

NEWS

NDAD Newsletter #8 - July 2000

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Project News

New datasets online

- From the [Lord Chancellor's Department](#), [Judicial Statistics 1986-1996](#) and [1997](#) (CRDA/8).
- [Internal Drainage Board Database \(1994/1995\)](#) (CRDA/9).
- [Agricultural and Horticultural Census Parish Summaries \(1989-1994 but excluding 1992\)](#) (CRDA/4).
- [Agricultural and Horticultural Census County Summaries \(1994-1996\)](#) (CRDA/4).
- [Metropolitan Police Crime Statistics](#) (CRDA/1)
- [HM Customs & Excise Beer Duty](#) (CRDA/19).

New web site section for NDAD contributors

A new section has been created on the web site for **NDAD contributors**, containing information and advice for Departmental Record Officers and other departmental staff responsible for transferring data to NDAD. You can find it at <http://ndad.ulcc.ac.uk/resources/contrib.html>.

Resources include copies of the forms necessary to accompany transfers of data and documentation and guidance on completing the forms, in PDF format. HTML versions of these documents (where appropriate) will also shortly be available.

Phillimore Prize

Congratulations to the [Kingston Museum and Heritage Centre](#), winner of the annual prize offered by Phillimore, publisher of local history books, for its [Eadweard Muybridge Collection](#). The judges also commended the catalogues entered by NDAD.

ADROs Conference

On 19th May 2000 at Kew, the Association of Departmental Records Officers, in conjunction with the PRO, hosted a conference dedicated to Electronic Records Management and Archiving. Speakers included Ian Macfarlane from the PRO, and several members of the NDAD team. Kevin Ashley spoke about the significant changes brought about during recent decades by the introduction of computers into the work of government; Peter Garrod and Sally Hughes, with the assistance of Carol Dimmer of the PRO, described the decisions and problems entailed in accessioning one of NDAD's first datasets; and Patricia Sleeman presented her *Bluffer's Guide to Data*, explaining in layman's terms some of the issues and terminology that sometimes confounds departmental staff with relatively little experience of Information Technology. A version of [Kevin's talk](#) on the history of computing in government is printed in this newsletter.

The presentations were all well-received, and it was in general considered a very useful exercise. As usual we were very grateful for the excellent facilities and assistance on offer at Kew.

Topically tropical

On 30-31 March 2000, Kevin participated in a workshop of the Tropical Forest Inventory Data Archive.

International Record Management Trust

On 6th July 2000, Kevin made a presentation to a training day held at ULCC for the International Records Management Trust.

Society of Archivists Conference

Peter Garrod, Patricia Sleeman and Kate Bradford attended the annual conference of the [Society of Archivists](#) at [UMIST](#), Manchester on 27-30 June 2000. The Society of Archivists represents archivists, archive conservators and record managers in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. As usual, the conference had a diverse programme with sessions covering topics such as freedom of information, networking initiatives and conservation workshops. Much of the conference was focused on the recent creation of [Re:source: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries](#), and the related creation of Regional Archives Councils under the auspices of the [National Council on Archives](#). These are important initiatives for the archive world which will hopefully give archives a higher profile in central government.

HCU Seminars

Peter Garrod attended two one-day seminars at the [Humanities Computing Unit](#), Oxford University Computing Services on 12-13 July 2000. Peter writes: "The first seminar was on 'Digital Libraries and Metadata' and included some useful sessions in the morning on the practicalities of running a digitisation project: both the technical aspects (e.g. scanners and resolutions) and the managerial side. The afternoon provided a somewhat galloping overview of the [Dublin Core Metadata](#) standard and the metadata aspects of two markup languages, [Text Encoding Initiative](#) (TEI) and [Encoded Archival Description](#) (EAD). The second seminar, on 'Creating and Documenting Digital Texts', was primarily focused on TEI, though XML and digitisation were covered briefly. TEI is used by the [OxfordText Archive](#) (based at the Humanities Computing Unit) as a markup language for the electronic texts which have been deposited with the Archive. We were given a chance to do some basic markup ourselves. The TEI DTD is a very 'rich' standard with tags that allows you to mark up

almost any aspect of the formatting of a document, editorial conventions and insertions, and metadata elements. A 'slimmed down' version, [TEI Lite](#) is also available. Its application to NDAD would seem to be limited, though we could potentially use it to mark up the text files which are produced as part of the process of scanning dataset documentation."

Forthcoming conferences

One or more NDAD staff are likely to be attending the following conferences:

- [DRH 2000](#) at Sheffield University, 10-13 September.
- [PRO Annual Conference on Records Management in Government](#), Bristol, 4-6 October.
- [Preservation 2000](#), York, 7-8 December.

Staff

More electronic archives initiatives

Frances Blomeley is contributing to the development of database systems for [AIM25](#), an [RSLP](#)-funded project to provide networked access to archival holdings in higher education institutions in the London/M25 area, and [CASBAH](#), a database of materials relevant to Caribbean Studies and the history of Black and Asian people in Britain.

In a similar vein, Richard Davis has been assisting Judith Etherton, the University of London Archivist, to convert Finding Aids for part of its impressive collection of manuscripts into [EAD](#) for submission to the [HE Archives Hub](#).

Tour of Senate House

At the end of June, several NDAD staff enjoyed a tour of Senate House, kindly organised by the Training and Development Office. Highlights included watching a documentary based on original filmed footage of the construction of Senate House in the 1930's (an era when a cloth cap rather than a hard hat seems to have been de rigeur on building sites), and the opportunity for our most recent recruits to sample the view from the roof of what was, at one time, the tallest building in London.



Departure Lounge

We are sorry to have to say farewell to Linda Heron, who has spent two years as Archives Assistant at NDAD. Linda is going to [Jupiter](#) Unit Trust Managers. We are grateful for the contribution she has made to the project and wish her success with her new employer.

A Brief History of Government Computing

Kevin Ashley, NDAD Project Manager

In his recent presentation to the Association of Departmental Records Officers, Kevin Ashley demonstrates that there are more reasons than might at first be obvious for selecting datasets for preservation, and explains why NDAD staff go to considerable pains to uncover background documents of all sorts relating to the datasets they preserve.

In my experience, it is true to say that most people, if they think about the issue at all, would say that the datasets worth preserving are those that contain interesting data. This is true in a sense, but it isn't the only reason a government IT system might be of interest. Forty years of civilian government computing have had a huge effect on how government works and what it can do, for good or ill. Computing changed the nature of the Civil Service: its size, skills mix and working environment. In the 1960s and 1970s particularly, government also shaped the products of the computer industry. This was particularly true in Britain where for some years the fortunes of what we once called the British computer industry were inextricably intertwined with government spending, and its enthusiasm, or lack of it, for computing solutions. The end result is that the history of government computing is relevant to a wide range of research interests: social history, politics, economics, the history of computing and the study of government itself.

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It hasn't taking computing to make some citizens and politicians wary of the way governments collect data. In 1753. in the House of Commons, William Thornton was provoked to declare:

I was never more astonished and alarmed since I had the honour to sit in this House [...]. And what purpose will it answer to know where the kingdom is crowded [...] except we are to be driven [...] as graziers do cattle? [...] As to myself, I hold this project to be totally subversive of the last remains of English liberty.

The scheme that aroused his anger was a plan to count the number of able-bodied males in each parish of the country: a census. In the first glimmerings of central planning, someone had realised that it might be a good idea to know how many people there were in the country, whether they were all staying in one place and how many of them might be able to put up a fight if someone tried to invade. The Honourable Mr Thornton clearly didn't agree (and the Data Protection legislation that might have appeased him was going to be a long time coming) but more than two centuries later his words were to inspire a remarkable study of the impact of counting and tracking people on our lives, which I will describe in more detail below.

I would like to think there are number of reasons why the PRO might want to select datasets, and

Links in this Article

- [IBM 360](#)
- [Passport Office](#)
- [History of the London Ambulance system](#)
- [ESRC](#)
- [Routledge](#)
- [DSS](#)
- [Inland Revenue](#)
- [ICL](#)
- [CCTA](#)
- [EDS](#)
- [SEMA](#)
- [ONS](#)
- [MAFF Coastal Defences survey](#)
- [Metropolitan Police Crime Statistics system](#)
- [e-government](#)

their documentation, for permanent preservation. ¹ Interesting data clearly must be one reason, but as someone with an interest in computing techniques and history, I believe that interesting implementations - either technological or organisational - are also worthy of consideration. Systems that changed what was possible, rather than just re-implementing manual processes, are of great historical interest to many; striking successes of the use of IT in government (I am sure we can find some if we look hard enough) are good candidates for preservation, as learning tools for the future if nothing else.

Failures can be equally instructive. One of the most widely read books on how to manage IT development projects is *The Mythical Man-Month* by Frederick Brooks, which relates the sorry story behind the development of IBM's [OS/360](#). Despite being a disaster in many ways, this operating system went on to become the single most successful operating system in the world before the advent of Microsoft. Useful lessons could equally be learned from the story behind recent changes in the [Passport Office](#) and the immigration service of which we read so much in the press last year, or the [troubled history](#) of the London Ambulance CAD system (already a topic on degree courses in computing).

Sometimes failures will have been so total that they never actually produced any data to preserve, and NDAD is probably not the right home for them; but the documentation that survives may be of considerable interest, for example as evidence of particular trends or modes of working: outsourcing versus in-house development; decentralised IT versus large central data warehouses.

The literature

Three publications examine these issues in detail, from somewhat different perspectives, are:

- James Rule, *Private Lives and Public Surveillance: Social Control in the Computer Age* (Allen Lane, 1973)
- The report of the Economic & Social Research Council ([ESRC](#)) Programme on Information and Communication Technologies (PICT) study group (ESRC, 1992)
- Helen Margetts, *Information Technology in Government* ([Routledge](#), 1998)

Unfortunately I still haven't located the 1992 ESRC report, although I am assured it is of great interest and other authors make much reference to it. Of the other two, the first is probably the reason I am doing this job today, having read it as a 19 year old student and been fascinated by the issues it raised. The latter is a striking study of contemporary issues in how government is being affected by its increasing reliance on IT and in particular IT outsourcing.

Rule's interest was primarily as a sociologist, in issues related to mass surveillance and the social control it offered. By 'mass surveillance' he doesn't mean spy cameras on every corner, but rather systems which gather information about a large sector of the population. He looked at the US and the UK, and considered more than just government systems: Bank Americard (the first widely available credit card), criminal records, National Insurance, and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Centre (DVLC) were amongst the subjects. Many of these systems were not yet computerised, at least not fully, at the time he wrote, however, all were in the process of computerisation. Rule looked not only at the impact on citizens but also at the working lives of civil servants. One of the most enduring images of this that remains with me is of an early attempt to improve job satisfaction and variety at the National Insurance centre in the north-east of England. After some six months working on surnames beginning with A-B, staff were given a welcome change by moving to L-M. Computerisation was meant to remove much of this drudgery. Twenty-five years on, we have the drudgery of call centres instead.

Twenty-five years after Rule's, Helen Margett's book takes a somewhat different approach and provides us with other reasons for considering what we might wish to preserve for posterity. It is an inward rather than an outward look, concerning itself with how government operates and makes decisions related to IT. It has little concern with how this affects citizens, but a great deal to say

about how recent trends have affected what is possible in government and what skills the Civil Service loses when it moves increasingly towards outsourcing as a solution. Margetts also chooses to look at US and UK institutions, although all of her examples are from government. Interestingly, she suffered from many of the same problems as Rule in getting information, particularly 'on the record', and in most case the same departments proved the most difficult in this respect.

Contracting out

Although primarily concerned with contemporary issues of the late 1990s, Margetts spends some time looking at the history of IT usage in government and how this history affects present-day ways of working. One noticeable contrast is made between the preferred route of the Department of Social Security ([DSS](#)) and its predecessors, and that of the [Inland Revenue](#). The latter had long had a close working relationship with [ICL](#), unusual even in government, but had been keen for many years to divest itself of IT development even before outsourcing was popular. Commenting on the 1970s IR COP (PAYE) system, it was clear that ICL was not up to it and that the technology was being pushed to its limits; 'R&D is not what we should be doing' was the main feeling. The result was the loss of all IT development skills within the Inland Revenue. Margetts comments that the British Civil Service always prided itself on being the world's best at what it did: can it now be 'best in the world' at writing and supervising contracts?

IT systems have changed forever what can be done, but not always for good. One story, covered in detail by Margetts, is of the problems that attended the failure of a new computerised fingerprint system after two years of unhappy trials in 1997. Rather than waste more time and money, the system was withdrawn, but the sudden return to manual systems caused a severe strain in many parts of the service, and demonstrated that many skills that staff had once had had been lost, even after such a short period. Another example is the computerisation of tax and pay, both within and without government, which means that a lead time of 2 years is now needed to make any significant change to the PAYE system in this country. This is a severe constraint on what any Chancellor or Government can choose to do, however radical they might wish to be. Bob Asseratti (then head of the [CCTA](#)) warned in 1997 that the eventual implementation of European Monetary Union in the UK would stretch IT resources to breaking point.

What particularly interests Margetts is the way outsourcing may involve more than simply having someone else run your computers for you. In the US, and increasingly in the UK, it leads to the outsourcing company wanting to take a greater and greater degree of control over the entire process of which the computer system is a part. This type of relationship is shown to have worked well in the past, ICL and the Inland Revenue being seen as a useful and symbiotic partnership. But Margetts points out that companies such as [EDS](#) and [SEMA](#) see running the computer systems as only Phase One: eventually they see the chance to make real money by taking over the entire process, civil servants and all. Phrases such as 'vertical integration' and 'process re-engineering' are commonly heard. PFI contracts lead to the suggestion of what is effectively profit-sharing: 'we'll collect more tax for you if you allow us to change the tax system', perhaps. Whatever your opinion of these changes, the way in which they have happened and the results of the process are clearly of interest to the study of the present and recent past, and will be of interest to historians of the future.

Census and births

In 1961 the General Register Office and OPCS - now integrated as the Office of National Statistics ([ONS](#)) - considered one of the largest civilian computing systems ever commissioned at the time (the process actually began in 1959, two years before the census.) It was hoped to produce census statistics on computer to improve on what was seen as very poor performance in 1951, when it had taken many years before useful statistics had emerged from the census. The idea was to share this system with another dealing with registrations of births, but this proved to be an unrealistic hope. The planning papers show those involved grappling with problems they had never had to deal with

before and, in my opinion, acquitting themselves extremely well. They realised they had to recruit hundreds, if not thousands, of people with skills which were not widespread, or even well understood, such as punch card operators and programmers. It was believed that some programmers were available from another government project, but unfortunately nobody seemed to have any way to test their competence. One prescient administrator raised the question of whether computer printout could be truly said to be 'a record'; others with greater vision saw the possibility of using computerised death certificates to analyse patterns of ill health, perhaps even to catch epidemics before they took hold. All on systems which would seem Heath Robinson-like today, the output being produced on specially converted typewriters.

Coastal defence

The [MAFF Coastal Defence Survey](#) is one dataset in NDAD that resulted from a contracted out process: not just the computer system but the entire data collection and interpretation process. Perhaps this would be a good test for the theory about de-skilling of the civil service as a result of outsourcing. We have certainly ensured that we have preserved documents that describe not just the data itself, but the contracts that governed how it was collected and how quality control was to be carried out. They certainly don't seem to show any lack of relevant skills in the department - quite the reverse, in fact. However, they don't throw much light on why the survey has not been updated. The insurance industry is certainly concerned that we don't have current information on the threat of flood and subsidence from weakened coastal defences: the unquantified risks are reaching very large amounts.

Crime statistics

Also in NDAD is data from the [Metropolitan Police Crime Statistics system](#), another dataset where understanding of the process is key to understanding the data. It existed only to produce statistics from crime reports, but it is clear that it could have done much more. What is apparent from its documentation is that the system's developers were also aware of this. However, cost constraints and time constraints chipped away at the specification bit by bit, and problems encountered during testing limited the functionality even further. Political and commercial concerns meant in the end that something had to be delivered without further delay, and it ended up performing one particular job very well, until superseded by another system five years later. ² If we didn't have the minutes of the planning groups and system design documents, future researchers would never know how much more ambitious were the hopes of its original developers.

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This, I hope, has gone some way towards explaining why NDAD is interested in collecting a lot more than just the data in databases and why we are so persistent in trying to collect the contextual material that surrounds it. My aim has been to think a bit more about what we might want to keep and why. I also hope anyone involved in processing our accessions has gained a greater understanding of why we ask the questions we do. We are privileged to be able to deal with the history of government computing from its very earliest days (if we discount its funding of Charles Babbage's ill-fated engines). The processes of change that computing wrought brought in their wake outsourcing, process re-engineering and vertical integration. These changes are still taking place as we experiment with allowing greater and greater control of the interaction with the citizen to be handled by others. The advent of [e-government](#) will doubtless bring with it further changes of type, rather than just degree for the civil service, for government and its citizens. When we choose which parts to remember, let's make sure we record the abject failures along with the sparkling successes: suffice it to say that at NDAD we are looking for the complete picture.

1. In talking about what should or should not be preserved, I realise I am straying from the role assigned to us by the PRO: appraisal is not something we are asked to deal with. Nonetheless, I hope I can speak as an interested citizen rather than as NDAD's manager for once.

2. The successor, the Crime Report Information System (CRIS), did provide considerable extra functionality; the story of the development of CRIS is even more interesting.

A Report on the Ethnic minority archives training day at Nottinghamshire record office

Patricia Sleeman, NDAD Assistant Archivist

Archivists gather the collective memory of the community they serve, however many ethnic minority groups within our society as a whole have not felt the connection with 'the archive' as it was felt it had little relevance to them and that their history was not being recorded. On the 5th of July 2000 I attended the Society of Archivists training day on ethnic minority archives held in [Nottinghamshire archives](#). The day began with a talk given by Marika Sherwood, a researcher from The [Institute of Commonwealth Studies](#), on the history of black peoples in the UK and Ireland. This presentation challenged many of our spoken and often unspoken assumptions held regarding the subject. Many references found within UK and Irish archives to minorities seem to indicate that they lived in many sections of society throughout time. From as far back as Roman times Britain was a multi-cultural society. Examples such as Mary Seacole were given, she was a nurse of Jamaican origin who went to the Crimean war having first been refused by Florence Nightingale; Olaudah Equiano who was the first black man to fight against the slave trade in Britain and Ireland in 1791, travelling around these respective countries campaigning for the end of the slave trade having bought his own freedom. Records show that black men in the military in Britain were recruited in both Britain and Ireland.

Jenny Moran of Nottinghamshire archives then spoke about the difficulty in identifying and determining ethnic minorities and the terminology barrier which exists. Are all minorities to be termed as 'black' as this seems limiting minorities to peoples whose skin are not white and excludes many other minorities such as Irish who in my immediate experience have never felt themselves to be black. Jenny discussed Equal Opportunities and how it applies to clients as well as staff, therefore it applies to everyone who uses the organisation. Best Value Law of April 2000 aims to ensure services provide the best value to all of our society.

Referring to the [Department for Culture, Media and Sport](#) (DCMS) guidelines regarding social inclusion, it was noted that very little is said about how exactly archivists should apply these guidelines and that there is no mention of increased resources despite the fact that it will increase the workload of archivists and archives service in general. Section 4 of the DCMS guidelines asks us to identify people who are socially excluded, assess and review our common practises such as indexing and cataloguing and help highlight whether our sources do pertain to ethnic minorities. It also encourages us to keep a list of references made about ethnic minorities, develop services and train staff to provide them, implement the service and publicise it and then of course evaluate success, review and improve. Fine words indeed but pretty general and no sign of more money for actually doing the job properly! Various other obstacles in the way of doing anything proactive about ethnic minority archives are frequently given such as 'we can't be seen doing more for one group than another' which would seem to suggest doing nothing at all; the potential for offending somebody and the potential for suspicion which does exist whether rightly or wrongly as there exists no traditional relationship between these minority groups and archives. Hearing how some archives have gotten to grips with the area and managed to get funding was useful and practical.

Sylvia Thomas from the [West Yorkshire Archives](#) spoke about 'The West Yorkshire Cosmos', a travelling exhibition launched at the Bradford Mela aimed at increasing awareness of its work

Links in this Article

-  [Nottinghamshire archives](#)
-  [Institute of Commonwealth Studies](#)
-  [Department for Culture, Media and Sport](#)
-  [West Yorkshire Archives](#)
-  [CASBAH](#)

particularly among the minority communities of the county; this was enabled by the "30,000 millennium award from the Heritage Lottery Funding.

Jenny Childs, of the Worcestershire records office spoke about their outreach program which included an open evening for minority groups in the county. Their outreach with the gypsy community was interesting as it brought an awareness of different ways people can record their history such as the oral tradition of the gypsy community. It challenges our traditional notions and concepts of 'the record' and ways in which history can be recorded. Trust was a key factor in all of these projects: it is important to establish contact with a respected member of each community who would encourage people to come and use the archives as well as contribute material if they so wished. Sam Collonette then spoke about the [CASBAH](#) project and the interesting work being carried out there and raised the need for authority files for indexing. Overall it was an interesting day stressing the important of connecting with the many cultures in society in order to obtain/locate records, for if we do not we will not be serving the community/society as a whole.

Personnel Profile

Patricia Sleeman has been one of the NDAD team's Assistant Archivists since 1998, with the unenviable task of applying and adapting archival standards to meet the requirements of an electronic data archive. Patricia has worked on the cataloguing and accessioning of many NDAD datasets, as well as making invaluable contributions to NDAD's internal procedures.



I was born and raised in the county of [Cork](#) in Ireland in the townland of Ballylibert (Bally being the anglicised version of *baile* meaning 'town' in Irish and *libert* being 'Elbert' who was a Cromwellian soldier to whom Cromwell kindly gave the land) which was part of a small settlement of houses which my parents renovated, with a view of the

[sea](#). It is about an hour's drive from Cork city, and 5 hours from Dublin. I was educated in Rathbarry National School near Castlefreke, with 6 others in my class (they hadn't seen such a big class in years), and then in Mount Saint Michael Secondary School in [Rosscarbery](#) (*Ros Alithir* in Irish meaning 'place of the pilgrimages') which was once one of the biggest settlements in Ireland in around the 6th-8th century due to a popular saint called [St Fachtna](#) who founded a school there. A particularly nice Stone circle nearby is called [Drombeg](#).

After my Leaving Certificate (A-levels) I was an International Exchange student for a year in beautiful [Lancaster](#), Pennsylvania, where I went to [JP Mc Caskey High School](#) which was roughly 4 times the size of my old secondary school where I became an avid archer, studied US history, politics and journalism and travelled the East Coast of America from Florida to Vermont. I also became a regular visitor to the [Greek Orthodox church](#) due to my [hosts](#). I returned to Ireland where I went to The Crawford College of Art in Cork city and [Galway](#) where I qualified in Textile Design, during which time I designed the 1990 Love Stamp for Valentine's day for [An Post](#). After graduating I worked as a set and costume designer using my textile skills in an Irish Language theatre company called *Na Fanaithe* (roughly translated as 'The Wanderers') where I had the honour of receiving a gold *Fainne Nua*. All our hard work paid off with a sell out show for the 1991 Galway Arts festival and a trip to the Expo in Seville. Very sadly *Na Fanaithe* had to disband mainly due to lack of funding but its archives have since ended up in a colleague's hands! and its members have gone on to do great and [varied things](#) a lot of which are through the medium of Irish. Our work included many works by Federico Garcia Lorca translated into Irish from the Spanish. In 1991 I then headed off on my own to live in [Madrid](#), Spain where I spent a year working hard and had many adventures including a trip at Christmas time to the fringes of the Sahara desert by camel in [Morocco](#).

On my return to Ireland I went back to college and commenced my BA in [University College Galway](#) on the west of Ireland. I studied Spanish and Archaeology and spent a year on a grant in the [University of Granada](#) studying archaeology and working on [excavations](#). On graduating I was

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- [Cork](#)
- [Rosscarbery](#)
- [Drombeg](#)
- [Lancaster](#)
- [JP Mc Caskey High School](#)
- [An Post](#)
- [Madrid](#)
- [Morocco](#)
- [University College Galway](#)
- [University of Granada](#)
- [University College Dublin archives course](#)
- [NARA](#)
- [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives](#)
- [The Smithsonian Archives of American History](#)
- [The National Archives of Ireland](#)
- [The Ordnance Survey of Ireland](#)
- [The Valuation office of Ireland](#)
- [Modern Archives Institute](#)
- [The Irish Embassy](#)
- [ISAD\(G\)](#)

delighted to be accepted on the excellent [archives course](#) in [University College, Dublin](#). During this year I went on work experience to the National Archives and Records administration of the United States in Washington D.C. otherwise known as [NARA](#) where I was very fortunate to spend time in [The Center for Electronic Records](#) at the impressive [Archives II](#) building in Maryland. I also visited [The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives](#) and [The Smithsonian Archives of American History](#) while in Washington. After a thorough education in archives and 2 stone lighter I spent a month in recovery and then went on to work at [The National Archives of Ireland](#) where I worked on the records of [The Ordnance Survey of Ireland](#) and [The Valuation office of Ireland](#). My work included listing collections, basic conservation work on newly accessioned material, helping the public with their varied research interests in relation to the records I worked on, and a survey of the Valuation Office's records who were moving premises. While working there I received The McHale fellowship to attend the [Modern Archives Insitute](#) at NARA having the good fortune to spend a pleasant time in [The Irish Embassy](#) while there. I realised that my interests pretty much were veering towards electronic records but saw that I needed to work in the area with the records to really learn about how to deal with them so when I saw the advertisement for a job at NDAD, I applied and was again very lucky to come on board the good ship NDAD thereby becoming an [Irish woman abroad](#) going against the recent trend of most Irish people who seem to be returning home as a result of the new Celtic Tiger Economy about which we hear so much, well I've always seemed to have done things the other way around... My interest in archives developed from Archaeology, as context is as important for archaeologists as it is for archivists. My experience working in medieval excavations in Spain - a country with a rich archival tradition and the assistance primary sources provides in such a context awakened my awareness of their value.

At NDAD I deal with electronic records using archival science, preserving the records in context cataloguing them using [ISAD\(G\)](#) etc. This is unusual for a 'data archive' and is to be encouraged as too often now information is provided on-line which has no context and as a result cannot be proven to be a reliable source. I have enjoyed the team spirit of the job and believe that the way ahead with regard to the long term preservation of electronic records is to work with the specialists in the area - Information technology specialists, as no matter how much archivists try to know it all we never will. What exercises me at the moment is the lack of awareness both by large organisations and the the public in general of the vulnerability as well as the very limited lifepsan of software, hardware and the mediums on which information is held (a floppy disc has a lifespan of roughly 5 years all going well) and the potential tragedy in the form of the loss of years of valuable material in electronic format that may result, which has occurred already throughout the world due to lack of intervention and planning. The jargon which is busily being invented when it comes to research in the area of electronic records makes an already challenging area even more difficult to manage and understand. It needs to be de-mystified and it is the responsibility of large national insitutions to interpret these large research projects for smaller less well endowed repositories/lone ranger type situations through practical guidelines and help when needed so that the loss of data and information held electronically can be avoided.

In my spare time, I sing in a choir, learn the fiddle, like hill walking, travelling and enjoy [swimming](#), having been a year round swimmer while living by the sea.