

Recent Activities



Address by Janet Prowse, State Archivist, to Royal Historical Society of Queensland, 19 November 2009

It is a pleasure to be here this evening among some of the many friends and supporters of Queensland State Archives - to celebrate our 50th anniversary.

On behalf of the Queensland Government and State Archives, I'd like to thank the Royal Historical Society for hosting tonight's function – and acknowledge the volunteers who've provided valuable assistance. I'd also like to acknowledge Manfred Cross for his informative and entertaining recollections of the early days of State Archives. As you know it's not an easy task to research and then summarise such highlights - but I'm sure you'd all agree with me that Manfred has done an excellent job.

Well, 2009 has been a landmark year for Queensland and Queensland State Archives (QSA). Yesterday – as some of you know – the Minister for Public Works and Information and Communication Technology – the Honourable Robert Swarten officially opened our special 50th anniversary exhibition at Runcorn. The exhibition is aptly titled "For the Record" – which I think nicely sums up the mission of the Archives over the past five decades.

With regards to my presentation tonight – It has been a daunting task to develop a short overview of some of the more recent highlights and what lies ahead for the organisation. I'd like to begin by saying that - at a high level - Queensland State Archives ultimately does three core things:

Firstly it manages and preserves a priceless asset – the state's archival collection of public records - in state-of-the-art purpose-built facilities at Runcorn. This asset is the largest and most significant documentary heritage collection in Queensland – a collection which is some 40 times larger than any other heritage collection in this state.

Secondly, we administer a significant piece of legislation – the *Public Records Act 2002* – which makes us the lead agency for government recordkeeping. We research and write policy advice on contemporary records management issues for public authorities. We also manage a comprehensive recordkeeping compliance program for those agencies.

And **thirdly**, we provide public access to the archival collection – including online access – to a com-

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bined total of around 390 000 individual researchers each year.

In administering the Act – we are required to develop an annual report to Parliament – and we have a nine-member board known as the Public Records Review Committee. We undertake all of these activities – as well as plan for the future – with a total of 48 permanent staff! It would be fair to say that Queensland State Archives has consistently generated a great deal of public value from the important roles that it plays and from the valuable work it undertakes.

Moving forward

I'd like to fast forward now to some more recent times – and provide a brief overview of the impact of the *Public Records Act 2002*, the changing role of recordkeeping and information management, as well as touch on some of the future directions for the archives.

As Manfred has told us, 50 years ago, the Queensland Government appointed its first State Archivist Robert Sharman and Queensland State Archives began in earnest - commencing its activities in this very building, operating under Part 4 of the then *Libraries Act 1943 -1949*. There were 36 feet of records arranged and described in the first month. Today, there are over 40 kilometres of records managed at our climate-controlled facility at Runcorn.

This time last year the Queensland Premier, The Hon Anna Bligh, and our Minister, the Minister for Public Works & Information and Communication Technology, the Hon Robert Swarten, opened an expanded archival facility at Runcorn – doubling the available storage space. This is a lasting legacy for the state's Q150 celebrations. As a result of the additional space, we've accelerated the rate of transfers – taking in some 2.7 kilometres of archival records last financial year. The extended facility adds another seven repositories and includes space for the State's future digital archive – something I'll touch on later.

The Public Records Act 2002

I arrived to take up the position of State Archivist in 2001, a year before Parliament debated and passed *Public Records Act 2002* – which modernised public records legislation in this state. (Previous to my appointment at the archives I had been the Director of Policy and Development at the State Library of Queensland.)

The Public Records Act ushered in a period of great change for the archives. Queensland State Archives became the State's lead agency for recordkeeping, with responsibility for a whole-of-Government Recordkeeping Policy Framework, to ensure a consistent approach to government recordkeeping. Under the legislation, the State Archivist has the power to issue standards and guidelines for the making and keeping of full and accurate records. This ensures that the current business of government is appropriately documented, so that the rights and entitlements of Queenslanders are protected and the State's future history is preserved.

The new Act also brought more public authorities within the scope of public records legislation for the first time, including many statutory authorities and Government Owned Corporations, and in more recent times regulations have been added to include Parliamentary Secretaries within that scope. Queensland State Archives now sets recordkeeping standards and guidelines for more than 600 public authorities. We truly operate at a whole-of-government level – not just 13 state departments. We understand the business of government on a much broader scale.

Record Keeping Compliance

In terms of recordkeeping compliance across government – our research and survey programs have provided demonstrated evidence of compliance against the seven principles within *Information Standard 40: Recordkeeping* – these compliance rates range on average from 62.5% to 85.5%.

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Certainly there is strong evidence of a broad awareness of the importance of recordkeeping as a core function of government business. So – we've come a long way – but acknowledge that there's more work to be done.

To build on compliance activities, we've just released a Recordkeeping Assessment Framework and next year will work on a recordkeeping maturity model – which will take into account the different sizes of public authorities & the complexity of their activities. It would be fair to say that Queensland State Archives has developed a world-class recordkeeping compliance program – which compares well (if not exceeds) with overseas best practice models. This is quite remarkable for a state archival authority.

MOG Changes

One of the interesting things you quickly learn about setting recordkeeping policy advice for government – is the rate of machinery of government changes. MOG changes, as we call them, don't just happen around the time of elections – they are continual – and seem to be becoming more complex and broader in their scope.

Perhaps over the last 18 months there seems to have been an unprecedented rate of MOG changes – all of which are monitored by Queensland State Archives. We track administrative histories in terms of the custody and ownership of government records; we make the critical subsequent changes to our catalogue Archives One; authorise Retention and Disposal schedules; negotiate any transfers of permanent records and authorise any interim custody agreements etc. To give you an example, recent MOGS have included:

- The Local government boundary reforms – where a great number of councils were amalgamated – from 157 councils to 73 councils
- Changes to state government departments after the State election – with 23 departments becoming 13
- The restructure of the water sector
- There has also been the rationalisation of government boards, committee and statutory bodies (known as the Weller review) – where 103 bodies were abolished and there were changes to 81 bodies
- We've also been working with the Qld courts on the current amalgamation of tribunals into the new Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal (QCAT)
- Next year, the Local Government Association of Qld ceases to be a public authority
- As well, we're working with our colleagues from around Australia on the pending major reforms to health registration bodies – as new legislation will create one registration board for some 10 health professional bodies. These reforms alone will generate a major piece of work for QSA.

Whoever thought archives was boring! So, QSA does an extraordinary amount of important high level administrative work – much of which is invisible to most people; you won't read about our work in the newspaper - but we hope our role is not undervalued because this meaningful work does not give us a public profile.

PRRC

I'd like to move on now to the Public Records Review Committee. The Act established the Public Records Review Committee in March 2003 to advise the Minister for Public Works and Information and Communication Technology, and myself as State Archivist on the administration and enforcement of the Act. The new chair of the committee is Miguel Diaz who recently replaced Brian Herd - who'd been in the role for six years. I should also acknowledge Dr Jennifer Harrison, who's been a foundation member of the committee since it was formed, and was recently re-appointed by Cabinet.

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In addition to its advisory role, the committee has a number of dispute resolution functions. It has served as a strong deterrent – and because of its existence, I have been able to resolve all potential disputes with public authorities on an administrative basis, rather than referring them to the committee for a formal review. Committee members have been invaluable in providing State Archives with a wide range of advice and support.

RTI reforms

Like other archival authorities around the world, Queensland State Archives is playing an increased role in the government's broader information management agenda. In Queensland this has been driven in part by the recent Right to Information reforms – which are promoting greater access to government information. These reforms have highlighted the need for a whole-of-Government information management policy – which will build on our existing recordkeeping policy framework.

Nineteen recommendations in the Queensland Government's report to Cabinet on Right to Information had implications for QSA – and this year we set about devising four programs of work to respond. Briefly, we reviewed a range of Information Standards, established a new Recordkeeping Assessment Framework to promote continual improvement in recordkeeping; and we were funded to deliver Recordkeeping Awareness and Trainings Programs for government.

In particular, the Director-General of Public Works and the Qld Government Chief Information Officer, Mr Mal Grierson recently launched our Recordkeeping Awareness Program – titled – *“Queensland Records – they all count.”* The full details of these initiatives – including Mr Grierson's excellent podcast - are on our web site.

Overall, Queensland State Archives is working well with the Office of the Information Commissioner, the Public Service Commission, the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and others to promote a strong recordkeeping culture across government.

Information Management Skills

While QSA recognises the importance of cultural change – we also have an important role in shaping the capability of government to manage its records in different formats. (By capability – I am referring to the knowledge and skills of government employees). Late last year, Queensland State Archives organised a very successful National Information Management Skills Summit to increase awareness among government decision-makers of the need to invest in information management capability.

An important outcome of the summit was the development of an Information Management Skills Action Plan, coordinated by Queensland State Archives. Tomorrow – I'll be in Melbourne as a guest of Monash University – as the keynote speaker at its forum on Information Management Skills short-ages.

One initiative we're working on is a specific short training course – which has the working title “IM for the non IM executive”. The course, which is a strategy in our IM Skills Action Plan – will be rolled out to CEOs from February next year, and is being delivered in a partnership between Queensland State Archives, the Information Commissioner and the Public Service Commission.

E-Government

It is important for government archival authorities to be concerned about capability development – as electronic records are inherently more complex to manage – particularly over time.

Over the past few decades, the business of government itself has undergone many changes and has become increasingly complex in the electronic environment. Rising e-government service delivery has seen an unprecedented growth in the volume of information created and stored. The community

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now interacts more and more with Government online.

The increasing scale, complexity and extent of electronic information have accentuated the need for effective information management expertise. New skills are needed in this digital world.

It is critical that public authorities have not only the necessary IT systems with recordkeeping functionality – but that the staff themselves have the necessary skills to implement sound recordkeeping processes, to ensure that valuable records are identified, captured, well managed and – where required - preserved over time.

Digital preservation

Indeed, the long-term management and preservation of public records in electronic formats is one of the most important challenges facing all government archival authorities around the world. Queensland State Archives is a member of ADRI – the Australasian Digital Recordkeeping Initiative – and is working with its counterparts on common solutions to these problems. Its early days – and while there's been much innovation around the world – however no one common international solution has yet emerged.

The Queensland Government recently released a new policy statement called “Towards Q2 Through ICT” – and that document outlines a role for us in terms of reviewing current archiving methods across government – and allows us to begin exploring the potential for a digital archive in Queensland.

Countries like the UK, Canada and America have invested heavily in digital preservation research over the past decade. While Queensland has yet to make a major investment in this area, we can learn a great deal from these early adopters. While we have begun some preliminary research; we hope to step up such efforts next year – with further research and consultation across government – all of which will inform a future business case.

At the same time, we still plan to continue to develop and publish policies in various areas of electronic records management – to provide ongoing guidance to government agencies in this area.

Online Services

In terms of our future directions – not only will we be developing a vision for a future digital archive – but we're also planning on how we can introduce more online services for researchers today. New technologies are changing the way people interact with heritage collections – and today, researchers can visit the archives online – which more and more are doing. Last financial year we had 7.6 million hits to our web site – and of these - there were some 382 000 unique visitors – coming through online. This means on average, every user is coming through online – accessing the catalogue and downloading content - 20 times a year.

To better understand the needs of our clients we will continue to invest in market research. Also – we've recently developed an internal Online Services Plan to explore new ways we can reshape our reference services; and add more digital content to our web site. We're also working in partnership with the State Library of Queensland to publish over the coming months what we call a Digital Content Strategy – this will be a high level document which articulates the intent of these two organisations to publish more digital content for the Queensland community.

Stories in the archival records

With such a large collection you'll always find some gems which are worth sharing. I am reminded of a recent transfer of records from the Toowoomba City Council which provided a fascinating insight into important council business. It concerned the planned visit to that city by King George 6th in 1949.

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Apparently the then Mayor couldn't procure a new wig anywhere in Australia for his meeting with the monarch, and Council doubted there were sufficient flags and bunting to 'dress' the city for the royal occasion! In the wash-up it didn't matter because the visit was cancelled because the King was ill!

Experienced researchers have also had many "Eureka moments" – with one finding that opera singer Dame Nellie Melba had purchased a land selection in the Mackay area from the Qld Government in 1909 – however she had done so under her maiden name of Helen Porter Mitchell.

Also, who would have thought there were important gaps in what is known about Breaker Morant? As our records show Morant – with the name spelt MURRANT – arriving in Cooktown on the vessel Waroonga in 1883. The biographer of both Morant and welfare pioneer Daisy Bates failed to discover the pair actually married in Queensland. Further research established this fact, which many Australians are unaware of to this day.

On a more serious note - last month UNESCO listed 63 archival records of the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement (1824-42) on its Memory of the World Register. This is a great honour for Queensland State Archives.

Overall – the ability to publish more digital content – will make these and other stories more accessible to the community.

Q150

To sum up - the past 12 months in particular have been considerable for Queensland State Archives. We have opened a new building, taken part in the State's 150th celebrations – with our two exhibitions travelling to over 30 regional venues, we've responded well to some major challenges such as the Right to Information reforms, dealt with an extraordinary number of Machinery-of-Government changes, and taken in an unprecedented volume of archival transfers. This has been on top of our existing huge work programs.

And the fun isn't over yet! Highlights over the coming weeks include the media briefing for the release of the 1979 Cabinet minutes, and we'll have our Q150 exhibitions at St Johns for Proclamation Day.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge the Queensland Government and the Department of Public Works for its ongoing support and thank my management team and staff, some of whom are here this evening, for their professionalism, energy, commitment and passion – without which I'm not sure all of this would have been possible.

Indeed the success of the organisation has been a credit – not only to the current team – but also to the teams led by the former State Archivists – Robert Sharman, the late Paul Wilson and Lee McGregor. And tonight I acknowledge and thank them for their outstanding contributions as well.

It there is one thing to remember about our own half century – it would be this: Queensland State Archives has consistently generated enormous public value from the important work that it does. And I have every confidence that it will continue to do so in the years ahead.

Thankyou.