Accessing archive collections: a pluralist approach

Ian Johnston
Archives & Special Collections
Co-ordinator
The Library,
University of Salford
i.johnston@salford.ac.uk

Jane Stevenson
Archives Hub Service Manager
Jisc
jane.stevenson@manchester.ac.uk

Salford University Library has, for a number of years, been working to facilitate online access to the archive collections it holds. We initially started this process by creating detailed descriptions of our collections using Encoded Archival Description (EAD), an XML standard for encoding archival finding aids. This information was made available on our website, but whilst it enabled users to browse individual collection descriptions, they were unable to undertake a single search across all our descriptions.

From the very beginning, we recognised the immense value in ensuring that all the EAD data we created was submitted to the Archives Hub, a gateway to thousands of the UK's richest archives. This is a Jisc service that brings together descriptions of collections, enabling researchers to explore content and locate archives relating to their subject interests, wherever they exist in the UK. It acts as a discovery focus for the archive community, supporting archivists in the vital work of making sure their collections are exposed over the web to the widest possible audience.

The Archives Hub has an ethos based on open access and 'making the data work harder'. In the online world, it should be possible for researchers to take different routes through to content; the idea of a single interface onto content is no longer practical or desirable. The Hub has recently developed a practical and lightweight solution for any higher education institutions wanting their own search application for descriptions stored on the Hub, and Salford University Library has become the first Archives Hub 'micro site' adopter.

This means that it is now possible to search remotely, direct from our website, across all the archive descriptions we have provided to the Hub. Users can search by keyword, title, creator, date, reference, subject and name. For example, a keyword search on *football* will retrieve information about material held in five of our collections, including links to digitised content in our Archives Repository. Simply select the Search Archives option from the Archives & Special Collections homepage: http://www.salford.ac.uk/library/archives-and-special-collections

The beauty of a micro site is that an institution has the benefit of being part of the Archives Hub, whilst also having the advantage of its own interface. The data is stored in one place, and is fed into both interfaces. This is very much a work in progress, and the Archives Hub are looking to gather feedback and suggestions for improvements. The Hub team started by working with four 'early adopter' institutions: Salford University, Brighton Design Archives, the University of Glasgow and the University of Manchester. They are now also working with Brunel University and the University of East London. The micro sites are based on the idea of a template approach, which means customisation is minimal. But it also means that the Hub can roll out micro sites to higher education institutions without significant overheads, which is vital for the sustainability of the service. Please take a look and let us know if you find any problems, or have suggestions for enhancements. The Archives Hub team are very happy to get feedback (archiveshub@mimas.ac.uk).

Note that the speed of the site has a direct relationship to the general speed of the Archives Hub, so you may find that it is faster at some times than at others. (Ways to improve response times are currently being investigated.) More information about Archives Hub micro sites can be found here: http://archiveshub.ac.uk/microsites/