

Archives in the 21st Century: Service Delivery as Never Before

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Introduction

Archives have traditionally been places researchers had to visit personally as documents are unique and usually exist in only one location. Modern technology is changing the face of archives and Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) is at the forefront of the change. The introduction of a digital archive together with a new online access catalogue, online databases and indexes, and digitised records has meant researchers can now do archival research in their own homes. This paper looks at some of the changes over the last 25 years and what researching in the early part of the 21st century looks like.

When I first started working in archives in Queensland in 1981, automated finding aids were nowhere to be found. Instead there were card catalogues and other paper finding aids to assist researchers locate material. Another key resource was the personal knowledge of individual staff members whose expertise in various parts of the collection was essential. Knowledge of archival methodology was a must because without knowing who created the file, it was almost impossible to find it. Terms like provenance, original order, series, agency, items and consignments were all foreign to researchers but essential to their research. With luck there might have been subject entries which could speed up a search but more often than not, researchers would go through card by card looking for relevant items or hope that staff could point them in the right direction. Technology has changed a researcher's dependence on the archivist and researchers are enabled more than ever before to find what they are looking for themselves. It must be remembered, however, that not everything in an archive is online or listed at item level in the catalogue and perhaps never will be. Resources simply don't permit that type of retrospective work although frequently used records might be revisited.

Reading Rooms

Before I explore all the changes arising out of the tremendous growth in technology over the last 25 years, I would like to briefly explore the physical changes in archival reading rooms. Over that time period all of the state and federal archives have seen upgrades in their reading rooms or even new buildings and locations. Queensland led the way with its new building in 1993 with a reading room that could seat 100 researchers with a separate area for microform, individual carrels and meeting rooms. PROV constructed its new building in 2000 but it was not until 2004 that the new reading room for the public opened. It is a huge room with three service points, individual carrels, meeting room, small reference library, and separate microform room. Each desk has power and data outlets so researchers can plug in their laptops, connect to their local online provider, read or send emails, take digital photos of documents and download to their laptops and even email the photos out to family or friends all without leaving the reading room. This is a long way from the old days when researchers might have to wait several days for their photocopies to be completed.

On average PROV has 60-70 researchers a day and we usually have at least 3 staff in the North Melbourne reading room which has 3 service desks (enquiries, copying and issues). We usually have 3-4 people retrieving records to meet the four service deliveries during the day. And of course, at the end of the day staff have to put the records back.

The National Archives of Australia (NAA), Victorian Office also have a small reading room within the main room at North Melbourne.

In the 1980s a number of state archives started to make their most frequently used record series available for sale on microform and these publications have been purchased by libraries and family history societies. In NSW State Records have community access points across the state which has meant good access throughout NSW to the most frequently used colonial records. Queensland State Archives did the same for their immigration records, electoral rolls and naturalizations records. State libraries and genealogical and family history societies were the primary purchasers.

Also PROV recently published on microfiche the last of our inwards passenger lists which means that researchers no longer have to visit PROV reading rooms to see passenger lists from 1852 to 1923. Sales of the new microfiche have been strong to state libraries and family history libraries around Australia and New Zealand and even the USA.

Online Catalogues

It was only in the 1990s that Australian archives started to automate their collections with the National Archives of Australia leading the way with the development of RecordSearch. Queensland State Archives developed Archives One with a public interface known as ArchivesSearch which went live in 1998. Archives One has since been on sold to Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and the Northern Territory with local variations. State Records New South Wales developed Archives Investigator and this system has also been adopted by State Records Western Australia. Each of the states are at various stages of development and implementation and the Northern Territory Archives Service is the only one not currently online.

The availability of catalogues and other resources online has meant that researchers don't have to visit a reading room to make their initial enquiries. One of the new initiatives with PROV's online catalogue was the provision of an 1800 number Help Desk for researchers. PROV's Help Desk statistics have been increasing dramatically as researchers are planning their research trips and ordering over the telephone and website. One of our Help Desk aims is to save researchers from having to make unnecessary trips to our reading rooms.

In some instances, researchers can find exactly what they want online and order copies, again without personally visiting. Over the last few years we have seen improved navigation facilities within our online catalogues which allow researchers to find more easily what they want. Also the ongoing retrospective addition of items into online catalogues means that more records are able to be located at item level. Researchers may now do all they want to do in one visit, rather than two or more visits as previously.

Name identified data

Something that is very popular with researchers, especially family historians, is name identified data in online catalogues and this is something that a number of the state and federal archives are doing where possible. The National Archives of Australia have done this with their World War One and World War Two army dossiers and also with post World War Two immigration. It is not a traditional area of archival documentation and as such is largely done with the assistance of volunteers. It means that a researcher can key in a family name and see what might be available and there is also a certain serendipity factor as well.

Online indexes and databases

In April 2004 when PROV opened its new reading room at North Melbourne, it also placed online a range of indexes and databases giving researchers greater access to frequently requested series. One example is the index to teachers which fast became the most looked at index on our website. While the records it indexed are only available on microfilm in PROV reading rooms, it means that researchers can search at home and then either visit or get someone else to do a copy on their behalf.

As I mentioned earlier indexing is not a core task for archivists and the compilation of online indexes has mainly been done by volunteers with staff supervision. PROV's inwards unassisted immigration index was compiled solely by volunteers over a twenty year period and contains approximately 1.8 million names of unassisted immigrants who arrived in Victoria between 1852 and 1923. The volunteers are currently working on the outwards immigration index and in December 2006 the index covered the period 1852 to 1876 and contained 507, 112 names. Having this online makes it accessible no matter where the researcher is located and searches can be done on surname, given name, date and name of ship if known. This degree of speed and flexibility in searching could never be done in a card catalogue.

PROV collaborates in exhibitions with other cultural institutions and loans records from our collection. A side benefit is that this is an easy way to show public records in a greater range of contexts which brings them to the attention of a much broader audience. Also it is a really easy way to get more publicity for PROV without having to do all the hard work of a full exhibition on our own. A particular example is the *Emigrants and Exiles* exhibition curated by the National Gallery of Victoria and held in the Ian Potter Centre of the National Gallery at Federation Square in the Melbourne CBD in 2006. Not only did it attract a record number of visitors but our website numbers also increased dramatically as there were onsite terminals linked to our immigration indexes online. In fact I believe it was responsible for PROV making the Top 20 searches on the Victorian Government website in July 2006. We came in at No 15 with 'passenger lists' as the search term. Not surprisingly, our Help Desk was bombarded with requests for information during this period too!

Online copying orders and payment

Having online indexes available to researchers makes it much easier for them to identify relevant items and most state and federal archives now have online payment facilities although it is something that we are still to introduce at PROV. The largest group of public clients satisfied by this online service are family historians. The identification of specific items in online catalogues has also meant easier access for

researchers who then can request copies of records likely to be useful to their research. All without having to personally visit a reading room.

Digitised records

In April 2004 when PROV's new reading room at North Melbourne opened we placed online digitised copies of a number of frequently used records and control indexes. All mental asylum registers in PROV's custody have been digitised and placed online so researchers no longer have to personally visit to use these records. We are currently doing the same with prison registers. Frequently used indexes for male and female prisoners, divorces and teachers have also been placed online but if a researcher does find a reference in those indexes, they still have to personally visit or use a search agent to obtain a copy. This is another area where our Help Desk plays a large role as people seek assistance in using these online records over the telephone or by email rather than personally visiting the reading room. The desk is staffed by a reference officer and all reference staff rotate from duty in the reading room to the Help Desk.

At PROV we are currently digitising, in partnership with the Genealogical Society of Utah, our top three frequently requested series (wills, probates and inquests) to 1925. The project started in November 2004 and has an estimated end date of December 2008 so in 2009 we will no longer have to retrieve these three series for researchers in the North Melbourne reading room. The records will be freely available on PROV's website. Currently we have available online wills for the 1850s through to 1910 and more are uploaded on a weekly basis. There is a good chance that this initiative will lead to a fall in the number of researchers visiting the reading room. An alternative view is that it will actually create more interest in other records we hold and might actually encourage people to come to a reading room to do research. Time will no doubt reveal the answer!

There are also digitising initiatives like the National Archives of Australia digitising on demand program which has meant that researchers can find what they want online and then request a free digital copy. This in turn means no personal visit to an NAA reading room. National Archives of Australia has now reduced the number of hours their reading rooms are open. From October 2006 NAA offices in Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide, Hobart and Darwin are now closed to the public on Mondays and Tuesdays. Only the Canberra and Melbourne office reading rooms open all weekdays now. For those of you who may not be aware, the Melbourne office is a shared facility with PROV at North Melbourne which is open Monday to Friday 9.00am to 4.30pm.

This decision to restrict opening hours was done in consultation with researchers and other stakeholders after it was established that over 84% of inquiries from those seeking access to NAA collections now occur through their website or remote reference service. Currently 15 million pages of NAA records are available through the website and more is being added each day. Digitisation on demand has been widened to include state offices so more state based records will be made available online over the next 12 months. Unfortunately it is not likely that the state archives will ever have the resources to have their own digitisation on demand programs.

Digital transfers

PROV's earlier online catalogue called Archives@Victoria allowed the importation of electronic databases and this meant that PROV could provide online current indexes for series such as probates and inquest files, a boon for family history researchers. This type of data has been captured into the archives system since 1993 and it means that a researcher at home can find the file and order it from home for viewing in the reading room. There are only a few record series that this applies to at present but no doubt it will increase in future years. PROV's upgraded online catalogue, the user interface for which is the Access the Collection page on the PROV website replaced Archives@Victoria in 2005 and is part of the Digital Archive which allows PROV to take in digital transfers from government departments and agencies and make them available online if they are open records. PROV's search screens now allow for both a physical record search and a digital record search or both if you tick both buttons.

Digital Archives

PROV's digital archive was launched in December 2005 and it supports the transfer of digital records from government agencies and facilitates the administration, management and maintenance of PROV's digital and digitised collections. Secure storage for the permanent digital records of the Victorian Government is provided by a dedicated Digital Repository. PROV's upgraded online catalogue, through Access the Collection allows government agencies immediate access to their archived records and enables researchers around Victoria, Australia and elsewhere in the world, to access PROV's physical, digital and digitised records.

Conclusion

In this paper I have primarily concentrated on the impact of technology on the service provisions of reading rooms and reference staff and the benefits to public researchers. Anyone interested in the more technological aspects of PROV's Victorian Electronic Records Strategy (VERS) program and the Digital Archive should visit the VERS website at www.prov.vic.gov.au/vers/vers and the Digital Archive website at www.prov.vic.gov.au/vers/digitalarchive. PROV's free Digital Recordkeeping @ PROV magazine is available online or paper copies can be sent out on request.

In summary, no longer do researchers have to personally visit to view records but, and there is always a but, not all of PROV's holdings of 85 shelf kilometres have been digitised. Nor are they likely to be. This is also true for other state and federal archives. There will probably always be a need for a 'real' reading room as well as the 'virtual' reading room and balancing user expectations will be a challenge. Archivists need to ensure that researchers don't forget that not everything is online and that the thrill of discovery can still lie within an archival box of records. Thank you.