

Archiving for Beginners: Advice and top tips

A quick reference guide from Kathleen Stringer | July 2021

Those who attended the Networking for the Environment hui #13 – Stories to celebrate (29th June 2021) will now be aware of how important it is to look after the history of their organisation – the written and published documents as well as any objects. **This is a brief guide to help people make a start on preserving their valuable archives.**

Steps and advice to follow

- The first step is to gather all of the material together. Contact past members to see if they have documents, photos etc. If required, offer to copy any items they may want to keep. Tūranaga, the Christchurch Central Library, is interested in obtaining scans of interesting documents.

Appraisal of archival material

- Decide what needs to be kept (you can't keep everything!). Certain things need to be kept – minutes, annual reports, submissions to Councils and Government etc., correspondence that you wrote or was written specifically to you (not flyers, newsletters from other groups etc.), annual balance sheets, scrapbooks, and photographs (other items you may want to keep for a few years are operational records, for example, receipts for audit purposes etc. They are separate).

Note it doesn't matter what format these archives are in, they may be on paper or they may be stored on a computer or digitally on a pen drive etc.

- What you are trying to do is keep a permanent record of your activities and people for future members as well as researchers.
- You may want to be super organised and list what you have; a simple label on a box will be ok, for example, minute books.
- While you are going through this 'keepable' material, try and provide as much information as you can, to help people of the future, or those not connected to your group understand that you have it and why. You might want to include full names, dates, location, activity – anything that adds to your story and the significance of the item.

Remember, an undated, unnamed photograph runs the risk of being thrown out by someone in the future, even if it is very significant).

- Notes should be made in soft (6B) pencil on the back of the photo or on a piece of paper and the photo and note placed in a white envelope.

Top tips!

- Pencil can be erased, lasts longer than an ink pen and won't run if it gets wet!
- Top tip! Don't be tempted to write or put a biro x on the front of photographs!
- Top tip! Do not post-it notes, pins or paper clips to attach notes. If an item is damaged do not sellotape or glue items back together, just put the pieces in a white envelope. You could scan or photocopy it as one item.
- This process is called arrangement and description.

Storing your archival material

- Now that you have your collection sorted, you need to store it. Grants are available for conservation supplies, but you can get away with slightly cheaper options while you look for a permanent location for the collection.
- As a rule the whiter the paper the better the properties for storage. White folders (not manilla), archive boxes from warehouse stationery type stores will suffice.
- For those who have access to funding, businesses such as **Conservation Supplies** www.conservationsupplies.co.nz or **Port Nicholson Packaging** www.pnp.co.nz are good to ask for information and you can buy as few or as many items as you need. Posting is expensive, so try and work with other groups to buy in bulk!

What to do with the boxed collection?

- Archives in storage require a constant temperature, not too hot, cold, damp or dry.
- A back room or a cupboard in a meeting room that is only used once a month may suffice for short term storage. As a rule, cooler is better. It's not the actual temperature that affects items, it's the variation. Paper, wood, fabric, anything made of a living thing, will expand and contract as the temperature rises and falls. With enough movement, the fibers will break and the item will tear or cockle (go wiggly). Changes in the humidity (the wetness or dryness of the air) may encourage mould or the paper to become brittle.
- Some items are more susceptible to damage than others. Video, coloured images (especially from the 1960s) and paper from the 1930s – 40s (Depression and War, when paper was in short supply and lower quality paper was used) really do need to be put in a constant environment.

A question to ask your Committee is **“do WE want to take on the responsibility of looking after these records?”**

- Maybe you are planning on a jubilee and will be referring to the archives soon. Perhaps, however, you won't be needing them in the foreseeable future. In that case you may consider donating them to an Archive. In an archive, you will know they are being looked after, you can access them (in the archive) when you want, others can access the records for research (you can place restrictions on the material, so if there is something you don't want all and sundry to read, you can say “restricted for a period of ...years”).
- Sounds great, you say! However, you should bear in mind that by donating the records, they cease to be 'yours'; they will belong to the Archive.
- Copyright for images or a byline to be used with the material (in studies or publications) can be retained by your group.

Currently, finding places that will accept your type of records in Canterbury is exceedingly difficult. However, Kathleen Stringer has managed to encourage Lincoln University to accept your environmental group's records.

So there it is, Archiving for Beginners! Easy, isn't it?

Final top tips!

- Stay clear of plastic bags and boxes. This material doesn't breathe and will encourage mould.
- The best photo albums are the old-fashioned black-paged ones with photo corners. The worst, are the 1970's ones with sticky pages and a plastic film over them; these are wrong in so many ways! REMOVE THE PHOTOS IMMEDIATELY!
- Never laminate important material, it becomes opaque, hard and brittle over the years, so your land deed etc. will eventually be a crumbled piece of dark plastic, with the contents invisible.
- Metal, as you know, rusts, so if you have pins, paperclips, binders holding your archives together, remove them! Good old twine or string is a much better alternative, or acid free folders.
- When scanning, do not throw out the original, no matter how poor a condition it is!
- Depending on what you want the scan for, you can scan at various resolutions. For publications, you are looking at between 600 – 1400 dpi. The trouble with technology, is that it is always changing, so whatever resolution you scan it at, it will soon be too small. TIFF file formats are larger, but preferred (they do not compress the image). However PDF, or even better PDFa, is the current format of choice.

- Talking of technology, remember to upgrade software and backup your files often!
- Programmes change, technology changes. Try to use generic programmes, rather than fancy ones, as these don't tend to age as much. I'm thinking of Microsoft Word, Excel etc., they may need upgrading, but not so much as you can't read the old files.
- Look at how you store the digital data. Is it on a video, DVD, CD, cassette? Many businesses these days offer services to transfer your old formats onto newer formats.
- Many people store material on the cloud, or on their computer; always have a second backup, as accidents happen!
- Finally, think of the researchers and future team/organisation members, not ten years hence, but 100 years or even longer. What you keep and how you keep your records today will be how your society and our community will be viewed by history.

**Kathleen is happy to answer questions, you can email her at
kathleen.stringer@xtra.co.nz**

If you want assistance, grants are available to pay for Kathleen to undertake any of the above processes (appraisal is often the hardest for people to grapple with).