



# How to build National and International Histories from existing Archives

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## **Summary**

The presentation will explain and describe the various collections of material held about the Founder and Scouting within the United Kingdom and in particular those located at the national Headquarters at Gilwell Park. The Association's archives hold a wide range of papers and books of considerable interest as well as a unique collection of memorabilia, much of which was personal to the Founder. I will then explore the limitations of the national archives – of what is and what is not possible; some of the challenges to be faced and make some observations on the role, purpose and function of the archives before drawing some conclusions.

## **Address**

Ladies and gentlemen, brother and sister Scouts, fellow historians.

I am delighted to have been invited to address you this afternoon during this wonderful congress and to give my perspective as the Archivist of The Scout Association in the United Kingdom on this interesting and, in my mind, important question.

Ever since I first engaged in studies of an historical nature, more years ago now than I care to remember, I have held as a sort of statement of faith: If you forget your past, you forget your purpose. So for me the keeping and the use of the UK Association's archives is of the utmost important for local, national and international Scouting. We can learn from our past, to assess where we are today and to guide us into the future.

To do otherwise is folly.

Let me first sketch out for you what material is held in the United Kingdom as it is not all with the UK Scout Association. There are some significant other collections of material that are of interest to us as historians:

Girlguiding UK – the UK Girl Guide Association – its own archives [and full time archives staff]. Obviously their material is mainly more Guide related but they do have some material on the Founder.

Different parts of the Baden-Powell family resident in the UK still have a wealth of personal and family related material – early letters, some Baden-Powell watercolours, gifts to him.

The Baden-Powell family have had a connection and involvement with the Mercers Company – one of the City of London livery companies [this one involved with the cloth trade, but who engage in great charitable works] for centuries, a connection that continues to this day. They have their own archives relating to its members and a large collection of personal material, letters, photograph albums and scrapbooks.

Then there are a number of private collectors, museums and other institutions which hold papers of interest. These are all listed by Tim Jeal in his definitive biography of Baden-Powell. For instance Scottish Headquarters has a collection of letters between Baden-Powell and Kenneth 'the Boy' Maclaren during the Siege of Mafeking, while a private individual has several letters written by Baden-Powell during the 1907 camp on Brownsea Island.

I must also acknowledge the material held by the Boy Scouts of America – most of Baden-Powell's diaries, and a large collection of drafts of articles, some of which were published, others not. This material is held at Texas but I have a microfilm copy.

And finally there is the UK Scout Association archives which hold some 70 or so boxes of Baden-Powell's office papers and correspondence from 1908 onwards up to his retirement to Kenya in 1938. And what a wealth of information and detail is there. If I want to know the Founder's views on the important matters facing society, on smoking or on Scout bands, it's all here.

In essence then, we are fortunate that Baden-Powell came from a family that by the look of things did not throw things away. So I have his early school reports, some childhood letters to his mother, and even some sketches by him, when aged 2.

And while there was no great master-plan for the growth and development of Scouting much early material does survive.

But there is much else in the UK Archives that is of interest to us. There are over 500 boxes of other papers, relating to my own Association. However there are some files and boxes relating to Scouting in other countries, a relic of our status as founder country.

There are files of Scout Group, District and County records, mostly dating from 1919 onwards. Prior to that date the registration of new Troops was a local matter and therefore what information we hold about early Troops is sketchy and incomplete. While I can prove that some thirty or so British Scout Troops were started in 1908 and are still in existence today, I cannot and will not be drawn into any discussion or argument as to which was the first Troop to be formed, for the simple reason that based on the evidence available, we simply do not know and no claim can be proved.

The archives also contains some 5,000 books on related to Scouting or to the Founder. We aim to keep two copies irrespective of edition of most books, one as a working copy, the other for posterity. However in the case of books by B-P, we collect two copies of every edition of every book by him – which is a lot of books. There is also a good collection of foreign language translations of some of his books – mainly 'Scouting for Boys' which I have in some 40 languages including Chinese, Hebrew and Welsh.

Then there is also:

- a large collection of cine film, videos and dvds, photographs, slides, glass lantern slide and photographic negatives;
- minute books and agenda papers for the UK Association's national boards and committees back to 1908 – a valuable resource for the academic who wants to study the growth and development of the Movement.
- uniform [mostly UK], badges UK local and national, as well as international, postcards, toys and games, medals and awards;
- scrapbooks, log books and photo albums – showing how Scouting was happening at grass roots. While these items may not be of national important, I do believe it essential that I hold some material that can demonstrate how Scouting was happening at local level as well as being created 'on high'.
- Jamboree material – papers, documents and ephemera for each and every World Scout Jamboree including the first in 1920.
- paintings – including a unique collection of oil paintings by the same artist, Ernest Carlos, which were as instrumental in the early days of Scouting in putting over to the unknowing general public what Scouting was about as was the book 'Scouting for Boys';
- watercolours and black and white sketches by Baden-Powell along with some sculptures by him;

some of his many gifts given to him, particularly in the aftermath of Mafeking and a substantial collection of Baden-Powell merchandise – items produced immediately after the siege by companies cashing in on the popularity of the national hero of the day.

The evidence is there in this collection that you could virtually furnish your house with items with B-P's picture on them – china, glassware, statues, plates, tea services, boxes of cigars, to egg cups, alarm clocks, pub tables and washing mangles. And this collection is by no means complete – there is much more still out there in the hands of other collectors. And virtually every month we hear of something else being found that we did not know exist. While we might merchandise today, we really have nothing on these Victorians for cashing in on an event and a personality.

On top of all that there is a large collection of gifts of one sort or another given to the Association, its Founder, or to one of our Chief Scouts over the years.

In short the UK archives are a paradise for the Scout historian. I have taken time to lay out before you in fairly basic terms what we hold. If we are to create histories than we need to know what tools, what resources, what information is available to us.

As you might expect I do therefore have a steady stream of academics of one sort or another making appointments to come and spend time at Gilwell to research their chosen topic – everything from secondary school projects and exams through to PhD – and on matters not always directly to do with Scouting but in which you can find a link – gender issues and the role of women in the 20th century, changing attitudes to smoking, relations between the UK and Germany between the two World Wars.

I also have a flood of emails and post to contend with – from national volunteers and staff colleagues, from other members of the Movement, the media and the general public.

But having said all that I must point out certain limitations that effect our work.

Some information has been microfilmed [in some cases, badly] but little is available in an electronic format. The view of the archives profession in the UK is to be cautious of such new technology, especially if you are then disposing of the original hard copy material. Discs can be easily corrupted; technology can change, thus rendering your disc useless. There are American institutions that have material on disc that they now cannot read because the technology has moved on.

There are gaps in the collection of material and therefore gaps in our knowledge. The UK archives were only properly established in 1975 and that was only after we had moved national headquarters from Buckingham Palace Road [where we had been since 1917] to Baden-Powell House in South Kensington. Even during that move we know that material in the form of paper and records was thrown out – but we know not what.

Not everything has been kept. For instance I do not possess a complete set of every badge issued nationally by the UK Association. What I do have has been built up over the past 30 years mainly through kind donation from badge collectors.

There was of course no great master plan for birth, growth and development of Scouting. What happened in 1908 after ‘Scouting for Boys’ was published was just as much a surprise to Baden-Powell as to everyone else. And I guess the fact that it spread abroad, so widely and so quickly, was equally surprising if not even more so.

There is also another statement of truth: an archive is only as good and reliable if material is deposited in it. Just because something is not there does not mean that it did not happen. All it does mean is that I cannot prove it from this archive.

I would now like to share with you what I perceive as challenges and my own wish list if you like for the future.

First, I wish I had more time! My assistant and I spend nearly two third if not three quarters of our time dealing with inquiries. There is little time for strategic thinking, for developmental work, or even just plain basic archiving.

I would also wish to explore further the possibility of electronic developments so that material might be shared and disseminated more easily. Not everyone can afford to come to Gilwell and research – yet I believe we hold this collection of material in trust on behalf of the whole Scout community, no matter who and where you are.

There are a number of good Scout history web sites, privately run and managed. I do try and support these as they are providing a valuable and useful service that I could not achieve even in my wildest dreams.

And I would wish to be able to co-operate more easily with other Associations around the world, to share what material and information we have and thereby support the development of their histories. But as you will readily appreciate there are limits and pressures on my resources, time and budget.

Among the risks I would highlight for starters that well-known auction website, ebay. Whereas in previous years materials might have been donated to me, all too often these days people place their possession up for auction and maximise their income. I can't blame them for doing that – I just regret that I cannot afford to purchase and am usually reliant on a kind donation.

I am also concerned when people rush into print without checking things first. While much has been published and produced this past year to support the centenary of Scouting and the World Scout Jamboree, there have also been many errors that could and should have been avoided. For instance did you know that the word Jamboree had Swahili origins? I thought not – it doesn't. Or that half the boys on Brownsea were killed in the First World War? Not true. Of the 20 only 5 were, a sixth dying from natural causes.

But there could also be lessons to learn from our past.

Some five years ago the UK Association issued an entirely new youth programme, developed over the preceding five years. Personally I would have expected at least some research to have taken place in the archives to establish how the training programme had evolved in the first place over the years, and, second, to see if there are any lessons we might have learned over the process of managing change. No one did and it was, I think, a missed opportunity.

On occasions though we do have to rewrite history – to change our view or records as some new or long lost detail emerges. Up until about six years ago we had no idea how many wood badge beads the Founder actually wore – we had assumed two or four – until his own wood badge necklace was discovered by the family and bearing six beads.

Funding is always a challenge. As archives do not earn a revenue then its budget is always a soft spot for cutting when times are tough. But there is an enormous potential in the archives collection for books, pictures, souvenirs, merchandise, provided someone is prepared to take the risk and invest in the production of such items.

Another problem I find is that we are very good at making decisions – and then forgetting we have made them. So part of my role is occasionally to remind people of what they or their predecessors agreed. We can be guilty of forgetting our fundamentals in our rush to adapt and change and be relevant.

And finally there is the challenge to encourage more and deeper academic study. There has been little study at PhD level at least in the UK in the last 20 years. This is an area that I am exploring with the assistance of a major UK university to see if we can encourage study at the highest level particularly to do with oral history and people's memories of Scouting.

We have a great story to tell; we have a history to be proud of. We need to ensure it is recorded for future generations.