

# Speech: Minister for Digital and Culture Matt Hancock's speech at the launch of 'National Archives: Archives Unlocked'

Thank you Jeff for the introduction and Jude for your kinds words.

It's great to be back at the Southbank Centre today – which Jude will be pleased to hear has been my most visited cultural institution since joining DCMS.

As Jude so rightly said, this is a very exciting time for our nation's archives. Knowledge and information are valued currencies in these global times. Thanks to the opportunities of new technology, we enjoy mass digital access to records ranging from the iconic – the Domesday Book – to Cabinet minutes that help us understand how and why previous governments made their most affecting decisions. And also to more personal records – soldiers letters home during WW1 and WW2, insights into our sporting lives, boardroom battles, births, deaths and property ownership.

At the same time, archives are feeding a renaissance across our world-beating creative industries and wider afield, as old and once forgotten ideas and approaches inspire new ones in business, fashion, music, art and across our communities.

I imagine when some, maybe many of us hear the word archive we think of some cobwebby vault, where favoured experts and academics blow the dust from forgotten, mildewed files. But in this digital age, our history is accessible to everyone, no matter where they live or what they do. The potential of that, the significance of that, can't be understated. Mass digital access to physical records democratises our history and our collective understanding of who we are.

Archives Unlocked shines a light on the value of archives – framed around trust, enrichment and openness. It sets out ambitions for their future – so we all can fully exploit the immense riches of our archives, for the cultural, economic and intellectual common good.

So let us look at those key themes in turn. Trust, enrichment, and openness.

First trust.

As a democracy, we are strengthened by scrutiny and by being held to account.

Easy access to archives is central to this. It is a sad example, but the Hillsborough Inquiry is a good high-profile case of archival records helping to build a picture of past events to ensure justice now and in the future. 27 years after the loss of 96 lives at Hillsborough Football Stadium, a jury

found that the victims had been unlawfully killed, a ruling only made possible by the release in 2012 of 450,000 archived documents relating to the tragedy.

Trust and confidence in our public institutions are essential, and openness and scrutiny strengthen that trust.

Second enrichment.

Archives enrich society. Because art and knowledge enrich our lives. Any work of art, however ancient, when experienced for the first time is a current work for the beholder. Just as any little nugget of information is new to the person first discovering it.

In the age of Google, Spotify and YouTube, Instagram, Wikipedia where people expect ready access to the things that intrigue them, archives have never been more relevant. That inquisitiveness, that thirst to be entertained is there, ready to be met. And modern technology makes it so much easier to connect to the rich culture of the past and make it present.

And as times change forgotten works can suddenly become – or at the very least seem – relevant once more. I shall simply mention the phenomenal recent success of the neglected Sinclair Lewis novel *It Can't Happen Here*, which has lately topped several best seller lists – I assume you all know the background – and make no further comment.

Third and finally – openness.

Archives encourage a thirst for learning.

We have a wonderful array of archives across England and we want to see them made accessible to everyone, regardless of their background.

During my recent visit to The National Archives, I saw a primary school class learning about the Great Fire of London. Those kids were fascinated by the historical documents they saw, as the past came to life in front of them. Not literally, thank goodness.

But not everyone can easily get to Kew, or even to the other archives up and down the country, where children are being similarly thrilled and inspired. Adults too.

Digital enables access. Online archives can be accessed from anywhere – from the sofa, from a cafe, from the top deck of a bus. And in Government we're making sure that is literally true with our work to improve connectivity and infrastructure.

Until very recently it has always been the case that our archives had to be curated, so what was made available was still decided by persons other than the consumer. Digital can change that as people become able to search and explore on the basis of what matters to them, and that is a very exciting development.

It doesn't mean I don't fully appreciate the great work of our archivists and curators. As excited as I am by the opportunities for democratisation digital technologies offer, I greatly value the specialised work of maintaining and expanding our nation's archives.

You need only look here, at The Southbank Centre's archive. It is a treasure trove of information and artefacts dating back to the 1951 and the Festival of Britain. Dedicated staff and volunteers are working – here at the Archive Studio – to make available online, the 100 cubic metres of documents, oral histories, programmes, photographs, posters, artworks and objects found in the archive.

These are providing content for new and exciting events here at Southbank, both now and in the future. And I applaud their work.

So what's next?

Archives Unlocked is inspiring and it is ambitious. Unlocking the potential of our archives sector will require focus on building digital capacity, strengthening resilience and demonstrating impact. But there is an appetite for change. The National Archives, as sector lead, will work in partnership with archives and stakeholders across and beyond the sector, to realise the ambitions of this Archives Unlocked scheme.

Together with £750,000 from Heritage Lottery Fund, and funding from The National Archives, a total of £1 million pounds will be used to help train a new generation of digital archivists and to encourage new and innovative practice.

And as we digitise our collections, who knows what neglected treasures will be rediscovered?

Ultimately, we will unlock the full potential of our amazing, rich and diverse archives and the records they preserve and protect.

We will make it easier for people to explore and learn and be inspired.

We look forward to working with you all here today, to make it happen.

Thank you.