

Progress Report

Past Caring Project Advisory Board Meeting, 11 April 2017

Introduction

We are now entering Month 7 of the 24-month Past Caring project to catalogue and conserve the health care and poor law records of York. The Project Archivist will soon start work cataloguing the records in Work Package 2, while the Project Conservator, who started on 28 March, will repair and package the records in Work Package 1 over the next year.

1. Cataloguing and conservation

1.1 Cataloguing progress

We are now coming to the end of the cataloguing work on the Poor Law Union records that make up Work Package 1. The Project Archivist, with the help of the volunteers, has sorted this material, catalogued it into Excel spreadsheets, created authority files for the various committees and sub-organisations (see attached example), and numbered the material. These records are now ready to hand over to the Project Conservator who will begin with a conservation survey of the collection.

Over the next two weeks the data in these Excel spreadsheets will be imported into CALM (our collections management system) as closed records, meaning the public will not be able to access them, although staff will be able to view the records if necessary. By the end of this importation process there will be over 2600 new descriptions in CALM relating to the York Poor Law Union.

The release date for the Poor Law archives has yet to be determined and will depend largely on the progress of the conservation of these records; however we are currently looking at March 2018 as a potential launch date. There is also the option of delaying the release of this material until the end of the project. We would welcome the Board members' views on whether a staggered release date for the catalogued material would be preferable to releasing the collections together at the end of the project.

1.2 Subject indexing

The UK archival thesaurus (UKAT) has been imported into CALM and indexing of the York Poor Law Union will use this as the main thesaurus. We had originally planned also to use MeSH, the Medical Subjects Headings thesaurus, particularly for the last three work packages. However, we are not able to import this thesaurus in-house, and Axiell (who provide our cataloguing software) have quoted £3000 to do this. As this is an expense that has not been catered for in the budget we have decided to:

- delay making a decision until after Work Packages 2 and 3 have been surveyed. It may be the case that UKAT will provide sufficient breadth and specificity for subject indexing these records
- in the case that we decide MeSH would aid resource discovery, we have the option of applying to Wellcome for an extension grant.

2. Volunteers and student placement

2.1 Project Volunteers

Four volunteers were recruited in January 2017 to help with listing property records, legal cases, government orders, rate books and staffing records in the Poor Law archive. Over an eight-week period they put in a total of 72 hours and created over 750 item-level descriptions. Their contribution has meant that we have catalogued some records to a level of detail not originally anticipated. All volunteers were eager to volunteer again for Work Package 2.

2.2 The National Archives (TNA) correspondence volunteers

Two volunteers were recruited in November 2016 to carry out research for the joint York Explore-National Archives Correspondence Project. Their task was to discover how, and to what extent, the York Poor Law records work in tandem with the pauper correspondence held at The National Archives to reveal agency in the lives of paupers.

Over the course of 11 weeks the volunteers put in 55 hours of work, searched 77 volumes, and scanned 194 images. The results of their work have been collated and will now be handed over to Paul Carter from The National Archives for use in a grant application to develop the project further.

2.3 University of York Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past (IPUP) placement

In January we were joined by a history master's student enrolled in the work placement module of the Institute for Public Understanding of the Past programme. The placement lasted for nine weeks and during that time the student used the poor law records to research the lives of four individuals. She then developed this research into four life narratives, and created a web resource designed to engage a wide-range of audiences with the content of the Poor Law records (see attached sample narrative). In addition, the student will be writing a blog about her experience here and will write a reflective essay for her major piece of assessment.

3. Promotion and outreach

3.1 Social media

Our dedicated project Twitter account @pastcaringyork is doing well, and is attracting a range of followers including institutions, academics, students and local historians. Currently we have:

- 175 followers
- retweets vary depending on time and content, however the average tweet attracts between 3-7 retweets and a similar number of likes
- the average number of impressions per tweet is 1000-1300, which essentially means the number of times a tweet is delivered to a Twitter stream. Our average number of impressions per month is 11000-12000.
- the average number of engagements is 50-60, which means that a user has interacted with a tweet by clicking, retweets, replies, follows etc.

The supplementary project blog is attracting approximately 80-100 views per post. Visitors do tend to click around the site to look at our static information pages, which includes an introduction to the Past Caring Project.

3.2 Talks

The Project Archivist delivered a Mint Yard lecture on 13 December 2016 at York Explore. This talk was well-attended and provided an introduction to the project and the poor law records.

Laura Yeoman, the Access and Engagement archivist gave the same talk to the Yorkshire Group of Family History Societies at their AGM on 25 February 2017.

3.3 Legacy resources

The Project Archivist has developed resources that will help researchers and staff to use the collection effectively. These include: information sheets providing a brief history of the York Union, a glossary of terms, an organisational structure of the Union, a list of parishes (including those in the West, North and East Ridings), and where to find information if you are interested in researching children, staff, medical care, welfare recipients, and the workhouse.

The web resource developed by our Institute for Public Understanding of the Past master's student will be placed online to provide an introduction to the records and to show, both staff and researchers, how the records can be used to explore the lives of individuals as well as broader themes. The resource will also highlight the pros and cons of using any given series of records.

4. Looking ahead

4.1 Cataloguing

In mid-April, as per the project schedule, the Project Archivist will move on to Work Package 2 – the Medical Officer of Health records – which comprises approximately 150 boxes of unsorted material. We have decided on one minor change to the project schedule in relation to these records: the Project Archivist will now survey this collection in conjunction with the records in Work Package 3 – the Department of Health and the Department of Environmental Health and Housing. This will provide an important, initial overview of the functions and relationships between these various bodies and will aid the cataloguing process. Following this survey, the cataloguing will focus on Work Package 2 before moving on to Work Package 3 again.

4.2 Volunteers

The project volunteers have expressed an interest in volunteering again, so we will be harnessing this experience and offering further roles when the records in Work Package 2 are ready. We will also be recruiting new volunteers to list material.

Later this year our Project Conservator will develop a new volunteer role centred on packaging, cleaning and numbering the archives of Work Package 2. This will be a new volunteer experience for York Explore Archives as they have never had an onsite conservator. We expect the role will attract a broader range of volunteers including those interested in acquiring skills associated with conservation, and those who would prefer not to work with computers.

York University would like to send another master's student for their Institute for Public Understanding of the Past placement, and we are looking at the possibility that the student could work on Work Package 2 of the Past Caring Project.

4.3 Promotion and outreach

4.3.1 Talks and conferences

On 22 April 2017 the Project Archivist will attend a conference on The New Poor Law held at Winchester University. A conference postcard introducing the project will be distributed at this event.

At present, the following talks have been scheduled:

- the Project Archivist will be presenting to the De Partu History of Midwifery and Childbirth Research Group, who are having their AGM at York Explore on 27 May 2017. This will be a new talk introducing both the Poor Law records and the Medical Officer of Health records. There will also be a small exhibition of archives for the group
- the Project Archivist will deliver a talk to the Clements Hall Local History Group on 26 Jan 2018
- the Project Archivist and Project Conservator will be delivering a joint session at the Explore York annual staff conference in November 2017. The session will be an ideal opportunity to introduce all of the Explore staff to

both the cataloguing and conservation strands of the project.

4.3.2 Social Media

We hope to attract new audiences to our Twitter account and blog with the introduction of content based on the Medical Officer of Health records, and conservation updates from the Project Conservator.

4.3.3 Workshops

Towards the end of this year we would like to develop workshops based on the Past Caring collections. The sessions could be aimed at students and/or the general public. If any Board members have experience in this area we would be grateful for any advice on what makes a successful workshop and any pitfalls to avoid when delivering sessions.

4.4 Collaboration

4.4.1 Regional poor law hub

The City Archivist is currently working with Paul Carter from The National Archives, Margaret Boustead from the North Yorkshire County Record Office, and James Etherington from Ripon Workhouse to develop a multi-institutional project based on the poor law records held at the North Yorkshire County Record Office. The proposed project is still in its early stages, but would complement the work being carried out on the Past Caring project and create a regional centre for research on the poor law.

4.4.2 The National Archives correspondence project

Our collaboration with The National Archives on the Poor Law correspondence project is ongoing (see 2.2 above) and we hope will result in a formal grant application in the coming months.

4.5 Conservation

Our Project Conservator will be spending her first two weeks familiarising herself with the work environment, collections, and project material. She will also be ordering additional conservation supplies, as well as negotiating collections and collaboration arrangements with the Borthwick Institute. The conservation work on Work Package 1 will start in earnest on 10 April 2017 and will begin with volumes degraded by red rot.

The working week of the Project Conservator will be split between the Borthwick Institute for Archives, where more specialist conservation work will take place, and York Explore, where she will undertake basic preventative conservation and packaging.