

ENIGMATIC OBJECTS

A REFLECTION ON OBJECTS IN ARCHIVES

BY Michael Piggott

The first thing which struck me on my first day as University Archivist at the University of Melbourne Archives was that familiar musty smell common to second hand book shops and the closed stacks of many libraries and archives. The next impression was visual, and far less expected. In the foyer display case were objects such as a sample bottle from the first batch of 500ml Bailey's Hermitage released in 1984; a faded tin notice declaring "This is a war savings street"; and a printer's block urging "Vote No on Saturday October 8". Just beyond were an old two piece wall telephone and a number of original art works which I learnt were used for the covers of the United Commercial Travellers' Association's *Australia Today*. Once inside I was shown my office, complete with clocks, old bottles, crockery, bricks, leg irons, a gravel fork, a huge solicitor's bookcase, an 1885 rifle club trophy, wooden skis and commemorative tin of IXL jam. Immediately outside a side door was a pedal operated dentist's drill. In the weeks following, I discovered not even this variety had prepared me for the hundreds of objects large and small in the Archives' repositories either side of University Square. Had I actually joined a museum? Had I confused the address and ended up at the Chapel Street Bazaar or Dante's in Fitzroy?

The question triggered several flashbacks. There were memories of my few unhappy moments in the Manuscripts Section of the National Library; trying to decide how to deal with a set of false teeth in the Billy Hughes papers, with the pedal wireless generator in the Royal Flying Doctor Service records and Lord Casey's regalia which had followed his diaries and other papers. There were scenes too from the Australian War Memorial, Canberra: being caught up in disputes between the art curators and the registry staff over the most appropriate division for donor files, and trying to convince curators of medals and large vehicles that their material meant much more with the associated archival documentation. And I remembered Canberra's only archival document to achieve iconic status as a museum object: the 1297 *inspeximus* issue of the Magna Carta in Parliament House.



Objects challenge the archivist in several ways. The first is definitional. It is widely accepted that archives are records of historical or enduring value (or "continuing" value, as is now preferred). This is why archival institutions are sometimes still called record offices — as in the Public Record Office of Victoria. As for the term "records", attempts to pin down their essential core

have generated considerable debate within law reform, standards and record keeping forums alike in response to the emergence of e-mail and other electronic record "formats". The late 1990s consensus represents a shift from listing physical formats to an emphasis on records being authentic and reliable evidence of personal or corporate transactions, and being as important to accountability as history. Thus the Australian Society of Archivists expresses the archivist's mission to be ensuring,

"that the records which have value as authentic evidence of administrative, corporate, cultural and intellectual activity are made, kept and used".

This work

"is vital for ensuring organisational efficiency and accountability, and for supporting understandings of Australian life through the management and retention of its personal, corporate and social memory".¹

What then of dentists' drills and tins of jam? Could they ever be regarded as records, and thus, if important to posterity, archives? Certainly objects can, in either of two kinds of situations.

Firstly, where objects are deliberately set aside as evidence of transactions or activities, then they are legitimately records and potentially archives. Classic examples include circumstances

involving objects created by bodies functioning as registries being deliberately set aside “for the record” (for example, weapons and seeds); where record keeping naturally incorporates objects (for example, architects’ and shipwrights’ models), and with any number of businesses which, for their own reference or protection, establish master sets of their product. Publishers are a good local example (thus the University of Melbourne Library holds Melbourne University Press’s master copy of each book published), but one might also cite recording studios, currency and philatelic agencies, potteries and fashion houses. And there are numerous three-dimensional records from other centuries where such materials as rope, wood, shell and clay were used to make records, as in Inca quipus, English tally sticks, Aboriginal message sticks and Elbaite clay tablets. When written records first emerged in England, transactions were symbolised and authenticated by such objects as swords, knives, hunting horns, pieces of turf and seals.² In short, it is the purpose not the format which defines what records (and hence archives) are.

Secondly there are objects which are inextricably linked to or incorporated into individual records; pre-electronic compound documents so to speak. We are familiar with newspaper cuttings and photos featuring as enclosures accompanying correspondence or reports. It is also possible to find badges and buttons in scrapbooks; botanical specimens in reports; objects in police, court and solicitors’ files;³ medals, ribbons, hair and ore samples attached to letters and subsequently kept there — “registered” or “filed” — by the record creator.

Archivists approach objects with some diffidence. Their mindset has been dominated by concepts such as provenance, custody, evidence and context; their most common formats have been files of letters and memos, registers and minute books; and their methods, education, standards and philosophies have not been curatorial and museological, though they share much. Occasionally



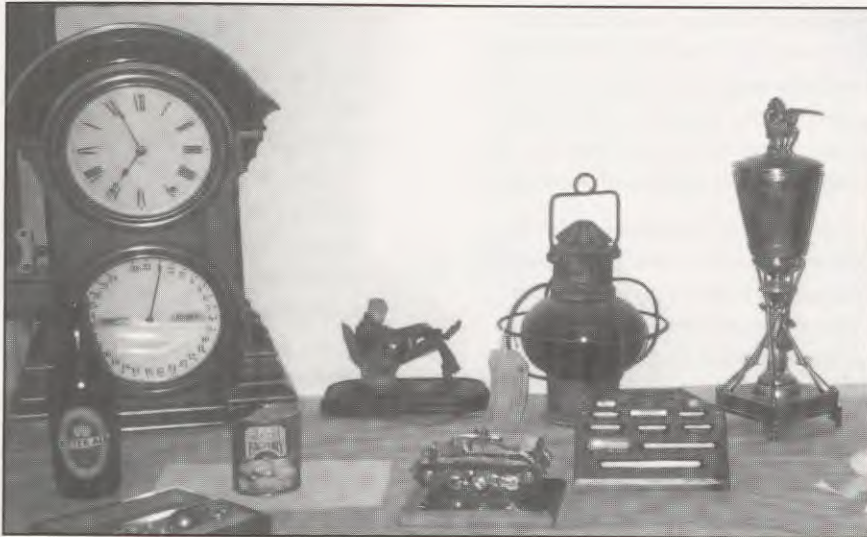
Objects held in the University of Melbourne Archives

Above: Objects from the United Tinsmiths and Sheet Metal Workers Union collection, including armour, shield and container.

Below: Miscellaneous objects from the Leicester Street store of the University of Melbourne Archives. They are currently being reappraised, most for relocation in the new Archives repository at Dawson Street, Brunswick. (Photos: the Author.)

this is acknowledged outright. Thus in 1997 the University of Melbourne Archives identified the Museum of Victoria as a more appropriate home for a collection of trade union banners (as Suzanne Fairbanks explained in this Journal last year).⁴ Other approaches have been to rationalise the grey areas conceptually by such terms as “archival ephemera” and “non-record archives”. Another has been the notion of “objects of archival significance”, namely those

items which, while not strictly records, should be retained for their importance to understanding records. Included would be items of equipment used to certify, emboss, cancel or frank records, and that vast array of technology used over the centuries to create and copy records. A number of the University of Melbourne Archives’ objects fall under this heading. Section 61 of the Commonwealth Archives Act 1983 in fact empowered the responsible minister



Objects held in the University of Melbourne Archives

Above: A sample of smaller items including a calendar clock from the D. & W. Murray Ltd. collection, wax figurine of E.H.C. Oliphant, tank model and spirit bubbles from the L. J. Hartnett collection and Henry Jones (IXL) jam tin celebrating the opening of the converted Jam Factory shopping centre, South Yarra.

Below: A seal press from the Kauri Timber Company collection. (Photos: the Author.)

to declare an object to be of archival significance, and in desultory fashion the National Archives acquired material which in some way could be linked to records, for example the drum and marbles used to select birthdates when national service was in force during the 1960s and early 1970s and even an outside-broadcast van to match its ABC audio visual records! The concept has not been a great success however; and earlier this year the Law Reform

Commission recommended the section be dropped.

Another approach to coping with the array of materials which document a life, a subject or an institution's history has been simply to ignore traditional boundaries of libraries, archives, museums, art galleries and film and sound archives altogether. Thus one institutional type will be used, but all kinds of material collected. The Grainger

Museum is a perfect local illustration, the US presidential libraries being a good international one. The safer and perhaps more honest alternative is to employ a neutral term embracing them all (and more): hence the Australian War Memorial, the John Curtin Centre. Either way, being multi-functional and multi-disciplinary works best above a certain size. The title of a favourite article from the professional literature says it all: "What do I do with the Rowing Oar?; the role of memorabilia in school archives".⁵



How then do we account for the majority of the University of Melbourne Archives' collection of objects? A mixture of prudence and helpfulness in dealing with organisations and individuals is one factor, given that life doesn't always conform to the neat categories of archivists. An office clean out before a move or following a company takeover, a union amalgamation or someone's death can leave the archivist little time to survey and select. Along with station journals, files of correspondence and photographs, the bequest of a property can equally bring a well intentioned individualistic idea of "historic memorabilia". There are occasions when it is easier on everyone to rescue or accept the important records and what remains of a study, foyer or trunk. Where the collection itself resulted from collecting, the variety and complications multiply. The great collectors of Australiana and Pacificana challenge the librarians and archivists of the National and Mitchell Libraries with their carved, emu eggs, pieces of scrimshaw, and sextants.⁶ The University Archives has its E. J. Semmens collection of Creswickiana complete with currency tokens and cigarette cases.

Undoubtedly however, the desire to obtain items suitable for exhibitions explains the majority of items which have found their way into the University Archives. Archivists know it is exhibitions of visually arresting material

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which catch the eye, which can grace the covers of a “treasures” coffee table book or a corporate Christmas card, support education programs, enliven hundreds of pages of text or a web site, be linked to virtual cabinets of curiosities.⁷

So together with photographs, illuminated addresses, trade union banners and honour boards a myriad of other objects comprise the archivist’s public programs arsenal. Just as the Mitchell Library treasures the desk Patrick White wrote at and the John Curtin Centre has the war time equivalent from the Lodge, so the bureaucratic context of the record has long been a special University of Melbourne Archives objective. The Archives has long hoped to be able to recreate spaces such as the office of a historic Melbourne business house and an eminent scholar’s study. It explains much of the furniture, the clocks, the phones and paper processing equipment; it explains the pipe from Sir Joseph Burke’s study, the pharmaceutical jars from Oggs, the graticules from Professor Ernest Hartung.



Whether historical record or archival adjunct for display, objects in the University of Melbourne Archives best justify themselves through scholarly and educational use. On further acquaintance with my inherited Blake and Riggall bookcase, it was reassuring to see, among row on row of publications compiled wholly or in part from the Archives’ collections, that a good number included illustrations — reproductions of photos, banners and artworks. I look forward to a time when some of our objects too come to the fore as historical evidence in their own right. ◆

Michael Piggott joined the University of Melbourne Library as University Archivist and Head of Special Collections in September this year. This is his first contribution to *The University of Melbourne Library Journal*.

NOTES

1. See www.archivenet.gov.au/asa/ASA.html
2. For photos and a discussion of the use of objects in record keeping, see M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066–1307*. 2nd edition, Oxford, Blackwell, 1993.
3. For two recent instances of archival legal objects, see “A Unabomber’s Cabin is His Castle”, *Australian Magazine*. 21–22 November 1998, p. 49 and “President’s Brain is Missing”, *The Age*, 21 November 1998, p.6.
4. Suzanne Fairbanks, “Eight Hour Day Tradition and the University of Melbourne Archives”, *The University of Melbourne Library Journal*. vol. 3 no. 1, June 1997, pp. 17–20.
5. Anne Cooke, in *Archives and Manuscripts*. vol. 19, no. 1, May 1991, pp. 57–62.
6. For example, see for illustrations and discussion of objects collected by Rex Nan Kivell the exhibition catalogue *Paradise Possessed*, Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1998. There is an extensive literature on collectors, including the ground breaking Australian study by Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: the Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996. See particularly chapter 2 on the Victorian collector of objects and compiler of scrapbooks and diaries, R. E. Johns.
7. An early use of objects by the University Archives and the Grainger Museum was for an exhibition in the University Gallery in February–April 1978. See *Objects, Documents and Pictures to Reflect Upon*, the University of Melbourne, 1978. See also the Archives of Australia website at www.archivenet.gov.au. Perhaps feeling the competition from the site host, the Australian Cultural Network, the creators of the archives site use images of “Aussie icon” objects rather than of historical records to encourage visitors to look further.