

**Family History and the Changing Face of State Archives
Since 1974 and Into The Future
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Introduction

Originally Justine Heazlewood, Director and Keeper of Public Records was invited to give the 2004 Don Grant lecture and unfortunately Justine had to travel to Vienna, Austria to attend the International Council On Archives Congress. If Justine had been here today, she would no doubt have told you about her visions for PROV now and into the future. So by default, or perhaps destiny, you have me before you and I have decided not to talk about PROV although it is mentioned at various points throughout this lecture. Instead I have decided to give you my personal thoughts from two perspectives – first as a long term family historian and user of state and federal archives throughout Australia and second, as a professional archivist and librarian.

By way of introduction I have been working in government for over 30 years at both the state and federal levels and for 23 years in libraries and archives. Ironically I had toyed with the idea of being a librarian and working in a library when I left school in 1973 but both the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) and the Brisbane City Council Library Network said that I was not suited to library work. However, less than 10 years later I was working in a library and in 1990 I was one of the front runners for the position of the SLQ person who had originally turned me down at the interview. That person was none other than Shirley McCorkindale who had gone on to become SLQ's first genealogy librarian and when Shirley first talked about retiring in 1990 I went back to the SLQ to a position within the Special Collections branch which also contained the Genealogy unit. Interestingly Shirley remembered that interview and me and we both thought it was ironic that we ended up working together. By the time Shirley did retire in 1995, I had moved to a senior executive position at Queensland State Archives (QSA) so I never did get to be genealogy librarian but next time the position becomes vacant (Stephanie Ryan replaced Shirley and has been in the position ever since) I might be ready to start heading north again!

Briefly my library and archives career highlights include starting at the John Oxley Library (JOL) as a library assistant in 1981 before moving to QSA in 1982 as an archives assistant, and later archivist. Between 1990 and 1994 I held various positions in both the SLQ and the JOL. In 1994 I moved back to QSA in the executive management position of Manager, Public Access. Between 1994 and 1999 I held a number of executive positions at QSA including Manager, Automation Project and oversaw the development of Archives One which is now the standard archival management system used in five Australian state archives including Victoria.

In 1999 after 25 years with the Queensland Government I moved to the federal government and took up a position with the National Archives of Australia (NAA) in Canberra. In my four years with NAA I again held a number of positions mostly in the Collection Development and Publishing areas of NAA. My last and perhaps not

final move has been to Victoria and the position of Access Services Manager here at Public Record Office Victoria (PROV).

It was my family history hobby or is that obsession that led me into university studies in 1980 to study Australian and British history and for the next six years I worked by day and went to university by night to obtain my Bachelor of Arts majoring in history. Over the following years I completed a Graduate Diploma in Library Science that included some recordkeeping and preservation subjects, a Master of Arts in Australian Studies with my major thesis on Female Philanthropy in Colonial Queensland and the Diploma in Family Historical Studies from the Society of Australian Genealogists with my minor thesis on prison records. I also completed an electronic recordkeeping subject at Curtin University to keep myself up to date with new developments in the archives world. All of this study was done part time at night while I worked during the day, researched my family history in my spare time, looked after my own family although they might put that differently and when I look back, I wonder how I found the time to do everything! Today I don't have half of those commitments and I still don't have time or is there just more to do these days?

I have also been heavily involved with the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) as a professional member since 1987 serving as Queensland Branch Convenor on a number of occasions and also as National Secretary 1993-1997 and as Managing Editor 1997-2000. Since 2002 I have been the Convenor of the ASA's Reference, Access and Public Programs Special Interest Group (RAPPSIG). While National Secretary I was also Convenor of the Professional Membership Committee and was one of the leading drivers of the acceptance of reference as a professional archival function with a subsequent change of the Society's rules at the AGM in 1997. When the ASA was first established in 1975 reference was not seen as a professional function of archival work as reading rooms were usually staffed by paraprofessionals who retrieved and reshelfed the records after the researcher had discussed their topic with the archivist and received a list of records to look at. Of course this way of things changed dramatically with the advent of the family history boom of the late 1970s and it took a while for the Society to acknowledge that reference had moved on from a paraprofessional stance to a true professional function. I will come back to this point again when I look at staffing in state archives today.

To leave the professional side of me for a moment, I would like to mention briefly my family history activities over the last 27 years. My husband and I were of that generation that sat down to watch the television mini-series **Roots** in 1977. I was hooked after the first episode and watched it faithfully to the end. If Kunta Kinte could trace his African American ancestry then I could trace my ancestry! Initially my husband and I both joined the Genealogical Society of Queensland (GSQ) and my husband went on to be Treasurer and was the designer of the GSQ logo still used by the society today. Although never actually serving on a GSQ committee, I have been involved with them primarily as a speaker at annual conferences and at branch meetings, especially North Brisbane and Southern Suburbs branches. On my frequent returns to Queensland, I usually give a talk to one of the family history groups in Brisbane eg in November I am talking about PROVonline to the North Brisbane Branch of GSQ. I am a regular contributor to *Lost In Victoria*, the newsletter of the GSQ Victorian interest group.

In 1979 I was one of the founding members of the Queensland Family History Society (QFHS) which was originally the Brisbane Branch of the GSQ before the breakaway. This was a bit tricky as my husband was still Treasurer of GSQ at the time. I joined the committee of the QFHS and served in a variety of positions until 1987 when my son was born. Even after retiring from the committee, I continued to act as Education Officer and held other non-committee roles. During the early 1990s I also taught family history in Brisbane as part of the TAFE adult education program. In 2000 I was made a Fellow of QFHS for services to family history in Queensland. In all of my work and voluntary positions I have been extremely active in promoting archival collections to researchers and it was not unusual for me to do 12-15 talks a year on researching in Queensland, mostly in Brisbane and South East Queensland but I did venture as far north as Townsville and Cairns one year.

On moving to Canberra in 1999 I joined the council of the Heraldry and Genealogical Society of Canberra (HAGSOC) - (having already known June Penny and Pam Ray for some years) and again became Education Officer and part of their Roadshow team. Once again I started giving talks on various topics throughout the ACT, Sydney and neighbouring parts of NSW. I also convened their annual Beginners Course held every year in July. Over the last 27 years I have given many, many talks to various 'genie' groups and conferences in QLD, NSW, ACT, SA and now Victoria.

As you can see from that perhaps not so brief career summary, I have moved around a lot between archives and libraries and experienced a number of different positions over the years in both state and federal arenas. There are not too many people with the breadth and depth of experience and qualifications in the field that I have which is why I sometimes think my view of the world is so different from everyone else's view. I stress that these are my personal thoughts and recollections over the last thirty years and they are not always flattering to the institutions that I will be remembering. There has been much change over thirty years, and mostly for the better, but there has been slow progress in some areas and sometimes the move onwards and upwards into the electronic future has not been embraced as heartily as it might be. No doubt my memories are coloured by my own experiences and others will have had similar or different experiences over that same time span.

What Was It Like Researching Family History Back Then

When I first started researching family history in 1977, 'genies' and I use that term fondly, were not always welcome in libraries and archives – these were the days before large scale indexing projects such as BDMs, monumental inscriptions, newspaper indexes and immigration indexes to mention just a few, had made research so much easier. A lot of fragile directories and newspapers had not been microfilmed and very few 'how to trace your family history' books had been written. I can still remember staff at the JOL in Brisbane on my first visit giving me an early edition of Nancy Gray's *Tracing Your Family History* and telling me everything I needed to know was in there! It wasn't and I went on to earn in 1980 the distinction of being the number one 'genie' pest at the Library. Why? I worked across the road from the Library and spent every lunch hour in there researching my family. It was at the University of Queensland that I met and became friends with one of the librarians at JOL. My uni studies and friendship with one of their own finally convinced them that perhaps I was not all that bad!

Most of the library staff didn't want to know about family history (they simply weren't interested) and even resented the increased use of the library and the impact it was having on fragile and precious books, photographs and so on. Simply serving on the reference desk was taking away from cataloguing tasks and other projects – due to the sheer number of library users more than one staff person had to be rostered on to avoid unmanageable queues. Towards the end of 1980 the library decided that they needed someone to handle all the family history enquiries and my new friend recommended me for the job. Well I was certainly interested in getting behind the desk and into the shelves (JOL is a closed access library) but the salary and the position was less than what I was getting at the Lands Administration Commission. Sadly, my family history lust was greater than my desire for money so I accepted the position and started work at the Library in January 1981. Well I was just like a pig in mud – behind the desk and in the stacks was simply wonderful; there were all these records and references to my family that I would never have discovered if I had stayed on the other side of the desk. It is this knowledge and experience that I have tried to share with other researchers ever since.

The JOL was open only one night a week and not weekends so Wednesday night was 'genie night' and I was always rostered on with one other unlucky person. I can't tell you how much information I found on my own family through helping others with their research. Working late on Wednesdays meant that I had the mornings free and this was my chance to visit Queensland State Archives (QSA) and do my research there as they weren't open at night or weekends. This is another area of change in that most archives now have some form of evening or Saturday access. Like JOL, QSA employed an archives assistant to handle all family history enquiries and the archivists were available to assist 'bona fide' researchers. While I did find some information on my family at the Archives, I still felt that there was so much more but I just didn't know how to find it.

One day the Archives family history staff person was away sick and I encountered an archivist for the first time. Fortunately for me it was Ruth Kerr who went on to be one of Queensland's most distinguished mining historians. I was looking for information on the Wee McGregor Mine near Ballara, which is where my GGgrandfather had died, but no one could tell me where it was and the certificate only said the Kennedy district which was in North Queensland. Well Ruth simply stunned me by saying that she had been to Ballara and the mine, she had written an article on the school and she just brought record after record out to the reading room for me. This proved that my ancestors were in the archives but how was I going to locate the material for myself?

Early in 1982 the QSA family history person was burnt out and quit and I was offered the position (those were the days before recruitment and selection). By this stage I had already learnt lots about my ancestors from JOL's holdings and the Archives was still unknown territory so I readily accepted the offer. Again I found the same staffing situation – resentment against family historians because they were creating so much more work, the reading room was always full, mail enquiries were relentless and staff simply exhausted by it all. However, I thrived and again my own family history grew in leaps and bounds as I helped people with their research.

In some ways archives were in an even more of a difficult position than libraries following the family history boom in the late 1970s. Libraries at least had a card

catalogue that most users knew how to use and there were books in the open stacks that researchers could look at. This was not the same for archives that have never had open stacks and even today there is not much standardisation between archival systems although it is improving. Archives, as the custodians of primary records such as immigration, naturalisations, lands, probates, inquests, education, and so on were a prime target for family history researchers. Certainly in the late 1970s archives were not geared up for the enormous increase in numbers of people visiting to undertake research.

The Family History Legacy

The advent of family historians en masse led to a number of developments that I now want to briefly look at. To cope with increased researcher numbers new, or revamped reading rooms and even purpose built repositories were essential. Also in response to the sheer number of demands on both staff and the records, there had to be a move to self-service with the medium of microform (both film and fiche) seen as the best option to achieve that. This was closely allied to the need to make records available outside of the reading room and we saw the development and sale of various genealogical kits. Informing researchers of what was held without saying the same thing over and over again led to the development of family history sheets known as fact sheets, brief guides or here in Victoria we call them PROVguides. Various other publications were produced all with the aim of informing researchers and perhaps taking the burden away from staff.

Other outreach activities such as seminar programs and regional tours all helped to educate researchers and to reduce dependency on staff. At the same time both family history and genealogical societies provided informative meetings, newsletters, journals, education classes and so on for their members. This all led towards more informed researchers using the archives. I now want to look at some of those aspects in more detail.

The Move To The Outer Limits

During the last 30 years most state and federal archives have moved buildings or had purpose built buildings constructed. It is interesting that most of the state archives started up either in inner city areas or in near suburban areas but with their new purpose built repositories they have ended up in places often not easily accessible by researchers. Some like the Canberra office of NAA are in heritage restored buildings in central locations while others have found themselves removed to what I have termed 'the outer limits'. While it is true that NAA Canberra is on the tourist route and visitors do pop in to look at exhibitions, the records themselves are still stored offsite and have to be couriered on an hourly basis throughout the day. This puts enormous pressure on retrieval staff who have to meet the timeframes for retrieval and delivery. It also means that researchers are left waiting for records to be delivered but with pre-ordering through archival systems such as RecordSearch this is now minimised somewhat. So yes it is desirable to have a central presence but that desirability is somewhat lessened if the records are not also onsite.

QSA started off in the Old Commissariat Building (one of two remaining convict buildings in Queensland today) in William Street before moving to a purpose built building located in the inner suburb of Dutton Park in the early 1970s. The reading room originally had half a dozen desks and by clever use of furniture we managed to

squeeze in 12 researchers post the family history boom. At that time QSA was open from 8am to 5pm and it was not unusual for all seats to be taken by 9am with others waiting in the courtyard for someone to leave. By the mid 1980s we successfully managed to extend the reading room by building in the courtyard and destroying the garden and increased seating from 12 to 21 researchers. We then built what was fondly known as the 'bus shelter' along the side of the building so that those waiting to come in could wait in the shade although if it rained there wasn't much protection. Not surprisingly people did not like queuing up to gain access especially if they had travelled any distance and only had a limited amount of time for research.

For years during the 1980s QSA was on the five-year plan for a new building but for various reasons we never got up to the starting position. As the years passed we went from proposed sites in the CBD opposite Old Parliament House to the Expo 88 site on the south side of the river but then that was also considered too valuable for an archive even though the new state library, museum and cultural centre were all on Southbank by this stage. A proposed site at Cannon Hill followed this that was not too far from the NAA Brisbane office but again the land was taken for other purposes. Eventually QSA was given the site at Runcorn and a purpose built building and a reading room seating over 100 researchers opened in 1994. The fact that the site was not serviced by public transport was immaterial – there was no bus service and the nearest train station was about a mile away and required a trek down a busy road with no footpaths and bush on either side for part of the way. This was before the site was overtaken with residential development. Even today QSA offers a free taxi service from the train station on Wednesdays.

We saw the same scenario in NSW with the gradual closure of the Sydney Rocks reading room (except for microforms) to the purpose built building at Kingswood some 45 minutes from the CBD on a good day. With respect of new buildings, PROV has been the most fortunate of all the state archives in that its new purpose built building is here at North Melbourne which is reasonably close to tram, train and bus transport. Plus there is free car parking all day for those who prefer to drive. I know that many researchers did not favour the closure of the city reading room and I hope that the tours today show that the services and facilities that we can now offer far outweigh the convenience of the CBD. All I can say is that if you ever have to trek out to Kingswood or Runcorn then you will certainly appreciate the convenience of North Melbourne.

The Move To Self Service

During the 1980s the sheer numbers of family history researchers coming through the door, or writing in with enquiries or phoning was crushing most state archives. Thank goodness that email had not yet been invented! The solution was seen as getting the most heavily used series indexed, microfilmed, published and sold and State Records NSW (SRNSW) led the way here. By publishing a lot of their early in demand records they took the pressure off the reading rooms and the records. Also by establishing their 40 community centres throughout NSW they ensured that most NSW researchers were able to access the microform records without having to travel all the way to Sydney. Similarly Queensland published its Genealogical Kits for immigration, electoral rolls and naturalisations. State libraries around Australia and some of the larger family history and genealogical societies that had also grown considerably following the **Roots** explosion were primarily the purchasers of the genie kits.

As most of the state archives gained new and larger reading rooms and often separate microform areas as part of building upgrades, this in turn meant that microform could be made more self service with researchers able to retrieve and reshelve their own films. This was a tremendous boost for staff and meant that retrieving records from the repository was a quicker process as staff no longer had to retrieve microfilm. Microfilming of frequently used records also became a full time function in most state archives although some, like PROV, did not set up microfilming units and as a result there has not been large scale series microfilming at PROV.

Another variation from other state archives was that PROV did not go into partnership with the LDS Church which did a lot of microfilming of wills, probate and other genealogical type records in other state archives during the 1980s and even through to the present day. This is why I have made it a priority to start negotiations with the LDS to microfilm/digitise probate files, admin files and inquests to 1925 as a matter of urgency. Once these series are more widely accessible outside of PROV, either online via the PROV website or on microfilm through the Family History Centres, this should free up staff from retrieving, reshelving and copying these heavily used series. It has taken some time to get this project going and we are now almost at signing the contract stage, but it will definitely be worth the effort.

NAA took the microfilming phase even further with the introduction of their free digital copies on request service introduced in 2000. Instead of having to come into the reading room, those wanting records held in Canberra could request a free digital copy by simply clicking a button. Despite no publicity this service took off like a rocket and before long the Archives had digitisers employed around the clock to meet demands and keep within a two-month waiting period. Despite introducing limits to the service this has not really slowed down demand and as of 1 September they have introduced a new photocopy policy to give greater efficiency of service although at a cost to researchers who can't personally visit.

None of the state archives is in a position to introduce a digital copying service like NAA's although most now have small digitising units. Here at PROV we have mainly concentrated on whole collections such as Eureka and Ned Kelly in conjunction with online exhibitions. This has changed slightly somewhat with the new reading room and the introduction of PROVonline but in reality we still only have one digitising officer. We did use some of the relocation funding to outsource the digitisation and microfilming of whole series that were identified as high demand including mental asylum records, convict records, prison and divorce indexes to mention just a few. In recent times we have also had volunteers working in the online projects area.

Indexing Projects

In conjunction with microfilming projects, archives also started massive indexing projects to assist easier access to frequently used records and also to preserve the records from additional wear and tear. Some state archives used their own staff to compile various indexes for increased access to heavily used records and this is the path that QSA followed. Volunteers were trialled in the late 1970s but without any real success and to this day QSA still does not have a volunteers program.

On the other hand PROV is an example where volunteers have been a part of the archives program for the last twenty years. PROV's big volunteer effort has been the indexing of inwards and outward immigration lists. Next Monday the final instalment of the inwards British and Foreign immigration index will be launched online making that index complete from 1852 to 1923. Work continues steadily on the outwards immigration lists. In recent times PROV volunteers have worked on a number of other indexing or digitising projects including transcribing Ned Kelly documents and data entering captions for the 1956 Olympics online exhibition.

With the development of websites, researchers can now see more and more indexes being published online and even digitised records available online. PROV went down this path in April this year with the launch of PROVonline – this is largely taking indexes previously only available in the North Melbourne reading room and making them available online for people to search prior to visiting. This is an ongoing project and as databases are taken into custody we are looking at the feasibility of placing these online as well. A recent example of this is the teachers database from the History Unit of the Education Department which came into custody in June and was placed immediately on the website.

SRNSW also has a range of volunteer generated indexes now available online together with a copy service for those finding something in the indexes. This is the next stage that I would like to move to – offering copies of selected items for a predetermined fee. We are already looking at how we might offer this service although not having an online payment facility is a bit of a drawback at this stage. It is interesting to note that SRNSW volunteers also enter item-level information into Archives Investigator, which is the equivalent of Archives@Victoria here at PROV. They have just completed over 2000 entries relating to NSW Supreme Court probate packets.

Opening Up Access Through Finding Aids

PROV does not currently have as many research guides as some of the other comparable state archives and these brief fact sheets are a way of opening up the collection to researchers by drawing attention to various groups of records. All reference staff are working on new PROVguides which will be steadily published and promoted over the next few months.

In April 2003 PROV published *Private Lives Public Records: Family History Resources at Public Record Office Victoria* with the first print run selling out within the first year. A revised print run was published in conjunction with the new reading room in April 2004 and again it is proving a best seller. I am also happy to say that it is the winner of an Australian Society of Archivists Mander Jones Award for 2003 for best new finding aid. Justine will accept the Award next week at the Society's conference in Canberra. Only State Records SA and NAA have published similar guides for family historians. Publications such as these open up the collection to researchers by highlighting what records are held and how to use them.

Also another major access tool has been the development of automated archival systems for searching and ordering records for research. NAA developed RecordSearch and SRNSW further developed David Robert's original Tabularium software into Archives Investigator. At QSA we developed Archives One which is

now used in five state archives as I mentioned earlier. It had been my hope back in 1997/98 that there would be a single system to make it easier for researchers but each of the State Archives have modified Archives One for their own purposes although there are still some similarities.

Old Attitudes Still Out There

My basic philosophy is to teach fellow family historians how to do their own research – to empower them to find information for themselves in libraries and archives – to not be at the mercy of whoever is on the reference desk at the time of their visit. In my 27 years of research I have to say that times have changed greatly since the late 1970s when genealogists were often seen as pests, with the typical stereotype of the little old lady or gent narrowly chasing BDMs and not doing bona fide research. These days there is more awareness of the value of research done by family historians and it was refreshing to hear at a Australian Historical Association conference in Newcastle in July a family history session where the three presenters (all Victorian academics) gave a somewhat old fashioned view of family history research only to have the audience come back and criticise them heavily for that view. Those in the audience pointed out that they had used family history society libraries and resources in researching their PhDs and other academic qualifications and that family history was not just who begat whom.

Where To Next

PROV is actually leading the way into the future with its ambitious Digital Archive Project which will make Victorian electronic records accessible online. In conjunction with this project, a new website user interface is being designed to replace the current *Archives@Victoria* website. This is scheduled for completion in June 2005, less than twelve months away.

Another initiative that PROV currently has responsibility for is the National Online Archival Network (NOAN), which is a joint project with the other Australasian government archives including New Zealand. This is looking at a portal development through which researchers can search participating archival systems such as NAA's RecordSearch, PROV's Archives@Victoria, SRNSW's Archives Investigator and QSA's ArchivesSearch to mention some systems already available. This is still very much in its infancy and initial project briefs from consultants have been too ambitious and expensive. PROV has been tasked with trying to find a cheaper alternative without losing the functionality of having one portal for all Australian archives.

Archives New Zealand is the first Australasian government archive to introduce an Access Standard which sets out principles for the provision of access to public archives in NZ. The nine principles are rights of access; partnership with users; access channels; documentation and promotion; access facilities; service quality; reproduction and use; protection of records; restricted records and special access. PROV has already started to give consideration to an access standard and I think it is only a matter of time before all of the state and federal government archives develop access standards.

Conclusion

I can remember people saying that family history research was just a passing phase and that after Australia's bicentennial in 1988 things would die down and go back to

normal, whatever that was. As we know, that didn't happen and family history research shows no sign of dying off and is perhaps as popular today as it was in those heady days of the late 1970s. One of the things I have noticed most is that people don't stop doing family history research – it is something that they continue to do while there are always new people taking up the hobby. Family history numbers are growing and will continue to grow in my opinion – even the high price of BDM certificates these days does not deter people from purchasing certificates they need in their research.

We will continue to see more and more online archival resources being produced and greater access to archival collections around the country and overseas. As government budgets shrink, and they usually shrink, we have to maintain services by thinking of more clever ways to access the collections and justify our existence and our budgets. Access is not just in the reading room – it is on the website, it is the travelling exhibition, it is the publication, the newsletter, the talk, seminar or open day. Archives have to market themselves to existing and future researchers and through collaborative ventures with the family history world we are already half way there in getting our message across. I don't have another thirty years in the workforce – only a mere seven years before I retire - but I wouldn't mind betting that even in that short time frame, we will experience changes that we can't even speculate on now.

I trust that this talk has given you an insight into who I am (now I am the devil you know!) and an understanding of the direction that I would like to see PROV take with respect to accessibility of the records and promotion of PROV to the wider community.

Thank you.

Shauna Hicks
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