

The Churchill Papers: a modern historical epic

“For my part, I consider that it will be found much better by all Parties to leave the past to history, especially as I propose to write that history myself”.

Winston S Churchill, 23 January 1948

It is not often that the tale of the archive itself, rather than discussion of its contents, becomes the story – but the Churchill Papers collection is perhaps as large, as complex, and as multi-faceted as its creator.

Professor David Reynolds in his book *In Command of History* has shown how Churchill assembled, mobilised and published his own archive to win the battle of the books following the Second World War, while David Lough in his exhaustive financial study *No More Champagne* has documented how Churchill used his papers to earn money, to limit his tax liabilities, and to establish an asset for his heirs.

And when the Churchill Papers were bought for the nation using a £13.25M grant from the newly established Heritage Lottery Fund in April 1995, the collection was front page news. Surely the nation owned some of these papers already? And even if they did not, should they not be given to the nation by the Churchill family?

More recently, the archive has had a better press, with its inscription on both the UK and the international register of the UNESCO Memory of the World Project (making it the archival equivalent of a world heritage site, but without the funding).

What is the Churchill Papers collection?

The Churchill Papers collection comprises the personal papers of Sir Winston Churchill, Britain’s celebrated wartime Prime Minister, politician, statesman and writer, whose career spanned the reigns of six monarchs, from Queen Victoria to Elizabeth II. He was someone who lived by his pen, so it will not surprise you to learn that this is a huge collection, some one million items comprised in two and a half thousand archival boxes. It is also a very rich collection, combining personal correspondence (starting with childhood letters) with the literary manuscripts and proofs for his many books and newspaper articles, as well as his political correspondence and the drafts and notes for his speeches (including his wartime broadcasts). It juxtaposes the official with the personal and the contemporary documents with his later published reflections. It covers major events in British and world history from the Boer War to the Suez Crisis; it features correspondence with kings, presidents, prime ministers, politicians, generals, admirals, authors and artists – everyone from Franklin Roosevelt to Charlie Chaplin and Vivien Leigh; and it contains some of the most famous phrases spoken in the English language.

Historically, what we now call the Churchill Papers Archive has been two collections. In 1946, acting on the advice of his financial specialists, Churchill created the Chartwell Literary Trust. All of his personal papers up to 27 July 1945 were then vested in this body. By contrast, his post 1945 papers were bequeathed to Clementine Churchill, with the recommendation that she might consider giving them to the National Trust to house at Chartwell, but confirming that she was free to dispose of them as she wished. Between 1961 and 1964 an initial arrangement and file listing was carried out

by the staff of the Public Record Office. This recognised and captured the division by assigning all the pre 1945 Chartwell Trust Papers with a Chartwell Trust stamp and the four letter prefix CHAR , while the post 1945 papers were stamped “WSC” and given the prefix CHUR.

The exercise led to the references but also to a classification structure that remains to this day which divides Churchill’s life into compartments based on function. It arranges political papers by office, constituency papers by constituency, groups speech and literary material together, separates personal correspondence from more general political material and creates a special grouping for acquired or inherited papers, which latter group includes some of Churchill’s childhood material kept by his mother. Within these classes, the arrangements are largely chronological. All of which means that this is a collection which has been worked and reworked, first by Churchill and his many personal and private secretaries and literary assistants and researchers, then by archivists, and then to a lesser extent by Randolph Churchill and his successor Martin Gilbert as they began work on the official biography. Randolph had custody of the papers at his house in Stour until his death in 1968, and Martin had access at the Bodleian until their transfer to the new purpose built Churchill Archives Centre in Cambridge in 1974.

Since 1974 the arrangement of the collection may have been static, but the question of ownership has been complex. Having raised a lot of money from wealthy Americans to build a dedicated Archives Centre, Churchill College clearly wanted and needed to know that the collection was secure in Cambridge. This had seemed a realistic proposition: Clementine Churchill having given the post-1945 papers to the College in 1969. Unfortunately, the Chartwell Trust felt the need to realise the value of its asset, and wanted the state or a private donor to step in and purchase the pre-1945 papers. The State was understandably reluctant but also felt it had an interest in “strayed” official documents within the collection that the trust should not be allowed to sell. As you can imagine, years of tense and rather frustrating negotiations followed between the various interested parties, until, in April 1995, the new Heritage Lottery Fund was used to break the impasse.

The papers were bought for the nation from the Chartwell Trust for £12.5 million, with a further £1.75 million being provided for cataloguing, conservation and endowment. £13.25 million came from the newly established Heritage Lottery Fund, with the remaining £1million coming from Getty. The Churchill Archives Centre was suddenly front page news. In the words of then Keeper, Dr Piers Brendon: *“Its announcement caused a furore. But, as we pointed out to the enormous number of press enquiries at the time, there is no doubt that the grant was well spent. All the Churchill Papers (including the post-1945 Papers, which Clementine Churchill had given to the College and which it contributed as “matching funding”) remained together in the building that was designed to hold them. They were vested in an independent charitable trust, the Sir Winston Churchill Archive Trust, whose first chairman was Andreas Whittam Smith. And in purely financial terms, as subsequent sales of holograph Churchill letters showed, the nation got a bargain”.*

The lottery purchase effectively acquired the Churchill Papers for the nation and vested their ownership in a new charitable trust, the Sir Winston Churchill Archive Trust or SWCAT. The Trust exists to ensure that the papers remain in Cambridge, in the Archives Centre purpose-built to house them, but also oversees the work of the Archives Centre on the collection. It is comprised of four Cambridge trustees, a representative of the Imperial War Museum, a representative of the British Library and an independent chairman, and its primary objective is to make the collection accessible

so as to support education and research at all levels. As Director of the Archives Centre, I serve ex officio as its secretary.

The challenge that has faced this body since its inception has been to counter the negative publicity of the purchase and to develop a strategy that will allow the collection to fulfil its rich educational and research potential.

What have we done do it to make the archive accessible in the digital age?

The new Trust inherited a partially catalogued collection at a time when microfilm was becoming obsolete as an access vehicle, but was still favoured as a preservation medium. It also inherited a deal between the Churchill family, as the single major copyright holder, and Gale/Thomson for the microfilming of the papers.

The strategy that the Trust adopted was a combination of high-profile mass access, through exhibitions of original documents in Cambridge, London, Manchester and Edinburgh, and the opening of the collection to researchers under supervised conditions in the Archives Centre reading rooms. The long-term strategy was designed to maximise access and ultimately to harness new digital technology.

The immediate aim and first step was the completion of a detailed catalogue, to go well beyond the simple skeleton of file names and dates produced by the National Archives. A huge database of almost 70,000 records was produced between 1995 and 2000 by a team of five professional archivists, comprising detailed descriptions of files and individual documents. Since the end of 2001 the catalogue has been available online, allowing researchers to search remotely around any name, date or subject. This invaluable finding aid is made available through the website of the Archives Centre. In its first two years, between its launch in late 2001 and December 2003, the online catalogue received almost 50,000 successful requests and it has continued to be heavily used ever since.

The cataloguing was funded by a specific £750,000 portion of the HLF funding. It took place alongside the microfilming, with the intention that researchers would be able to use the online catalogue to access the finished microfilm, whether in the reading room of the Archives Centre or in any institution that purchased the microfilm set. This was conceived as a commercial project, in recognition of the fact that the Trust did not have the resources to fund both the cataloguing and the image capture. The microfilming began in 2001 and continued through to 2005 with a rolling programme of copyright clearance and image capture.

The image capture was carried out by subcontractors. It was slow and labour intensive but it was predictable. The real headache came from the related process of copyright clearance, which was ably (and patiently) handled by my colleague Natalie Adams. Such was the complexity of this area that Natalie now gives a talk on the subject. Put simply, this is a modern collection where almost all the unpublished original letters and papers were still in copyright. Excluding the Churchill family copyrights and the Crown copyright material, there were still some 360,000 documents relating to 20,482 copyright holders that would need to be cleared prior to publication. This was an estimated 36% of the total collection. Counsel's legal opinion was sought and the easy but high risk option of publish and be damned was ruled out. And so another five year process was undertaken between

2000 and 2005, which involved assembling a huge clearance database, writing to known parties and advertising in the Times Literary supplement for those who were untraceable. This was labour intensive, both for the commercial publisher and for the Archives Centre in policing the process, and even caught the attention of *Private Eye*. The result was 4195 letters of permission, 7909 untraced names and just 14 refusals.

But even as this process was being undertaken, it was also becoming redundant. It was clear that microfilm was becoming obsolete as an access medium and that the market was moving to digital. Thus when Gale/Thomson, after comparatively poor sales of the complete microfilm edition, made it clear that they did not wish to exercise any options in comprehensive online publication, the Trustees consulted with the Churchill family and their literary agents Curtis Brown, as the major copyright holder in the collection, and then launched a tendering process for a new commercial partner.

This was a different tendering process, one that we did not simply inherit, and therefore one over which we had far more control. We were looking for a company that understood the increased searching and presentational capabilities of electronic publication, as well as being prepared to actively market the material in different ways, through different products, to different audiences. Bloomsbury Academic won the contract and we signed with them in July 2010.

This was not quite the end of all our problems. Conversion from the microfilm to digital was not difficult; the microfilm edition had been produced to a suitably high preservation specification and our catalogue was relatively easy to incorporate. But another copyright clearance exercise was required to ensure that the collection was cleared for online publication. At least this time we had the database and could replace published adverts with online lists of untraceable copyrights.

And so this brings us to today. The Churchill Archive Online is live. The Churchill Papers are being accessed in digital format both within the Churchill Archives Centre, where they remain free at point of access, and at some 35 subscribing institutions worldwide (including universities in Australia, Beirut, Canada, China, France, Finland, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States). It is currently being trialled by over 70 other institutions.

The ability to search the catalogue and view items and files has been supplemented with introductory articles, as well as more in-depth guides, written by expert historians on themes and subjects found within the papers. The material can be accessed by topic, period, person or place. It can be searched by date. There are changing exhibition pages in front of the paywall highlighting the treasures within and there are guides showing how to get the most from the resource.

In addition, and thanks to the amazing generosity of Mr Laurence Geller, Bloomsbury has been able to develop the complementary resource, Churchill Archive for Schools, which provides online exercises and teaching resources and is completely free to secondary schools worldwide. These resources have been developed by educational experts on such subjects as *Key Developments in Modern World History* and *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century*. Any school using Churchill Archive for Schools can subscribe free of charge to the Churchill Archive Online itself. To date 890 have done so across 29 countries. The aim is to get 3,000 sign ups by March 2017.

And so we have gone from paper, to microfilm, to digital; and from a closed collection to one that is now globally available.

What lessons have we learned?

Short-term pain has been worth long-term gain. The Churchill Papers project has been complex. Every phase from cataloguing to copyright clearance, from supervising microfilming to digitisation, has involved years of work by Archives Centre staff. It has helped that the Trustees have had a very clear vision from the beginning about the need to digitise the material and a strategy that worked through the various phases in a clear and logical order. We have been very lucky to have the expert advice of such highly experienced trustees, and the existence of the Trust has allowed the Archives Centre to resist pressure from third parties to rush the publication of the material, and to sacrifice quality for speed. The Trust was clear that the conservation and cataloguing of the collection had to come first, as these processes gave us the physical and intellectual control of the material. They were also understood that copyright clearance, though hugely time consuming, must be done properly if such a high-profile national collection was to be made available on a commercial basis. And I would argue that commercial partnership was the only viable way forward.

It is better to fight with the right allies. Churchill famously said that the only thing worse than fighting with allies was fighting without them. I cannot pretend that all our partnerships have been perfect. However, the decision to work with the Churchill family, recognising their status as the main copyright holder, has made things so much easier. After the lottery purchase the Trust could have attempted to keep the family at arm's length, especially as there was a real danger that the Trust would be criticised for helping the family to generate a further income stream from the copyright in a collection they had just sold. In reality, the family has been consistently supportive in ploughing its royalties back into Churchill related charities, and in helping promote the online products. The decision to work with a commercial partner, in this case Bloomsbury, has also removed the burden of product development, copyright clearance, marketing and advertising from the Trust. The Trust and the Archives Centre simply do not have the scale, resources and infrastructure to create what Bloomsbury has achieved.

The end product has to be led by the end user and I have no doubt that the online products will continue to be refined by user demand. This has already led to the curation of additional content for the Churchill Archive Online, and to the creation of the Churchill Archive for Schools website. It is a process that must continue if the product is not to become static and irrelevant. As Churchill said: "The empires of the future are the empires of the mind."