
Private horde to public collection: cataloguing the archives of the Liverpool Poets



Jo Klett
Archivist, University of
Liverpool Library
Tel: 0151 794 2696
E-mail: jklett@liverpool.ac.uk

Photograph Copyright Marc Marnie



Roger McGough, Brian Patten and the late Adrian Henri first emerged onto the national cultural scene in 1967 with their poetry anthology *The Mersey Sound*. With the exception of Henri, who died in 2000, the poets are still writing and performing. Their archives give insight into their working practices and are a rich source for the study of performance poetry and the Liverpool Scene of the 1960s and 1970s. The archives have been brought together by the University of Liverpool library with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and others, and have been catalogued as part of a two-year project.

Having already acquired part of Henri's archive in 1983, the library began negotiations for the purchase of the poets' papers in August 2003, with the archives finally arriving in November of 2007. The poets had packed their own material in a variety of boxes, folders, plastic bags, suitcases, trunks and cardboard tubes, their personalities very much apparent. Patten's rather disordered papers were stored in boxes alongside waste paper and old cigarette packets. Items frequently had post-it notes sporting hastily scribbled notes

giving context, noting interesting facts and marking his attempts to bring the items he felt important to the forefront of the collection.

In contrast to Patten's, McGough's papers were far more orderly, reflecting in their sheer volume his prolific output since the 1960s. He had clearly given some thought to the arrangement of his papers, gathering related material together in files and storing them in labelled boxes. He too provided the occasional explanatory note, again drawing attention to items he thought particularly significant. This is by far the largest of the three collections.

It was evident that Henri had been planning for the eventual deposit of his archive. The first accession had been arranged by him in series, clearly identified with accompanying box lists. The second accession contained material from a time later in his life when he was affected by illness, though still able to work. Inevitably this material was less studiously arranged, although it had been grouped roughly into subject files and bundles of correspondence, often identified by year.

The primary aim of archival arrangement and cataloguing is to make collections accessible for research. It is fundamental that the original order of the material is preserved, where it is apparent, ultimately to maintain the authenticity, integrity and provenance of the material. Where there is no discernible arrangement it is the job of the archivist to impose an order that reflects as much as possible the working practices of the creator.

It is increasingly common for writers to give up their personal papers for permanent preservation during their lifetime. There are a variety of reasons for this: to promote research, for financial gain and ultimately for the safeguarding of their legacy for future generations. For an archivist, dealing with personal papers when the creator is still working is a rare opportunity and one that can enhance and complement the cataloguing process.

For the Liverpool Poets project the cataloguing process began with an assessment of the material and the drafting of a timescale to ensure that the project's deadline of two years would be met. An initial box listing of all items was undertaken over a period of five months, with a projected timeline of six months to complete Patten's archive, eight months for McGough's and four months for Henri's. The next stage was to identify distinct series, and the box lists prompted initial ideas on the

system of arrangement for each collection. Generally the papers have been organised into series that reflect the poets' working practices. Distinct records series already identified by the creators have been retained; for instance McGough had already created a series of literary files, each containing a wide range of material and correspondence relating to specific projects or books.

In terms of record types and content, the three collections have, as you would expect, some marked similarities: all contain many bundles of manuscripts and typescripts, for poetry, prose, stage, television and radio plays, and work on books for children, alongside notebooks, dairies, correspondence and ephemera. However, they are also very discrete and distinctive, individual archives that chart the life's work of three quite different poets.

The papers of Brian Patten date from 1958, and include some early attempts at poetry, written at age 14 when he was still at Sefton Park secondary modern school; there are also notebooks dating from 1961 when he worked as a cub-reporter on the *Bootle Times*. From about 1961, aged 16, Patten began to think of publishing his work and produced several typescript handmade poetry booklets; these, now incredibly fragile, are a precursor to his later published poetry magazine *Underdog*, in which his own, McGough's and Henri's early works were published in eight issues between 1962 and 1966. His correspondence includes many personal letters and those from literary figures such as Allen Ginsberg, Ted Hughes, Harold Pinter and Alan Brownjohn.

Roger McGough's archive stands testament to his prodigious output over the years. There are a large number of manuscript and typescript drafts of his poetry and children's books, as well as many manuscripts for stage plays and a wide variety of works for television and radio. There are also 150 notebooks and sketchbooks in the collection, dating from 1953 onwards. Many of the early sketchbooks are undated but are primarily from the 1950s during his time at Hull University and whilst teaching in Liverpool. In addition to his own literary work, McGough's archive is also a rich source of material relating to his time as a member of the music/comedy performance group 'The Scaffold', of which he was a member from 1964 to 1972. McGough's archive is also remarkable for the large amount of correspondence it contains. Many of the personal letters have been closed at McGough's request, but there are many from friends and colleagues on various literary

matters and collaborative projects, and also a large amount of fan mail. Notable correspondents include Philip Larkin, John Betjeman, Peter Blake and Victoria Wood.

Adrian Henri was an artist as well as a poet, and a man who kept absolutely everything, from manuscripts to restaurant receipts, from telephone bills to 'found objects', the items he collected for use in his artwork. Alongside the manuscript poems, prose and plays, sketches and illustrated poems there is much material relating to the work he did to promote the arts, particularly with the Liverpool Academy of Arts and his collaborative work with schools, poets and artists. The archive also reflects elements of his personal life, through many letters from family and friends and the work of other poets, artists and writers.

Dealing with sensitive material is a serious concern when working with materials from living writers, and closure periods need to be considered carefully. Given the constraints of time in a project of this nature, a blanket closure of 100 years has been applied to sensitive materials, whilst material of a financial nature has been closed indefinitely, to be reviewed at a later date. Provision for new accruals is also an issue. Henri's final accession is to be catalogued separately and cross-referenced extensively; this method will be followed for additional accruals for McGough and Patten. As yet no provision has been made for the deposit of electronic records, though this is an issue that may need to be addressed for future accessions.

In 2008 McGough and Patten visited the library and were given a tour of the archive stores. They were interested to see their archives and to understand more about the cataloguing process, but maybe also a little nervous about the outcome. There had been some apprehension that the autonomy of the cataloguing process would be challenged by creator involvement. Ultimately, however, there has been relatively little contact with the poets. McGough has on two occasions requested information and loaned a notebook and Patten has expressed a recent interest in how his archive has been organised.

One fascinating aspect of this project is the ability to have the creator's perspective on what must be an uneasy transformation from a very personal collection into a publicly accessible archive. McGough says of the process:

'It was a huge wrench to part with my notebooks, because I always kept them on hand, and would

refer to them often. I always seem to find an image or an unfinished poem that would kick me off. Also, several of them served as diaries recording a whole spectrum of feelings. I still miss having the notebooks around, and wonder if new poems have been lost as a result of handing them over. A sense of "leaving the past behind" can be reassuring. I used to console myself that I could always pop into the archive and refer to the notebooks, see how they were getting along, but somehow I never do, because they are no longer mine.'

Patten would only very occasionally open the boxes of his past: his early work would create in him a raw feeling of loss and nostalgia:

'It could all be boiled down finally to two or three boxes of materials that are missed; mostly the very earliest poems. The boxes, I decided finally they were no use piled up in a cupboard, and at the time I was wanting to move and didn't want to lug my past around with me. There are poems and stories I could revisit and create new poems out of – but I'm a lazy person, and letting the past go seemed the right thing to do at the time.'

For the poets, their archives are incredibly important personal papers that chart their life's work but also that no longer belong to them. However, intellectually speaking, the poets remain an indelible part of the archive that they have created, and continue to create.

The catalogues will be available on the Archives Hub from autumn 2010: <http://archiveshub.ac.uk/>.