

**CATALOGUING LITERARY ARCHIVES:  
From the West Yorkshire Playhouse Archive into the Future  
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**Slide 1 - Introduction**

Hello, I'm Karen Sayers from Special Collections at the University of Leeds

Today I'm going to talk about:

- 1) how we processed and catalogued the West Yorkshire Playhouse archive,
- 2) reflections on the cataloguing process,
- 3) new developments in the way in which Special Collections is processing and cataloguing its collections in future.

**Slide 2 - West Yorkshire Playhouse Archive**

The West Yorkshire Playhouse Collection is a large collection of archives from a local theatre.

The theatre was established in 1970. The Collection also includes some material from the campaign for a playhouse in Leeds which dates from the 1960s.

There are around 100 metres of material. We have received several accruals since the collection first came into Special Collections in 2001 which bring the archives up to 2013.

The Playhouse holds a wide range of events from plays, to education and community outreach work. This means that the Collection comprises a variety of material from paperwork such as administrative files, production and stage management files to programmes and posters. There are also plenty of photographs and a handful of stage sets.

**Slide 3 - Sources of information**

I used several different sources of information to help organise the material. Fortunately the Playhouse provided a brief history of the Playhouse and a list of productions from 1970 to 2008. This gave me an outline of some of the activities underlying the material.

I also needed to get more of an idea of how a theatre worked so my next source was the National Theatre archive catalogue, <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover-more/archive/archive-catalogue> This gave me a good knowledge of the different types of departments and functions found in a theatre. Much of the West Yorkshire material matched series in the National Theatre hierarchy including education, press office, stage management.

However the West Yorkshire Playhouse material did not break down into as many series, partly as it is a smaller organisation. For example, the technical papers in the National Theatre archive are in separate files such as Prop-buying, Sound and Technical Departments.

The West Yorkshire Playhouse technical papers are in clearly labelled Production files so I've kept these intact.

I checked the GLAM Thesaurus and Glossary for help but there weren't many terms referring to theatrical performances [http://glam-archives.org.uk/?page\\_id=1147](http://glam-archives.org.uk/?page_id=1147) I've now contributed some theatrical terms including rehearsal notes and production schedules to help other archivists. If you would like to contribute more please submit them to the GLAM committee.

#### **Slide 4 - Organisation**

When I started to process the archives the greatest challenge was the size and diversity of the collection. It soon became obvious that there were two sub-fonds: 1) The Leeds Playhouse which existed from 1970-1990 and 2) Its successor the West Yorkshire Playhouse from 1990 the present day.

Both functioned as local theatres so the content of each sub-fonds is similar except that the Leeds Playhouse sub-fonds contains material from the initial campaign to build a theatre and the competition to select an architectural company to design a permanent theatre building.

The series in each fonds were decided based on their function or format. The functions were often those used by the National Theatre such as stage management and press office. I also used some based on the format of the material e.g. photograph as it was not clear exactly why some of the photographs had been taken. Obviously many would have been taken for publicity, but there were others e.g. of the ground-breaking for the new theatre building where the reason wasn't immediately evident.

I divided most series into the theatrical seasons running from September to August as this reflected the arrangement of some of the material e.g. the press cuttings and programmes.

#### **Slide 5 - Hierarchy**

The arrangement I ended up with was similar to this with a series heading in this case 'Production Files', and under that a sub-series for the season from September to August, and below that a file with the papers and diagrams for that particular producer.

#### **Slide 6 - Reviewing the processing and cataloguing of the WYP Collection**

Cataloguing and processing the collection took around a year for one full time equivalent archivist with volunteer assistance. This was the bulk of my work.

Most of the material was catalogued to file level with a list of the main types of material to be found in the file. Occasionally I mentioned an item if it was of particular interest e.g. documents relating to a joint production with another theatre such as Birmingham Rep.

A few series were catalogued to item level e.g. programmes, but this was done by a volunteer.

Re-foldering and labelling the archives took up a lot of time. We started to re-package the photographs using volunteer help. This took a lot of time and was proving to be expensive in terms of materials, especially as the photographs were of varying sizes, so we've currently stopped.

### **Slide 7 - Drivers for re-thinking our approach to processing and cataloguing**

As another part of my role I've been carrying out a survey of the uncatalogued and partly catalogued collections in Special Collections. This has uncovered that we have a backlog of at least 12 years of cataloguing.

In April 2013 the University Library undertook a project which focused on Special Collections' accession procedures. Special Collections agreed to endeavour to make 80% of all our new archives available to users within 5 weeks of their arrival in Special Collections.

We recognise that with current staff resources we can't process and catalogue incoming collections or make an impression on our backlog if archivists continue to work on collections in an intensive way. Our approach needs to change if we are to provide timely access to the new collections and address our backlog.

### **Slide 8- Adopting the More Product Less Process Model**

In view of this Special Collections started to look at the More Product Less Process model. This is an approach to processing and cataloguing that was put forward in an organised way in the paper by Greene and Meissner published in 2005  
<http://www.uiowa.edu/~c024120/Readings/Greene-Meissner.pdf>

Greene and Meissner advocate a 'golden minimum' for processing collections. They believe that archivists need to establish the level of processing which is appropriate for individual collections. There is not a one size fits all.

Greene and Meissner outline five levels of processing for collections from minimal to highly intensive which vary according to their research value and use, degree of organisation and packaging, and size. They advocate that the majority of collections are processed to the minimal to medium levels. Most collections will be reasonably accessible to users if catalogued to series level.

The other major proposition Greene and Meissner put forward is that not all items should be re-foldered. If the existing folder is serviceable, use it.

In summary MPLP says that the archivist must exercise his or her judgement to achieve sufficient intellectual and physical control over a collection. This means identifying the most appropriate level of detail for appraising, preserving, arranging and describing a collection,

appropriate to its research value and condition. The archivist must then ensure that each process is carried out to the same level.

### **Slide 9 - Changes in procedures at Leeds**

Leeds is in the early stages of implementing MPLP and establishing an acceptable minimum level of work on collections to make them accessible to our users. The detailed processing that was applied to the West Yorkshire Playhouse is unlikely to be replicated in future. Instead we are defining quality processing as the level which makes a collection usable by our customers.

Firstly the accessioning archivist assesses collections at the point of accession. The archivist evaluates the collection according to several criteria including the intellectual value of the collection, its local value to the University and Yorkshire. He or she considers how complex it will be to catalogue – does it need a lot of re-organisation, are there any handlists available? The archivist records any obvious conservation issues and makes a quick assessment of any legal restrictions.

To help with this a prioritisation tool has been developed and incorporated in our new archive management system EMu. This means that we can combine the different elements in the assessment to produce reports on cataloguing priorities.

Secondly the accessioning archivist creates a brief collection level description which can be used as the basis of a catalogue record, and if it is a small collection, may comprise the record which is made available on our online catalogue.

Team assistants help the archivists with re-folding work and listing particularly on the larger collections

### **Slide 10 - The introduction of MPLP**

The most recent accrual to the WYP collections has been processed using MPLP. The names of the plays have been listed at file level, but not the contents of the files. Team assistants have carried out minimal re-packaging. This accrual of 10 metres has been processed more quickly than previous ones.

We have accessioned the Ken Smith archive using MPLP processes. The collection did not have a box list so team assistants have listed the archives ready for the accessioning archivist to create an over-arching hierarchy. The list created by the assistants should speed up the process of cataloguing for the cataloguing archivist.

We are hoping to avoid re-organising the material physically. Consequently particular emphasis is placed on creating clear records which show what material is in which box to help researchers pinpoint the box they need. We think this should make retrieval easier for front of house staff.

We had to re-package and label the Ken Smith archives as they had no external packaging apart from the boxes they arrived in.

These two examples show how MPLP processes have to be adapted for different collections.

### **Slide 11 - What has the introduction of MPLP meant so far?**

One of the most important aspects of MPLP is changing existing attitudes to cataloguing and processing. Most archivists have a desire to arrange and describe an archive as best they can. It is a challenge to accept that this may not produce the greatest degree of benefit for our users. They can carry out a lot of the research into the collection themselves as long as they are able to locate the papers that are of interest to them.

The accessioning archivist needs to get to know the collection quickly and reasonably well to anticipate potential problems that team assistants may encounter. They need support and guidance in the different approaches being taken to different archives. Special Collections has produced detailed and standardised guidelines for listing collections, but there are always be cases which don't fit the guidelines.

In 2014 we will be monitoring how less intensive packaging and less detailed cataloguing impacts upon our customers – can they find what they need? What is the impact on our front of house staff in particular - can they retrieve the items which the users want easily? When catalogue records for our new accessions go live on our online catalogue next year we will be able to find out whether MPLP is working for our customers.