Creating Collaboration: Accessing the Archive

Georgina Green and Margaret Makepeace

Abstract: Green and Makepeace adopt a biographical approach to explore the myriad ways in which researchers based outside HEIs engage with and use archives. They begin with Green’s experience as an ‘amateur’ local historian whose research projects exploit local archives. Second, it explores the work of Margaret Makepeace, lead curator for the EIC records at the British Library and a published academic historian who researches family and local history as a hobby. Examination of their engagement with archives and libraries illuminates the often hidden support systems that shape research and a range of ‘access issues’ that need to be addressed if co-production in historical research is to flourish.

Keywords: access; archive cataloguing; British Library; East India Company; local history

Run by national institutions, local authorities, universities, libraries, museums, businesses, charities and private and specialist bodies, approximately 2,000 archive services are currently in operation across the UK.1 As well as manuscripts and printed papers, archives care for photographs, maps and plans, art works, sound recordings, moving images and, increasingly, digital records. The collections that make up archives have been consciously selected for preservation either because of their importance to an organisation or because they have wider historical significance. They are ‘our public and corporate memory, a fragile and often beautiful legacy from the past to the future, which it is our duty and our privilege to protect and enhance for the generations to come’.2 Despite this important duty, local, county and even national archives have seen their funding severely cut in recent years. The government has reduced its funding to major London institutions, such as The National Archives and the British Library, which hold important public records. In consequence, since March 2010 The National Archives has closed on Mondays, opening only five days a week instead of six. Similarly, in 2011 reduced funding forced the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) to cut its opening hours to four weekdays plus one Saturday a month.

The challenge of working with increasingly limited resources comes at a time when the demand for archive services remains buoyant. The practice of family history has undergone a staggering transformation since the 1990s and the emergence of a booming interest in genealogical studies has significantly boosted the demand to consult original documents. At the same time, local, county and national archives are also called upon by local historians keen to reveal the hidden histories of their local areas. New researchers are regularly travelling to repositories to carry out sophisticated research projects. While Keith Sweetmore and Helen Clifford’s chapter considers how and why archives were established in the UK, this chapter looks more deeply into who uses archives and how they use them. It considers the broader range of sources with which local and family historians interact in order to complete research, and the approaches different researchers might take when faced with unravelling a particular research problem. It does so by focusing on two researchers whose careers and interests have journeyed along very different trajectories. This chapter first looks to Georgina Green’s experience in researching the life of Sir Charles Raymond (1713–1788). As an amateur local historian with 30 years of experience, her investigations cover far more than just archives. It then focuses on the work and research experiences

doi: 10.1057/9781137480507.0009