

CARMARTHENSHIRE RECORD OFFICE

Parc Myrddin, Richmond Terrace, Carmarthen SA31 1DS

ARCHON number: 211

Visited 18/03/2011 by Nick Kingsley, accompanied by Mary Ellis and Sarah Paul from CyMAL.

Staff or officers met during visit: John Davies (County Archivist), Elin Cullen (Head of Business & Specialist Services)

Date of subscription to TNA Standard: 2007

Existing approvals: Public records; manorial and tithe documents; diocesan records

CURRENT ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS

The County Archivist reports to the Head of Business and Specialist Services, who in turn reports to the Director of Education. The relatively flat structure is in principle to be welcomed, but in practice other priorities have meant that the archives service has received relatively little attention from Elin Cullen since she became responsible for the service. This is due to change in 2011/12, when it is intended to develop an action plan for the archive services, to parallel one recently developed for libraries. Corporate records management is part of the Chief Executive's department. It has very poor accommodation, but communications between RM and archives is good, and records are regularly transferred for permanent retention.

The budget is managed by the County Archivist and covers all areas of expenditure. It continues at a broadly similar level to previous years. Whilst it is excellent news that the service has so far been protected from budget pressures (the authority is cutting £25m over the three years from 2011/12), the revenue funding is an active constraint on the ability of the service to develop further.

STAFFING

In 2005 the staff comprised three archivists, one searchroom assistant and a receptionist. This position is little changed, but whereas in 2005 the receptionist was able to act to a significant extent as a second searchroom assistant, the role is now funded by a central business unit which is also based in the building and plays a much reduced role in relation to the archives service. All the current staff have been in post for a number of years, and this means that they have a rich experience of the records in the service's care. There is, however, a need for some succession planning to ensure that the service does not suffer catastrophic disruption when the current staff retire.

There is a clear need for a second searchroom assistant as the service frequently only has two staff on duty, which is not enough to maintain security and the public service: a minimum of three staff overall are needed for the building to open securely. A new appointment could potentially help with the succession planning issue noted above.

Staff training and development

The County Council holds Investors in People accreditation, but there is limited provision for staff training in the archives service, partly because of the constraints provided by the tight staffing complement and the need to keep the building open. The service has changed very little in the last ten years and there has been little progress with new challenges in a number of areas, such as digital archives. An enhanced programme of staff development could help to address this.

Volunteers/community links

The service has a number of long-standing volunteers who contribute significantly to its work in traditional areas. However, it has been slow to develop outreach initiatives in the community and to demonstrate the contribution it can make to achieving the wider policy objectives of the County Council through community engagement. Lack of staff capacity has to some extent been a constraint in this, but more could have been achieved with greater commitment.

SITE AND BUILDINGS

The archive service was relocated into its present home in 1999-2000, as a result of an HLF-funded project to which the County Council contributed just £39,000. There have been a number of attempts in the last five years to secure further investment in the existing site or to relocate the service once more, but none of these has been brought to fulfilment. A sum of £1.2-1.5m is provisionally allocated in the capital programme for an upgrade to the service, but this has not yet been assigned to a particular year. The Welsh Assembly Government has recently reduced the County Council's capital allocation by 40%, so the service is competing with other priorities for a much reduced pot of funding.

The archives service occupies former school buildings in a Council-owned park just outside the town centre. Several other council services are based here, including the IT department, library headquarters staff, the business unit and some Childrens' Services staff [CHECK – copied from 2005 report]. The grounds are used as sports pitches. The archives service is not well signposted within the town, although once on the campus, the archives are reasonably prominently signed. Car parking is available, but it is barrier controlled and looks like a staff only car park to first-time visitors. Readers have to collect a token from the reception desk to exit from the car park.

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s31.

In the past there has been some difficulty with water penetration into the archives accommodation, both as a result of leaks in the office accommodation above and because of flooding from blocked drains. A new drainage system is believed to have eliminated the risk of a repetition, but the office still has a large number of water-pipes running through storage and office areas, which pose a risk of bursting and subsequent damage.

PUBLIC FACILITIES

(i) Reception and admission arrangements

There is a ramp for wheelchairs to gain access to the archives, and the public spaces are all on one level. The most obvious (although not the intended) access route for able-bodied visitors involves an awkward change of direction on a sequence of steps, and a number of users have had accidents in negotiating this. As a health and safety measure it might be advisable to block this access approach and to erect signage to indicate the intended access route.

Readers enter a small reception room, where the receptionist is based, and where lockers are available for personal belongings. This area also provides the only space where readers can consume refreshments they have brought with them; the lack of comfortable facilities and privacy makes this uncomfortable for all concerned.

The office is now a member of the Archives Wales joint readers ticket scheme; new readers are asked to read the searchroom rules and a member of staff provides advice on document handling to them. There is no charge for visiting. Readers are encouraged to book in advance, but those who arrive without booking are not turned away. Since 2005 the microfilm area has been relocated and there is now more space for this, and it is less of a constraint on public use.

The service is closed to the public on Mondays but to compensate opens late on a Tuesday evening by appointment. There is no weekend opening. The searchroom normally remains open at lunchtimes, but there is no production of original material between noon and 2pm, or in the half hour before closing time.

(ii) Searchrooms

From the reception area an uncontrolled door leads into the microfilm reading room, and the main searchroom opens off this. Changes made to the layout since 2005 have significantly improved the security arrangements and provided a much improved visitor experience. The microfilm room is [redacted], and has two PCs which provide access to CD-Roms and the Internet as well as film and fiche readers.

The main reading room is approximately 7m x 6m in size, with staff desks in one corner. In the searchroom there is space for about 16 readers at the main table, and an extra table accommodates users with maps or large documents. The windows are sealed and treated with UV-screening film. They also have blinds. The room tends to become unacceptably warm in summer. [redacted]

At the inner end of the searchroom, the large public toilet is wheelchair-accessible and suitably equipped for use by the disabled. From behind the staff counter there is access to a lobby leading to a staff office and the strongrooms. [redacted]

(iii) Finding aids

Lists and card indexes are provided in the searchroom, which also houses a good collection of reference books. CALM is used for accessioning and for the small amount of new cataloguing which takes place. The plans reported in 2005 to have online access to the system from 2006 have not been realised, but collection level descriptions are included on the Archives Wales site.

The rate of accessions runs at 50-60 a year [Check this is still true]. There is very little time for cataloguing and the backlog has got bigger in the last five years. John Davies estimates that 50% of the holdings are unlisted and that only 15% of collections are described in conformity with ISAD(G). Many of the older catalogues defy logic and really need scrapping or at least completely re-ordering into more logical sequences.

(iv) Rate of use

User numbers have dipped since 2005 from around 4500 per annum to just below 4000 in 2009-10. The service participated in the most recent PSQG survey and achieved a satisfaction rate in the 95-98% bracket. The number of enquiries increased with the introduction of e-mail but has been broadly stable since [check].

(v) Security

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(vi) Website and publications

The web presence on the County Council site is very limited, although the service is a partner in the Archives Wales site and is also participating in plans for the digitisation of tithe maps in Wales.

(vii) Research service

The service provides contact details of record agents undertaking work at Carmarthenshire on its website, but does not provide a direct research service of its own. This might be an area where it would be possible to collaborate with neighbouring authorities to support a shared post to improve the service offering.

(viii) Reader consultation

The service has participated regularly in the PSQG annual user survey in recent years.

(ix) Other public areas

None.

STRONGROOMS

(i) General

The archive storage occupies three rooms. Environmental monitoring is by Humbug dataloggers, which show that SRs 1 and 3 tend to be too warm and that all areas have humidity levels in excess of BS5454 recommendations. Diurnal variations are substantial, and are exacerbated by the heating being turned off in the evening, at weekends and during statutory holidays. All the strongrooms have central heating pipes, and the main strongroom has a 4" rising main. There is limited expansion space in the strongrooms, but the rate of accessions is very low, so the available space is not being reduced quickly. A more active collection development policy might lead to a rapid reduction in capacity.

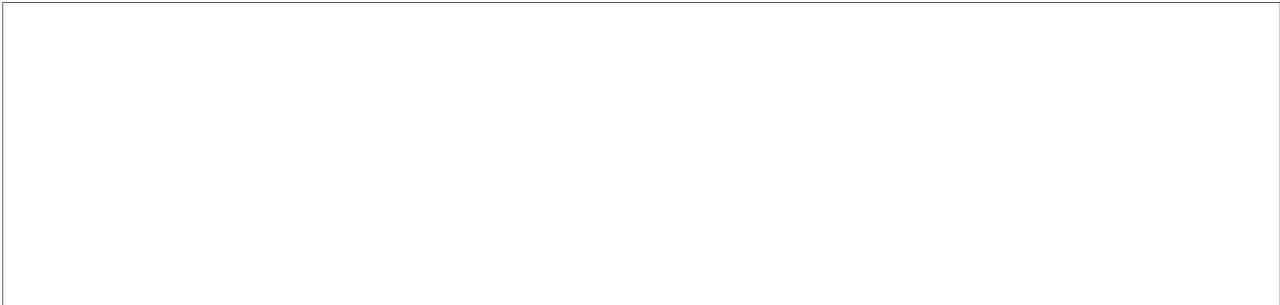
Strongroom 1 is approx. 5m x 4m. The room has a mix of shelving and map chests. There has been a minor problem with water penetration from above in this room, which has now been resolved. The existing static shelving and map chests do not make effective use of the space available. A mezzanine floor could be inserted, or high mobile shelving accommodated.

Strongroom 2 is also approx 5m x 4m. There is mobile shelving with exposed raised tracks, which provide a significant trip hazard. Above this, a mezzanine deck has been recently fitted with purpose-designed map storage. A low beam crosses the room at eye level and represents a significant hazard. There are clear indications of damp damage on the walls including bubbling and peeling paint and signs of mould. At the time of the inspection it was not possible to determine whether these represent an active problem or not, but the cause of the defects should be investigated and eliminated and the interior decoration should be made good.

Strongroom 3 is the main strongroom, 19m x 6m and some 3.5m high, with a pitched roof and tie beams, which prevent a mezzanine deck being inserted. The large roof area heats up considerably in the summer making temperature control difficult given the lack of air-conditioning, the reverse occurs in the winter period. It would be desirable to insert a false ceiling with insulation above to minimise the

impact of the external environment on the environment of the room. The wall behind the mobile racking has blocked windows, and there is an apparent infestation of dry rot in the wooden panelling on the lower part of this wall. Once again, it is not clear if this is active or not, but the condition of this wall should be investigated as a matter of urgency, any necessary works be undertaken and the interior made good.

The room is equipped with Nordplan mobile shelving, which periodically gives problems with sticking and is difficult to operate; the problem is believed to stem from flooding some years ago, when water got under the false floor and into the tracking mechanism of the shelving. There are also faults with the rollers. It is clear that the existing shelving is at the end of its useful life and needs to be replaced. This may also require a re-screeding of the floor to provide a flat surface.



(iii) Flood and damp prevention

There are pipes and radiators throughout the strongroom accommodation (contrary to BS5454), and there have been floods and leaks on a number of occasions, although none of these have done significant damage to documents. A drainage system around the building is believed to have eliminated the external flood risk. Since the last inspection radiators within the strongroom area have been shut off and flood detection equipment has been fitted, but presence of water-filled pipework continues to provide a risk to the records. Residual heat from hot water passing through heating pipes to other areas of the building also impacts detrimentally on environmental control within the strongrooms. We would strongly recommend that the pipe runs for the building's heating system are diverted to isolate the archive storage areas.

(iv) Fire protection

Smoke alarms in all strongrooms are linked to the Council's emergency control centre and from there to the fire brigade. The brigade arrives within 5-10 minutes.

The building has no fire suppression system and this should be considered in the context of any future plans for the development or extension of the accommodation. However it is possible that the current strongrooms would be insufficiently airtight for a suppression system to be fully effective.

It is recommended that the service reviews its fire response strategy and disaster plan with the local Fire Brigade at the earliest opportunity.

(v) Environmental controls

There is no air conditioning, although there are dehumidifiers in each room. Those in strongroom 3 are plumbed, but those in other rooms have to be emptied. They run only during working hours, which may contribute to diurnal fluctuations in humidity. The dehumidifiers are totally inadequate for the size of the strong rooms.

One of the key problems appears to be the height of the ceilings, which in two of the strongrooms rise to roof level, with no intermediate insulation. As a result the environmental conditions are strongly influenced by the external climate. It is recommended that as a short-term measure consideration is

given to inserting a lowered ceiling in strongroom 3 and fitting intermediate insulation. This would help to buffer the storage environment from external climatic variation and by reducing the volume of the strongroom areas, make it easier to maintain a stable environment. Consideration should also be given to ventilation arrangements to ensure a good air exchange rate and prevent microclimates from forming within the strongroom.

In the longer term, any development of the site should include the provision of full air conditioning to ensure closer control of the environmental conditions, ideally within the parameters recommended by BS5454. Given the construction of the accommodation, it is unrealistic to imagine that close control can be achieved by passive means, although this should be achievable in purpose-built accommodation, and would obviously give lower running costs and a greener solution.

(vi) Special storage

None

(vii) Outstores

None.

CONSERVATION

There is a small budget for work to be sent to private conservators on the Conservation Register, but there is no consistent programme. Only a handful of items a year are treated. The Friends Association contributes to, or pays for completely, one or two items to be repaired each year, and further work has been grant-aided by CyMAL. Following an NPO assessment some years ago which identified poor packaging and a lack of cleaning as key challenges for the service, CyMAL has grant-aided the purchase of appropriate packaging materials and staff have made some progress with cleaning and repackaging items. However this work is proceeding very slowly by comparison with the scale of the collections.

Since 2005, the service has developed a disaster plan, but staff have not yet been fully trained in their roles. It is recommended that such training should be carried out; that the Fire Brigade should be invited to review the plan; and that consideration is given to the conduct of a full-scale test of a disaster scenario.

STAFF OFFICES

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It is recommended that in the short term they are refurbished to offer an improved working space, and that consideration is given to more appropriate provision as part of any future development scheme for the site.

EXPANSION SPACE

There is still some expansion space, mostly in Strongroom 3. John Davies estimates this at 10 years worth because of the very low level of accessions. If privately deposited material in Llanelli library's "local collection" were transferred, as has been mooted, this would reduce the expansion space considerably.

The searchroom spaces are adequate for the current levels of use.

DOCUMENT RECEPTION/SORTING/ISOLATION FACILITIES

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MODERN RECORDS/INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Corporate records management is part of the Chief Executive's department. It has very poor accommodation, but communications between RM and archives is good, and records are regularly transferred for permanent retention.

The archives service has no involvement with the Council's management of electronic records, and it is not clear that the Council has developed adequate arrangements for ensuring continuity of access to its digital records. To ensure that the Council's arrangements remain within its risk appetite, we would recommend that the Council undertakes a self-assessment against the requirements of the Code of Practice on Records Management issued by the Lord Chancellor under s.46 of the Freedom of Information Act. A toolkit for this purpose is available on our website at:

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/s46-self-assessment-toolkit-online.xls>

COLLECTING POLICY AND RELATIONS WITH OTHER ARCHIVE COLLECTORS

Generally good. There are no collecting policy issues with neighbouring record offices and because of the assiduous collecting activities of Major Francis Jones the big family and estate collections are mostly here rather than at the National Library. There are some concerns about the conditions in which manuscript material is kept at Llanelli Library.

There are no active collaborative projects with other archive services, except through Archives Wales.

The service does not have a proactive collection development policy, and this is reflected in the low level of deposits. Despite the lack of staff capacity, the low level of accessions is a cause of concern, as the collecting remit of the service is not being actively fulfilled.

The service is on friendly terms with the library and museum services, but does not do much in the way of joint working.

OUTREACH, AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

The service is minimally active in these areas, partly because of the limited staff capacity. There is a certain amount of very traditional outreach work (e.g. lectures to local and family history societies), and the service has a relationship with Trinity College, Carmarthen, as part of which John Davies and colleagues give presentations to history students. The service consults with Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society and Dyfed Family History Society, with members of staff sitting on both committees, the meetings for which are hosted at the office. An active link is also maintained with Carmarthenshire FHS. Informal links are maintained with other local history groups. A Friends Association meets occasionally in the archive searchroom with a programme of talks and visits. There is no educational offer to schools.

Overall, there is little evidence the service seeks to align its outreach and development work with the policy priorities of the Council, or to work in partnership with non-traditional partners to access hard to reach audiences. This is an area of the service's work requiring significant development in the future.