

## Co-operation is the Key

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### Abstract

*In times of limited resources, staff, finance, and expertise in local heritage organisations are all at a premium. Cultural institutions should learn to collaborate in promoting their collections and, thereby, to foster public interest in the local history of their communities.*

*An exciting way of giving access to local history source material is through digitisation, both on CD-Roms and on the internet. Digitisation projects can be overwhelming to any one organisation, but not if supported by a team of partners. In North Yorkshire (England) a library service joined up with an archives service, a museum and other neighbouring library authorities to publish a website of digitised photos, a CD-Rom and other publicity material.*

*The library service has also linked with a commercial company to produce a website of digitised photographs of a North Yorkshire town, collected over many years by two local historians.*

*Another project in progress involves the archives and the library service working together with teachers in North Yorkshire (England) to produce a CD-Rom with two case studies, that will inform schools and the education department as to what local studies information is held in libraries and the archives.*

*Individually no one institution could be totally successful with any of these projects. The co-operating partners bring together their individual source material and discuss the projects from their differing historical backgrounds and disciplines. The combination of co-operation and digitisation has been of advantage to everyone.*

Libraries, archives and museums hold many hidden historical sources that would be of great interest to the public at large, students and researchers, if only this material was more easily available.

Archives care for many kinds of documents, deeds and registers. Libraries file accumulations of photographs and ephemera while museums collect household implements and artefacts.

It is common for members of the public to have to go from archive repository to local studies library to museum, developing their family trees or uncovering the history of their ancestor's home village. Few researchers have the time, or even the knowledge, to seek out the connections in associated information from different venues. Individually, institutions can promote their own collections, but collectively, they would be able to do so much more. It is not easy for heritage institutions to exploit their specific collections or to give the public access to the rich resources that they care for individually. The cost to the holding organisation is too high, despite any

wish of local studies staff in these institutions to give the wider community freer access to the resources. Proposals for promoting the collections may be inventive or even unique, but there is unlikely to be extra funding, little expertise and even less spare staff time to produce a sustainable promotions plan. The public, students and researchers, are the losers.

### **Digitisation and partnerships**

Lateral thinking is required. Individually, local heritage institutions can work with their own collections, but, in partnership, they can attempt so much more. *Co-operation is the key.*

One of the most innovative ways of giving access to local history source material is through digitisation, on CD-Roms and on the internet. By co-operating together, institutions can use the new electronic media to bring their different historical resources together. In doing so, they can foster interest in the history of the surrounding communities not only locally, but even further afield. Combined and interpreted as a whole, the historical evidence, in many and different formats, can define historical themes and illuminate the narrative of particular places.

In the late 1990s some UK library authorities had created partnerships to utilise the emerging internet technology to digitise illustrations and to create easy access to databases of historical information. A prizewinning website, *Knowsley local history: its people and heritage (1998)*<sup>(1)</sup> had been developed by Knowsley Local Studies and Archives and the Internet Centre for Merseyside Businesses. This used over 500 digitised historical photographs to record an interactive history of Knowsley townships and inhabitants.

In North Yorkshire, staff at the County Library and Information Service knew that the Library Service did not have the means to move forward alone. Guided by the example of more pioneering authorities, it became clear that the internet revolution gave institutions the opportunity of moving forward together to provide greater and more seamless access to their collections.

Three projects from North Yorkshire in England demonstrate that working with other very different organisations has brought great benefits.

By collaborating with the archives service, a museum and other neighbouring library authorities, and aided by a large government grant, North Yorkshire Libraries and their partners have published a website of digitised photos <sup>(2)</sup> and have helped to produce a promotional CD-Rom and other publicity material.

The Library Service has also associated itself with a commercial web development company, which has produced a website gallery of digitised photographs of a North Yorkshire town <sup>(3)</sup> using historic photographs collected over many years by two local historians.

With another project in progress, the County Record Office and the Library Service is, this year, working together with representatives of the teachers in North Yorkshire and an outside web company to produce a CD-Rom. This will include two case studies and will include material designed to inform schools and the County education department about the range of local studies information held in libraries and the County Archives.

## **The Unnetie Digitisation Photographic Project**

On his retirement in 1979, a professional photographer, Bertram Unné (1913-1981), had sold his working archive of negatives and prints to the County Library Service. This was a unique and valuable set of images of town and country life in North Yorkshire, England between 1940 and 1979. The archive of more than 19,000 negatives in non-archival envelopes was stored in the Library Headquarters building in conditions that over the years became less than ideal. Though efforts were made to exhibit the Unné photographs at exhibitions in the county and through a browsing collection of around 1,000 mounted prints, the collection was mainly known to contemporaries of the photographer. Access to the archive was by appointment only and by means of a very basic card and paper index.

A chance came with the bidding process for a grant from the UK New Opportunities Fund which was awarding National Lottery money for electronic projects using the digital technology accessible through the People's Network connecting every library in the country to the internet. The conditions of the grant insisted on successful ventures being collaborative and the project, which was intended to open up an almost forgotten archive to local historians, grew into a joint undertaking. The County Record Office and the Dales Countryside Museum contributed digitised images of manuscripts and artefacts to attach to eleven storylines. Members of the local history society gave advice and confirmed the historical texts. 7,500 of the Unné negatives were digitised along with 2,500 historic engravings, postcards, lantern-slides and prints from collections held by two other of the North Yorkshire libraries.

In this way, supported by the partners and by a regional library consortium whose four members were also digitising material, the library service completed what was a small but unique project of immense interest to Yorkshiremen at home and abroad.

## **The Rowley Collection**

In addition, the Library Service has also combined with a commercial company to produce another website of digitised photographs, collected over many years by two local historians. These photographic images give a historical panorama of a North Yorkshire town of Skipton, and its surrounding area.

The Rowley Collection website [\(3\)](#) is a partnership between a web development company, *SkiptonWeb*, and staff at North Yorkshire Library and Information Service, Skipton branch. Steve Smith and Wayne Deveney oversee *SkiptonWeb* [\(4\)](#), a website that is an internet information resource for the residents of Skipton, and for tourists to this 'Gateway to the Yorkshire Dales'. The site only incidentally promotes their own successful web design and development business, and *SkiptonWeb* freely advertises the work of local shops and associations and local events on its pages.

These two web developers had been keen to collaborate with the Library Service. They knew about the Rowley Photographic Collection that had been deposited in Skipton Library — over five hundred historic photographs dating from the 1850s. In the case of the Rowley Collection the web-team have neither charged for their services nor for the hosting of the site.

Dr Geoffrey Rowley had been a solicitor and local historian who wrote books on Skipton and Yorkshire. After his death his wife sent his collection of historical notes, postcards, slides and photographic prints, amassed in the course of his lifetime's

research, to Skipton Library. A friend of the Rowley family also supplied additional photographs. The archive had been kept in a special cabinet in the reference department, in 13 cardboard boxes, each containing images of similar subjects and labelled, for example, *Skipton High Street*. Mrs Rowley used her husband's collection to illustrate the local history talks that she gave to societies, but the photographs of old Skipton and its people deserved a far greater profile.

The web developers suggested that they could create a special Rowley website, attached, but separate, to *SkiptonWeb*. They would supply the expertise in building the site and digitise the images at no cost if the Library Service co-ordinated the project and supplied the necessary indexing, titles, descriptions, keywords and dates. The result has been a fully searchable on-line gallery of over 500 historic photos of Skipton. The site is also inter-active, a real local community resource, since there is the facility for users to add comments and personal information. There is a guest-book, the photos can be sent as e-cards and prints of, for example, *Edwardian Skipton* or the local football and cricket teams of the 1920s and 1930s can be ordered from Skipton Library. It is intended that other historic photographs should be added to the site at a later stage. Meanwhile the photographs can be seen on-line, on CD or on DVD, an outcome that could not have been accomplished by the Library Service alone. (5)

Here again the collaboration of active library staff and a committed commercial company has resulted in a website that might not have otherwise existed – one of which Mrs Rowley has said: *It's fascinating that technology has been used in this way, to allow my husband's collection to be seen by people around the world as well as locally.*

### **The Reaching the Teacher Project**

This year North Yorkshire County Record Office took the lead on a new co-operative project. In the past the Record Office has been a very mysterious building, and its vast collections have remained largely unknown to most of the public – apart from industrious family historians searching through the parish registers. The new Archive development manager has been anxious to dispel the view that the archive collections are only available to the few. He is eager to develop new audiences and to encourage students and schoolchildren to regard the documents and information as open to all.

There are guides to the holdings of the Record Office, but these are academic listings hardly likely to appeal to either teachers, who want information that is related immediately to their curriculum subjects, or to first-timers who need to have a less academic approach to the records. However, rather than archives staff deciding what teachers might like to access for their class-work, the Record Office has successfully won a regional grant that will focus on collaboration with teachers and the Library Service in the production of an informative CD-Rom. This will contain many images and some appropriate text. The information has been chosen and researched by a representative teachers' group, regularly meeting with archives and library staff. There will be two case-studies on the CD. One, for Primary school teachers, will be based on a Police Charge Book of 1869-1878, showing mug-shots of those unfortunates due to appear at the Court of Quarter Sessions. The other, for Secondary schools, will be a circular study around the life of a local Workhouse Master who in his old age became himself a Workhouse inmate. The enthusiastic teacher-representatives will ensure that the material meets the real needs of the school curriculum and is worded in language that suits their colleagues. The launch of

the CD is due at the end of this year with the teachers-group actively promoting this introduction to archival records around the schools in the County.

## **Conclusion**

Individually no one institution could have been totally successful with any of these projects. The co-operating partners have combined their individual source material and continue to discuss the projects from their differing disciplines, historical backgrounds, and their belief in what the projects must achieve - that the end result must be faithful to the original source material and yet expand the horizons of students of every age. Everyone must gain in experience. Digitisation has given the public new access to rare and exceptional local studies material, but the advantages of partnerships and collaborative project planning cannot be stressed too highly. Hidden collections are opened up to the public and new historical and community connections are made. *Co-operation is the key.*

## References:

- (1) [www.history.knowsley.gov.uk](http://www.history.knowsley.gov.uk)
- (2) [www.northyorks.gov.uk/unnetie](http://www.northyorks.gov.uk/unnetie)
- (3) [www.rowleycollection.co.uk](http://www.rowleycollection.co.uk),
- (4) [www.skiptonweb.co.uk](http://www.skiptonweb.co.uk)
- (5) [www.skiptonweb.co.uk/everything\\_else/rowley\\_collection.asp](http://www.skiptonweb.co.uk/everything_else/rowley_collection.asp)