

Contemporary Archives at the British Library

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The British Library is the national library of the United Kingdom. As a legal deposit library, it receives a copy of every publication produced in the U.K. and Ireland. In addition, the Library holds a large number of archives, some of which are collections of individuals, businesses and non-government organisations dating post 1950.

British institutions started to collect contemporary (i.e. post 1950) manuscripts relatively recently. It was Philip Larkin (1922-1985), poet and librarian at the University of Hull, who started a campaign to stop the sale of writers' papers to foreign institutions. Until then, many archives had been sold to universities in the U.S. which had, and arguably still have, more funding for the acquisition of such collections. Larkin's work was later continued by Andrew Motion (b 1952), Poet Laureate between 1999 and 2009, whose papers are held at the British Library.

Thanks to Larkin and Motion's campaigns, many British institutions started to collect archives of contemporary writers and to actively encourage them to deposit their papers in the U.K. To facilitate this, the [Cultural Gifts Scheme](#) and the [Acceptance in Lieu](#) scheme were introduced. The first allows individuals to donate collections to public institutions in return for a tax reduction tax relief; the second allows individuals to transfer collections into public ownership while paying Inheritance Tax.

In addition, in 2005 the [Group for Literary Archives and Manuscripts \(GLAM\)](#) was formed. GLAM brings together those interested in the collection, preservation, use and promotion of literary archives and organises meetings and conferences on the subject. Its website contains many useful resources for those working with this type of material, including the [Location Register](#), a database of literary archives in the U.K.

The British Library has played a significant part in the campaign to keep archives of contemporary authors in the U.K. and has acquired a large number of them. There is now a department in the Library dedicated to their management, the Contemporary Archival and Manuscripts Collections, with a team of 8 staff. The department has two sections, one that works with literary and creative archives, the other with politics and public life. The first section curates collections of [novelists](#), [poets, publishers and societies, and popular culture](#) and [theatre](#). The second works with papers of politicians, campaign groups, charities, volunteer organisations, journalists and scientists.

The collections are acquired thanks to the Library's acquisition budget, donations, private funds or schemes such as the two mentioned above, 'Cultural Gifts Scheme' e 'Acceptance in Lieu'.

Once transferred to the Library, the collections are catalogued in IAMS (Integrated Archive and Manuscript System) a system developed in-house a few years ago and based on [ISAD\(G\)](#) and [ISAAR\(CPF\)](#). The construction of personal, places and corporate names for the cataloguing and indexing follows the [NCA rules](#), developed by the National Council on Archives. The online catalogue, [Explore Archives and Manuscripts](#), is accessible via the website. It is possible to download a PDF of the finding aid by using the 'Browse this collection' function. See, for example, the papers of [P.G. Wodehouse](#), [Lee Harwood](#), [Punch Magazine](#), [Harold Pinter](#), e [John Lennon](#).

In addition to acquiring and cataloguing archives, the department contributes to one of the Library's core function, which is to facilitate research. For example, the Library runs [collaborative programmes](#) with U.K. universities that include projects developed through the AHRC PhD Collaborative Doctoral Partnership Programme, drawing on the Library's collections. At the same time, the department works with the 'Learning Programmes' team to create online resources such as [Discovering Literature](#). Here many manuscripts of contemporary authors are displayed, including the one of [Crash](#) by J G Ballard.

The department also plays a part in the [education programme](#) of the Library, which includes courses for children and adults, conferences, talks and exhibitions, many of which are inspired by material from the Library's contemporary archives.

Working with contemporary collections comes with some challenges. For example, the material includes a large number of information about living individuals. Access to personal data is regulated in the U.K. by the [Data Protection Act 1998](#) (DPA) which follows the EU Data Protection Directive 1995 and which will be replaced by the [General Data Protection Regulation](#) in May 2018. The DPA allows the processing and release of sensitive personal data for research purposes but not if the information causes damage or distress to living individuals or any other person. This means archivists need to carefully read and check all the documents in the archives to make sure that sensitive information is not released to the public by mistake. This can be a very time consuming process.

Another challenge for archivists working with contemporary collections is the cataloguing of born digital archives. Currently the Library is developing a system which aims to speed up the extraction of metadata from digital records and transfer it to IAMS. The system uses tools such as DROID, developed by The National Archives, which helps with the profiling of file formats and is free to [download](#). Thanks to this system, the number of born digital archives available to view in the Library's reading rooms is gradually expanding.

Given the growing struggle to obtain funding for the management of archives, the department has achieved impressive results since its formation, acquiring many significant collections including, most recently, the papers of Michael Palin and Kenneth Williams, and contributing to the success of popular exhibitions such as '[Harry Potter. A History of Magic](#)', where manuscripts of J.K. Rowling are on display.