Archivist’s report*

The Biochemical Society archives: cataloguing and preservation of collections

Oral history records
I am delighted to report that, in May 2003, a contract was signed between the Biochemical Society and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), via the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC), to “encode and deliver appropriate moving image and sound material [from the Biochemical Society Collection] for online access by the UK further and higher education institutions”. The agreement involves the award of £100K to cover the technical costs of digitizing 34 videotape interviews (each of 2–3 hours’ duration) of eminent biochemists, as well as some 80 audio tapes (dating back to the 1950s) of interviews, addresses and lectures.

The first phase of this project — the dubbing of master video tapes onto DigiBeta master tapes and producing matching time-coded VHS viewing copies) — was completed by the BUFVC at the beginning of 2004, and I am now working on the catalogue summaries (Metadata), using the VHS copies, which will subsequently be incorporated into the digital versions for online access. The next phase of the work — on the audio tape collection — is scheduled to begin in about 6 months’ time.

Relocation of archives from Colchester to Egham
This was completed in September 2003, and the archives are now stored safely within the purpose-built University of London Depository Library at Egham, adjacent to Royal Holloway, University of London. This is a user-friendly environment, which provides visitors with good working facilities (desks, photocopier, computer, video viewer, etc.). Access to the collections is provided by the Honorary Archivist to all bona fide researchers.

There remain, in Colchester, small items of historic scientific equipment which I am hoping to have transferred in the near future to the Biochemical Society Collection at the Science Museum, London.

External requests for archival material
I was able to respond to various requests by science historians over the last year. For example, copies of several photographs of J.L.W. Thudichum and his children were sent to Professor T.L. Sourkes, O.C., for an exhibition to mark the hundredth anniversary of the death of Thudichum, which took place at the Osler Library of the History of Medicine, McGill University (Montréal, Québec, Canada); some of these were subsequently included in The Life and Work of J.L.W. Thudichum, 1829–1901, by T.L. Sourkes (Osler Library Studies in the History of Medicine, No. 9, 2003). I also took photographs of the original wooden models built by Mitchell (in the late 1950s) to illustrate his early ideas on the chemiosmotic hypothesis, and on ion translocation by anisotropic ATPase, for the science historian, Professor Douglas Allchin (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MT, USA).

In addition to the ongoing project with digitizing oral history records, my priority for the coming year will be to raise additional external funding that is required to prepare a professional, web-browsable catalogue (‘finding aids’) for our extensive collection of hard-copy material. Without this ‘tool’, access to and exploitation of our valuable historical collections will continue to be very limited. This will also save me from the time-consuming rummaging through packed boxes to locate old documents and photographs for which I receive requests in ever-increasing numbers!

Various
L. Stocken (Oxford University) kindly donated material of historical

*This report summarizes and updates the annual report that was presented to the Executive Committee in December, 2003.
Past times

interest, notably a tape-recording of a lecture he gave in the 1950s, plus related papers.

Glyn Jones kindly agreed to record his reminiscences as Executive Secretary to the Society (1984–2003) and Robert Freedman conducted an in-depth interview in Glyn’s former office at Portland Place on June 17, 2004. Thank you both for all the work you put in to produce an invaluable addition to our archives! We celebrated this event over a small dinner, hosted by Chris Finch, during which we were treated to a few more reminiscences from Glyn – off the record…

In May of this year, Rhonda Oliver and I attended the splendid launch of ‘PeoplesArchive’, a new project produced by Tamara Tracz (see below). We are currently exploring possibilities for future collaborations.

Acknowledgements

I thank various members of the Society, but most particularly Glyn Jones, for their generous support and encouragement.

PeoplesArchive

The recent death of John Maynard Smith was a loss to the world of science. But Maynard Smith was more than a great scientist, he was also a great human being. While the science he did remains in books and his papers, what will be missed most is the man himself.

It is in an attempt to preserve for future generations a sense of Maynard Smith, and others of his calibre, both as a man and as a scientist, that the PeoplesArchive project, which launched this month, was started. Since 1996, PeoplesArchive has been conducting in-depth filming sessions with some of the greatest scientists of our time, such as Sydney Brenner, Hans Bethe, Benoît Mandelbrot and John Maynard Smith himself.

These filming sessions are not interviews. Instead they are a lengthy and detailed autobiography of each person’s life in science, as told by themselves, in their own time. Speaking to a specially chosen ‘listener’, always a fellow scientist, filming continues until each person has said all they wish to say — PeoplesArchive often records for up to 15 hours over the course of a few days. Every effort is made to ensure that each speaker is at ease, and able to examine in depth both their work and the contexts in which it was done.

This way of filming results in a detailed and candid series of self-portraits — and brings us as close to these important scientists as it is possible to come without actually being in their presence. Preserved for the future are the voices, faces and thoughts of people whose work has changed our world.

This method of gathering raw material is distinctive, but equally important to PeoplesArchive is the way in which the material is accessed. The company wants the material to be readily available to anyone who might need it. Navigation through the huge amounts of material is easy and quick. Context is provided and further research is facilitated. All this is made possible on the company’s website at www.peoplesarchive.com.

The material is split into its constituent stories, titled, and placed on the archive in chronological order, allowing viewers to browse easily through the wealth of material. It is also possible to conduct detailed full-text searches, for areas of specific interest. Using accurate transcripts (which are also available to ensure accurate quotation), PeoplesArchive can pull up all the stories on any subject, and offer them to the viewer in order of importance.

To give context, biographies are provided of all speakers and listeners, as are bibliographies of each speaker’s published work with direct links to Amazon, where they can be bought. A collection of relevant outside web links is also offered — links specific to both the speaker’s work and to the specifics of each story. As a further resource, there are links, updated monthly, to events such as seminars, conferences, upcoming publications, television and radio programmes.

Such a resource is likely to become an invaluable tool for educators, researchers, historians, and all those interested in science and the people who practise it. But the scope of the project is even larger than this. It is not unusual for different contributors to the Archive to talk about similar subjects, similar practical or ethical problems, even the same event. The Archive links such stories, making it possible to use the archive not only for specific and intense research, but to track an idea or a subject through a number of different people’s testimonies.

The company’s aim is for the Archive, which will be a continually growing entity with new contributors added regularly, to be available in the libraries of all institutes of higher learning and research. As a pioneering venture, efforts have been made to keep the subscription prices as low as possible — currently £60 annually for institutions and £20 for private individuals — and the company is keen to work with its customers to make the Archive as relevant and as useful as possible.

PeoplesArchive can be found at http://www.peoplesarchive.com, and any questions can be sent to info@peoplesarchive.com.