

TRANSPORT FOR LONDON CORPORATE ARCHIVE

by Tamara Thornhill

A report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Clubhouse on Tuesday 14 June 2017

Firstly, Tamara made it quite clear that the TfL Archive is not the same as London Transport Museum; although they do work very closely together. The archive is within the structure of TfL whereas the Museum is an independent body (although answerable to the Board of TfL) and a registered charity; secondly: the Museum aims to tell the story of transport in London, whereas the Archive provides access for individuals to make their own stories and interpretations from the collection; thirdly: the Museum concentrates upon objects, whereas the Archive concentrates upon documents. There is an understanding between the two bodies about sharing material and with whom an item should sit.

ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

Basically, the Corporate Archive Team sits within the Information Governance Department of TfL. This reports to the General Counsel Directorate and then ultimately to the Commissioner.

WHAT THE ARCHIVE DOES – ITS ‘MISSION’

The Archive’s mission statement is:

“Transport for London Corporate Archives serves as the institutional memory of the organisation, evidencing that every journey matters. The primary mission of the Corporate Archives is to collect, preserve and make accessible institutional records of enduring value that reflect the history and development of Transport for London and its predecessor companies. To this end, the Archives will:

- *Manage appropriate storage facilities for the retention and preservation of its collections.*
- *Support research and teaching by making available and encouraging the use of its collections by the Transport for London community and the wider public.*
- *Provide information services which support Transport for London employees in performance of their duties.*
- *Promote knowledge and understanding of the history, programmes and goals of Transport for London and its predecessor companies”.*

This is based upon TfL’s simple, but effective strapline, “every journey matters” – the Archive adapts this too: showing how each item in the collection evidences how every journey matters.

The Archive aims to support research and teaching by making the collections available and encouraging their use. Tamara feels that it is important that items can be accessed and used, otherwise they might as well be thrown away. They provide information services to TfL employees in their duties to show what has been tried before and prove rights and responsibilities, and to promote understanding and knowledge of the history of TfL and its predecessor companies.

Institutional Memory is a term the Archive uses a lot. They define it as collecting oral history, evidence of commercial activities, documents, etc to protect TfL against litigation and trade mark infringement. Institutional Memory is a key asset in the promotion of the organisation’s activities, business and reputation.

They have a development policy which states where there are gaps in the collection and what they will, and won’t, collect. As a rule, the Archive only keeps items prepared or commissioned by TfL (or its predecessor companies). It must evidence a decision, process or outcome – why something was done or how an outcome was achieved and potential alternatives that were dismissed, and why. The Archive, however, does not exist only to provide an “audit trail” for TfL – it also keeps the good and the bad and will not manipulate history to ‘hide’ mistakes or events better best forgotten.

THE COLLECTION

This is very, very large and Tamara does not even know everything that is in it! It dates back to the 1600s (the earliest dates from 1642-ish and is a property deed) and is being added to daily, particularly with digital records. Over 155,000 physical files of paper items and 181,000 digital files are held. These paper files have been collected over 150 years, but the digital files only go back five years – so Tamara is concerned how quickly this is going to grow in the future.

About 10% of the collection dates from 1642 to 1820 and this is all property records relating to land or property which has been purchased to dig on or under. The period 1820 to 1850 is a smaller proportion and contains items relating to the history of the companies who provided the earliest transport systems in London. For 1850s to 1900 it holds the records of the General Omnibus Company and the beginnings of the Underground. From 1900 it becomes much more of a business archive, containing agendas, minutes, committee decision records, annual accounts and budgets etc.

However, the collection does cover Social, Architectural, Economic and Environmental histories and there is so much in there that it is a fascinating record of London.

The Archive is starting to look at preserving the digital records to protect them against changes in software programs, so these can be opened in 20 years' time! Tamara works closely with TfL staff to ensure that items prepared today can be preserved for the future.

They also look at preserving the physical records and even removing and destroying items, such as Nitrate film stock, which could damage other items.

Most of the physical files (19,000+ boxes) are stored in salt mines in Cheshire. So only a small proportion (about 1,000 boxes) can be kept on site in London.

USERS

The Archive are working with Centre for Lifelong Learning of York University who are setting up an on-line short course about transport in London.

It provides internal exhibitions based at their offices in London; but they sadly don't have the budget (for insurance, transport, security etc) to do these externally.

The Archive is open to all and receives a diverse range of enquiries. Its digital catalogue is available from <http://www.tflcorporatarchivecatalogue.co.uk/CalmViewA/> This is a description of their holdings, rather than digital copies of items in the collection. There are over 130,000 entries in the catalogue – so the search bar is very useful! You can do a “quick” search or an “advanced” search which gives options to define search terms or date ranges, etc. Each item is linked to others which relate to it, and to which it relates. A limitation of the catalogue is that all items relating to a topic are not necessarily within the same series. Also, not every single item within a physical file is catalogued, due to time pressures, so you might have to look at every file produced by a certain department or on a subject. Another issue is that not every item can be included in the catalogue due to issues of commercial confidentiality, security or data protection. The catalogue is updated every six weeks and “closed” material is regularly reviewed to see if it can now be opened.

RESEARCH AIDS

The Archive publishes over 40 guides as introductions to areas of research such as a guide to researching the history each of the Underground lines, closed stations, Thames Tunnel, and the 1948 Olympics.

Staff registers (over 36,000 names) are also available now via Ancestry.com, rather than the Archive. It is recommended to look out for “free weekends” when **Ancestry.com** allow access without subscriptions!

If you are using the London Metropolitan Archive catalogue and find a reference beginning “ACC/1297” that means the item is on long-term loan from the TfL Archive. This material is predominantly bus related, but some early railway company material is also there.

The Archive is also on Aim25, Tumblr and ArchiveHub. Their website is on the main TfL website within the "About Us", then "Culture & Heritage" section: <https://tfl.gov.uk/corporate/about-tfl/culture-and-heritage/corporate-archives?intcmp=2758>

If you were doing a Genealogical (family history) enquiry, Tamara would recommend that you search their catalogue, search Ancestry, look at their Research Guide number 17: Sources for Genealogical Resources and ask the Archive to do a search of the collection of Staff magazines for information about long service awards, retirements etc.

VISITING THE ARCHIVE

They are based at Windsor House on Victoria Street, Westminster, and are currently open Monday to Friday, 10.00 to 16.30 but closed for lunch (but this may change). It is essential to contact the Archive at least five days in advance on corporatearchives@tfl.gov.uk. This is so they can confirm they are open when you want to come and have space to accommodate you and, most importantly, so they can make sure the item(s) you want are in the Search Room (and not still in the Cheshire Salt Mines). You will need to bring photographic ID and proof of address to your appointment and sign a register and Data Protection Act declaration. Digital photography is allowed.

WHAT ARCHIVISTS' DO

Tamara concluded by explaining that Archivists are not historians, but her team seek to promote the archive and manage the collection; preserving digital records, collaborating with external bodies, and most importantly, preserving and conserving the collection. They are helped by volunteers and students on placements.

After a short Q and A session the meeting thanked Tamara in the usual manner.

Amanda Griffiths