

DIGITISATION: THE WAY FORWARD



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Working title: Making the most of the archives
Leader Theme: Exploiting digital technology

This project followed Cowbridge History Societies' journey to find
a suitable online platform to host their collection of archives



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WORKING TITLE: MAKING THE MOST OF THE ARCHIVES

LEADER THEME:

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This project has received support from Creative Rural Communities (CRC); the Vale of Glamorgan Council's Rural Regeneration Initiative. In short, we run loads of great projects supporting creativity and enterprise in the rural Vale of Glamorgan.

This project has also received funding from the Vale of Glamorgan Council and through the Rural Development Plan for Wales 2014-2020 which is funded by the Welsh Government and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. This part of the fund is known as 'LEADER'.

The LEADER approach to regeneration remains at the core of the day to day work at Creative Rural Communities. LEADER is a French acronym (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale) meaning 'links between actions for the development of the rural economy'. It is a method of harnessing local knowledge to enable a "bottom up" community led approach to rural development and is a Europe-wide programme. There are seven key principles of LEADER:



LEADER projects should aim to pilot new solutions to an existing challenge, be innovative and collaborative, be proactive in the evaluation and sharing of the lessons learnt, and recognise that not everything will succeed.

Please be aware that any information relating to funding, including this report, may be shared widely and published on the Vale of Glamorgan Council's, Government and European websites. CRC will only use personal data in compliance with the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

To find out more about Creative Rural Communities, please visit:

www.creativeruralcommunities.co.uk

BACKGROUND

As at January 2018 Cowbridge History Societies digital archive was based on a windows computer and structured using the windows file system. It consisted of 15.6 GB of data files made up of 26 folders and 275 subfolders containing 5044 photo files (JPEG), 2109 PDFs (some text-searchable) and 813 Doc /Docx files (all text-searchable). The size of the archive is expected to double in the next few years.

Digital files are arranged in a folder structure which reflects the tried and tested ring binder collection of hard copy records in the Cowbridge local history room. This is a rough classification scheme suitable for initial browsing by a researcher. A separate Excel spreadsheet provides for the recording of information (metadata) about each file. Within the archive all the types of files are treated in the same way, simply as accessions, and each has a unique accession number at the start of the file name.

Searching for information

The digital archive can be readily browsed for finding images of interest. However, more detailed searching, for example for a family name, requires text searching. In the Windows based system it is possible to search for text in file names but results are limited by the small amount of information possible in a file name.

Secondly, it is possible to search in the metadata file – but we have not adopted a ‘keyword’ approach (the file contains information about donors and digitisation technicalities, but in practice not much more). A keyword approach was not adopted because of the effort required to ensure completeness and accuracy. It should also be noted that there is no automatic means of displaying metadata for a selected item.

Thirdly, Windows File Explorer has the facility to search for text inside several types of document file – in our case Doc, Docx and certain PDF files. This is an essential component of the system. File Explorer can automatically maintain an index of the contents of all text files in the archive. A search quickly produces a list of the files that contain the text being searched for – it is then up to the researcher to open a file that might be of interest and then, if necessary, do a further search within the file reader application.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Project Objectives

The Cowbridge History Society (CHS) wishes to make its present Windows-based archive more widely accessible to researchers by use of the internet, and hence would like to implement a web-based facility similar in function to the PC-based system in use at present.

The primary objective of the project is to create an on-line archive could be accessible as part of, or as a link from, the existing CHS website <http://www.cowbridgehistorysociety.org>

The requirements were as follows:

- There should be a similar data structure and similar search facilities as on the Windows based system, including the ability to search for text within file content and in metadata. Searching for text in file names would not be necessary if the text is also in the metadata.
- The ability to display metadata alongside selected items.
- A facility for users to obtain copies of items and possibly pay for them via the website.
- Appropriate controls, particularly with respect to copyright, over downloading by users.

Many further points were also to be investigated such as

- Whether the web-based archive is to be a subset of the present one.
- On-going annual costs.
- Management of the on-line archive – such as the addition of new items, adding ‘folders’, and the skills required (e.g. generally computer literate volunteers)
- How they would protect their investment.

The Process

Understanding other history societies platforms

CHS began with searches through Google and via other means to identify other societies and organizations that are facing or have faced similar "access" challenges to our own.

They also examined the work of commercial organisations who offer to set up and manage history society websites that contain archives.

Choosing a platform

The group concluded that progress would probably be best via a dedicated website or as part of our existing one. Having examined many websites of societies like theirs it became clear that this was the default method.

People we engaged

A number of people were engaged along the way to determine appropriateness of sites and to establish whether they could meet user requirements:

- Rhondda Cynon Taff Library Service – face to face meeting (CRC officer)
- Community Sites – email and telephone exchange (CHS members)
- People’s Communities Wales – face to face meetings (CHS members)
- Other history societies - follow up contacts via websites and phone calls (CRC and CHS)

People’s Collection Wales is a Welsh Government sponsored site for the public to upload photographs, recordings and documents that hold stories about Wales and its people. They can also offer support and training for those interested in digitising large collections and community projects.

Events

An event was proposed, inviting local history societies from across the Vale. Initial contact was made with societies in:

- Rhoose and District
- Llantwit Major
- Bonvilston Reading Rooms
- Llancarfan
- St Hilary

The purpose of this was to share the learning taking place with other history societies. Despite initial interest from groups when an attempt was made to set up a meet there were no responses to the event. As such it was cancelled.

Subject Research

Suitability of Systems for text and PDF based searching

Cowbridge History Society wish to make their digital archive available on the web for research. The archive contains many PDF and DOC/DOCX files and our desktop system depends on Windows Explorer Search (which can search the text within these file types). Although they record some metadata in a spreadsheet, keywords or tags are not used, just folders/subfolders for initial browsing.

The CHS digitisation group looked at websites of other similar organisations and sought advice from those that seemed to match their aspirations. However, many of the sites found seemed to concentrate on images but not text-based items. The ability to search text files remained a key requirement of the group.

Online archives

The Group investigated the range of different options available. As it was apparent that the group were quite advanced as a history society in terms of the recording of their information, it was difficult to find many examples of other history societies of a similar scale who had the same technical requirements and desires. A variety of options were considered:

Platform	Cost	Users	Suitability	links
Flickr	Free (up to certain storage)	Newcastle Library	Does not meet requirements	https://www.flickr.com/
The People's Collection	Free	Port Talbot History society	Could meet requirements	https://www.peoplescollection.wales/
iBase	£4,950	Rhondda Taff Libraries service	Cost possibly prohibitive	http://archive.rhondda-cynon-taf.gov.uk/
Community Sites	Dependent	Chipping Camden and District	Cost and ongoing requirements	http://www.chippingcampdenhistory.org.uk/ https://www.communitysites.co.uk/
Towns Web Archiving	Dependent on volume of material	Isle of Man History = Manx national heritage	Digitisation for web optimisation inc. metadata	http://townswebarchiving.com
Past View	Minimum £20,000	Herefordshire History Royal Photographic Society	Can meet user requirements	www.past-view.com

Copyright and security

The group had concerns about the ability to download/ reproduce from certain websites and wished to maintain a level of protection over their records. As such, systems were looked at which provided the

security to prevent this happening. Many of the more established systems which were investigated did have this level of functionality.

Project Challenges

Appropriateness of other collections

The history society were quite advanced in terms of both their data storage and their aspirations for how they wished the data to be accessed. This is a wonderful aspect for such a small core society of volunteers, however it created challenges around finding best practice from elsewhere which would meet technical requirements whilst not proving prohibitive through cost.

Cost

Some of the best solutions on the market were extremely costly, requiring high purchase fees and ongoing maintenance fees. It would be difficult for such levels of capital to be raised by the group and commitment to ongoing annual fees would also be difficult.

PROJECT RESULTS

The Outcomes

Due to the support available from the People's Collection Wales and the robustness of the organisation, the fact it is a free resource and the ability to meet the technical requirements of the group, this has become the chosen platform for the history society to upload their files.

As of October 2019, the history society had uploaded over 5,000 documents to the site. They aim to replicate most of their windows-based system on People's Collection Wales.

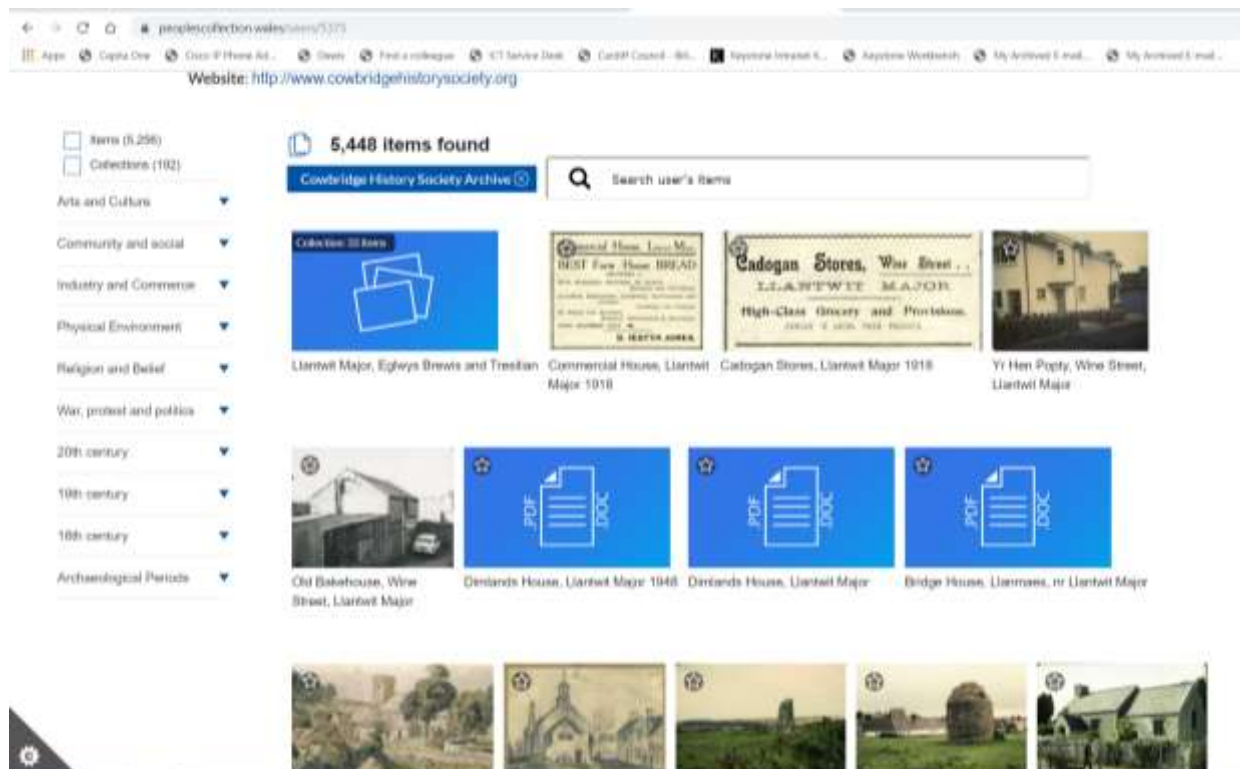


Figure 1: Cowbridge History Society page on People's Collection Wales

Project Lessons Learnt

Variations in ability and scope of history societies

The project highlighted how varied the size and scope of history societies are around the Vale and elsewhere. Having support to guide history societies in the collection and storage of data could be very beneficial.

Viability of systems

A variety of different options were looked at for presenting archives online and during the length of the project, changes had already been made to some systems. For example, Newcastle's use of Flickr as a resource to upload pictures had already changed as Flickr introduced charging for storage over a certain amount. This highlighted the vulnerability of some systems, which can make it difficult for community groups who wish to make their information accessible to the public but do not have the resources to commission and maintain a standalone system. It is hoped that due to the national support for the People's Collection Wales, this resource will remain as it is free, whilst meeting all the requirements and allowing anyone to view, search for and follow groups or societies who use it as a resource.

Dissemination

As there was little support for a meet with all the history societies as originally envisaged, dissemination of project results will take place through:

- Uploading the project report to the website
- Sharing the project findings on Wales Rural Network
- Emailing this report to the other history societies in the Vale.

Next Steps

The project has achieved its outcome of finding a suitable platform to host all the materials collated over time. The group are to continue uploading their resources to the People's Collection Wales.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Project website

Website of History Society: www.cowbridgehistorysociety.org

Digital Archive Collection: <https://www.peoplescollection.wales/users/5375>

Useful Contacts

Creative Rural Communities

Email: create@valeofglamorgan.gov.uk

Website: www.creativeruralcommunities.co.uk

Tel: 01446 704868

Cowbridge History Society

Email: cowbridgehistsoc@gmail.com

Website: www.cowbridgehistorysociety.org

Thanks to

Thank you to Cowbridge History Society for the extensive work undertaken to digitize their archives.

Thank you to the work from People's Collection Wales in supporting Cowbridge History Society to meet their requirements.

And to others who contributed:

- Rhondda Cynon Taff libraries service
- Community Sites representative

APPENDIX A

Final project expenditure

Cost Description (as per Project Funding Letter)	Total Approved (As per funding letter)	Total Final Expenditure
Research costs	£ 1000	£ 0
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	£ 1000	£ 0

