

MORGANNWG 2009

News from Glamorgan Archives

Building News

At the end of December 2009 Glamorgan Record Office ceased to operate from the Glamorgan Building in Cardiff's civic centre, bringing to a close 70 years' association with the building. To mark the significance of the event the service has been rebranded Glamorgan Archives. Contact details for the new building are:

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Web site remains the same, www.glamro.gov.uk

After all the delays in the early stages of the programme I am pleased to report that the building was delivered ahead of schedule. The move of the Collection was also ahead of target with all documents decanted from the three sites before the end of the year. The success of the decant project is a tribute to the value of careful forward planning and to the hard work of so many members of staff who assigned reference codes, made boxes, applied bar codes and size labels and generally performed a boring but essential task with cheerful dedication.

The new building has 18,000 shelves in the four storey repository block which will house the 8k Collection, plant and server rooms, multi-media repository, box-making room and a large document reception area with separate cleaning and isolation rooms. The 4 storey block is covered in full-height terracotta panels, providing a visual dramatic indication of the Collection's size. The panels are the largest ever made by the manufacturer and required specialist lifting equipment to lift them into position.

The building is really two linked zones with different construction methods and intended functions. The main four storey repository is constructed of a reinforced concrete primary frame with concrete floors 450mm thick and a concrete ceiling slab at the top providing a highly robust structure. Perimeter walls to the repository are in blockwork or in discrete concrete shear walls, both of which provide the structure with a high thermal mass. This provides consistency with the building services design philosophy, assisting in maintaining the environmental conditions of the repository within agreed

tolerances to meet BS5454, the British Standard recommendations for the storage and exhibition of archival documents. Encircling each strongroom are corridors intended to mediate variations in external temperature and humidity on the thermos principle. Even so, sufficient plant has been included to air-condition, dehumidify and even humidify the entire block. Entry points to the strongrooms have a lobby, reducing the amount of air exchange when the door is open. Each strongroom has a minimum fire resistance of 4 hours and an Argonite gas system for fire suppression has been fitted into one section of the ground floor buffer zone.

The two storey office area which fronts the “treasure chest” is a composite steel frame with concrete floor slabs providing column-free open spaces. Every effort has been made to reduce noise transference while maintaining a feeling of space and openness. Most of the office space, including the conservation studio, is visible from the entrance. Glazed panels separate areas devoted to particular functions, searchroom, conservation, work room and the modular offices on the first floor, and the general impression is of openness and transparency.

The entrance is designed to be a welcoming space which can be used without formal registration. People can access computers here or use the vending machines and comfy chairs. A project to digitise finding aids to the Collection is progressing so that documents can be ordered electronically and hand lists consulted before entering the searchroom. Registration is only required to access original documents in the searchroom, clearly visible from the entrance. Opposite the searchroom is a large room divisible by an acoustic screen, and intended for group use. Behind it sit a small servery to enable catering and a store room for chairs and tables.

On the first floor is a reprographics room for digitisation and printing and the conservation studio. The Studio houses a massive wall board, three metres high by four metres wide, on which large documents, particularly plans, can be effectively repaired. The board is a huge vertical light box, back lit to provide a diffused broad spectrum white light over the entire working surface, and is the largest single sheet board of this type in the UK, at least. It had to be fitted into the building at a very early stage, through the front wall, and spent most of the year padded and contained in a plywood box. Fortunately it survived the process intact. Adjoining the Studio is a workroom while a large open plan office is visible across the atrium with modular offices attached.

This area was designated for staff use but as the building has moved from planning to reality it has become clear that public activities could take place anywhere in the office area. In keeping with the Office’s core values (Accessible, Skilled, Inclusive, Flexible, Innovative) service delivery has been reconfigured to maximise the opportunities offered by the new space.

As a first step all rooms with the potential for multi-purpose use have been given non-functional names. What appeared on the plans as *searchroom*, *group room*, *staff room* and so on have been assigned the names of the rivers which run through our locality. Furniture is as flexible as possible with a

preference for folding tables over rigid desks and no differentiation between furniture used by staff and that intended for public use. Designated staff desks have been abandoned in favour of mobile units which can be personalised and will accommodate laptop computers. For staff this is not such a change as they have been working in teams and sharing desks for some years in the previous building despite difficulties caused by the layout and lack of space.

The first year of occupation, 2010 is our launch year. Glamorgan Archives is open for events, activities, meetings and groups of any kind; many are already booked in and all enquiries will be welcomed.

Outreach and Education

Although the new building has absorbed the bulk of staff resources this year other aspects of the service have not been neglected. In March the Office received a Most Valued Partner award from Careers Wales Cardiff and Vale. The award was in recognition of the success of the Office's teacher familiarisation days, citing its 'continued support of both primary and secondary teacher placements and encouraging follow up support, project activities and class visits'. Higher education students were not neglected. A new partnership was forged with the Architectural Subject Librarian at Cardiff University to participate in source review sessions for undergraduate students. As a result many used original documents in the searchroom to inform their investigation into urban conditions. This will be a continuing partnership.

The Office is a partner in a major national project for the National Archives (TNA) entitled *Living the Poor Life*. TNA staff have selected a number of Poor Law Unions around the UK, including Cardiff Union, and have digitised several volumes of correspondence, 1834 – 1871, for groups of volunteers to catalogue. Local survival of records for Cardiff Union is poor and those held at TNA are poorly listed and massively underused. The project's result will be a searchable catalogue and scanned images of the Cardiff Poor Law correspondence available on TNA's website. The project is managed by TNA staff and facilitated locally by the Record Office. The Cardiff Poor Law Union covered a huge geographical area. It consisted of 45 parishes in Glamorgan and two in Monmouthshire, extending westward into the Vale and north to Eglwysilan, Llantrisant, and Llantwit Fardre. The volumes of correspondence are an excellent resource for poverty, education, health, labour and employment and provide detailed information on hundreds of individuals who fell into the system.

Another national partnership was with the Parliamentary Archives in a major project to demonstrate the impact of the Westminster government on selected localities. Glamorgan is one of five local repositories (and the only one in Wales) invited to contribute. An launch exhibition, 'People and Parliament: Connecting with Communities' was held in the Palace of Westminster in July 2009 with traveling exhibitions expanding the themes planned for the next year. The Glamorgan exhibition will be at the end of the sequence but will form part of our long launch. For the London exhibition two letters from the

Agent to the Glamorgan Estate of Lord Bute were loaned to complement the item on display from the Parliamentary Archives, plans for the Bute Ship Canal, later the West Bute Dock, completed in 1839.

Also in the summer, and as a result of a recommendation from the Welsh Screen Commission the pilot for a full length feature film provisionally entitled 'Four Working Days' was filmed in one of our strongrooms. Filming took place after the public had left. A team 'dressed' the set, arranging lighting, sound and cameras using the searchroom as the green room. The director and actors were delighted with the site, creating a menacing atmosphere in a scene involving missing documents and a murderer stalking a records assistant.

All the activities described above will be developed at the new site which will be better able to accommodate multiple use. Services to individual members of the public will not be neglected and I hope all readers will take an early opportunity to visit our new premises and enjoy the facilities on offer.

Susan Edwards
Glamorgan Archivist

