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# Understanding Our Past, Changing Our Future

Developing a New Vision for  
Kent Archives and Local History Service



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# “History has the Power to Change Lives”

No matter who you are or where you live in Kent, you and your community have a story. Learning about that story can have huge impact on your life, and the lives of all the people of Kent. In our Archives and Local History Collections we have many of the documents that tell these stories.

“ I think when people understand more about the past it helps one to have a sense of everything. ”

Lord Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, Leader of Kent County Council 1997-2005  
Chairman of English Heritage 2007-2008



Above: Architect's vision of the Kent Library and History Centre  
Cover image: WWI soldiers - part of the Facing the Great War Project

People's lives are changed by access to the fantastic historical material in our collections. We see this happening all the time in archive and local history centres, libraries, museums, and in venues throughout the County when we take our collections out into the communities whose stories they tell.

The DCMS has recognised that the rich national legacy contained in our archives collections:

*“...can be turned more fully to advantage as a rich learning resource accessible to all, a means of reinforcing our sense of local and national community and the nation's personal, corporate and public memory”*

(Aims of The Archives Task Force, 2002).



In the following pages we have outlined the ways in which we believe access to history can deliver a huge range of benefits. These are illustrated with real stories which show how Kent County Council and other Archives and Local History Services are working. These are the stories through which we are building our own experience and expertise. We are drawing on this experience in developing our vision for future development of the Archives and Local History Service.



# Stronger and Safer Communities

By helping people to learn about and understand the history of their communities, we help local people come together and form strong ties with their neighbours and their local area.

This sense of belonging and responsibility for the neighbourhood can have far reaching and beneficial effects on a range of key local priorities.

## Local History Day

A single mother who brought her children to a local history day on the Parkwood Estate in Maidstone said:

“ My kids love anything to do with history... in fact it's the only time they listen to something when someone's talking about the old days and how it used to be. I think they learn from that because everyone was a community then and had a lot more respect for each other. I wish things were still like that... ”

As part of a regular programme of outreach activity we work in partnership with colleagues, in this case Maidstone Museum and the KCC Adult Education Service. Here we set up a Community History Day, taking historical material from our collections to a community centre in the middle of the Parkwood ward.

The material included some of the historic papers of the Romney family. Park Wood used to be owned by the Romneys who hunted deer in what is now the housing estate. We introduced local people to the history of their local area and showed them how to research family history. As a result some of the residents formed themselves into a small adult education class looking at their local history.



## Community Archives

One of a group setting up a community archive in Smarden following a training day at the Centre for Kentish Studies said:

*“ What we've learnt here today will really help us to set up our community archive so that not only can we look after the historic material we've got in the village far better but local people will also be able to use it far more easily... ”*



We provide support and training for local groups who wish to set up their own heritage centre in a local venue. The Smarden group went on to set up a Time Team History Club for local children and have taken part in a Libraries and Archives staff development day. The Heritage Lottery Fund provides funding for this type of group through its 'Archives for All' programme and actively encourages groups applying to use their local archive service for support and advice.

## The Greek Cypriot Community

We work with different cultural communities across Kent to help capture their history and document their contribution to Kent life. One such project involved us working with the Greek Cypriot community. We visited groups in Maidstone, Herne Bay and Margate and recorded the history of their community in Kent, and from this we produced a display which circulated a number of venues including archive centres, libraries and other events. The text and pictures were posted on the Here's History website to give more people an insight into the community. This picture of the Blessing of the Sea Ceremony at Margate is one that was shown to us and illustrates how Greek Cypriot culture has been integrated into the local community.





# Learning for Everyone

Lifelong learning and exploration are stimulated by access to the history of local people and communities.

We bring young people into contact with witnesses to historic events or experiences through intergenerational activities.



## Westminster City Archives case study – Education through Football

Lara Coyler, Year 6 Team Leader, English Coordinator, Hallfield Junior School said:

*“What has really impressed us about this project is its cross-curricular nature. It is extremely rare in Year 6 to maintain a broad and balanced curriculum with the pressure of standard assessment tests. The project has enabled us to do just that. Schemes of work of this calibre are extremely rare. The response from the children so far has been overwhelmingly positive.”*



The Chelsea Football Club and Westminster Archives Education through Football initiative began in September 2003 with children using materials provided by the Archives to understand how Britain has changed since 1948. The project kicked off with pupils at participating schools reading *Billy the Kid* by children's laureate Michael Morpurgo, a story about a Pimlico boy who plays for Chelsea FC as war breaks out. This was followed by workshop-type classes on creative writing led by Michael Morpurgo and author/illustrator Michael Foreman. The pupils also had the opportunity to meet and hear about the lives of Chelsea FC legend Roy Bentley and Chelsea Pensioners.

Nine primary schools throughout Westminster Council participated in the programme, and produced displays of their pupils' works. All the work was exhibited at Stamford Bridge football stadium. This unique and exciting programme was a great way for schoolchildren to learn, developing their skills in history, literacy and citizenship with Chelsea Football Club as the focus.

Source: IDeA Knowledge website [www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/1162618](http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/1162618)

We help young people understand difficult issues through historical events mentioned in our collections:

### Ties and Lives HLF Project (Slavery 2007)

We got funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Creative Partnerships for this project which researched three of our collections: one of a slave-owning family; one of a family involved in trying to stop the slave trade; and a collection of books relating to slavery. The material we discovered in these collections was used by artists from Music for Change. They helped schoolchildren across Kent develop performances reflecting the issues which slavery highlights, such as cultural differences, equality and diversity.



History comes alive for children when they come face to face with the treasures we hold.

### School Visits

A pupil of Lenham Primary School aged 10 said:

“ Did they really have pirates in Faversham?! I'm going to ask my dad if we can go there on Saturday and see them. ”

A pupil of Simon Langton Girls' Grammar School said:

“ I never thought in a million years that I would see William the Conqueror's actual 'signature' - wow! ”



We regularly visit or entertain schools throughout the County, using staff and historic material from our three archive centres to introduce children, especially Key Stage 2, to the history of their local area and how to find out about it. We use lots of different material from our collections to get the children interested and inspired. For the school in Lenham we used a list of items found on a pirate ship that was captured in Faversham in 1572. The signature of William I is contained in the Accord of Winchester, dated 1072, and held as part of the Canterbury Cathedral Archive collection.

Children learn about the lives of their ancestors when they hear the stories told in our collections.

## High Firs School visit to Folkestone

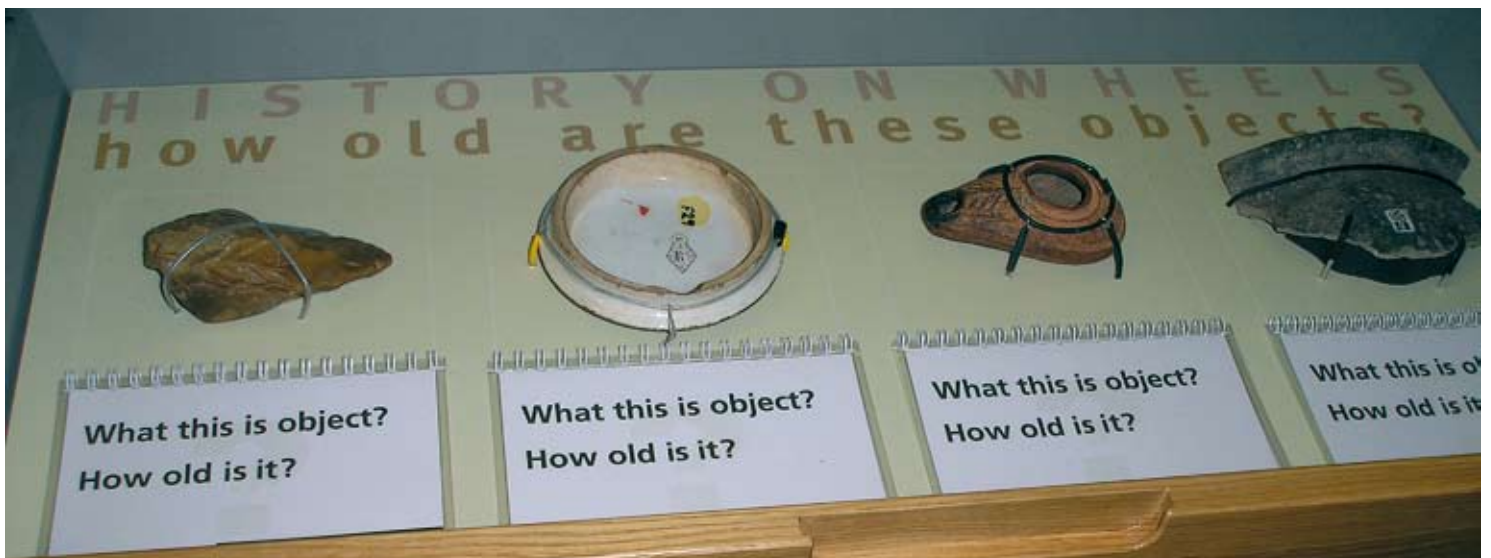
A quote from a letter from a child who was part of this visit:

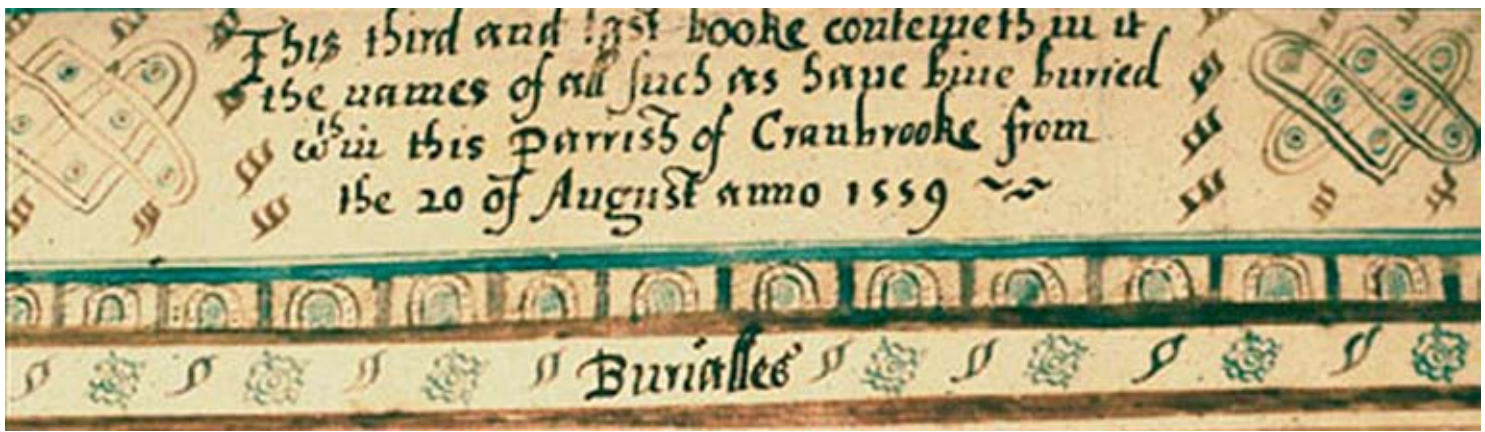


“ I am writing a letter to thank you for letting my class visit Folkestone. I enjoyed all the activities. My favourite thing was holding the delicate things. My second favourite thing was the skeleton because I have never seen a skeleton before. My third favourite thing was the pictures of Folkestone in the olden days. ”

We invited a class of Swanley schoolchildren, aged 6, to Folkestone Library, Museum and Gallery for a range of activities linked to their theme of a day at the seaside. Using one of our new Hands On History Boxes the children were able to handle real objects. They also drew their favourite objects in the Museum including the skeleton and some ammonites that had been found on the beach. They watched archive film of children in earlier years visiting Folkestone on holiday including the Switchback Railway and saw photos of the town as it used to be. The children had their picnic in the gallery and despite poor weather, thoroughly enjoyed their own day at the seaside.

We are developing a range of mobile and interactive display units which combine original objects and facsimiles from our archives, items from our local history and museum collections, and associated books and references to published works. These units can be used by staff and volunteers to support learning and literacy, in our own facilities and in community venues, to help people get in touch with the stories of Kent's past.





Whatever it is that stimulates the first interest, the further someone takes their own journey of discovery through our collections, the more they develop new and transferable skills. Skills developed include how to find information and carry out research. And as they become hooked by the subject they are researching, they find themselves broadening their reading habits and developing writing skills so they can share the stories they have unearthed with their community. In these ways people develop the skills that will help them throughout their lives and which are so much in demand by local employers.

## Courses

A quote from an adult education tutor:

“ Archives help students to learn by connecting them directly with the past. Holding a class at CKS allows students the opportunity to see and work with documents written by and about ordinary people, giving insights into their lives with an immediacy that cannot be equalled by books, lectures or television programmes. ”



Using resources from our collections, we run courses for members of the public, students and adult learners, and give advice on how to search for and find information.

At the Centre for Kentish Studies we are currently helping to run an evening course for adult learners called 'The Parish Chest', looking at all the different types of information you can get from church records. By having the centre as a base the students are able to use the wonderful resources in the collections to explore their subject with expert help at hand.

# Improved Health, Care and Wellbeing

The link between activity, in mind and body, and physical and mental health is well established, as is the beneficial effect on personal wellbeing that comes from enjoying life.

We have countless examples of how stimulating interest in local history has helped people cope with and sometimes overcome both mental and physical illness.



## Questions we're asked

A single woman aged 45 said:

*“ I haven't been well for about 8 years with depression – it's only in the last few weeks that I've started going out again. I've been looking for something to keep me active....you know to help me think and keep my mind off things. I think I'm going to do my family history because I've got an interesting family...will anyone at the library be able to help me? ”*

We have major local history collections in all our town centre libraries and staff trained to help our customers start their research. These staff are also able to refer the customers on to other sources like online genealogy tools, local history societies and to our own unique Archive Collections.

Health benefits may be a result of keeping active by exploring, thinking about and understanding the lives of their ancestors and the history of their community.

An elderly lady who discovered through our collections that her Mum had spent time in Bexley Hospital said:

*“ I cannot believe they put my mum in a mental home...just because she had epilepsy! It explains so much... her outlook on life and why she was always so sad. She's gone now so I can't talk to her but it will change how I think about her completely... it will definitely help me to move on and in the way I see my children. I still can't believe they were so cruel. ”*



We provide a face to face, telephone, postal or email enquiry service to help people research the history of their families and communities. We hold the historical records of many health institutions across the County.

Some people report increased self-esteem when they become involved in telling their own history to others. And the power of reminiscence work is recognised in helping older people keep their minds active and develop a sense of shared history with neighbours and friends. For some, the interest in local history sparks involvement in wider local networking and helps to counter loneliness and help support independent living.

We regularly give talks to all types of community and local groups both in our centres and out in the community, underlining how important history is and how people can use our collections to find things of interest to them. In many cases people attending the talks go on to join an adult education class on family or local history or pursue some sort of independent informal learning.

### **Talk on family history and reading old handwriting**

An elderly gentleman who attended the course said:

*“ I wasn't sure whether to come out today as I'm still recovering from a stroke but the talk sounded interesting and I've always been interested in old writing... you know trying to read it... This has made me think about doing a course or something ... this is the first time I've actually been interested in doing something since it happened - what can I do? ”*



This was one of a regular series of events and talks we run, aimed at stimulating interest in local history.

History can fire people's imagination and inspire them to get involved in all sorts of projects.



*This picture features a composite image of the Red Lion at Sittingbourne put together by students involved in the project.*

## Changing Places

BBC South East are working with us on an exciting project that links the visual arts with history. Local schoolchildren, students and volunteers are using our image collections to highlight the changes that have taken place in their local communities over many years. The participants research images from our collections with help from our staff and then take pictures from exactly the same places and build these into montages to show the changes. These images are then loaded onto the BBC South East website at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/kent/places/changing\\_places/index.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/kent/places/changing_places/index.shtml). In this way the participants are learning about the stories of their communities, developing their own creative skills and contributing to the historical record that will inspire future generations.

Much of our work is focussed on inspiring a lifelong love of history among children and young people.

### Kent County Show

We regularly attend events throughout the County to entertain and enthral local people with the richness and beauty of many of the items in our collections. As an example, we took copies of the oldest document in our collection, Wihfred's Charter from AD699, to the County Show in 2006 and got children writing their own charters using quill pens. Most of the children used the opportunity to decree that their parents should be banned from entering their rooms!



As part of a wider cultural offer delivered in partnership with public, private and voluntary sector partners throughout Kent, we bring joy and inspiration to many lives.



### Identity 1000

Two comments from young people who accessed our collections to research the history of Sheppey for this project:

*“ I found it fascinating because I never knew there was going to be so much change or difference. ”*

*“ No cars or lorries or buses or vans or mopeds or motorbikes or bikes. And people being more friendly. ”*

We took part in this nationwide project in partnership with the National Theatre which aimed to encourage disadvantaged young people on the Isle of Sheppey to get involved in writing and performing. As a result of visiting the archives and talking to staff, the performance which the young people devised was based on the local history of the island. This, alongside the other work we do, illustrates the potential of our local history and archive collections to stimulate the interest of young people.

# A Universal Service – Open to All

In addition to the targeted activity described above, we provide universal access to our rich collections. This access is available to anybody, whatever their reason.

Last year nearly 13,000 people visited the archive centres to research subjects including local history, family history, national and international history. We answered 3,000 written enquiries, almost 8,000 email enquires and 20,000 telephone enquiries. Unique visits to our webpages went up by 19% between 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 with total hits to our webpages for 2007-2008 numbering 106,969.

Many users come to us indirectly. They may be referred on to us by other agencies and groups, or they may become aware of our services through the extensive education and outreach activity we undertake. Many access our services initially through the local history collections in our libraries and progress to visiting our archive centres later.

Some of our users are professional researchers, trawling our collections for vital sources to inform publications or research work.



## ***The Life of Lady Hester Stanhope***

The Stanhope/Chevening Manuscripts have just been used to produce a comprehensive new biography of the noted nineteenth century traveller and adventurer Lady Hester Stanhope. There is a possibility that the book will lead to a film about this amazing woman who travelled the world in the early 1800s.

## ***General Gordon of Khartoum***

An expert from the National Army Museum discovered a journal in the Amherst Collection relating to the expedition to relieve General Gordon at Khartoum in 1885. As far as we are aware the journal is the only personal account of the expedition and sheds new light on an important episode in the history of the United Kingdom.



Last year we took in 183 new items and collections relating to the history of Kent including some from parishes, businesses, organisations and individuals.

We have a team dedicated to collecting, cataloguing and preserving these records for future generations.

# Our Vision for the Future



We know what potential exists within our Archives and Local History Collections to deliver enormous benefits to Kent communities and individuals. Our vision is to exploit this potential much further than we have been able to do so far, working in close partnership with public, private and voluntary sector partners across Kent.

While this document evidences the huge positive impact that access to Archives can have on so many lives, we must not forget that none of this would be possible if our predecessors had not collected and preserved the documents that tell our stories. We now carry that obligation to collect and preserve documents for future generations. Balancing resources to ensure that this work is done, while expanding the opportunities for customers, many first-time users of our services, to access our collections, will always be challenging.

But our existing users appear to support this widened access:

## Survey of Archive Service Users, November 2007

- 98.6% of our users agreed or strongly agreed that the Archive provided opportunities for learning
- 99.9% agreed or strongly agreed that the Archive played a major role in preserving Kent's culture and heritage
- 91.3% agreed or strongly agreed that Archives helped to strengthen family and community identity



We need to start a debate across Kent and beyond to find out if others share this vision. Once this consultation process is complete, to make this vision a reality, we would need to plan a way forward covering the following areas:

- Providing much improved accommodation for the Archive Collections, the staff who care for and provide access to them, and the public who visit our centres to come into direct contact with the priceless and unique items we hold.
- Redefining staff and volunteer roles, and training and equipping both groups to meet the new challenges posed by the new ways of working.
- Providing the best possible equipment and expertise to allow preservation and conservation of our collections so that they will be accessible to future generations.
- Developing new collection policies and partnership agreements in the context of the current local government environment, working in informed partnership with donors and depositors.
- Reviewing, and making decisions about the backlog of uncatalogued material in our care.



- Developing improved access to our collections, using:
  - ICT developments to deliver improved catalogue access and remote enquiry and information services;
  - digitisation to support online access at work, at home and through mediated access in our libraries;
  - facsimiles to enable handling of copies of documents where handling of originals is not practical or desirable;
  - improved promotion and publicity of the services we offer;
  - community outreach and engagement to understand the needs of and promote our services to those members of society most in need of the benefits we can deliver; and
  - partnerships with public, private and voluntary sector organisations to secure ongoing funding and enable wider access to our collections.



In whatever way the vision develops, the planned new History Centre in Maidstone will support this process of transformational change.