



## Archives at Westminster College: So... what does an archivist do, exactly?

As the archivist at Westminster College, I look after archives and special collections (including rare books, art, and objects) of Westminster College, the Cheshunt Foundation, and the URC History Society.

I'm often asked what archives are, what archivists do, and how to become one, so although these are questions that every archivist will answer differently, here's my personal take on it.

### What are archives? Why are they important?

An archive is a collection of records of a person or a family, or an organisation: maybe a business, an institution, a university, a charity, a religious organisation, part of local or national government... and different archives obviously hold very different types of material!

Archivists manage, preserve, and promote the historical records and information of people and institutions. Archives have one sort of value as evidence for your organisation - they might record decisions taken, safe procedures followed, assets owned. But they also have another sort of value: value as something culturally significant or historically interesting as a product of its time. For example: if you bought something in 1823, your receipt could help you keep track of your money. But 200 years later, that receipt is evidence that people in the 1820s paid for... lace shawls, or stagecoach fares, or beeswax candles. And *that* can tell us more about what people wore, how they travelled, or how they lit their homes.

There are two more key ideas about evidentiary value in archives. One is **original order** – you keep everything in the order you found it, so you can see how things interrelate. The second is **provenance** – you keep records of where and when it came from, so you have its context. Archives are (mostly) interconnected series of records, so original order and provenance will help you to see how they were put together and used, and why, at what point in a person's or organisation's life.

Unlike published books in a library, archives are usually unique. But they're not always written documents. They *can* be written – and most of ours are! – like letters, charters, contracts, emails, or minutes of meetings; but archives can be photographs, audio recordings, maps, architectural drawings, advertising fliers,



Detail of a Portuguese antiphonal from 1600



Looking after collections: a volunteer cleaning glass lantern slides from the 1890s



Archives can be in many formats, not just paper

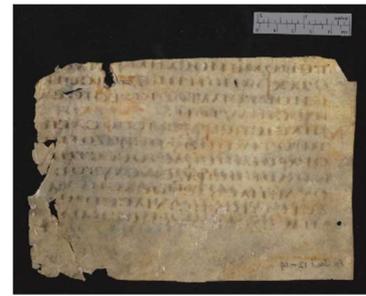
films... and there are often a few printed works and historical objects in an archive collection, too! And increasingly, we also receive, create, and manage electronic records in archives as well.

### What are an archivist's responsibilities?

Different people will answer this differently, but I think there are three key areas of responsibility. Firstly, you try to **care for the collections**, by keeping them safely and ensuring they survive for future generations. Secondly, you try to **reach out to and help your users**, making sure the widest possible range of people can see your archives and find the information they need. And thirdly, you **work for your organisation**, promoting their heritage and protecting their intellectual property. Archivists try to find a balance between these three responsibilities.

As an archivist, you try to...

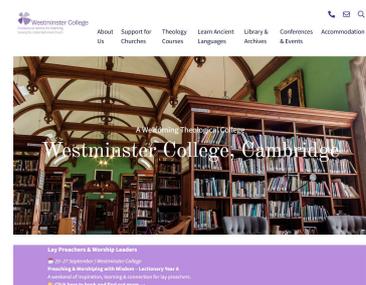
- Develop the collections with an 'accessions strategy' - identify what your archive collects, decide what should be kept and what should not, and liaise with donors about gifts
- List the collections – work towards getting things labelled and catalogued, usually on a database, so everything's easy to find
- Answer enquiries, in person or by email, phone, and letter – and ensure the archives are accessible and welcoming, so as many researchers as possible can use the records and information, in person and online.
- Preserve the collections so their physical condition doesn't deteriorate, by making sure they are stored securely, in boxes, at the right light, temperature, and humidity levels, and try to keep them safe from fire, flood, pests, and disasters
- Ensure conservation of the collections, by working with qualified conservators who can repair existing damage
- Learn about how your archives collections reflect the history of your subject or organisation, so you can help researchers find what they need, and support their use and interpretation of the archives
- Promote the collections as widely as you can – with digitisation, displays, social media, websites, talks, tours, publications: tell people why your archives are awesome!
- Collaborate with stakeholders: talk to researchers, liaise with librarians, supervise volunteers, advocate to management, apply for funding, ask advice from conservators, and collaborate with other archives and archivists on a whole range of things!
- Protect people's legal rights in the archives: that's Data Protection, Freedom of Information, copyright law, ethical considerations, and other legislation



A C7th manuscript, now digitised and online



Be willing to talk about items in your collections, from large to small!



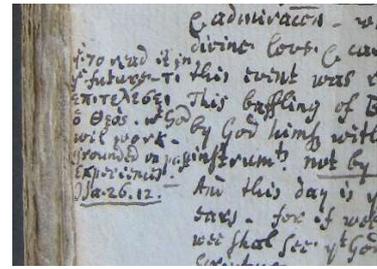
Online presence is an important part of archives promotion – make sure people can find you



Preservation: making a cardboard enclosure for a book with a missing cover

## So, what skills do you need to be an archivist?

- You need to be organised and have good attention to detail, so you can manage information and documents carefully and keep track of everything
- You need to be friendly and have good communication and people skills, because archivists try to be helpful, clear, open, and inclusive
- You need to be happy to work with IT, so you can use catalogue databases, digitise records, handle electronic documents, and promote your collections using new technology and online
- You need to be enthusiastic, so you can advocate for archives as a resource and tell people how your archives are interesting and useful
- You need to be interested in history, but remember history begins yesterday and some collections can be very modern
- And just in case you're wondering: you don't have to be able to read Latin! It's useful in some jobs, but archives are so varied that it's not necessary for all organisations.



A sermon preached in 1689 – in English, with notes in Greek



A group of visitors looking at rare books and manuscripts

## What training do you need to be an archivist?

In the UK, most qualified archivists have a degree – often, but not always, in History (mine is in English!) – and then you usually need work experience and a post-graduate archives qualification. There are several universities which offer post-graduate courses, and some offer opportunities for part time study, or distance learning, where you can work as well as study over one or more years. In 2023, a new 3-year apprenticeship scheme was launched, too, in order to diversify routes into the profession.

## Where can I find out more?

Sound interesting? A good place to start investigating careers in archives is the Archives and Records Association website, here: <https://www.archives.org.uk/a-career-in-recordkeeping> ...and the UK National Archives website, here: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/careers-in-archives/>. Both these websites have lots of details on postgraduate courses and apprenticeships, and you can also find out more about similar careers working in records management, heritage management, or conservation.



Archives can be held alongside (or sometimes include) other heritage collections



A display of papers written by one of our students in the 1940s

Helen Weller, Archivist 2025

## P.S. Want to find out more about our archives and special collections at Westminster?

Have a look at our blog posts on the website at <https://www.westminster.cam.ac.uk/library-archives-history/from-the-archives>