



Fourteenth Thing: Archives and Special Collections

The University of Melbourne holds large and diverse [Archives and Special Collections \(ASC\)](#), which are accessible for all to use. But what are Archives and Special Collections, and why use them in your research? You will be enriching your own understanding of a topic and working with unique materials that connect you directly to the experiences and perspectives of the past, as ASC Engagement and Outreach Program Manager Lisa O’Sullivan outlines in this Thing, which also features an interview with Deputy University Archivist Katie Wood.

Special Collections

[Special Collections](#) are made up of items that are ‘special’ because they are unique in some way. They may be rare or very old or have an interesting provenance (meaning the people who have owned and used the item, perhaps writing notes or otherwise changing the item). At the University we hold [Rare Books](#), [East Asian materials](#), [Prints](#), [Maps](#), and [Rare Music](#) collections. The collections are used for teaching and research across the university, and are also made available through exhibitions in the Baillieu Library’s Noel Shaw gallery. Exhibitions, such as [Here Lives Our Culture](#), offer a more detailed look into the collections, in this case, treasures from the East Asian collections.

Archives

Archives are the raw materials of history; the records produced by individuals, groups and companies that document their activities and have been preserved and organised to make them accessible to researchers. The [University of Melbourne Archives \(UMA\)](#) holds nearly 20km of

records. The UMA was established in July 1960 to collect and preserve records relating to the University and to business. Since that time, the UMA's collecting has expanded to include trade union and other labour history material, and the records of professional, community, women's, peace and political organisations and individuals. A particular strength is documents relating to social movements including labour, peace, Aboriginal Australian activism, the women's movement and associated LGBTQIA movements.

Accessing the collections

You may encounter Archives and Special Collections being used in your classes as primary documents; Object Based Learning means that students can interact directly with objects from the past and learning directly from them. Our collections are used in classes including History, Art, Sociology, Criminology and Architecture. You can [learn more](#) about the ASC teaching program and [contact us](#) if you are interested in using collection materials in a class.

However, you can also access items directly yourself. Because they are all unique in some way, Archives and Special Collections cannot be borrowed. Anyone, whether a student, researcher or member of the general public can make an appointment in the Reading Room in the Baillieu Library at the Parkville campus.

The Baillieu Library [Reading Room](#) has rules designed to protect our rare materials. So, before your first visit to the Reading Room, you will be asked to read the [Visit page](#), for advice about how to order the materials you are interested in, what to expect when you arrive, how to handle our fragile collections, and information about copying material. If any of the instructions feel intimidating or confusing, the Reading Room team are there to help you.

Finding what you need

You can find the Special Collections through the [library catalogue](#), and order materials to be sent to the Reading Room (use the catalogue's right-hand drop-down list to restrict your search to the collection(s) you are interested in. Because they are generally unpublished materials, archives are made accessible through a separate, [UMA Archives Catalogue](#), with a few more steps to go through. You can search for records created by an individual or group. Finding aids list the contents of a collection, which are generally stored in archival boxes. These are the boxes you can order for use in the Reading Room.

Because our collections are so vast, we also produce [research guides](#), which give contextual information on a range of subjects relating to collections held at the University of Melbourne Archives. These guides are thematic, so if you are interested in learning more about the history of women; computing; the Australian peace movement or many other topics, you can start here and be guided to collections that might be useful for your research. Our archival pages will also guide you in how to cite archival materials in your work.

About the author

Lisa O'Sullivan is the Engagement and Outreach Program Manager in the University's Archives and Special Collections department. She has worked in libraries, museums and archives, and originally trained as a historian.

Interview with Katie Wood

What is your role?

I am the Deputy University Archivist at the University of Melbourne Archives. My role involves overseeing the operational matters of the archives – helping my team implement a new collection management system (with a brand new online catalogue!), managing acquisitions and donation enquiries, supporting digitisation efforts, and so on. I have done most jobs in archives, including arrangement and description, reference, and teaching with archives. I am also a PhD candidate in history at La Trobe University, and have found my archives background to be of enormous help to my research, of course.

How have you used Archives and Special Collections in your role?

Being a reference and teaching archivist was a wonderful experience – meeting so many different researchers and helping them with their questions. I've helped establish the identity of the world's first female photographer, discovered a telegram from the famous suffragist Emmaline Pankhurst to the Prime Minister Billy Hughes in which she denounces the antiwar activities of her daughter, I've helped people find details for asbestosis claims, or information about their time growing up in out of home care. The UMA collections tell stories from millions of lives, so they are of incalculable research value.

How have Archives and Special Collections helped you work smarter, not harder when managing your research?

Archives are notoriously difficult to get into. Catalogues are often old and clunky, but even if they're new they are rarely as easily navigable as Google, or even a standard library journal database. Often, reference archivists must act as a sort of 'gatekeeper' – not because they want to, but because many of the collections remain unlisted, or they are restricted for perfectly valid reasons, or because they contain fragile material.

I spent 10 years as a reference archivist, seeing how researchers approached archives and archivists, before undertaking a PhD. To be honest, it turns out that many of the frustrations and stereotypes that the two groups hold of each other have a grain of truth! Researchers tend to get frustrated at the difficulties they encounter in archives without realising that archivists are just trying to help. Archivists sometimes fail to understand that researchers can get frustrated when they can't see the full picture. It would be beneficial to all if we better understood one another! Archivists are professionals, with over 100 years of intense debate within the profession that has shaped their work and the collections they care for. If you want to get better at primary source research in archives, learning a bit of the history or archival organisation (written by archivists) goes a long way.

What is your number one tip for working with Archives and Special Collections?

As mentioned above, understanding why archives (or indeed special collections and rare book collections) are organised in the way they are, will make it much easier to navigate them. Archival collections are not organised by subject, as is the case with most libraries and their catalogues, but rather by provenance. And they are generally kept in the original order in which the creator maintained them. This is to preserve what is left of the context of their creation in order to maintain some evidentiary value. Understanding this will help a researcher navigate archival catalogues better, and also to better understand the nature of the material they are researching. So, make sure you take the time to understand the structure of a collection before diving in with that keyword search.

About the interviewee

[Katie Wood](#) is the Deputy University Archivist at the University of Melbourne Archives, where she has worked for 15 years. She has worked in a range of roles, including reference, outreach and teaching. She is currently undertaking a PhD in history at La Trobe University, researching women workers in the Australian metal trades. She has published several articles on both archival practice and her doctoral research.

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