

2020
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Audience Awareness in Rail- Related Memory Institutions



Introduction

If an archive is to reach its fullest potential, those that would benefit from using its collections must be aware of its existence. If a collection is being preserved so that it can be used for research, interest and educational purposes, it follows that steps need to be taken so that the people who would be interested in seeing that material know that it exists and how to access it. As Timothy Ericson puts it in the article *'Preoccupied with Our Own Gardens: Outreach and Archivists'*:

The goal is use. We need continually to remind ourselves of this fact. Identification, acquisition, description and all the rest are simply the means we use to achieve this goal. They are tools. We may employ all these tools skilfully; but if, after we brilliantly and meticulously appraise, arrange, describe and conserve our records, nobody comes to use them, then we have wasted our time. [1]

There is no way for an archival collection to achieve its ultimate goal of being used if nobody knows it exists and for many of the collections covered by the survey circulated ahead of this study, that low audience awareness is a major problem. 44% of rail-related organisations surveyed reported low audience awareness among the main challenges they faced in managing and promoting their archives, which is significantly higher than the 29% of general archives reporting this problem in 2015. [2] If they wish to reach the audience awareness levels enjoyed by other archives, rail-related organisations must find a way to embrace the four cornerstones of archival outreach: “learning more about our users, enhancing our image, promoting awareness of archives, and educating people about archives.” [3]

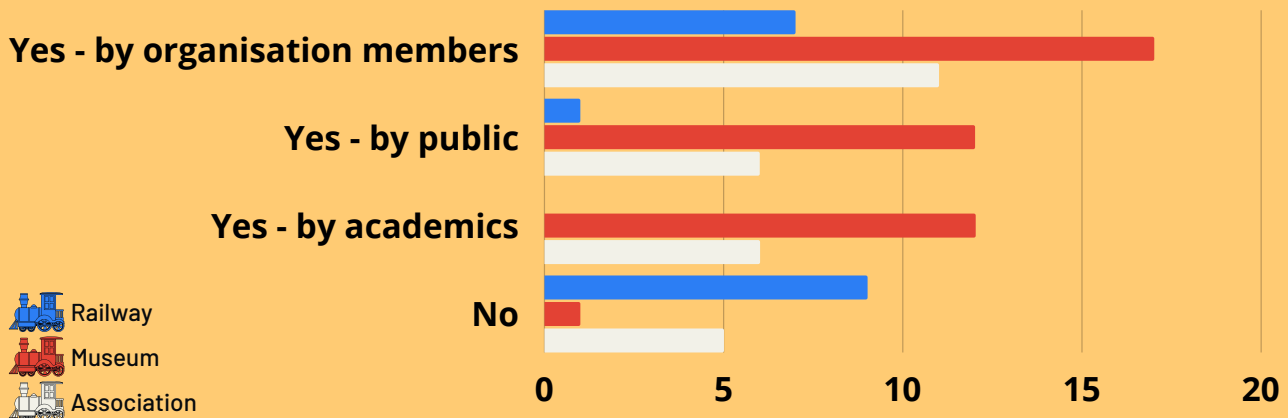
“It would be nice to collaborate with others to raise its profile and use. As it is on the main shelves it is hard for me to tell how much use it gets but it is tucked away and not widely known about.”

– Survey respondent.

The Numbers

When asked “Are your collections accessed regularly?”, 17% of collections were not accessed regularly while 83% of collections were accessed regularly.

Is the archival collection accessed regularly?



Of the organisations whose collections were accessed...

- 40% reported having their archives accessed regularly by employees, volunteers and members of that organisation.
- 22% reported having their archives accessed regularly by members of the public.
- 21% reported having their archives accessed regularly by academic researchers.

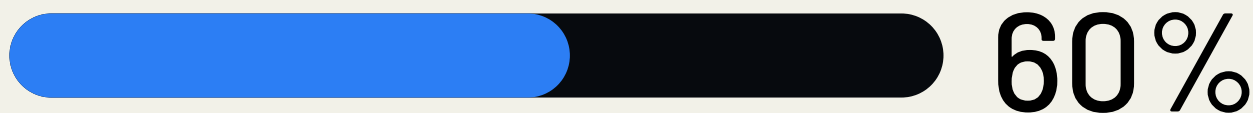
When asked “What are the main challenges you face in managing and promoting your archives?”, responses were as follows (where % refers to the percentage of organisations listing that item among the challenges they face):

Lack of capacity – staff 60%
Low audience awareness - 44%
Cataloguing backlogs - 42%
Funding - 42%
Lack of or diminishing resources - 35%
Low internal profile of archive - 31%
Lack of evidence archival value - 25%
Lack of capacity to collaborate - 17%
Low awareness - 17%
Geographical isolation - 15%

Lack of management skills - 15%
Lack of space for donations - 10%
Lack of opportunities to collaborate - 8%
Prioritisation of other areas - 4%
Inappropriate parent body - 4%
Aging volunteer cohort - 4%
Government policies - 4%
Limited collection - 2%
Encouraging visitors - 2%
No challenges - 2%

Museums and Archives

60% of railway museums and archives surveyed identified low audience awareness as one of their main challenges.



Respondents who reported low audience awareness appear to be doing what they can to manage this issue:

- **55%** have invited collaboration with other archives and railway organisations.
- **36%** have tried inviting cross-sector collaboration (for example, working with universities, schools, NHS or local businesses).

Other awareness-building activities have been less commonly used:

- **9%** have attempted to build awareness by developing work with after-school clubs and specific student groups on curriculum-based projects.
- **9%** have introduced a community engagement plan or policy.

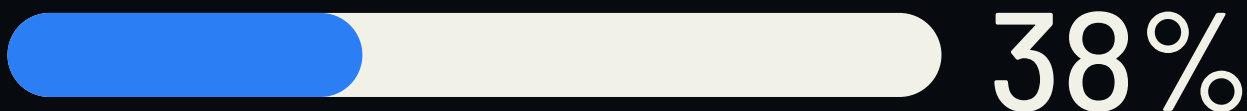
9% of archives and museums with low audience awareness (compared to 5% of all museums) have taken no action to improve circumstances.

When asked about changes respondents would like to see in their sector that would improve their ability to manage and promote their collections, one museum simply responded: *“Educational and media organisations engaging with local museums rather than biased towards state funded iconic ones.”*



Line Associations

Low audience awareness appears to be a much smaller issue for line associations, with only 38% of respondents reporting it among their main challenges.



- 33% of those affected (38% of all line associations) have tried building awareness by inviting collaboration with other archives and railway organisations.
- 17% (6% of all) have invited cross-sector collaboration.
- 17% (6% of all) have worked with after-school clubs and students groups.

While 13% of line associations reported having taken no actions to improve their archival management and promotion, all of those struggling with low audience awareness had taken some form of action.

No responding line associations had introduced a community engagement plan or policy.

When asked about changes respondents would like to see in their sector that would improve their ability to manage and promote their collections, one line association replied that they would benefit from *“more publicity for our organisation and the value of its archives”*.



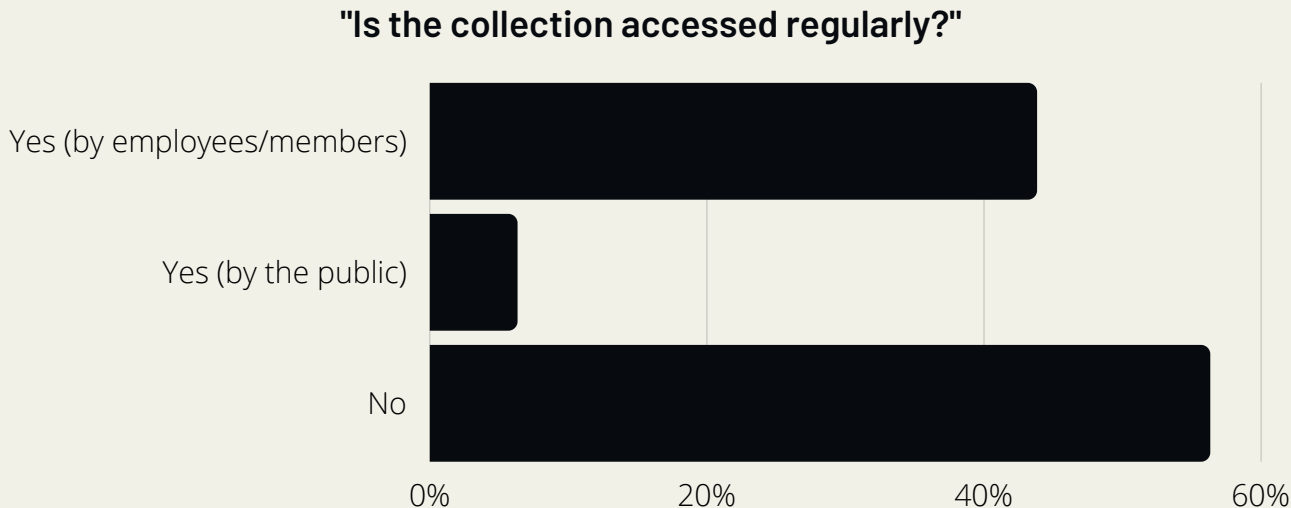
Heritage Railways

Heritage Railways reported far fewer issues with low audience awareness, a challenge which appears only to affect 29% of respondents.



None of the railways that reported low audience awareness have tried collaborating with other archives or railway organisations, initiating cross-sector connections or working with student groups to build audience awareness.

40% of heritage railways struggling with low audience awareness (versus 35% of all heritage railways) reported having taken no action to improve archival management or promotion.



When asked "Are your collections accessed regularly?", 56.3% of collections were not accessed regularly while 43.7% of collections were accessed regularly. Of the organisations whose collections were accessed...

- 43.8% reported having their archives accessed regularly by employees, volunteers and members of that organisation.
- 6.3% reported having their archives accessed regularly by members of the public.

Recommendations

An archive whose collections are not used cannot truly fulfil its purpose, and an archive whose audience does not know it exists can't expect to be used.

01 Building a Network

One solution to low audience awareness would involve a change to the wider heritage railway industry in the development of a network of rail-related organisations that hold archival collections.

A formal network would make the dissemination of information between these organisations much easier and more effective. Network members could gain an awareness of the collections held by other members and signpost interested researchers to the relevant collections.

It is worth noting that while a network like this did not exist when this study was carried out, there had been some discussion of The National Archives coordinating something like it in the future. This network was set to resemble the Aviation and Aerospace Archives Initiative [4] with a focus instead on wheeled land transport.

The subject was raised in a presentation by Mike Rogers published online, which posed the question: "With the air and maritime sectors now active, is there a need for something to cover land transport archives?" [5]



While still in its early days, the network proposed in Rogers' presentation - Land Transport Archives Network (LTAN) - has now been created. Information is available via their website, <https://ltan.info/>.

02


Inviting Cross-Sector Collaboration

Inviting cross-sector collaboration, for example with local businesses, higher education institutions, schools or NHS organisations, can bring a great range of other benefits in addition to improving audience awareness among members of the collaborating organisations and the general public.

A common example of this type of collaboration, and one which could be highly advantageous to rail-related memory institutions, is a collaboration between the archive-holding organisation and an institute of higher education. The National Archives have released guidance [6] on this form of collaboration, the most recent edition of which was published in 2018 and is itself a collaboration between The National Archives and History UK. As this guide explains, "this country's hugely rich and diverse network of more than 2,500 archives, are our collective memory, inspiring learning and research, and shaping our understanding of our past. We all have an interest in strengthening and supporting collaboration, learning and research, underpinned by our rich archival heritage." [7]

For smaller organisations who do not necessarily feel they have enough to offer higher education institutions in a collaboration, a solution is once again found in the network proposed above. In order to make a collaboration appear more enticing to universities, TNA guidance advises smaller archives to "explore whether you can work in partnership with other local organisations to present a group 'archive and special collections offer' to local higher education institutions." [8]





Importantly, ahead of the release of the Guide, The National Archives carried out a consultation with archives which had engaged in a collaborative programme with a higher education institution and found that these archives had identified key benefits such as “enhanced impact and profile raising”, “user/audience development”, “new interpretation of archives”, “knowledge exchange”, “access to specialist expertise”, “access to new research” and “access to funding streams”. [9]

The two benefits most commonly reported were enhanced impact and audience development. Participating archives were given “opportunities to demonstrate the value and impact of archives to a wider audience” and “opportunities to expand [their] audience[s] - particularly student and academic audiences.” [10]

In addition to the placement/internship possibilities outlined in the points above, TNA suggest that archives and universities can collaborate in teaching and learning activities, exhibitions, outreach, research and digitisation. [11]

03 **Introducing a Community Engagement Plan or Policy**

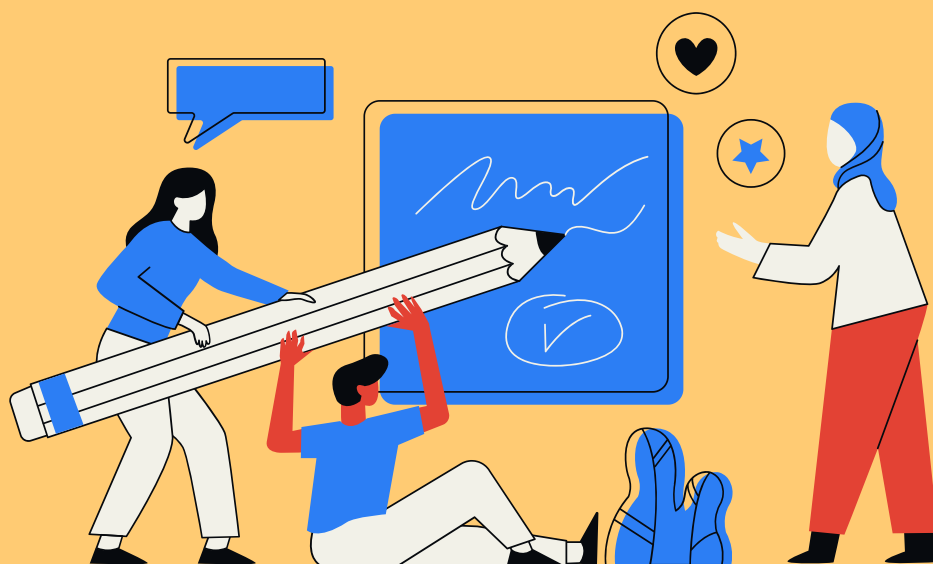
Where archival organisations routinely consider outreach and community engagement activities to be a low-priority activity and focus instead on cataloguing and collecting activities [12], the introduction of a Community Engagement Plan or Policy will create a sense of accountability for outreach within the archival organisation and highlight community engagement activities as important and worthwhile endeavours.

In 2008, The National Council on Archives’ Public Services Quality Group released their *Standard for Access to Archives* [13] as an updated version of the *Standard* published in 1999. While the 12-year-old update is no doubt in need of an update itself, this is still

the edition promoted by the Archives & Records Association [14]. This standard is “intended to be applicable in all kinds of archive service in the UK and was produced not as a prescriptive rule book, but as a model intended to encourage innovation [and] be sustainable in conditions of continual change.” [15]

The very first point laid out in the *Standard* is that an archive should make it clear who it intends to serve by producing “documentation setting out its aims in relation to access, including a definition of the community served.” [16] Setting out a target audience in an access policy and carrying this through to the community engagement policy will enable the archive to plan effectively for its community engagement activities to create greater audience awareness. It will also ensure that, once the intended audience learns of the archive’s existence, they will be able to confirm with little effort that they are, indeed, welcome to use the archive’s collections for their research and enjoyment.

A community engagement plan should also outline “active steps to ensure it can define the constituents of the community, assess under-representation from its community among users, and plan appropriately to improve knowledge of the archive service among under represented groups.” [17]



04

Enhancing Public Image

As discussed previously, one factor that blocks audience awareness of smaller local collections is the focus of the media and educational authorities on larger, government-funded museums and archives. While no set of actions can guarantee a shift in media or government attention, certain activities to improve the credibility of the organisation may lead to wider media coverage and, in turn, to greater audience awareness.

An organisation may pursue greater credibility by solidifying their archival policies and plans, improving their facilities and building up their overall “organisational health” in order to seek archival accreditation [18]. Organisations whose archives are too small or receive too little funding to apply for archival accreditation could improve their credibility in other ways. For example, one could pursue a collaboration as discussed above, or one could engage with a mainstream, publicly-funded archive.

Partnerships between smaller archives, such as those held by line associations, heritage railways and smaller transport museums, and mainstream archives can be beneficial to both parties. Stevens, Flinn and Shepherd have identified five main types of collaboration between these two types of organisation: Custody, where the mainstream archive helps the smaller archive by “supporting them in securing the long-term future of their collections through a range of increasingly flexible custody arrangements” [19]; Collection, where one archive helps the other to fill “gaps” in its collection; Curation/dissemination, where archive professionals from one institution offer another organisation guidance on exhibitions and engagement; Advice, where “publicly-funded archives... offer community-based organisations is training in archive skills and advice on matters such as preservation, digitisation, documentation, copyright and

utilising collections to raise revenue” [20]; and Consultancy, where the smaller archive supports the mainstream archive by providing specialist knowledge on their subject of expertise. In some cases, building relationships with mainstream archives will not only enhance a smaller organisation’s credibility, but will help them to tackle awareness, access and storage issues:

One of the most innovative recent solutions to the competing demands of preservation, access and community control comes... from the museums sector. The Beamish Museum, an open-air museum in north-east England, in collaboration with the local museums service (Tyne and Wear), recently developed a system of ‘heritage cubes’, whereby local organisations are invited to store their material in a special self-storage facility. Beamish offers training in collections care and access to a shared collections study room, whilst staff and the public benefit from the more regular presence on site of the expert knowledge embodied by the depositors. [21]

While smaller heritage railway organisations may view large, publicly-funded institutions as competitors who receive all the visitors, funding and recognition, and while mainstream archivists may view community archivists with no formal training “at best as amateurs and at worst as usurpers” whose involvement in the industry brings with it a risk of “devaluing of their own hard-earned knowledge” [22], collaboration between the two groups is often mutually beneficial.

Finally, organisations seeking greater recognition from the media and from educational institutions need not simply sit and wait for these institutions to notice their merit. Activities like sending out press releases, running coordinated social media campaigns and setting up education or apprenticeship schemes can all draw attention to an organisation and its collections.



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3. Ericson 1990-91, pp. 120.
4. AAI, 2020. <https://www.aviationarchives.uk>.
5. Rogers 2020.
6. McNulty and O'Rourke 2018.
7. Ibid. pp. 4.
8. Ibid. pp. 6.
9. Ibid. pp. 10.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid. pps. 19-22.
12. See ten Cate 1989 and Ericson 1990-91.
13. PSQG 2008.
14. ARA 2020.
15. PSQG 2008, pp. 7.
16. Ibid. pp. 12.
17. Ibid. pp. 30.
18. AAS 2018.
19. Stevens, Flinn & Shepherd 2010, pp. 64.
20. Ibid. pp. 67.
21. Ibid. pp. 65.
22. Ibid. pp. 70.



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