Creating a digital local history archive collaboratively: the My Leicestershire Digital Archive[1]

Introduction

The My Leicestershire Digital Archive project was funded by JISC from the start of May 2010 to the end of March 2011 as part of the Developing Community Content strand of its e-Content Programme, 2009-2011.

The project aimed to increase access to a diverse range of sources on and about the history of Leicestershire, drawn from the collections of a varied set of partners, through digitizing them and making them available as one coherent collection. The sources came from formal collections, such as a university library, and from local history organizations (the community partners). The project used a 'mediated' model for identifying and creating community content – with the lead partner working with the community partners to identify and add relevant content to the Archive rather than seeking submissions from members of the public directly.

The Archive can be visited at http://www.myleicestershire.org.uk

The partners

The partners came together as a result of links which most of them had with the University of Leicester's School of Historical Studies. One member of the School's staff, with a very good knowledge of the local history community, was instrumental in creating those links for the project. The project partners were:

University of Leicester Library
The Library serves a research led university with over 22,000 students and over 3,000 staff. We saw the project as an excellent opportunity to promote its special collections on Leicestershire – some of which had their origin in the establishment of the University - and to make them available to a wider audience. It was also an opportunity to strengthen and develop relationships with other organizations in the area with related interests, to bring information about scattered but related collections on Leicestershire together in one place and to reach audiences beyond our core University clientele. The project also provided a means of developing staff expertise in creating and managing digitised collections.

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[1] The content of this document will be included in a future JISC publication illustrating the work of recent JISC digitisation projects

Media Archive for Central England (MACE)
MACE is the public sector moving image archive for the East and West Midlands. MACE saw the project as an opportunity to bring some of its historical films about Leicestershire together with other related resources and to promote the existence of its wider collections.

East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA)
Based at the University of Leicester, EMOHA is a partnership between the University's Centre for Urban History, Leicestershire County Council and Leicester City Museums and Library Services. The Archive has extensive collections of oral history interviews, most of which have not been digitised. For EMOHA the project was an opportunity to make a selection of these recordings available to a wide audience by digitizing them for the first time and to promote the Archive.

Leicestershire Industrial History Society (LIHS)
The LIHS was founded in 1969 and encourages the study and recording of Leicestershire's extensive industrial history. The Society is run by volunteers and has an active programme of study visits, talks and a publications programme. The LIHS has been creating a digital library in recent years and was interested in exploring how to make its digital resources more widely available.

Rothley Heritage Trust
The Trust was formally established in 2009. It aims to educate the general public of all ages in the history and heritage of Rothley – a rural Leicestershire town - and its linked areas, particularly by undertaking research into its natural and settled history. The Trust is run by volunteers.

In addition to these partners, BBC Radio Leicester agreed to a number of its historical recordings being included in the Archive and a local architect, Dennis Calow, contributed digitised copies of photographs which he had taken of Leicester before major urban redevelopment in the 1960s and 1970s.

The collections

At the start of the project, we had identified many resources we wanted to digitise but there were also areas where we did not know what content would be available or be provided. In particular, the content to be provided by the local history organizations was unknown.

The project bid identified a large number of rare books, oral history and local radio recordings, photographs, videos and historical directories which could be included from the partners' collections.

These resources were selected because of their known or anticipated relevance and interest. The rare books from the University of Leicester Library, for example, were all titles which were in regular demand from researchers. The historical directories already existed in digital form. The oral history and radio interviews and the videos were selected by MACE and EMOHA staff who were very familiar with their collections and with the topics of regular interest.

The content to be contributed by the local history partners unfolded during the course of the project and finally consisted of a diverse range of historical photographs and postcards, videos, maps, parish and estate records and development plans.

Together the collections cover many aspects of the history of Leicestershire from the seventeenth century to the 1980s.
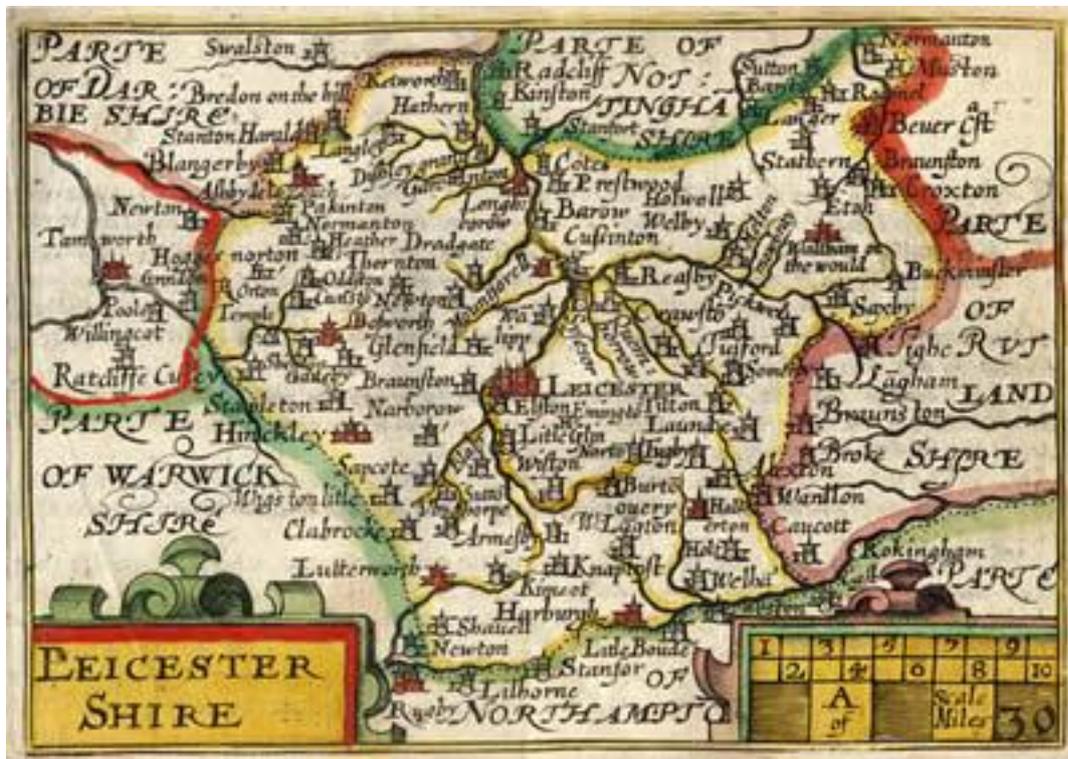
A map of Leicestershire in the 17th century (University of Leicester Library)

Project staffing and management

Three people worked on the project – all on a part-time basis. The Project Manager (4 days a week), the Metadata Officer (2.5 days a week) and a Research Officer in the East Midlands Oral History Archive (1 day a week).

The project team met every three weeks. The meetings were chaired by a member of the library management team and included a wider group of Library staff and representatives of MACE and EMOHA.

The project was overseen by a Steering Group which met quarterly and was chaired by the Director of Library Services. The Group included representatives from all the partners, including the community partners and of the Records Office for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland.

Overall the project management arrangements worked well. There was good communication between the partners and decisions were made quickly.

All the staff working on the project were seconded temporarily from other roles. This avoided the need to recruit and induct new staff and also meant that the skills and expertise developed during the project would not be lost. However, there was still a delay in staff being available to start work. The secondments started from 1 June 2010 while JISC project funding formally started on 1 May.

A map of part of the Rothley Temple estate in 1842 (contributed by the Rothley Heritage Trust. The original map is held at the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland)

Technical infrastructure and decisions

Most of the first two months of the project was spent making and implementing decisions about the systems, standards and procedures we would use to create the Archive. This was an important part of the 'learning' in the project as many of the partners had had limited experience of digitization to date.

Systems

At the start of the project, the Library was not using a digital collections management system but the system to be used by the project had been chosen. This was CONTENTdm provided by OCLC[2] – using OCLC's hosted service rather than a local installation. This

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[2] http://www.oclc.org/contentdm/

system was chosen because it was well established, offered a hosted service which we could easily get up and running, planned to implement a number of Web 2.0 tools for user engagement which we wanted to use as part of the project and, very importantly, was used by a Canadian library colleague who was on a research visit to Europe based at the University of Leicester library. It, therefore, provided us with the functionality we needed and we had access to some local expertise and experience to help us learn how to use it quickly.

In addition to CONTENTdm, we needed access to a streaming server for the audio and video files we intended to create during the project. Here we had the good fortune to have access to a streaming server provided by the University's IT Services department.

Digitization

The project required digitization of a range of different sources: bound, printed books of varying sizes and condition; photographs; analogue audio recordings and analogue video recordings.

As part of the project proposal we had decided that the book digitization would be done by an external agency as we did not have the skills and equipment to do this in house. Digitization of photographs was done on flat bed scanners purchased for the project. EMOHA digitized the analogue audio recordings and MACE the analogue video recordings.

MACE had existing digitization expertise. EMOHA was starting from scratch and undertaking the digitization in-house. The learning from this is outlined under 'Learning to date' below.

Decisions needed to be made about what technical standards we would use i.e. what file formats and bit rates to use etc. The two main issues which influenced our thinking were:

- Ensuring that files could be easily displayed/streamed using a domestic broadband connection
- Intellectual property. In some cases – particularly the audio and video files – we did not want to make high quality downloads available, either because we did not have express permission to include the item in the Archive (see Copyright issues below), or because we anticipated that doing so would make copyright permissions more difficult to obtain.

The Web-based guidance and training provided by JISC Digital Media[3] proved very helpful in informing our decision-making and members of the project team attended a number of JISC Digital Media training sessions.

The file formats used were:

File type	Delivery Format	Preservation format
Image	JPEG2000	TIFF
Audio	WMA at 64 kbps	WAV (held by EMOHA)
Video	wmv at 1-2mbps	Not held
Text	PDF	PDF/A

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[3] http://www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk/

Metadata

CONTENTdm provides considerable in-built support for metadata creation and management using Dublin Core and templates which can be configured for each collection that you define.

Most of the decisions we needed to make related to how we would ensure consistent use of author names, locations, time periods and subject descriptors across the wide range of items we had and also what metadata elements would display as search facets (i.e. categorisations of search results which enable a search to be narrowed down by location, subject etc.).

Given the nature of the items we were collecting, there was very limited use that we could make of existing authority files or controlled vocabularies. For authors, location names and time periods we worked on the basis of ensuring internal consistency as far as possible. For subject descriptors we used the Library of Congress' *Thesaurus for Graphic Materials* as a basis. This thesaurus is supported by CONTENTdm and gave us the most comprehensive list that would cover the topic areas we needed to use. Some adaptations had to be made to anglicise terms such as "railroads" to "railways". Alongside this we felt that broad "themes" were an important element for users to search and browse by, so we adopted a current list from one of our partners EMOHA.

Copyright

Initially, we anticipated that copyright questions would be time consuming and difficult to address. In practice, we did not encounter that many difficulties and benefited greatly by following the examples set by other digitization projects.

We made a decision early on to use a Creative Commons licence – using the licence which allows copying for non-commercial purposes with full attribution and no derivatives[4]. We used the licence governed by English law so that it would be directly enforceable in English courts.

The number of items in copyright where we could not track down a copyright owner (i.e. 'orphan works') was small – unlike many digitization projects. A large number of items were out of copyright (the rare books and historical directories) and, in many other cases, copyright owners could be found thanks to the contacts of our project partners who were often in the position of contributing content well known to them. Where we could not obtain permission to include an item in the Archive we took a 'best efforts' approach – making the item available, recording our attempts to contact a copyright owner and making it clear who to contact if a copyright owner emerges and objects to what we have done. This approach follows well established practice.

We had no instances where we were refused permission to include an item in the Archive.

We also benefited from the experience of the Library's Copyright Officer who often approaches publishers for permission to digitise items for teaching purposes. We drew on

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[4] http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/uk/

this experience to draw up a standard permissions letter to use when seeking and recording permission to include an item in the Archive.

Copyright was, however, an issue which caused some concern and queries for our community partners. Addressing their copyright issues was one of the areas where most support was required. This is outlined below under 'Community engagement'.

Deacon Street, Leicester 1965. (From the Dennis Calow collection)

Community engagement

The involvement of the Leicestershire Industrial History Society and the Rothley Heritage Trust was key to the project's engagement with the local history community.

At the start of the project very little had been agreed about how these partnerships would work.

Key contact

The most essential part of the partnership was having at least one member of each society for the project team to work with and, in both cases, the project was fortunate in having individuals who contributed a considerable amount of time and expertise to this.

Agreeing content

An early priority was to agree what content the societies would be able to contribute to the project having regard to (a) what was available to them; (b) copyright issues; (c) any technical constraints. It quickly became apparent that there was a considerable amount of content which the societies already had or had access to through their personal contacts. Agreement on what content to include was reached quickly and ranged from historical postcards, to parish records, to articles from society journals, to videos and photographs of historical sites made or taken by local historians. These items were either out of copyright or the societies knew who to approach to ask for permission to include copies in the Archive.

Equipment and training

We envisaged the lending of computers and scanners. In the event, only one flat bed scanner was lent as other equipment required was already available. Client software was installed on home PCs to enable direct contribution of items to CONTENTdm. Members of the project team visited the contributors in their homes to install the software and provide hands on training. This approach worked well and the contributors mastered use of CONTENTdm relatively quickly.

Support required

The project team provided most support over the telephone and by e-mail. There were also a number of face to face meetings.

While the technical aspects of using CONTENTdm were quickly mastered, the intricacies of metadata creation proved time consuming and tedious for one contributor, in particular. However, the detail of the descriptions which were provided added greatly to the usefulness of the items. Metadata was checked and added to by the project team before each item was made 'live' in the Archive.

Understandably, copyright was also an area in which the contributors had regular queries. We needed to ensure that copyright permissions were documented in each case and the procedures required could inevitably appear a bit bureaucratic at times – although the amount of paperwork involved was minimised as far as possible. Copyright holders' reaction to requests for permission to include an item in the Archive varied but no actual refusals were received. Given the contacts which they had, the community partners chose to seek permissions themselves and then sent the paperwork to the project team.

The community partners contributed over 850 items to the Archive - adding greatly to the subject matter available.

The range of resources began to tell 'stories' about specific aspects of the county's history. Many of the items contributed by the Rothley Heritage Trust, for example, combine to illustrate the story of the expansion and suburbanisation of the village during the twentieth century drawing on catalogues of land auctions, architects' plans and photographs.
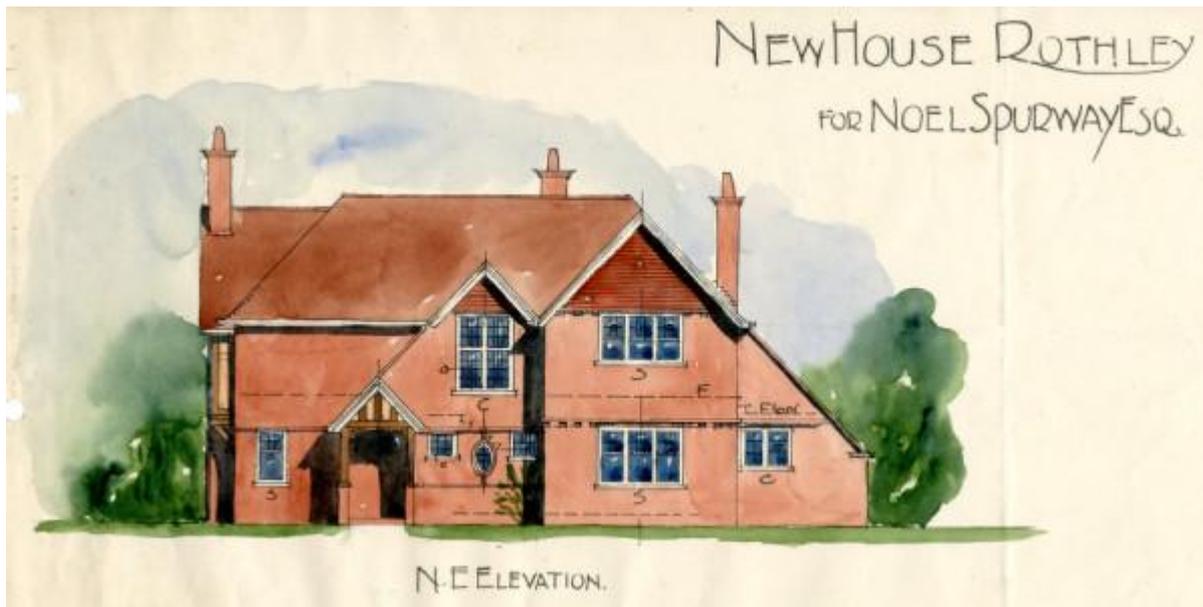
An architectural plan for Rothley Garden Suburb (Contributed by the Rothley Heritage Trust)

These complement the Calow photographs of Leicester and many of EMOHA's oral history interviews which illustrate how the city changed during the major urban redevelopment programmes of the 1960s and 1970s.

The complementary nature of these resources emerged from the work of the partners rather than being clearly planned from the outset and illustrated the value of bringing a diverse set of resources and partners together.

What we learned

At the time of writing, the formal project evaluation has not been completed. However, an end of project workshop identified a number of issues which we had collectively learned from the project.

Project set-up

Never underestimate the amount of time that project 'set-up' can take – from ensuring that technical systems are in place, to appointing and training staff, to developing relationships and communication channels with project partners. While this is often said of project start-ups it is easy to overlook the practical implications of this fact for overall project timescales.

Copyright

There is no need to re-invent any wheels with lots of existing good practice and standard documentation to draw on with respect to licences and permissions. However, you need to be able to explain and document copyright permissions in very accessible and understandable terms to rights holders who are usually private individuals in a project of this kind.

Build on existing relationships

Build on existing relationships where you can. The project benefited hugely from the contacts which one of our partners already had with a number of the other partners who became involved.

Metadata creation takes time

All partners found the process of describing and uploading items very time consuming. The community partners found it particularly time consuming to contribute the required metadata although we simplified this as far as possible. At the same time, the descriptive metadata which they provided added greatly to the usefulness of the Archive.

Respect volunteers' time

Our community partners were giving freely of their time and there were limits to how much time they could give. They contributed hugely to the expertise and resources available within the project but you need to be realistic about the level of commitment that volunteers can give. We tried to involve an additional local history organization in the project a few months after the project had started but, unfortunately, they were not in a position to contribute any volunteer time.

Provide high quality, self explanatory support materials for volunteers

Help sheets on use of CONTENTdm and the creation of metadata were created and used as part of the project. However, more detailed and user friendly support materials would be required if a larger number of community partners were to be involved in the future.

Hosted services

Using a hosted service for the Archive worked very well for us as it meant that we did not need to allow time (which we did not have) for server set-up and software installation. We also received good technical support from the supplier.

Second staff where you can

The project team were seconded members of Library staff which meant that we had the benefit of their existing experience and skills – and that the skills they developed during the project would not be lost to the Library at the end.

Publicity and promotion takes sustained time and effort

Effective publicity and promotion requires a great deal of sustained time and effort. Most of our publicity effort has fallen in the last few months of the project after most of the content has been added. We will need to find ways of continuing the publicity effort well after the formal end of the project because, if not, we will not realise the full benefit to the University and to the local community of creating the Archive.

Community created content is about much more than managing costs

The content added to the Archive by our community partners cost less in monetary terms because the project had the benefit of volunteers' time. However, in creating a digital

collection we would say that it is not a question of 'professional' or 'volunteer' time being better or cheaper than the other. The project benefited from both. The community partners contributed expertise and resources which were not available to the 'professional' partners and vice versa.

Digitising audio recordings from scratch

This was the first time the East Midlands Oral History Archive had digitized their audio recordings. The laptops used worked well – for processing sound most modern laptops cope very well – as did the Adobe Audition 3 software used. For budgetary reasons, two relatively inexpensive E-mu Tracker digital/audio converters were purchased and, with hindsight, we are not sure we would use them again. There still needs to be some testing done to confirm their superiority to the standard laptop sound cards, but they are not simple to set up with the software, and their use, while fairly simple, is not intuitive. Also, they could not handle the high quality output of the Studer tape players used and some attenuators were made up to compensate for this. For all this, the results of the digitization process were perfectly acceptable.

The model worked

Collaborating with local history organizations to identify and add relevant content to the Archive worked. But, as outlined above, there are limits to the amount of time which volunteers can contribute and sufficient resources need to be in place to provide the necessary support and co-ordination.

Glenfield Railway tunnel, constructed for the Leicester and Swannington Railway in 1830 (contributed by Leicestershire Industrial History Society)

Sustainability and take up

Sustainability is always one of the major challenges facing a digitization project and we cannot claim to have found a solution to the long term sustainability of the Archive within the lifetime of the project.

However, access to the Archive will be maintained by the University of Leicester Library and this has been budgeted for from the Library's annual budget. This was planned from the beginning. There is scope for the Library to use CONTENTdm for other collections and the intention is to redeploy some existing staff to continue work in this area in the future. The project will, therefore, have a clear benefit to the Library and the University above and beyond the creation and maintenance of the My Leicestershire Digital Archive itself.

We need to increase use of the Archive and to establish it as a useful and valued resource for local historians, schools and within the University of Leicester itself. Use will open up and identify opportunities for future income streams and partnerships to develop the Archive further. The Steering Group will continue to meet for some time after the formal end of the project in order to help maintain the relationships which have been established between the project partners.

While the model used for contribution of community content worked, it is not clear to what extent it is truly scalable. The time which volunteers can commit is limited, the benefits of spending time on creating digital collections need to be very clear to them and the support infrastructure needs to there. The more the Archive is known and used, the more local history organizations are likely to be motivated to contribute to it in the future and this view emerged clearly from the end of project workshop.

The Archive is already being used for teaching on a number of courses in the University's Centre for Urban History and School of Education. We are also working with the School of Education on promoting the Archive to local schools where definite potential has been identified for its use in teaching of History in Key Stage 3 (11 to 14 year olds). As part of this, we are exploring creation of support materials for teachers interested in using resources from the Archive in their teaching.

Conclusions

The project achieved what it set out to do and within the timescales envisaged. Our main challenge now is to ensure that the Archive is used for the benefit of the project partners and the wider community and that we build on the skills and expertise developed by the project team for the future.

Ben Wynne, University of Leicester Library, April 2011

A Bovril advertisement from the 1950s on Beaconsfield Road, Leicester (contributed by Colin Hyde)