

# Friends of Teesside Archives

Registered Charity No. 1082369

## Friend of Teesside Archives Report to Joint Archives Committee

Prepared January 2015

## **Friends of Teesside Archives Report to Joint Archives Committee**

The Friends of Teesside Archives is a voluntary support group with charitable status, formed in 2000, and presently boasting a loyal and active membership of just over one hundred. The group's objectives have always been to promote, support and assist the various services of Teesside Archives in as many ways as possible.

We have a large group of talented and committed volunteers, some of who attend family and social history fairs and local libraries promoting the Archives, and others who work extremely hard behind the scenes cataloguing, digitising, indexing and photocopying in order to make Teesside's historic collections readily available to the public.

Obviously we are very much aware of the impact on municipal services of increasing economic stringency, but we feel a number of quite specific concerns would benefit from being brought to The Committee's attention.

The main source of our disquiet, from which a number of practical issues flow, is the state of the Teesside Archives building. It is expensive to heat, not helped by draughty and badly sealed and rusted windows, many of which are broken and held together with adhesive tape. The heating system is inadequate. For example, during the winter many of the upstairs rooms are too cold to work in. In spite of the constant efforts of the conservator to control the heat and humidity in the storage rooms, conditions are far from ideal. The lift, which is currently out of order again, is so ancient that parts for it are no longer produced, resulting in long repair times as replacements have to be sourced. The lights in the building are very old fluorescent fittings, for which tubes are also no longer available and compatible replacements come with a very short lifespan. In addition the Search Room requires an electrical 'upgrade' as more customers expect to be able to use their own digital devices in the course of their research. The basement floods in wet weather having a detrimental effect on the floors above and we are rapidly running out of storage space.

These are obvious problems that we, and no doubt you too, can't fail to be aware of, but it is our belief that positive and carefully targeted investment would eliminate some of these substandard conditions. Not only would this encourage demand and more rigorously meet current archival requirements, but it would ease the way to Accreditation by the National Archives, and the benefits and funding opportunities this would bring.<sup>1</sup>

Many authorities have taken the decision to provide a new building to house their Archives, Central Library, Social and Local studies, including in some cases Registrar's offices, university libraries, museums and art galleries. In all instances this has improved efficiency, vastly increased usage, (particularly by students, younger people and older researchers), and provided a visitor attraction. The provision of such a building in a central location would no doubt be more cost effective than the upgrading and running costs of the current structure.

Our own 'investment' is not negligible. As just one example, we have recently begun a series of group volunteer days to enable the cataloguing, conservation and packaging of a collection of Hartlepool plans. This collection consists of hundreds of rolled bundles and requires teams of at least three people and a lot of space to work in. Current staff levels and workloads do not allow the staff time to tackle this and similar aspects of collections management. We are also cataloguing and digital scanning Redcar & Cleveland's Historic Environment Record.<sup>2</sup> Up to and including the year 2013 -2014, recorded hours worked by Friends volunteers totalled 3,374. Using timesheets to calculate the value of this labour, under guidance issued by the National Lottery, the approximate value of this time invested is **£67,480.00**. This statistic, as you will be aware, would provide a valuable asset in any application for funding.

One ongoing concern is the rather large quantity of documents, held in various locations throughout the four boroughs, that requires archiving for its own protection. While it is understandable that local groups want to keep items in the vicinity, unless these items are properly cared for they will not survive for future generations. (One example of this has been Whitby. When the decision to archive the material they held was finally taken, a lot of it was in such poor condition it had to be destroyed.) Funding for a suitable copier and some staff hours to operate it would mean duplicates could be made of any documents, including those currently held at Teesside Archives, which local groups wished to hold. Provision of a suitable copier would also negate the current situation of having to buy in copying services from other authorities.

In addition, we are in continuing receipt of numerous complaints regarding the family history material now held at Middlesbrough Library. These resources were originally moved to the library to provide better access when the Archive's opening hours were reduced. The complaints mainly identify lack of knowledgeable assistance and access to basic amenities. As a lot of the material is now available online, and the people who continue to use it place more importance on the assistance and amenities that (with the help of the Friends) are available at the Archives, we believe it should now be returned to its original depository.

We do appreciate that any discussion and/or decisions are complicated by the sharing of the service across four separate authorities. However, we believe the impetus for change has to begin somewhere, and therefore may we take the liberty of reminding you of Section 2.3 of the Agreement made in 2012 between the Borough Councils of Stockton on Tees, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland:

*The Joint committee shall administer maintain and **develop** the Archives Service and shall do all things as they consider necessary or proper to facilitate such purposes including but **not exclusively** the budget for the Archive and the apportionment thereto of the Councils.*

The Friends work extremely hard to support the Archives, dedicating time, knowledge and expertise to a service we believe the wider community has a right to access with ease. We would therefore very much like to see the members of this committee take a more proactive interest in the way archives work and the problems faced by Teesside Archives in trying to do that work.

Thank you very much for your time and attention.

Anne Clayton

Chairperson – Friends of Teesside Archives

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<sup>1</sup> 'Archive Service Accreditation is the UK standard for archive services. The standard defines good practice and identifies agreed standards, thereby encouraging and supporting development. The standard defines good practice and identifies agreed standards, thereby encouraging and supporting development. The standard is aligned with other relevant quality assurance schemes, improvement tools and data gathering processes. It is aimed at organisations that hold archive collections, whatever their constitution, and covers both private and public sector archives. It enables archive services to review and develop their policies, plans and procedures against a UK wide standard which has been developed by the archives sector, identifying strengths of the archive service and providing a framework to improve areas of weakness.'  
(<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/archive-service-accreditation-standard-june-2014.pdf>)

## 2 National Planning Policy Framework

Local planning authorities should make information about the significance of the historic environment, gathered as part of plan-making or development management, publicly accessible.