From a tin trunk to a niche in cyberspace: widening access to the records in Girton College Archive

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The concept of a Girton College Archive as a formal entity emerged in the 1970s. The article describes the context for this, with a brief history of the college and those who kept its records. It further explores the management of the archive during its recent history, in particular the development of its finding aids.

I’m an adjunct assistant professor in American literature at Columbia University, and I’m researching an article about the adventurer Henry Wikoff and the heiress Jane Catherine Gamble. I was delighted to discover the detailed finding aid to the Jane Catherine Gamble papers at Girton College, available through the Janus website. In some of the more detailed entries, there are notes indicating that transcriptions of some letters are available. Is it possible to request these Word files by email?

Enquiry received at Girton College Archive, 10 May 2005

On 9 May this year, Girton Archive reopened in a stunning new location. It is now housed with the special book collections in a purpose-built extension to the college library, in which there are a dedicated reading room for researchers, a secure store with room for expansion, rooms for unpacking and conservation, and office space. The wing has been built as a semi passive-state structure, but additional plant ensures that the temperature and humidity remain closely controlled whatever the vagaries of the climate outside.

The move to provide a new building to ensure the future physical preservation of the archive at Girton went hand in hand with one to enhance access and management. During construction, the archive was closed for nearly two years, with the collections in store off-site, and as a consequence no researchers and very few enquiries. It provided a perfect time to effect some of the changes required to meet the needs of users in the first decade of the 21st century – changes which are perfectly illustrated by the enquiry quoted above. I shall come back to the enquiry as I describe the route by which we have arrived at where we are now – the point at which such an enquiry can be made, and at which we can respond appropriately.

In some respects, the Girton Archive is like many other institutional and business archives: it is relatively small, and managed by one member of staff within a larger department (in our case, the library). However, its holdings are unique. The college is one of the constituent colleges of the University of Cambridge. Founded in 1869, it was the first residential college in England for the higher education of women. The university did not formally award degrees to women until 1948, even though women had been sitting the examinations since the 1870s. In the 1970s Girton went mixed, and it now has an equal balance of sexes in both its fellowship and its student body.

The archive collections contain unique material on the history of women’s higher education. They also offer a view of the college’s continuing vision of equal opportunities as it moved from a single-sex to a mixed institution. The archive holds the college records dating back to its foundation, as well as significant collections of the personal papers of eminent Girtonians and those connected with the college and the early campaign for female education. These include Emily Davies, Barbara Bodichon, Bessie Parkes, Jane Catherine Gamble, Eugenie Strong, Bertha Phillpotts and Dorothy Needham. We continue to collect material, and among recent acquisitions are the papers of the late Professor Muriel Bradbrook, and a collection of manuscripts from P. D. James.

The college archive as a discrete entity would appear to date from 1975. However, the importance of preserving college records was appreciated from the foundation and before. Emily Davies (founder, honorary secretary, treasur-er, and for three years mistress of the college), Mary Clover and Kathleen Peace (consecutively college secretaries from 1903 until 1964) and Helen McMorran (librarian 1930–62), were four key figures who ensured that records were retained and arranged in some kind of order. Until 1975 records were scattered throughout the college (indeed, they still emerge from cupboards and basements, as Girton’s buildings are full of hidden nooks and crannies), but some were kept in library cupboards and offices and were administered by the librarian.

In 1975 Miss Marguerite Gollancz (Girton 1930), recently retired as a county archivist, was asked to make a report on the college records. Following her report, non-current records of the college were moved, with papers presented or which had been acquired, to an oak unit consisting of four cupboards with shelves above, located in the librarian’s room, near the library. This was known as the ‘college archive’. The records were listed and described according to their location in the oak unit, and administered by the librarian. And so things continued until the late 1980s when the accumulated records began to burst out of the oak unit, the trickle of people who wanted to
consult them became a steady stream, and the college made the decision to appoint a part-time archivist and devote a former lecture room to an archive.

To begin with, the original listing was kept and developed, but made more usable with the addition of card indexes to various sections. The thrust of activity at that stage was the physical removal of material from its location of more than ten years, and the gathering in of records still scattered round college. (A black tin trunk containing the plays, poetry, journal, letters and relics of Jane Catherine Gamble (1810–1885) was found in an attic.) However, as the holdings grew and the numbers of enquiries increased, the limitations of a list designed to describe records by a location that no longer existed became glaringly obvious. It was time to take a deep breath and discard the familiar for something daring and new – word processing!

The laborious task of transferring the typed lists to computer was one that paid dividends. The exercise itself generated order. Even in the relatively early days of word processing (which these were), a page layout could be created and saved, providing an undreamt-of consistency.

It was easy to cut and paste together groups of records, invaluable in the building of a classification scheme, which became the next task. The scheme is based on the college administrative structure and functions, and is designed to allow for accrual. However, as the scheme is also intended as a guide to all permanently archived material held by the college, it includes personal papers and papers of organizations, despite the fact that these have originated from individuals or groups outside the administrative structure of the college. It is a scheme which, with some adaptations, is in use in a number of Cambridge colleges.

All this was about ten years ago. The Gamble papers were still in their trunk, in neat bundles tied with pink tape, some with paper labels attached. They were not listed, not catalogued, and a long way short of scoring a ‘hit’ for a browser on the Internet. In a survey of the archive in 1995 we found that 50 per cent of records were held in the word processed, classified list, 17 per cent in a simple flat-file database, 13 per cent still existed as typewritten lists, and 20 per cent of records were unprocessed. Access to the Girton Archive was still very much paper-bound. It was easy to cut and paste together groups of records, created and saved, providing an undreamt-of consistency.

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The second event that altered the situation at Girton was a successful application for catalogue funding to the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation. This enabled us to put four major collections of personal papers onto Cantab – and thence to Janus – and make them available for researchers with remote access. In most cases the catalogue descriptions extend down to individual documents or groups of documents. There are geographical name and subject access points at collection level, and name access points at collection and at lower levels, where appropriate.

In addition, we were able to import the word-processed, classified list into Cantab and carry out the necessary editing.

The period of closure for building work allowed time to consolidate and prioritize, and to work on immediate cataloguing needs. As a result, many more collections of personal papers appear on Janus. (These can be found through our own website at www-lib.girton.cam.ac.uk or the Janus site at http://janus.lib.cam.ac.uk.) Work is in hand to enhance the cataloguing of the college records already on Cantab, so that some can be exported to Janus. Of course, there are still outstanding collections of personal papers and new acquisitions to be processed. However, we have come a long way from the typewritten lists and card indexes, to a point where keying ‘Henry Wikoff’ into Google brings up the Jane Catherine Gamble papers at Girton.

We sent off the Word transcriptions to the professor at Columbia, but as ever that was not the end of the story. A long email exchange ensued with further requests for information. Unfortunately, Jane Catherine’s journal does not recount her abduction by the adventurer Wikoff in November 1851; instead she preferred to write out some

My first published index was prepared for the Medical Year Book, 1924 (Heinemann), a new reference work, founded and compiled by my father Charles Richard Hewitt, who, naturally enough, cast a critical eye over my efforts before despatch. I did not expect, nor did I receive, an indexing fee. One can almost hear expressions of incredulity that someone whose earliest index was published 75 years ago is still around (and who, quite recently, revised one of his later works). But this happens to be a fact of life.

Father, a distinguished librarian in the field of medicine, was also an outstanding indexer of medical works who taught me the elements of his skill. My first task was the sorting and alphabetizing of his manuscript slips followed, progressively, by practical instruction. Eventually, he passed on to me for indexing a work entitled The Ambulatory Treatment of Fractures, published, I think, in the late 1920s, for which I did receive a small fee!

My first appointment in the world of librarianship was to the library of the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple, one of the Inns of Court. Consequently and fortunately my involvement in medical literature gave way to that of the law, although, oddly enough, one of my earliest indexes was to a work on the law relating to public health. Probably my first in the new field was of one of my own books, devoted to Public Library law, 1930. The next, a summary of the same subject for students in librarianship, appeared in 1932, a modest publication of 70 pages (a page size of approximately 12.5 x 18 cm) the index to which consisted of eight pages in double column – somewhat overdone but indicative of enthusiasm.

From these early beginnings developed a fairly comprehensive coverage of the law – textbooks; numerous volumes of Halsbury's Laws of England and Halsbury's Statutes of England, two encyclopedic works published by Butterworths, followed by consolidated indexes to both (mammoth tasks, the former with a small team); various publications issued by the Statute Law Commission; consolidations of the laws of four former Colonies (one in 17 volumes); occasional indexes in other fields. More than seven decades of indexing (interrupted only by five years war service) was eventually brought to an end by the development and use of the computer, an inevitable fate.

During that long period (it would be impressive to refer to it as three-quarters of a century) much has changed in the world of indexing. Can any one change be regarded as the most significant? Perhaps, to be materialistic, recognition that the labourer is now worthy of his or her hire could be the most important advance remembering that, for a time after 1945, a fee of two shillings and sixpence (12 1/2 p.) per page of normal lawbook size was the norm. Compare that with today's minimum payment, calculated by time and recommended by our Society, now in the region of £14 per hour. Some indexers prefer the earlier custom of fee per page whereby the faster worker is not at a financial disadvantage against the slower. Although adequate reward has been long in coming it might be said that growing recognition of the importance of good indexing and the professionalism of the compilers (both full and part time) are of greater significance. Such recognition by an increasing number of publishers, authors and users of books, is mainly due to the rapid expansion and influence of the Society of Indexers (of which I am proud to have been first Chairman), followed by the formation of sister societies overseas.

The inevitable development of the computer and expansion of its use in indexing, together with the spread of IT, has given birth to a new professional jargon making it difficult for the elderly and simple-minded indexer to comprehend. Such is progress and IT must be accepted.

(see obituary on page 228)

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