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Ways into the Collection: Questions to ask yourself

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The Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre (AIU Centre) is the premier resource centre in the country devoted to making available materials to facilitate the study of race relations. As such, it's consulted by researchers from across the world. We at the University of Manchester are fortunate that it's situated down the road from us in Manchester Central Library. The AIU Centre is the University's flagship representative in the regional archive umbrella group Archives+. That we have such easy access to it is a rare privilege we should all appreciate and take advantage of.

That's if we know the relevance of race relations-related resources to our studies, and if we understand how to make the most of the collections. A couple of big ‘ifs’.

The blog posts I'll be contributing are designed to help us think through these issues. I'll be taking a look at the kinds of resources held by the Centre, and what they have to offer to various subject areas. Hopefully it will become easier for us to use those resources more efficiently and optimally to enrich our studies.

I'm going to start by trying to get to grips with understanding how to make the most of the collections. In this post, we'll touch on:

- some of the realities of archives and archival research that we need to bear in mind
- questions to ask ourselves that will help our preparations to engage an archive collection

With the stage set, in three posts we'll look at each of the three ways into the AIU Centre's collections:

- Databases (including subject area resource lists)
- Human interface (speaking to the librarian and/or Collections Access Officer)
- Serendipity (just going in and browsing)

So let's make a start…
1. Realities of archival research

Archival research is by its very nature time-consuming and labour-intensive. Although the results can undoubtedly be extremely rewarding, it has to be said that such research is often not easy. The main stumbling block for a researcher is being able to identify within the archival resources those collections and items of most relevance to his or her subject area. This is where understanding how archives work and the various ‘ways into’ them is important.

Here we’ll be specifically looking at ways into the collections held by the AIU Centre. As the foremost repository for race relations-related material, on a regular basis the Centre receives significant donations of collections from individuals and organisations. It also acquires significant quantities of printed books. All of these need processing.

In the case of collections, when they’re acquired it’s often not clear what they contain. Their journey from initial assessment to orderly, filed, catalogued and boxed entity can be complicated. The speed at which all this can be achieved very much depends on available resources – in terms of finance, time and personnel with appropriate skills.

There are always collections waiting to be processed, and always collections made newly available for which accessible user information (such as blog posts, detailed descriptions or listings) have not yet been prepared. For an organisation such as the Centre, resources to process these could always be more plentiful. Much progress has been made, but there's inevitably more to do. A couple of the Centre's blog posts give a feel for what's involved:

- ‘Bending the Rules: Archiving the Manchester BME Communities collection’
- ‘Documenting the Archive, Destroying the Magic?’

2. Questions to ask yourself

What does the above mean for you and me? It means that it’s not necessarily easy for us to assess what the archive holds that’s relevant to our research. Archives and information about them are being processed all the time. Because our task can be tricky and time-consuming, before we even contemplate searching for resources relevant to our studies, we need to be realistic in thinking through various fundamental questions:

- Why do we want to use archival resources in the first place?
- What are we hoping to achieve?
- How much time can we realistically allocate to the process of searching, consulting the material, and digesting what that material has to say?

Being clear on these issues early on means we can plan to take account of the issues noted above, think about which ways into the collection suit our needs best, and assess how much detail we really need to go into.

Now, all of this may make archival research sound a pretty serious business, and one that’s more trouble than it’s worth. I have to admit that it can sometimes be frustrating – but that’s not the whole story. It can also be an exhilarating journey of discovery, where the voices of those who might otherwise be forgotten spring to life, and our studies are enriched by allowing those voices to add human insight and experience to what might otherwise be merely an intellectual exercise.

If we want to know how aspects of our subject areas have affected the lives of real people in real communities over the years, our destination has to be an archival collection. The AIU Centre's collections offer a bewildering variety of such materials for your perusal, from books to correspondence, oral histories to photographic collections, newspaper cuttings to ephemera.

Time spent discovering these riches is never time wasted. Approach the task with a clear focus which suits your own objectives, and an open mind. The experience will be rewarding.