

CADG: COMMUNITY ARCHIVES IMPACT STUDY

CASE STUDY NO. 8

COMMUNITY ARCHIVES IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Introduction:

This is a report on community archives in Cambridgeshire. It addresses:

- the extent of community archival activity
- the kinds of group involved
- the types of archival activity
- the role it plays within different groups
- relationships with more traditional archives and record repositories

The report concludes by outlining the nature of community archives in the county; considering how this study impacts understandings of 'community archive'; and suggesting scope for development.

Cambridgeshire has been chosen as a sample county, comprising a mix of urban and rural areas, and types of community. It is not intended as a representative study, and the specific characteristics of this county form an important context for the study:

- Cambridgeshire is a largely rural, agricultural county, populated by small towns and villages. Cambridge is the only urban area of significant size.
- Cambridge and villages to the south are the most affluent areas.
- Cambridge is a highly important university town, and its 'associated culture' has a considerable influence on, for example, the profile and activity of historical societies
- The Cambridgeshire Community Archive Network (CCAN) was launched by the County Council in April 2006, a pioneering new network of community archives.
- The county is also served by many well-established, well-publicised traditional archives, local studies collections, local museums and libraries. These include the County Record Office and the Cambridgeshire Collection (a local studies collection based at Cambridge Central Library).

The methodology has involved:

- discussions with local groups and societies
- discussions with local archivists, museum curators and librarians
- discussions with CCAN organisers
- surveys of community group websites and directories

Section 1 examines the CCAN; section 2 looks at local history societies; section 3 considers other groups, clubs and societies. The report considers the significance of CCAN as a specific community archive initiative, setting it within a broader context of other community archive activity taking place in the county. It addresses scope, extent and variety of community archives, their accessibility, vulnerability and potential.

1. THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE COMMUNITY ARCHIVE NETWORK (CCAN)

The Cambridgeshire Community Archive Network (CCAN) was launched in April 2006, following the success of a smaller pilot project started in the previous year in East Cambridgeshire. 40 local volunteer groups are being set up across the county in addition to the initial 7, listed in Appendix A. CCAN has a particular and precise definition of community archive: 'a community archive is a digital collection of photographs, written word reminiscences, sound recordings and video clips created and maintained by local community groups'.¹ This point about community ownership and empowerment is a central consideration, although groups operate within agreed constitutions they are encouraged to establish their own methods of working and groups set up their own constitutions and practices. This suggests that traditional archives and repositories are *not* felt to be community owned. The project is clearly in its early stages, so it is not yet possible to assess its full impact, but several key factors concerning scope and significance are relevant to this study:

- **Funding and support**

The project has been awarded £299,500 by the Heritage Lottery Fund, to cover a 3 year period. The pilot was also HLF funded. The CCAN is also supported by the County Council through staff secondment and IT training. It is linked to Learn Direct initiatives. After this initial funding period ends, groups will have to be self-funding through grants or other fundraising. The Haddenham group, for example, is currently applying to the 'Community Champions Fund'.

- **Group profile**

With the exception of the planned Cambridge Ethnic Community Forum, the groups are associated with location-based communities, rather than those of faith, ethnicity or common interest. In practice, groups tend to have active cores of c.5 people. It is significant that the way groups are set up encourages a membership of those already involved in other local groups, particularly historical or museum societies. Existing local history experts/enthusiasts - 'opinion swayers' - are deliberately used as linchpins to build groups. Another

¹ CCAN leaflet

significant membership group comprises people new to a particular community, who are looking for ways to embed themselves. So far group members have tended to be aged over 45. Efforts to expand this profile, and connect with people who do not currently commonly access archives and local societies, may prove effective. See, for example, groups being set up in sheltered housing schemes.

- **Location**

The community archive groups largely 'piggy-back' the county's network of 'Community Access Points' - Computer/internet facilities located in library Learning Centres, museums, post-offices, day-centres and pubs across the county. Inaccessible and private spaces, e.g. homes, are avoided.

- **Digitisation and web access.**

All records will be digitised: it is intended that no paper archive should be kept, and that individual donors retain original copies and the copyright. Users and members can upload material from their own homes or any computer with internet access, although addition of material to the archive is vetted by the group. Groups are linked in an online network using systems supplied by Commanet (the community archive network).² Through the Commanet system, CCAN is linked to other community archives in other regions. Links to the website exist from County Council libraries site and from the national online directory of community archives in the UK.³

- **Collections**

The system is intended to hold digitised photographs, documents, oral history transcripts and recordings, film clips and other ephemera. These can be annotated and cross-linked. So far photographs are by far the most commonly uploaded category. Archives hold a mixture of historical and recent material, with a preponderance of the former, and there is a sense that groups value 'traditional' definitions of what archival material might be. Both original material and copies of material from traditional archives and library collections are collected.

- **Relationship with traditional archives and record repositories**

Although community archive autonomy is clearly an important value, groups are closely linked to the County Council, supported by staff from the Library Learning Services Team. Links are maintained between CCAN groups and traditional archives by the project's Archives Liaison Officer, who advises Groups on the best route to conservation for any donated items'. There is additionally a policy of passing on digital collections and rights to Cambridgeshire County Council, if a group collapses. Several groups are located in museums and libraries and involve librarians and curators as members, see for example the Haddenham, Chatteris, Denny Abbey, March, St Neots and Wisbech groups. This might invite criticisms that the new community archive groups duplicate these services. On the other hand valuable symbiotic relationships seem to be developing, whereby groups can include copies museum/library material in

² <http://www.commanet.org/ccan/>

³ links via : <http://www.communityarchives.org.uk>

<http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/leisure/archives/projects/communityarchives.htm>

their collections, and these bodies can benefit from the digitisation and therefore increased accessibility of their collections.

- **Activities and outreach**

It is too soon to assess these areas of activity, however it is clear that groups are planning outreach and other activities as they develop. Some pilot groups have already engaged in displays and exhibitions, and publicise their activities through local newspapers and newsletters.

CCAN clearly represents an innovative project, with potential for the development of many more community archives in the area, and serving as a useful model for other regions. There are certainly some limitations in current scope and overlap with existing services at present, but this is still an early stage in the project.

2. LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

Locally-organised historical societies form an important sub-group of community groups within the Cambridgeshire area. The historical societies are by far the most likely type of group to engage in archival activity, although there is significant variation across the sector in approach and kinds of activity. 79 groups are publicised through 'The Conduit' (a directory and events list compiled and published by the Cambridge Antiquarian Society and Cambridgeshire Association for Local History) and InfoCam (a directory hosted by the libraries section of the County Council website).⁴ These societies are listed in Appendix B. For most of these groups archival activity is an important, although not usually central, concern, i.e. many explicitly see themselves as holding 'community archives' and/or as conducting community archival activities. The main findings are as follows:

- **Group profiles**

Many of these groups are well established, with large memberships compared to CCAN groups. They hold lecture series and other events, publish newsletters and journals, and conduct research, amongst other activities. They are typically funded substantially by membership, in addition to grants. Members are often well-educated, with high levels of subject-specific knowledge.

- **Archives**

The kinds of archives held by these societies vary greatly. As many societies are well established, society administrative records are often recognised as being of historic interest. Many have or have had research reports, collections of photographs, and the papers of individuals, such as antiquarian collections, within their collections. Original material is frequently mixed with copies of material deposited in other archives. Most items are not digitised, although this is gradually changing.

- **Funding**

Several local history societies and similar groups have received funding for their archives, notably via the HLF Local Heritage Initiative. This scheme currently supports 44 projects in Cambridgeshire, of which the majority involve an element of archive activity, ranging from the central creation, preservation or presentation of community archives (See for example the project at Whittlesford) to the deposit of project-related archives in other established repositories.⁵ Many of these projects are linked to local historical societies. Such funding is a highly significant factor in archive activity and interest, providing the resources available for collecting, storage and accessibility, for example through digitisation and outreach. The stipulation of archive activity as a condition of funding is also noted as a motivation for activity in this area.

- **Relationship with more traditional record repositories**

The majority of these groups have good links with more traditional record repositories, notably the Cambridgeshire Collection, The County Record Office, the University Library, specialist departments at the University, or local museums. The societies relate to these repositories as users: copying and

⁴ <http://www2.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/cambssc/infocam/cid.nsf/index.htm?OpenForm>.

⁵ www.lhi.org.uk

transcribing material for their own collections, research and publications. But several also frequently make deposits of material. Policy on this matter is not consistent.

- **Local Museums as Archives**

Some local history societies, for example the Royston and District Local History Society and the Whittlesea Society were previously responsible for setting up local museums, and although management of them has now usually passed to a trust or the local authority, the maintenance of strong links means that these museums often form the archives for these local societies, providing storage, display and access for. Administrative records relating to the societies' function are more usually retained by the society itself, considered separately from photographs and other historical ephemera.

- **Publications**

For many groups, archival material is disseminated by publication (book, CD-Rom or microfiche), as an alternative to holding formalised, accessible digitised or paper archive. Copies of publications are deposited in traditional archives and libraries, and are available to purchase. This method has the benefit of raising income, and is especially popular amongst family history groups.

- **Storage**

Where archives are kept by the society, they are usually stored in members' houses and garages, often with the designated group librarian or secretary, but also sometimes split between society members. Their existence is therefore vulnerable.

- **Reluctance to conduct archival activity**

Groups often make an active choice not to hold their own archives, or to reduce their size. This is partly explained in terms of resources/space problems, but is also a more positive choice: that more traditional archives are the best places to deposit their archival material in terms of receiving professional assistance with cataloguing and conservation, and also for maximising accessibility.

3. OTHER COMMUNITY GROUPS AND SOCIETIES

Cambridgeshire is the venue for a very large number of community groups and societies. 4300 are listed centrally on 'InfoCam', with 969 entries for Cambridge alone. Directory compilers and local community websites suggest that these figures represent a significant underestimation, with the likelihood that actual numbers are closer to 6000. This figure does not include, for the most part, the clubs and societies associated with schools, further and higher educational establishments and workplaces, which might well fall within definitions of 'community groups'. Cambridge University, for example, lists 305 university-wide societies on its website, and individual colleges list up to 68 college societies each.⁶

- **Community websites**

Many Cambridgeshire local communities run one or more community website. Cambridgeshire.gov.uk lists and links to 93 such websites. Amongst other functions, these community websites provide a central directory for the groups and societies within the community, sometimes with links to their websites. To a limited extent, the community websites constitute community archives in themselves, and certainly have the developmental potential to provide many of the functions of the CCAN websites. Although rarely overtly presented as 'community archives' these sites carry out archival functions. For example, many provide a venue for contemporary and historic photographs. Photographs are often used to illustrate 'home', 'history' or 'events' pages, but some websites have 'gallery' sections, presenting contemporary and historic photographs in the format of an on-line archive. See for example the 'gallery' section of www.buckden-village.co.uk, where photographs are stored according to date, and annotated with a description and ownership details. Some also house other kinds of records. For example, Brampton Parish Council website hosts council minutes. The websites do not, however, actively collect through calls for donations/uploaded images.

- **Burwell sample study**

A sample survey was carried out of community groups, special interest clubs and societies in Burwell. Burwell is a large village on the fen-edge in East Cambridgeshire, with a resident population of c.5800.⁷ Typical of villages in the Cambridgeshire area, it is well served by such groups. 64 are currently listed on the two main online community directories serving the area, InfoCam and www.burwell.co.uk, listed in Appendix C. This figure is likely to represent an underestimation of extant groups.

Burwell's local societies include religious groups, sports clubs, leisure activity societies (including music, gardening, lace-making), gender-specific societies and elderly support groups. Some form part of umbrella organisations, for example the Women's Institute, or constitute special interest groups linked to a broader group, for example the St Mary's Burwell Preservation Trust, which has potential implications for their strategies for archive and record keeping, although most operate independently.

This sample survey, placed in the context of the broader study, suggests the following:

⁶ <http://www.cam.ac.uk/societies/>

⁷ 2001 census.

- There is an absence of community groups for whom an archive is a primary or even significant activity.
- Very few groups say that they actively collect archival material or even hold what they recognise as 'an archive', the local history society being an exception.
- However, following further discussion, the majority of groups said they kept 'records', most commonly minutes of meetings, usually because it is required of them as registered charities, but also because it is useful for them to track previous activities, procedures and policy decisions.
- Photographs of activities and events are also frequently kept, although usually not as part of a coherent, recorded collection. They are most commonly owned and kept by individual members, and used collectively for the purposes of displays, publications and websites. Photographs are increasingly kept in digital format.
- Commitment to keeping archival material does not depend on the subject area of the society, but more on an individual member or members' interest in the area.
- The main reasons given for reluctance towards archival activity is the time commitment and resources required, in addition to a belief that it should not be a priority for the society as it lay outside their main area of interest. All work is voluntary, and grants are apparently not sought by these groups for their records.
- Records are almost always kept in members' homes, usually that of the club's main organiser, and are not generally accessible to others, except for occasional displays and website illustrations.

CONCLUSIONS:

- The CCAN represents a significant development in community archives in Cambridgeshire, providing a useful model for other areas. There are no other groups which explicitly identify themselves wholly as community archive groups within the county.
- Many other local groups, clubs and societies effectively function *partly* as community archives, although they frequently do not recognise themselves as such.
 - These groups usually consider their administrative material as 'records', and understand 'archives' to mean resources such as the Cambridgeshire Collection or County Record Office, i.e. within location-specific, formalised and professionalised spaces and structures
 - Most of these groups and societies collect, store and/or use archival material as part of their activities to a varying extent. For the local history societies, this is an important, although usually not core, activity. For other local and special interest groups it is a more marginal activity.
 - Many groups differentiate between their treatment of administrative records and other historical/contemporary material such as photographs and press cuttings.
 - Administrative material is used for reference regarding society processes and decisions; whereas more visual material is used by the groups for display and publication. Unless it is deposited with a more established repository, it is not generally used for other research.
 - Local history societies and religious groups often have good links with more traditional archives: the County Record Office, the Cambridgeshire Collection and other libraries.
 - Most collections are not currently digitised.

- Many collections are stored in vulnerable places: in members' garages and spare rooms.

There are several reasons given for not conducting archival activity given by Cambridgeshire groups:

- Lack of time, funding and other resources are the most frequently cited reasons for not carrying out archival activity.
- Local history groups also frequently expressed the view that more traditional archives are the best places to deposit their archival material in terms of receiving professional assistance with cataloguing and conservation, and also for maximising accessibility.
- Some local special-interest groups express a lack in interest: suggesting that this does not relate to the group purpose and identity.

The successful future development of Cambridgeshire's community archive structures and activities seems to be dependent on effective education and outreach, secure funding and better networking:

- Effective education regarding the definition, purpose and benefits of community archives are needed to encourage groups to start archives or to recognise the activities they already engage in, and to formalise their practice in this area.
- Outreach work needs to be conducted to extend the diversity of individuals and communities involved in community archive projects: at present, activity is largely concentrated amongst individuals with existing knowledge of and expertise in local history, who are already well embedded in local-historical groups and networks. CCAN does not restrict its activity to these groups and does work with many individuals new to local history.
- The digitisation of existing archives represents a major, but much needed, area for work.
- The kinds of material collected could be developed, moving more frequently beyond photographs and administrative records, to include, for example, oral

reminiscences. The CCAN site does contain more varied material than this – and will have the capability to display audio and video records.

- Funding needs to be in place to support the County's continued community archive development: most 'archives' are unfunded or short-term funded, and are located in vulnerable locations, so their future is not secure. The CCAN network is being established with self-governance and sustainability for its groups at the forefront.
- Current archive networks, of the kind offered by CCAN, need developing to include other groups. This is what the CCAN project is designed to do.
- During discussions, there was much evidence of interest in developing more clearly defined 'community archives' within existent groups, and this represents important scope for development.

APPENDIX A

CAMBRIDGESHIRE COMMUNITY ARCHIVE NETWORK PROJECT

Pilot projects available to view via Commanet:

Haddenham/Aldreth
Little Downham
Mepal
Pymoor
Wicken
Witcham
Denny Abbey

2006 Projects:

Fenland:

Community House, Waterlees Ward, Wisbech
March and District Museum
Chatteris Museum
Manea
Wisbech Museum
Friday Bridge
Thorney Toll
Parson Drove
Morrow

Hunts:

Yaxley Community Information Project
Ramsey Rural Museum
Cross Keys, Upwood
Great Gidding Post Office
St Neots Museum
St Barnabas Centre

East Cambs.:

Ashley
Cheveley
Burrough Green
Coveney Village Hall
Croylands Day Centre, Ely
Fordham
Barns Community Rooms, High Barns, Ely
Ely Museum
Isleham
Ellesmere Centre, Stetchworth
Stretham
Swaffham Bulbeck
Wilburton
Viva Centre, Soham

South Cambs.:

Village Hall, Balsham
Sheltered Housing Scheme, Girton
OWL Café, Sawston
Village Institute, Longstanton

Sheltered Housing Scheme, Meldreth
Community Centre, Over
Sheltered Housing Scheme, Orwell
Sheltered Housing Scheme, Whittlesford

City:

Cambridge Ethnic Community Forum
Cambridge and County Folk Museum
Meadows Community Centre

sources: www.communityarchives.org.uk; <http://www.commanet.org/ccan/>

APPENDIX B

Local History, Family History, Archaeology and Museum Societies In Cambridgeshire

Abington History Group
Active8archaeology
Archaeology Rheeseearch
Balsham Archives and Photographic Collection
Barnwell and Fen Ditton Local History Society
Brampton Historical Society
Brewery History Society Cambridgeshire
Buckden Local History Society
Burwell History Society
Cambridge Antiquarian Society
Cambridge Antique Society
Cambridge Archaeology Field Group
Cambridge Natural History Society
Cambridge Preservation Society
Cambridgeshire Association for Local History
Cambridgeshire Family History Society
Cambridgeshire Industrial Archaeology Society
Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust
Cambridgeshire Records Society
Catworth Local History Society
Chatteris Museum Society
Cherry Hinton Local History Society
Chesterton Local History Society
Chesterford Local History and Archaeology Society
Civic Society of St Ives
Comberton Antiquarian Society
Cottenham Village Society
Duxford History Group
Eatons Community Association
Eltisley History Society
The Ely Society
Ely and District Archaeological Society (EDAS)
Fenland Family History Society
Fenland History Group with Mike Petty
Fulbourn Village History Society
Gamlingay and District History Society
Hartford Conservation Group
Haverhill and District Archaeological Group
The Hemingfords Local History Society
Hildersham Village History Society
Histon and Impington Village Society
Historical Association Cambridge Branch
Houghton and Wyton Local History Society
Huntingdon and Godmanchester Civic Society
Huntingdonshire Family History Society
Huntingdonshire Local History Society
The Isleham Society
Kimbolton Local History Society
Landbeach Society
Landscape and Local History Group
Linton and District Historical Society

The Littleport Society
Madingley History Group
Manea History Group
March and District Museum Society
The Milestone Society
Orwell Local History Society
The Pampisford Society
Peterborough Civic Society
Peterborough and District Family History Society
Peterborough Museum Society
Royston and District Local History Society
Saffron Walden Historical Society
Sawston Village History Society
Sawtry and District Archaeological and History Society
Shudy Camps Website
South-West Cambridgeshire Project
Staine Hundred Local History Society
St Neots Local History Society
Swavesey and District History Society
The Thorney Society
The Thriplow Society
Trumpington Local History Group
The Victorian Society – Great Eastern Group
Warboys Local History Society
Waterbeach Village Society
West Wickham and District Local History Club
The Whittlesea Society
The Whittlesford Society

Sources: *The Conduit*, no.44, 2006-7; InfoCam.

APPENDIX C

Clubs and societies in Burwell

Agricultural Discussion Group
Army Cadets
Art Group
Burwell Action Group
Burwell Allotment and Garden Society
Burwell Anchor Ramblers
Burwell Badminton Club
Burwell Baptist Church
Burwell Carpet Bowls
Burwell Country
Burwell Cricket Club
Burwell Ex-Service and Social Club – Bowls Section
Burwell History Society
Burwell Judo Club
Burwell Karate Association
Burwell Lacemakers
Burwell Monday Afternoon Club
Burwell Museum Friends
Burwell Music Circle
Burwell Music Workshop
Burwell Netball Club
Burwell Players
Burwell Scrabble Club
Burwell Sight
Burwell Society
Burwell Swallows Football Club
Burwell Swifts Football Club
Burwell Tennis Club
Burwell Tigers Football Club
Burwell Trinity Church
Burwell Village Twinning Association
Burwell Women's Institute
Burwell and Bottisham Branch of Liberal Democrats
Burwell and District Flower Club
Burwell and District Garden Club
Burwell and District Gardening Club
Burwell and District Over 60s
Carers UK Burwell Branch
Church Army
Churches Together in Burwell
Community Forum
Girl Guides
Good News Club
Junior Friends of Burwell Museum
Labour Party – Burwell Branch
Newmarket and Burwell Aikido Club
Peregrine Theatre Productions
Phoenix Singers
Photographic Club
Royal British Legion
St Mary's Burwell Choir
St Mary's Burwell Mothers' Union
St Mary's Burwell Tower Bell-Ringing Association

St Mary's Burwell Preservation Trust
St Mary's Church Burwell
St Mary's Burwell Young Wives
Theatre-goers
Trinity Youth Club
Volleyball Club
Young Lacemakers
Woodland Project
Workers Educational Association – WEA – Burwell
1st Burwell Scout Group
42 Group

Sources: www.burwell.co.uk; InfoCam.