



introducing

Jenni Stapleton, Manager,
Government Records Repository
State Records' commercial business unit



Jenni Stapleton reflects on the evolution of the Western Sydney Records Centre from a concrete bunker in a cow paddock in 1978 to one of the largest and most sophisticated records storage centres in the world today

Please describe the work of the Government Records Repository and your role as Manager

The Government Records Repository (GRR) is a large-scale commercial warehousing operation offering professional records storage to the New South Wales government sector on a fee-for-service basis.

As far as we are aware, the GRR is the only Government records storage centre in the world that is run on commercial lines.

We function in a totally commercial environment, with many competitors and no funding from the Government. The GRR makes a profit which is used to grow our business and to support the other programs of State Records. We have channelled over \$2 million into areas such as better access to the State archives collection for people living outside Sydney and State Records' copying and digitisation program.

As Manager of the GRR, I have the same role as any manager in the public or private sector: juggling priorities, budgets and staff, and trying to anticipate the next thing which will throw everything out of balance.

Whenever our clients experience change it has an impact on us, and, as you would expect, when one of them has a crisis or an emergency we are involved in helping them



find whatever information they need, usually in a hurry. We often joke that we don't have to watch the evening news to know what is happening in New South Wales.

What attracted you to becoming an archivist?

I originally intended to go into law, but discovered rather late I didn't want to be a lawyer and, therefore, looked around for something else to do. I had studied history for enjoyment, but, typically, no Australian history. However, I discovered that archival management is as much about the safeguarding of individuals' access to vital information and organisational accountability as it is about the provision of resources for historical research. After I became a 'hands-on' archivist I found it provided that same egotistical thrill of bringing order out of chaos and setting things right which probably drives lawyers too.

Describe the archives at Western Sydney when you first started working there

I joined the State Archives in 1978 and asked to go to the Repository at Kingswood in Western Sydney. This was regarded as a 'brave' choice. At that time it was a concrete bunker in the middle of a paddock, surrounded by cows. Once I was offered the job I had two weeks to get a car and learn to drive. The Repository was full and

unable to take in more records; you could hardly walk down the corridors because the boxes were stacked everywhere. Still, I thought the range of things a new archivist could learn in an active Repository would set me up for the future. I intended to be at Kingswood for perhaps a year.

The staff of six (all men of course) had been expanded by a team of young and idealistic archivists, led by John Burke, who is now the Associate Director, Western Sydney, and young and unenthusiastic teenagers from the local CES. Our job was to identify and list all the records to be kept, and appraise and destroy the rest. When Kingswood was cleaned out we moved on to the other repositories scattered throughout Sydney and progressively closed them down.

Exactly 20 years ago, in 1983, we finally closed the Shea's Creek Repository, which had been a dubious State Government landmark since the 1940s. Its closure was made even more difficult by the roof collapsing in a storm. The final closure of these old, unsuitable repositories and the decision to concentrate future growth at Kingswood was a significant point in records management in NSW and in my career. It would have been a sensible time to move on; I stayed anyway.

How has the Western Sydney site evolved over time?

There are now over 100 staff at the Western Sydney Records Centre at Kingswood, most of whom work for the Government Records Repository. This is the largest records storage centre in Australia and one of the largest in the world. Specialist staff handle access for members of the public and administer projects paid for out of GRR revenue. Although the original Stage 1 building is still recognisable, it is surrounded on all four sides by newer constructions. Even the site has changed, as the thousands of trees we have planted have matured.

What is planned for the future?

Because we are a constantly growing and changing organisation, there is always something happening here. In particular, we are always building on our site at Kingswood, and are currently planning our next storage extension. This building, which will have the fascinating name of Stage 6, will not be completed until 2005. At the same time we are introducing an electronic repository management system which requires bar coding every box, every shelf, every vehicle and probably every staff member by the time we are finished. This is a massive process and will be one of the largest data conversions ever undertaken in Australia.

Any magnificent obsessions outside of your work?

Stained glass. I find the complexities and possibilities of what should be a simplistic artform (areas of two-dimensional flat colour, brought to life by light alone) very exciting. I've been told that I can be a difficult person to travel with; other people travel to look at scenery but I travel to look at windows, not through them. I can spend hours studying the structure and design of a window. And not just old ones either: the windows in the National Library in Canberra excite me as much as the medieval portrait of Elizabeth I in Fairford in England. Maybe this is what happens to you when you spend most of your adult life in a concrete bunker!

- ↶ Jenni Stapleton in working mode and relaxed mode at the Government Records Repository
- ↑ Records being moved from the decrepit Shea's Creek Repository to the safety of the new repository at Kingswood