

CATHOLIC ARCHIVES SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS

ARCHIVE ADVICE LEAFLET NUMBER 1

ESTABLISHING AN ARCHIVE INITIAL STAGE – COLLECTING

This leaflet presupposes a situation in which a professionally untrained person has been asked to put into order the archives of an institution of perhaps fifty or a hundred years' existence, beyond the memory or knowledge of the current officials. The person deputed or volunteering to do the work may have been chosen because of the length of service or a known interest in the institution's history, but the advice offered applies equally to any volunteer archivist recruited from outside and lacking such acquired knowledge. This leaflet recommends critical steps to be taken, some of which may perhaps be considered over-zealous but are basic professional practice which may make the archivist's work easier in the long run.

COLLECT ALL THE ARCHIVES TOGETHER

A common experience of a novice archivist is to be shown an assembly of boxes, cartons, cabinets, plastic bags and other containers and to be assured these are all the archives of the institution. As often as not, the combination of firmness on the part of the official concerned and a lack of confidence on the part of the archivist can induce an acceptance of the situation, the archivist being expected to deal with the records presented to him, or her. The chances are, however, that these may be only part of potential archive material held elsewhere. The motive for the engagement of an archivist to order the archives of the institution may, indeed, be as simple as the need to put to office use the room in which the records have been previously stored. Discreet but persistent questions are suggested at the outset - there will be no better time - so that all possible offices, cupboards, lofts, and less obvious places are thoroughly explored, not omitting the principal's and secretary's filing cabinets. Most institutions will have had some system of filing and boxing papers in current or seltii - cufre'n't Use, and thus any box files of such material should be included in the initial trawl, and any older papers in the current filing extracted. It is important to gather together all material of possible archive value, not excluding photographs, printed papers, relics, souvenirs and objects of historical value, which while not themselves archives nevertheless need to be preserved and might be dispersed if not likewise collected together when the spirit of preservation is active. (The treatment of artefacts and objects of historical interest will be considered in another leaflet).

READ THE HISTORY OF THE INSTITUTION

Before examining the contents of any of the assembled containers, the archivist is recommended to read about the history of the institution and so become familiar with its foundation, objectives, ancillary bodies, work, personnel, and so on. If there are no published histories, then it is probable that minute books of the governing body or annual reports will be readily found, being often kept separate from the general filing. From these, the archivist should be able to trace the development of the institution, identify its functions, its operating committees, administrative structure, the principal or significant persons involved, all of which knowledge will be invaluable as much in the initial sorting of the records as in the later stages of classification and listing.

FIRST ACTION

Where to start and what to do first when faced with a considerable collection of boxes cartons, plastic bags and other containers can be a most daunting prospect for any archivist, let alone an untrained novice. The first action to take is simply to deal with one container at a time, to make a note of its type, where it came from, and to give it a temporary number, thus: 1 and 2, black plastic bags from storeroom; 3, cartons from loft; 4, files from the general office. The logic behind this tedious job is that where containers, and therefore their contents, were found may throw light on the provenance and inter-relation of the records within them.

At this stage the archivist should avoid the temptation to do any sorting even though the cursory examination may reveal connected material, even books and papers in a series. Instead, the contents of each container should be summarily examined, roughly described (e.g. "files and papers, 1950's"), and noted on a list for each separate container. Some bundling of loose papers or putting them into temporary folders may be necessary but, again, no attempt should be made at sorting. It may well become apparent that the records in the various containers have been so pretty thoroughly mixed up that the recording of their contents, even in a rudimentary fashion, may seem pointless, but it is as well to follow the recommended procedure since where the containers were found will help in identifying their provenance and possibly the later discovery of missing documents.

THE NEXT STAGE

Once this preliminary description of the containers and their contents has been completed and notes made of the action so far taken, then the archivist may transfer the records into more accessible containers, even open-top cartons being quite suitable, enabling the archivist to have a visual check when it comes to the initial sorting. If the contents of the containers are numerous, then some temporary numbering may be necessary to keep track of the records, but it will suffice merely to describe the contents in general terms, especially if they are similar in character. As the archivist notes the contents of the primary containers and transfers them, one by one, into the alternative and more accessible containers, he, or she, will begin to identify series and related records and, already equipped with background knowledge of the institution, will even recognize major omissions. For instance, it is quite common for the accounting officer to keep his records separate from other administrative records. The archivist should have the confidence, at an appropriate time, to raise tactfully with the principal questions about obvious omissions, and seek the transfer of any relevant records, or note their location elsewhere. The archivist will never have a better opportunity of persuading officers to transfer non-current records into the archives than when the initial decision has been made to set up "the archives", and a degree of interest, if not enthusiasm, affects the responsible officers - it can quickly evaporate!

SUMMARY: The initial stages in establishing the archives of any institution are, firstly, to search thoroughly and bring together all potential archive material and historical objects; secondly, to note their containers and where they were found; thirdly, to number and describe roughly their contents; and fourthly, to transfer them into more suitable and accessible boxes, noting their original containers. The next stage will be that of preliminary sorting and listing, and this will be described in Leaflet No.2.

Robin Gard, June 2000

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