

Hull History Centre

The major grant given to Hull History Centre enabled two public archives that were rich in material but more or less inaccessible, to be rehoused in a striking new building in the city centre. The new facility brings together material held by the City Archives – including borough archives dating back to 1299, records relating to Hull's maritime history, and papers of nationally significant individuals such as William Wilberforce and Philip Larkin – with archives and records held by the University of Hull.

Year of HLF grant: 2006

Value of grant: £7,697,000

Description of project: Creation of new building to house both Hull City Council archive and Hull University archive; re-location of archives from existing locations to environmentally controlled area; re-cataloguing of existing catalogues; provision of flexible research/learning space; landscaping of surrounding park area.

Year of completion of project: 2010

Interviewee: Simon Green, Head of Heritage, Hull City Council

“The effect of the major grant on the archives was enormous – the collection was unseen and unknown and might have stayed that way for another 50-60 years.”

Before the move, Hull City Council's (HCC) archive was kept in a fine but largely inaccessible Victorian building. The entrance was hard to find and opened on to a maze of stairs, and the collection was scattered across a warren of first and second floor rooms. There were some small study areas, with limited natural daylight, alongside staff offices, but there was only space for ten visitors at any one time – more than that would have been more than the staff could have coped with anyway. Because of this, public awareness of the archive was low, not least because Hull City Council didn't promote the archive. So although the collection contained many treasures, and fascinating nuggets of local social history, the population of the city was unaware of its existence.

The organisation and condition of the archive also left something to be desired. Environmental controls, while adequate, were not up to modern standards. And the system for managing the archive was rather haphazard. Hull had developed its own bespoke way of cataloguing, which was not standardised across the collection or compatible with other national and international archives.

The idea of sharing space with the University archive had been around for a few years. The University's archival spaces were in need of improvement, and lacked room to expand. The Council was looking to build partnerships, and the University was under external pressure to widen participation. The University is based three miles outside of the city centre, and can seem “a bit remote and forbidding” to non-students, says Green.

So, in the end, an entirely new building was built in the city centre with environmentally-controlled rooms to house both archives. The new facilities include a local studies library, a search room, education facilities, staff offices and a café (all

on the ground floor), with the archives themselves on the first floor, safe from flooding, and with enough space for 20 years' worth of expansion. (In fact, expansion space is needed because depositions have risen dramatically since the centre was opened, as people discover it.)

The building itself represents a remarkable achievement. The build went smoothly and finished on budget. The design is very contemporary and, although it was somewhat controversial on the grounds that it was so modern for a 'heritage' space, it has already become a popular icon of the city, and has won a Civic Trust award as a project that "makes an outstanding contribution to the quality and appearance of the environment".

As a result of the build, the archives have received some much-needed attention: existing items have been re-catalogued, bringing everything up to contemporary standards, and the collection is being put online. This process is leading the archive to (re)discover some items, such as the details of the war record of a well-known local singer, David Whitfield (the first British male vocalist to earn a gold disc). The new space has also allowed the team to make better use of volunteers – in the cataloguing work, but also on one-off themed projects.

All in all, the project has resulted in a wholly different visitor experience for people using the city archives. There is much more space, and everything is now fully accessible for disabled visitors. Consequently, the number of visitors has increased greatly, as well as the range – from casual visitors to professional researchers. The archive can now receive school groups, which it could not do previously. Although the facility still has two distinct staff groups – the Council and the University – visitors are presented with a seamless public face.

The archives are now used in displays both in the History Centre and in city museums and libraries, thereby enriching the wider cultural activity of the city. There is a good cross-over between Hull's museums service and the archives: if people are interested in a particular topic they are encouraged by staff to explore what the other institutions hold on that subject. Members of the fishing community, for instance, have been redirected from the Maritime Museum to the archives to find out more about history of fishing in the area.

The impact of the project is easy to discern: the archives are now much more accessible, and receiving around 30,000 visitors a year, which makes it one of the busiest archives in the country, outside London. And while the quality of the collection was previously known only to a select few, it has now been embraced much more by the city. "People feel a sense of ownership of the archive now", says Green, and the University has a much stronger profile in the centre of the city.

The Centre has helped the council to understand the benefit of culture, and has therefore raised the profile of culture politically too. Hull City Council was considering reconfiguring its service to limit the opening hours of the archive, but the election of a new council led to that decision being reversed and funding was secured for heritage, libraries and arts. The History Centre was part of the reason for this change – its success has been evidence of what culture can do for Hull. The political support has been rewarded by Hull's successful bid to be UK City of Culture in 2017.

Green was keen to stress the power of the large grants from HLF: “They allow you to advocate for arts/culture/heritage at a city-wide level. Their grand scale lets cultural professionals sit at the big table. It’s real currency for the profession.”