

Exploring the Bloodaxe Archive: a creative and critical dialogue

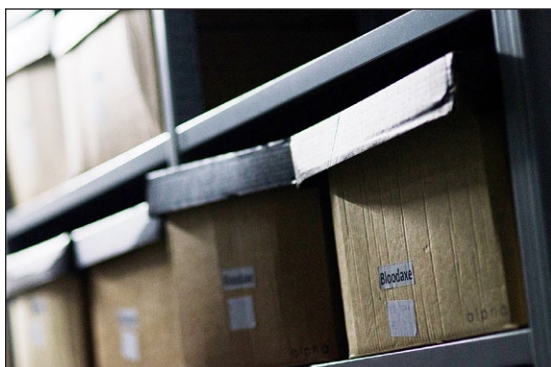
The acquisition of the internationally significant archive of poetry publisher Bloodaxe Books in 2013 was the starting point for a new collaboration between library staff at Newcastle University and researchers in the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics. An exploratory, and then a major, Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, 'The Poetics of the Archive: Creative and Community Engagement with the Bloodaxe Archive', became the opportunity to test new theories about archival practice, particularly through digital applications, and expand the audience traditionally involved with literary archives from humanities researchers, to poets, artists and film-makers.

The project was realized through both following and subverting established foundations of archival practice: alongside traditional cataloguing, which provided the strong frame for other activities and the metadata on which it drew, an experimental digital interface was created, which could harness multimedia and creative outputs. It was also the aim of the interface to emulate an experience where users had the capacity to 'browse' the data alongside 'search and retrieve' discoverability, and make links that depended on the kind of serendipity on which creative activity thrives.

Introduction

In a first for Newcastle University, the University Library and the School of English Language, Literature and Linguistics (SELLL) jointly acquired the Bloodaxe Books archive in 2013. Bloodaxe Books was established in 1978 and is now one of the largest and most successful independent poetry publishers in the UK. Thanks to the foresight of its editor, Neil Astley, Bloodaxe from the start laid down the habit of keeping everything and its archive comprises extensive editorial, business and financial records, and correspondence. It is also a continually expanding resource, with further accruals received by the Library on an annual basis.

As we transferred the first tranche of the Bloodaxe Archive from its home in Northumberland to our archival standard stores in 2013 (see photograph), a preliminary project, also funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), began. Two poets, PhD graduates Tara Bergin and Anna Woodford, under the direction of Linda Anderson, worked alongside our Archivist, Ian Johnson. We attempted to support the researchers in our traditional role of 'describer' and 'provider', giving clues as to what was in the boxes, while also ensuring legal requirements under Data Protection and Copyright legislation were adhered to.



The initial tranche of material from the Bloodaxe Archive



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32 While the latter was a necessity, the former was less crucial beyond the logistics of providing access in the controlled environment of an invigilated reading room. This pilot project provided an initial sense of the scope and potential of the archive to us, with the focus on creative outputs. It also allowed questions to be raised. As non-traditional researchers, the poets still felt the need for the metadata of box-lists and catalogues, even as the methods and assumptions behind them seemed alien.

Our outputs, in collaboration with visual artist Kate Sweeney, included a short poem-film documenting the initial 'opening' of the archive. Tara Bergin's poem 'What We Found in the Archive' ended presciently with the lines:

We asked the archivist to make us copies.

We promised not to tell.

We signed his orange form in pencil – and pocketed everything¹.

In this figurative view, we as a library emerged as an authority to be colluded with or subverted. It was a timely caveat, spurring further reflection: archival infrastructures are necessary but can also be viewed, as in creative contexts, as stifling, encouraging suspicion and even rejection.

This case study sets out first of all the general context in which research was happening from the Library point of view. It then addresses a particular set of issues that proved important for the project 'The Poetics of the Archive' from the point of view of literary researchers.

'we as a library emerged as an authority to be colluded with or subverted'

Context in archival practice and digital humanities

By the time of the project, it had become difficult for archivists and librarians simply to hold uncritically to the view that the desirable end product of archives was objective discoverability, particularly in the new ubiquitous digital environments. As Geoffrey Yeo states, even where expertise of archivists is acknowledged, 'experts cannot be seen as infallible providers of objective information'². Standards-based explorations of collections through catalogues that are compliant with ISAD[G] (General International Standard Archival Description) adhere strictly to concepts of faithful capture of provenance, original order and functional analysis. However, these constructs, especially around signalling significance, are based on fallible human assessments of what is the most logical presentation of descriptive data. Even where digitization provides the assets to 'show not tell', this metadata still drives discoverability.

Beyond the acknowledgement of 'islands of innovation',³ the first wave of the digital revolution, rather than undermining these curatorial constructs in archives, seems to have cemented them through the interoperability these standards afford. Through discovery portals, researchers are able to interrogate, with objective rigour, obscure and aggregated collections in a way that was unimaginable even 20 years ago.

But who are these researchers? Within this paradigm, they are predictable abstracts, seen as both logical and interested in narrative wholes as well as unexplored fragments. Do they always seek objectivity? Do they even know exactly what they may be looking for in an archive? How does the theory match up with the experience of coming into contact with a range of different researchers, researchers who may also include creative practitioners?

'Digital humanities ... extends and expands traditional humanities research to embrace, and co-curate, digital design'

As a field in itself, digital humanities as a subset of digital scholarship can be seen as amorphous, an attribute it often playfully embraces.⁴ At its core, however, it 'refers to new modes of scholarship and institutional units for collaborative, trans-disciplinary, and computationally engaged research, teaching, and publication'.⁵ It extends and expands traditional humanities research to embrace, and co-curate, digital design.

33 Moreover, digital humanities is a collaborative endeavour involving humanists, librarians and artists in conceptualizing and solving problems, never relying on one person's or group's interpretations. This view challenges entrenched ideas of objectivity as the end goal. Working on the papers of poet Elizabeth Jennings, Dr Jane Dowson has written, 'By digitally bringing the material into the public arena with self-declared interests and subjectivities, we shift monolithic narratives to multivocal ones'⁶ What power must information professionals and archival interfaces preserve in order to service the needs of end users of archives and digital libraries? To what extent can they function as 'critical nodes', 'a site of potential interdisciplinary collaboration and user engagement'⁷ in a more creative design space? These are the questions that underwent further elaboration in our project 'The Poetics of the Archive'.

The Poetics of the Archive – The view of literary researchers and poets

The particular AHRC scheme we responded to was a 'Capital Funding Call for Digital Transformations in Community Research Co-Production in the Arts and Humanities' and it seemed designed to cover many of the areas we hoped to develop in relation to the Bloodaxe Archive, including the chance to curate and catalogue the archive. Our successful application initiated 18 months of frantic learning with a large team that extended across poets, fine artists, digital artists, literary researchers and library staff, including a dedicated archivist and digitizer. The library professionals, as noted above, provided with great speed and assiduousness the building blocks to enable design.

'Collaboration enables or perhaps, at its most challenging, forces a kind of openness'

Collaboration enables or perhaps, at its most challenging, forces a kind of openness, if the ideas of the different researchers are to be fully respected and accommodated within the project and if it is to exceed any one person's vision. We accomplished more than we ever thought at the beginning we could. However, four particular areas are worth highlighting where a mixture of circumstance, lack of precedent, theoretical exploration and ambition created the crucible for innovation and laid down a series of challenges in terms of customary archival practice. Many of the results, including different kinds of creative output, can be accessed through the experimental interface we created.⁸

'We accomplished more than we ever thought at the beginning we could'

The uncatalogued archive

One of the results of receiving research funding shortly after having physically acquired the archive was that processes that one might have expected to happen sequentially had to happen at the same time. There was no time for Library staff to do more than briefly list materials before researchers began to delve into them (supervised, of course), choosing only two boxes of material at a time from a box-log (Figure 1).

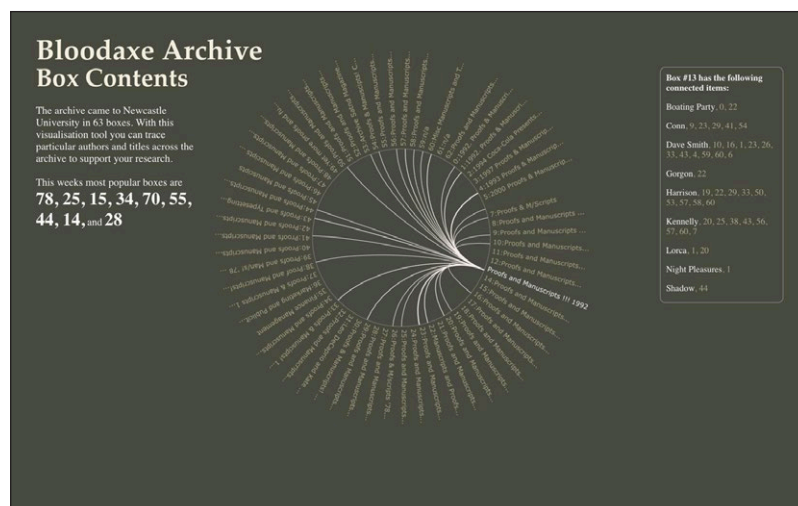


Figure 1. Bloodaxe Archive prototype box-log interface

This meant that researchers and participants got access to papers that ordinarily might have been disposed of in the course of sorting and curating. One participant commented on her surprise that ‘the packets of proofs and correspondence were still enclosed in original stamped envelopes that felt like relics in their tattiness’.⁹ This experience of ‘tattiness’ highlighted the materiality of the archive, its availability as a source of visual inspiration. Macro-photographs by photographer Phyllis Christopher helped to release a sense of the allure and fascination of paper, revealing its textures, its fraying edges and indentations, and a suggestive visual resemblance to skin. They also made visible ghostly traces of the poets’ working, hidden under coffee stains and Tipp-Ex. Whilst one of our aims was ‘digital transformation’, in this case the digital helped to create continuity with the material, exemplifying Jacques Derrida’s argument that the digital liberates the ‘past resources of paper’ and provides us with insight into materiality in ‘a sort of future anterior’. According to Derrida, technologies ‘liberate our reading for a retrospective exploration of the past resources of paper, for its previously multimedia vectors’.¹⁰ What is the temporality of an archive? Is the past it stores always a coming into being of the past? Is the process of writing that it records an illusion, its fluidity already fixed, its provisionality already a historical fact? Or can we encounter something in an archive, as Susan Howe writes suggestively, through a kind of telepathy, ‘quickly – precariously – coming as it does from an opposite direction’, maybe even, not what is fixed but ‘a moment before’.¹¹

‘Whilst one of our aims was “digital transformation”, in this case the digital helped to create continuity with the material’

More practically, what should be kept of an archive and what should be thrown away? How can we predict what might, in the future, become of importance to researchers? Is an editorial function already in operation in the tidying of papers and disposing of ephemera? And who decides what is important and what not?

The abridged archive

An archive by contemporary writers, most of whom are still alive, raises particular copyright problems when part of the aim is also to create digital surrogates. The filtering and redaction of personal information by our Archivist was important and conformed to best archival practice. However, when it came to digitizing editorial pages from the Bloodaxe Archive, permission had to be sought from the poets in question. Many gladly gave permission, but at least 40 per cent of those asked said no or did not reply. Again, there was a time pressure. Not everything in the archive could be digitized for practical as well as legal reasons, and indeed, it seemed uninteresting to digitize pages where there was no marginalia, no editorial changes, and the page was the same as the final, published version. The pages digitized therefore are and can only be a sample of the whole, and this archive cannot hope to emulate the comprehensiveness of some other, more historical digital archives. The techniques of computer text mining we employed in the digital interface are not operating across a complete record, and the patterns they establish can only be suggestive rather than definitive.

‘another set of meanings from those underpinning text-mining techniques’

Yet, perhaps it is here that the ‘literariness’ of the archive interposes itself, offering another set of meanings from those underpinning text-mining techniques. To follow the journey of particular words, even as a sample, is to appreciate how language within poetry is both a matter of individual choice – a making new – but, as one of our researchers and poets, Ahren Warner, reflected, also bound within previous uses by poets of the same words. The section of the interface entitled ‘Words’ (Figure 2), Warner reminds us, demonstrates that ‘words are malleable, changeable entities that will themselves always be reconstructed, renewed and perhaps rendered completely other by further words’.¹² The Archive offers, in its own way, a lesson in creativity and poetry writing, and the ever-shifting ground they inhabit between originality and repetition.

‘The Archive offers ... a lesson in creativity and poetry writing’

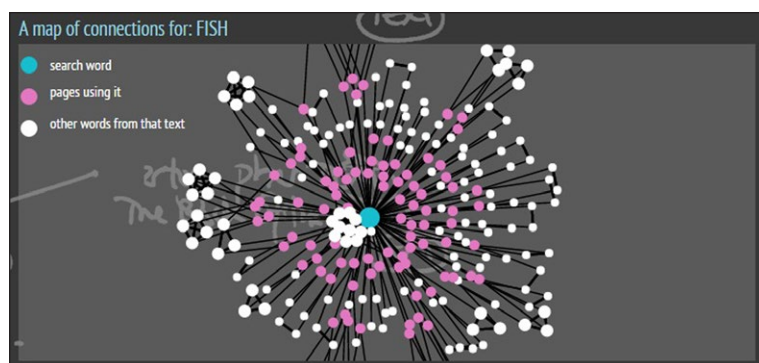


Figure 2. Word map of connections interface

Creative expansion

One of the exciting challenges of the original funding call was that it offered the opportunity to explore the archive as a provocation to fresh creativity, rather than as a scholarly resource which would produce writing *about* it, rather than in response *to* it. We gathered together 35 poets who were in poetry groups both regionally and nationally in order to create a community of people who could meet to hear about the Archive and spend time reading and responding to their own selection from it. There were also two fine artists, Irene Brown and Alan Turnbull, employed to make their own art in relation to the Archive, a film-maker, Kate Sweeney, and photographer Phyllis Christopher, whose work all contributed to an exhibition as part of the Newcastle Poetry Festival, 2015. This was in many ways one of the most exciting and rewarding aspects of the project. Some of our poets had never visited an archive before, nor thought of doing so, but found themselves responding to the archival space itself, experiencing the fascination of containers and secrets hidden away, waiting to be brought back to life. There was an element of serendipity about which boxes they chose to look at, and often the collocation of different pages produced a collage effect, generating different meanings. Or as poets they found themselves particularly affected by the seeming intimacy of the encounter with particular poets, and the effect, in the archive, of seeming to experience a voice or a bodily trace. Of her own experience in an archive, the poet Susan Howe writes, 'Here is deep memory's lure, and sheltering. In this room I experience enduring relations and connections between what was and what is.'¹³ One of our participants, Anna Woodford, commented, 'It is a strange situation – writing a poem about a vast poetry archive while surrounded by other poets doing the same thing. I realised that wherever I write, I am also in some sense in the Reading Room trying to insert my poem/my name into a room full of my contemporaries and the work of my forebears represented by the Archive'.¹⁴ The impressive showcase of work produced for the project is at the moment accessed from the digital interface, but this is work from only one occasion. We want there to be many occasions when poets use the archive to learn about and stimulate their own creativity, and can experience the digital interface in some of the same ways the poets entering the physical archive did.

'the fascination of containers and secrets hidden away, waiting to be brought back to life'

The digital archive

We approached the creation of the digital interface to the Archive with a set of questions about how we could create a different kind of interface which was 'generous' in Mitchell Whitelaw's terms¹⁵ and could support kinds of interaction which were less task-driven, but opened up new forms of encounter which were of themselves enjoyable, open and non-predictable, and where there was room for affect, rather than only, as Nicholas Belkin says, 'efficiency and effectiveness'.¹⁶ Led by digital artist Tom Schofield, we explored different kinds of browsing and search through words and shapes, which could throw up interesting and often serendipitous connections. We also added photographs and films, some of which feature interviews by two of our researcher-poets, Colette Bryce and Ahren Warner, with a selection of the poets whose work

'we explored different kinds of browsing and search through words and shapes'

36 appears in the archive, but some of which explore gesture or interactions with paper in their own creative way. It was nevertheless important, of course, that the archive be catalogued fully, and the new digital interface we created is in many ways parasitic on the information and metadata contained in the more traditional catalogue for the Bloodaxe Archive that exists on the Archives Hub. However, here for us was an opportunity to align an informatics tool with research in the humanities, and particularly with the creativity contained within the Archive. 'From analysis springs invention', Johanna Drucker writes, then warns us that 'humanities documents and aesthetic artefacts are not "data" and they don't contain "data"'.¹⁷ In the Bloodaxe Archive the partial nature and partiality of the knowledge it contains underpin an uncertainty that may be its most valuable discovery and asset.

Current and future developments

The Bloodaxe Archive and the potential unlocked through 'Poetics of the Archive' cemented contemporary poetry archives as a collection strength at Newcastle University and this is being expanded through further acquisitions, including the archives of individual poets such as Sean O'Brien, Moniza Alvi and Jack Mapanje, and the development of an overarching interface which, under construction at the moment, will in time grow and explore new forms of connection between the different archives.¹⁸

'A shift from archives to archiving emphasizes ... the construction of knowledge'

For the Library, 'Poetics of the Archive' and the generous interface that it created stands as a benchmark for the potential of working alongside humanities academics and exploring digital innovation and new ways of engaging with archives. One of the interests that emerged from this research was 'archival liveness', a topic on which Tom Schofield has subsequently published, and which explores the temporal interconnectedness of archival systems and archivists.¹⁹ A shift from archives to archiving emphasizes not only the dynamic nature of archiving but also the construction of knowledge that takes place within archival institutions. This focus is also being explored by Kate Sweeney as she finds new ways of registering through film the unacknowledged labour within an archive, both in relation to the creation of the original documents and their storage within the library system.

'the potential to grow in exciting new directions'

Conclusion

The work of discovery and experimentation that has been opened up by 'The Poetics of the Archive' has the potential to grow in exciting new directions. This research is built on the firm foundations of collaboration between literary researchers and Library staff. The project allowed for the development of new paradigms, through digital design experience and the serendipity of creativity, to which literary researchers and library cultures have responded in tandem and will go on responding in the future.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'Abbreviations and Acronyms' link at the top of the page it directs you to: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>

Competing interests

The authors have declared no competing interests.

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