives tend to digitise from microfilm? In many cases, the microfilm image is not as good as going back to the originals.	It is easier and cheaper to digitise from film. Also, we try to handle original documents as little as possible, so where we have microfilm, we prefer to digitise from microfilm if the quality is adequate. We do go back to original documents if the quality is very poor. For example we have used special techniques to scan parts of the original 1841 and 1851 census returns where both film and original are poor, to produce a new image. However, scanning from originals is far more expensive than digitising microfilm, and this can often make project costs prohibitive.

	<p>The recently digitised slave registers are a great online addition. However, it appears that Ancestry have only digitised the pages which list slaves' names, and not the pages which have 'nil returns' or the signatures. This is a shame, as the undigitised pages actually tell you a lot for research (e.g. a nil return might tell you that the slaves employed on the last return are still there, as nothing has changed). Does Ancestry realise this? And is there anything we can do about it?</p> <p>Has the condition of these registers been looked at recently? In 2002 they were in a really poor state, and whilst some of these are copies, others are the only original record.</p>	<p>We have microfilm of most of the pieces in T 71. We are currently investigating scanning the film and making the images of the entire series available free of charge on Documents Online http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/ for people to study, transcribe or use in any way they wish, which would of course include the analysis of "nil returns". A commercial family history site is primarily concerned with providing content of interest to its own customers. It therefore focuses on content that would be useful to people performing individual name searches. There would be such marginal use of nil return pages by this user group, that the cost of hosting effectively inert pages would not be commercially viable. In addition, the nil return pages could confuse users in that particular context. Ancestry has offered to consider adding some text to the 'further information' database description to clarify their approach to digitisation of the slave registers. The National Archives will work with them on the text.</p> <p>Adding T 71 to DocumentsOnline should address the needs of user groups other than standard family historians.</p> <p>Our Head of Conservation has checked personally 30 boxes of the registers in T 71 and considers that the paper is very stable, and although many bindings have been taken apart for filming, the volumes are still in a good enough condition to be handled safely.</p>
	<p>Are there plans to digitise Royal Marines, RNR and RNVR records (First World War and before), and what are the likely time scales?</p>	<p>The RNVR ratings' service records for men joining between 1903-1919 (document references ADM 337/1-108) became available on DocumentsOnline http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/ in November 2008. Service records of RNVR officers 1914-1922 (ADM 337/117-128) are also available on DocumentsOnline. There are no plans at present to digitise RNVR officers records in ADM 340.</p> <p>By the end of 2008 we hope to have launched ADM 159 Royal Marines: Registers of Service, followed in 2009 by additions to ADM 139 Royal Navy ratings' service records, pieces 221 to the end, to complete the online version of that series. We intend to digitize BT 389 Registry of</p>

		<p>Shipping and Seamen: War of 1939-1945: Merchant Shipping Movement Cards during 2009, though we are not able to give even a provisional launch date at this stage. We are investigating the possibility of putting BT 351 Registry of Shipping and Seamen: Index of First World War Mercantile Marine Medals and the British War Medal on DocumentsOnline, but if that goes ahead we would expect it to be late 2009 at the earliest before the records are available online.</p>
	<p>You remove microfilm from the reading rooms as you digitise your records. Please can you confirm that the microfilm copy is not destroyed?</p>	<p>We only remove the films from open access once we are satisfied that the digital version is of acceptable quality to meet the needs of the majority of users. We encourage and include feedback from readers when making these decisions. We still retain the master microfilms, which can be produced in exceptional circumstances if needed.</p>