

Andy Evans: Hello, and welcome to Episode 5 of The Association Conversation Station, the official podcast of the Open University Students Association. Remember that this is the place to hear about all the things we do, and all the things that inspire us. So, you might imagine since 1972, we have built up quite a bit of archive material. So, this podcast looks at the association's archive project. This project has enabled us to catalogue and order our wonderful content to make it a true celebration of our first 50 years. You'll hear from Matthew Taylor, Digital Archivist of the Open University, Nicola Powell, the Association's Senior Volunteering and Representation Officer, and one of our students, Patrick Johnson, who volunteered on the association archive project.

By the way, don't forget about our fundraising plans to celebrate our 50th anniversary. We're raising money for the Open University Students Educational Trust, otherwise known as OUSET. This is a grant which provides financial support for OU students in financial hardship to begin or continue their studies. And we would like to raise £50,000 for OUSET on May 2023. If you got to get involved, please visit oustudents.com/fundraising. Okay, onto the podcast. Our host is the association's project officer Georgia Demopoulou. Georgia, over to you.

Georgia Demopoulou: Well, hello everyone and welcome back to another episode of The Association Conversation Station. This is a very interesting podcast, all talking about digital archives, and I am with Matthew Taylor, Nicola Powell, and Patrick Johnson. So, I'm going to start off with Matthew. Could you say a bit about yourself and just an overview, more or less, about your role?

Matthew Taylor: Hi there. Yes, my name is Matthew. I'm the University's Digital Archivist. What that means in practice is that I report to the university archivist who runs the archives here at the OU. My main focus is on the digital preservation of things like OU teaching sites. So obviously, one of the things the archive has always held is print copies of all the teaching materials but as the internet has taken over, we've also got all the module sites that have been going out to students for the last 15-plus years. So, a lot of my work is to do with those and just generally supporting the archive service here at Walton Hall and answering queries from researchers.

Georgia: Brilliant. That's amazing. And Nicola, would you like to go next?

Nicola Powell: With great pleasure, yes. Hi, I'm Nicola Powell. I'm the training and well-being officer at the Students Association. I also come from many decades of working as an archaeologist so that's where my interest in archives comes from. So that's why I'm here.

Georgia: Brilliant. Last but not least, Patrick.

Patrick Johnson: I'm no more than a student. I've been a student at Open University for the last five years. As part of that experience, make sure that I got involved with the association. Through that met the lovely Nicola, and spent many hours with her and others down at Milton Keynes, looking at the materials that had been stored by the Students Association over many, many years.

Georgia: Wow. So, a big, big project to take on. And since I finished with you Patrick, this is going to be kind of the next question following on from that. Could you briefly, kind of discuss the archive project? What exactly it entails?

Patrick: I've already mentioned that thing that there were boxes and boxes of materials in the offices there, these were pulled out. The particular aspect that I was engaged with over two or three days in the first instance was looking at photographs. Catalogue in these photographs and trying to identify to what they referred. So we have the benefit of a former

student, Jordan. He participated in some of these events and he was able to pinpoint people and times, and then between us, we could look at a photograph and say, "Yeah, well, that's Harold Wilson. This is whoever this is." And between us, we'd look at, especially photographs, and make sure that they weren't just a catalogue, there's a photograph. We identified the people and probably what were the circumstances.

And then there was a mountain of paperwork. The original magazine that we used that was circulated by us and we would plough through those cataloguing dates and times. They were a bit distracting at times because people thought, "Oh, I remember this, and this, and this." Yeah, it was a lot more pleasurable than one would imagine. Especially, the essence of working in a team. There were a number of students, and there were the lights and Nicola there cracking the whip for making sure that we got something to work.

Georgia: Well, that's incredible. It's great to see all that collaboration going on with it. Probably, I'm going to ask Nicola what was the kind of turning point to actually start this project. What kind of started it all, really?

Nicola: Yes. Well, it was a bit of an office move at the Students Association. I think we're moving to an old IT suite downstairs, which was great. It meant we could put files down there and there was lots of sort of goings on. As I went down into that, to the new office, I noticed boxes and boxes. Those old tatty banker's boxes. The ones with the lid, not fitting or whatever, and stuffs spilling out, that was what I saw. I thought, "Oh, okay." Of course, my having archived things for years, my sort of spidey senses, my archive spidey senses sort of tweaked. And I thought, "Whoa, this looks interesting. Oh, I don't like the way it's, oh, no, no. This won't do." Because, of course, you know what it's like when you've got a pile of photos at home, and then very often, they start to stick together in the heat. Somebody's always managed to get a stuffy stuck to a photograph or something.

So, not what I'm saying I saw that. So anyway, I had a little rifle through as is my want. Actually, I still feel a tingle when I think about it now, I should drop in now into this, that I am a bit of a space freak. I'm really a geek, more like I'm really interested in all things space and planetary, and so on, as well as archaeology. Space Archaeology is a real thing as well now. There was quite a large or a couple of feet by about 18 inches framed picture face down on the top of the boxes and I thought, "Oh, oh." I lifted it up to blow the dust off and I thought, "Oh, my days, just look at that. I knew exactly what it was when I saw it." I'll tell you what it was, it was a sort of collage. There was a newspaper cutting, a photograph, and also a space mission patch. It was a space patch from, if I remember the date, I've actually got a note to remind myself. It was from the October 5th flight 1984 of the space shuttle challenger. What they used to do, I believe, is they used to take up in their payload, they take up mission patches to then distribute to universities and to schools. We had great good fortune back in 1985.

I think it was Dr Kathryn D. Sullivan herself, one of the two women on board that mission, who came and gave a talk and presented this. There it is with her signature. We did take this forward, and it has been presented by one of our past presidents, Cath. She made a presentation, it's now sitting. Those of you that do visit campus there, we've got a little observatory just as you come through the security gate and it's there now on the wall for all to see, rather than in an archive. So, once I'd found that I thought, "Well, this is just great." So, I brought it to the attention of the head of volunteering at the time, Beth, and she's, "Oh, we could perhaps put in an application to our trustees for a little money and make a project out of it. Of course, having archived on you, what materials to get." We did get the support and the help of the absolutely invaluable support and help of Ruth, the OU's archivist. We gathered all our materials, and we found some time for a number of student volunteers to join as archive volunteers and start to get the project going. We obviously adhered to the OU's archive guidelines and we have there a bit of their spreadsheet with our own catalogue

numbers, where we add every single item is added. Every single photograph had to be scanned and then catalogued with its own discrete number.

Of course, that number is then put onto the photograph. The photograph is stored. This is what Patrick was doing. I think, Patrick, it was the first time I'd met you, wasn't it, when you volunteered as an archive volunteer?

Patrick: It was. I've done other little bits and pieces but that was the first major contribution I made. I was thrilled by it as you were. It was interesting work. Believe it or not, it doesn't sound interesting, but it was interesting. Fascinating looking at the history of the Students Association. We seem to have a team that settled into. I do this, I do that, and I'll do the other. It worked really well. Although we had Nicola looking over at us, we had very little intervention from this. It was a good team. It worked well together. I know the university is always anxious to emphasize team working in collaboration, but that was it in practice.

Nicola: Absolutely. Well, we all have that common goal, didn't we? To secure, and make safe all these wonderful artifacts. There are a few artifacts in there as well. Documents and photographs to preserve them for posterity eventually, that they will go and sit in the OU with some curated archives.

Patrick: That little box that we presented.

Nicola: There's a lot more of those little boxes. Yes, we did do it. We did a sort of ceremonial presentation. I think it had just a photograph, a single photograph but no, there's lot more than that. Lots more boxes.

Georgia: Oh, I'm sure by the sounds of it. Yeah, just mounds of it. That sounds just so incredible and so fascinating, especially with that patch that you found. What a find that was.

Then, obviously, there's the Open University's archive, which is, there's associations archive and there's Open University. So Matt, could you just talk a bit about the kind of archive room and how there's also Students Association materials, like within it as well?

Matthew: Yes, certainly. I mean, I'd like to go back a step, actually, and just about managed to claim a little bit of involvement with the project as it has come to be so far. That I was part of the team with Ruth, the university archivist who went over the first few times to start talking for the volunteers through the procedure of using the spreadsheet and what sort of things to describe. It's really important to have that information because it makes things much easier to find if you're trying to look for them later. Also, I think I'd like to probably highlight how useful it is to have these volunteers that know all these things from the past days of the association or the university in general, really. We have a sort of little network that we contacted the archive if we want to track down who somebody was in an old photo. We think, "Oh, it will be one of these three or four contacts that we still have in touch that we can send them the photo and say, any idea who this is?" That sort of thing.

So, it's really, it's really vital to have the sort of institutional memory if you like but the university archive itself is very much part of that. Its job is to retain the sort of history of the OU and I guess the content is split into a sort of three big areas, really. One is the actual teaching materials, as I mentioned earlier. So, we've got the complete set of all the print materials that were ever produced for OU courses right back from the very first courses that the foundation courses in 1971, the first teaching materials that went out. We've also got all of the AV of those teaching materials. So, we've got all the TV programs that were broadcast in the middle of the night in the 70s and radio programs. All sorts of stuff, and later into sort of VHS tapes and DVDs.

We've also got home experiment kits that were sent out. We've not got all of those, obviously, because that would take up so much space. We've got an example of most of the big ones that were sent out. So we've got all these plastic brains that were sent to students to take apart. As slightly before my time, I'm surprised we were able to be posted through the normal post service like vinyl records and things that were eminently breakable. Chemistry sets with glass test tubes, and then things like that seemed to make it through the post with no problems at all. I'm not sure current delivery companies would cope as well.

Georgia: Yeah, no chance.

Matthew: So that's one of the main collections is the teaching materials. We've also got special collections, which are largely donated from a sort of historical OU figures. So, for example, the first vice-chancellor, Walter Perry. We've got a lot of his papers from the setting up of the University and Jenny Lee, who was very instrumental in forming the OU. She donated all of her sort of personal correspondence and stuff to us as well as the OU-related stuff. We've got a lot of papers from Betty Boothroyd, who was our chancellor for quite a long time. In fact, I sat right now in the Betty Boothroyd Library, named after her, because she was such an important figure as well.

Then we've got the institutional archive, which is largely the sort of the lifeblood of the existence of the University. So it's all the committee papers, all the reports that have been written over the years, and things like open house, the in-house staff newsletter, and Sesame, the student newspaper, we've got all of the copies of those. Lots and lots of photographs like the collection you're talking about. Much of them on catalogue then eventually, we'll have to try and get to sort through those as well.

We've also got a small collection from Oozer already, which we've had for a while, which is panned books and magazines, and things like that. Then eventually we'll receive the scanned photos as well. So it's a very big, broad collection of things and so many of the queries, we get it random. They're not the same queries all over. It's different researchers, researching different things about the history of the OU. So, you can never really predict what sort of inquiry you're going to get from day to day, which is nice. It makes it interesting.

Georgia: Yeah, no, definitely.

Matthew: I definitely related to what Patrick was saying about becoming distracted by the things that you're searching through and cataloging. Cataloging can be quite repetitive but when you come across some things that catch your interest, it's very easy to sort of stop and get distracted by it. So we have to watch out for that.

Georgia: A gift and a curse, I suppose.

Matthew: Absolutely. It keeps you sane during the more repetitive moments, I guess.

Georgia: So, Matthew, please explain to me, why is it important to archive, and digitally archived. Like, please send me the significance of all of it.

Matthew: Well, I think it's largely a duty of care to future researchers, isn't it? It's preserving the information at the time it happened and making sure it's available for people who want to know about this sort of thing in the future. I mean it's one thing for us in the archive to keep hold of the papers of all these important high-up figures but think a growing theory within the archiving world is that social history is equally, if not more important, the researchers will want to know how the everyday life of a student was. That way in which they interacted studying online for the first time, and receiving the materials. All that sort of stuff is really useful. I think this sort of thing, the project the Student Association is doing is very much an

example of that. It's the social history aspect of it that will possibly be more interesting to future researchers than who signed what contract on what day. That sort of thing.

Georgia: Wow, incredible. Yeah, definitely the social aspect is important. Nicola, do you have something else to add?

Nicola: Yes, like obviously, completely agree with Matt. Yes, it puts the Students Association into a context. People who may not know anything about us and of course, in to the Open University's context and the Open University into context, and the absolute importance of the Open University. So, yes, it is a thrilling and beautiful thing to see a well-ordered archive that somebody can use and tells the story in this case of the OU Student Association.

Matthew: I should probably also mention that if anybody is interested in coming to see any of the holdings, we have currently in the university archives, they can get in touch with us at any point. We have a brand-new researcher room that's open to anyone who wants to arrange to come and visit us in Walton Hall. So, if they contact the university archives, we can always arrange an appointment. I don't know what they might want to look at, but it's all listed online if they want to check.

Nicola: Well, I must say one of the greatest thrills of my most recent life was seeing Jenny Lee's dispatch box. That's in there. The worn battered box. I can't remember if we dared to peek inside, all the wonderful things that would have been inside that inspirational woman and politician.

Matthew: We are allowed to open it occasionally. So, yes, it does open.

Nicola: I would love to see it open.

Matthew: We've got a few artifacts from the very early days as well, which people are always fascinated to see. For example, the famous OU slippers were given out to all the first-generation staff, because the campus was such a mud pit when they were still building all the buildings. So, the first secretary decided he didn't want people walking through all his new carpets in muddy shoes. So, everyone is issued with slippers. So, they took their shoes off at the door and switched into their OU slippers, walked around the office and it became a sort of badge of, I was there at the very start for OU staff to say, I'm a genuine slipper wearer. So, people always love that sort of thing as well. Again, that's social history rather than the signing of charters and things.

Georgia: Oh, now I want some OU slippers. Maybe we should add that to our merch list.

Patrick: Just broadening this conversation as a student, it's always a much easier task if there's a digitalized archived there, waiting for you to plunder. Yet, so much of great batches of history. The papers are there, but not digitalized. It would never happen I can't see it happening. The more we get on digital, the more students are going to be able to look for different things and begin to examine those social aspects. I'm doing a master's at the moment, but trying to get the social context in it, we know the facts and figures, we know the dates, and we know the distances but trying to find the social aspect is very difficult.

Matthew: I think in the wider world, I mean not just the OU, but much further afield in various archives, it'll probably be a resources. If you want, it'll be about how long it would take all the companies to scan in all this sort of stuff. Presumably, they're using volunteers as well to do a lot of the scanning. With us, a lot of it is rights-based. So, there's some stuff we can't make available because of the original rights that were signed at the time by whoever did the programs or whatever. So, there'll be third-party music in some of the videos and stuff like that. But we try to make as much available as we can on through the digital archive. That will

grow obviously.

Georgia: Exactly. Yeah, to bigger and better things.

This is an extremely meaty project. It keeps going after years later. So, I think the big question pertains is, where are we now with it? Where are we going with it? So, I like Matthew to answer that first, and then I'll go to Nicola and Patrick.

Matthew: I don't think I can answer where we're at with it now, because we've not been involved since we sort of set the project going, I don't believe. So maybe Nicola and Patrick should answer this question rather than me.

Georgia: In that case over to you Nicola and Patrick.

Nicola: It is currently sitting in OU archive spaces, and it's quite safe there. Just for the pandemic, we started realizing that we still had so many to catalogue. Yes, there are still a few more to scan as well. We actually developed the online archive cataloguer volunteering role, which, again, was extremely helpful to move the project on. That meant we could send them as a set, Patrick did this as well, photographs digitally and we still got a few more of those to do. So that will carry on a bit.

We also, just trying to think when it was early 2018, Jahela and I, she was one of the volunteers, we delivered a presentation to the Chartered Institute for archaeologists. They had an archive session, their archive group of which I was a member. Had a session up in Birmingham where they talked about using archives in the community and developing archives in the community. So, of course, our little project sat in very well with that. So, Jahela went up with me to Birmingham. We delivered this project with a lovely selection of photographs, including those from the political years, the campaigning years, the caring years. All these things we itemize so that other people could see it.

Now, yes, we still got some more to catalogue. It also gave forth the most awesome, our achievements video, which we developed in 2018. It's just been updated, hasn't it? So that can now be seen on our website as we fill in the last few years since the end of the last achievements video. We now brought that absolutely up to date. So, there's still lots of potentials, there are still some photos to be done, still, some cataloging to be done, and also to Quality Assurance as well. I know Matthew would agree with me that the whole point of archiving is to create an ordered and accessible archive that anybody who wants to research it out of interest or because of a project, anything. They can get hold of the information they want.

So, quality-assuring these as well, and making sure it's absolutely fit for purpose and we've done the very, very best we can for these. This is just an amazing resource. It really is absolutely incredible. Patrick's right, it distracts in the most pleasurable way, doesn't it? As we go down that rabbit hole and say, "Oh my gosh, look at that. The Queen! The queen is in that photo. Look at that. Our president meeting The Queen." It is quite amazing. Absolutely amazing resource.

Georgia: I bet it sends a lot of chills down your spine. It's almost like you're living it yourself, all that history. So rich.

Nicola: Absolutely.

Georgia: Well, it's been absolutely incredible everyone I really appreciate talking to you guys. Thank you so much for giving up the time to talk to us and to be on this podcast. Thanks, everyone for listening.

Andy: Thank you to Nicola, Patrick, and Matthew for being interviewed about this exciting project. Thanks also to Georgia for hosting. Our September podcast, by the way, is a celebration of freshers, which is a huge part of the association's year. So, you won't want to miss that. Until then, this has been The Association Conversation Station. It was hosted by Georgia Dimopoulou, and produced by myself, Andy Evans. Thanks for listening and see you next time.

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