



Alumna Subject Graduated Place of Work Position

Dr Melinda Haunton
PhD History
2002
The National Archives
Programme Manager for
Accreditation of Archive Services



The National Archives (TNA) is the UK government's official archive, containing over 1,000 years of history. They give detailed guidance to government departments and the public sector on information management and advise others about the care of historical archives. Melinda is the Programme Manager for Accreditation of Archive Services.

Great minds *go on to* great places

Were you considering any other universities before joining RHBNC for your PhD?

I knew that my research would involve very extensive work among government records, and that moving nearer my key sources would be helpful, so I was considering various options within the University of London. In the end, I liked the atmosphere of RHBNC most. I also found a PhD supervisor who understood what I wanted to do and why – that's critical for doctoral study to succeed.

What did you enjoy most about studying in the History Department?

I worked with some great colleagues and enjoyed meeting many fellow postgrads. I also enjoyed the links to wider London history institutions, especially the Institute of Historical Research

What area was your PhD in?

I was researching the Conservative government 1924-29, which lay between the first two Labour governments. The government was one of the most stable one-party governments of the interwar period, and though it covers the General Strike it's oddly quiet in many interwar histories. I wanted to review their domestic policies and see what they were attempting to do, in the context of the rise of Labour and the major societal changes post-First

World War. It's the government which passed the equal franchise for men and women, but sometimes it feels like a forgotten administration.

What did you enjoy most about your research?

Not surprisingly, given my subsequent career, it was original research and contact with the raw materials of the past that inspired me. Never quite knowing what will come next when you open a file is fascinating.

Are there any lecturers that particularly inspired you while you were at Royal Holloway?

There was a really strong faculty when I was there, and I knew people being tutored by Amanda Vickery, for example, which gave me an insight into very different types of research from my quite traditional political focus.

Career

What has been your career path since leaving Royal Holloway?

I joined the Historical Manuscripts Commission in 2002. They were in the process of merging to become part of TNA and I've stayed with the organisation since. I've had a number of roles within TNA, all with a focus towards supporting

the wider archives sector. Among my key roles have been developing the National Register of Archives; monitoring manuscript sales; being part of our archive inspection team; undertaking digitisation; developing collaborative projects for the sector such as our workforce diversity programme Opening Up Archives or the UK Archives Discovery Network; and working on the government policy on archives, Archives for the 21st Century.

Why did you choose to work at The National Archives?

The National Archives is a large organisation which means there are lots of opportunities; it's a good environment to work in and to see how you can make a difference to something you believe in.

I wanted a more practical, more team-based role, but I didn't want to lose the connection with historical research, having put so much time and passion into the subject. A job which works towards preserving the raw materials of history combines those two ideals. Plus, I once shared a lift with the Domesday Book, and that thrill never quite wears off!

What is a typical day at work like for you?

On site I am currently doing a lot of planning and project management, drafting guidance documents, working with partners and developing



people with passion

“I liked the atmosphere of RHBNC and found a PhD supervisor who understood what I wanted to do and why - that's critical for doctoral study to succeed”



IT systems which will support delivery of my current project, making Accreditation for archive services into a reality. Off site I could be doing anything – from talking to archive students to inspecting storage areas to supporting workforce development in the sector.

The archives sector is very varied, and visits take you behind the scenes at a whole range of institutions from family homes to universities, museums and charities.

Do you continue to use the skills developed during your PhD?

Yes, absolutely. Being able to work alone and not get discouraged, to research and analyse, to synthesise a response, to write lucidly about complex subjects – they are all very transferrable skills. I also sometimes get to deal with records enquiries which relate to my research, and the background of historical understanding is always useful.

Why did you decide to write a blog about the work you are doing at The National Archives?

We're developing our social media presence. I'm interested in connecting with the public; a lot of people have a positive but rather vague idea of

what archives can do. I love to open up the variety and depth of archive work, and to explain that there's so much more to it than quietly reading old documents. Archives are about people, about how people recorded what happened to them in the past and about how people now access and respond to those records. Finding new ways to talk about that is exciting and always rewarding.

What exciting projects are you working on at the moment?

Accreditation is the core of what I'm working on, as it is a new programme which takes us forward into new ways of working. Following the closure of the Museums Libraries and Archives Council, The National Archives took on new responsibilities as leader of the archives sector in October 2011. Accreditation is a big part of how we deliver on those responsibilities and one way we take forward the vision of Archives for the 21st Century.

In the wider sense, I'm also working with the Archives and Records Association, the professional body for the archives workforce, to define a framework of competencies for people who work in archives. It's a hugely interesting piece of work, to define what it means to work in archives and the full complexity of the tasks we undertake and the skills we need to do them well.

What do you hope to achieve in the next ten years?

To see accreditation move from the drawing board to delivery and maturity as a programme in the next few years. Then I'm sure I'll be on to the next big project to make a difference! Some key areas where we know there are real needs are around building the archives sector's capacity to collect the archives of today. It's difficult enough to preserve digital records for the long term, but it's becoming more difficult as people's digital lives expand far beyond word documents and emails across the whole range of social media.

What advice would you give to students interested in a career in archives?

Working in the archives sector is all about people, and increasingly about being able to work with a whole range of technology. By all means bring a love of history to the collections you work with, but please never think of a typical archivist as someone who sits in a corner reading medieval documents and not speaking to anyone! In archives, you can work with anyone from schoolchildren to socially excluded groups to TV producers to academic historians. You may be at the cutting edge of digital preservation research, or you may be running reminiscence therapy sessions for elderly people, and having a profound impact on their quality of life. Working to make archives accessible means following a huge range of options and might be via any format from xml to drama workshops!

For more Alumni Profiles visit: www.rhul.ac.uk/alumni/profiles/