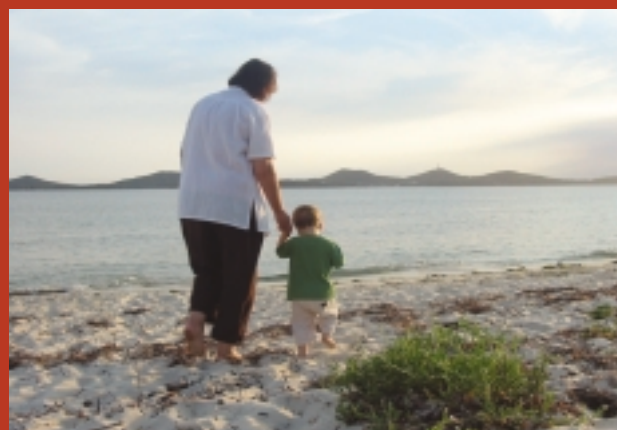


INTRODUCING KIRSTEN THORPE

Archivist – Aboriginal Liaison



**What led you to become an Archivist?
And what did your training involve?**

My mum had been on a tour of State Records as part of a visit by the Wollotuka Aboriginal Education Centre, Newcastle, in the late 1990s. She really enjoyed the tour (and was impressed by Archivist Fabian Lo Schiavo). Mum had seen an ad in the *Koori Mail* newspaper advertising for a Cadet Aboriginal Archivist at State Records, NSW, and encouraged me to apply. The advertisement sought a person to work with clients accessing the records of the former Aborigines Protection and Welfare Board (AWB) and other significant records held as State archives relating to Aboriginal people.

At the time the position was advertised, I was working in administration at the Koori Centre, University of Sydney. I had never thought of a career in archives. My prior learning had been a Diploma of Aboriginal Studies in Administration and a Bachelor of Social Science in Sociology. I had a passion for learning Indigenous and Australian history and, in particular, understanding the policies that families had lived through in the not-so-distant past. I suppose that is the reason that the cadetship appealed to me — connecting Aboriginal people to the physical records that document our history. Now, I feel like I was always meant to be working in archives.



The photos of Kirsten Thorpe and her family appear on the weblog <www.sixpacksam.com> which follows the adventures of her son Sam, lovingly recorded by his father Andrew



The cadetship required me to study full-time and undertake work placement at the archives. With the support of State Records I undertook a Post-Graduate Diploma in Science (Archives and Records) through Edith Cowan University, Perth. I did the course by correspondence and, by choice, worked full-time at State Records. It was a very busy year. On the successful completion of the cadetship in 2000 I was offered a permanent position as an Archivist within the Public Access team at the Sydney Records Centre, The Rocks.

Describe all the things you are involved in as part of your role as Archivist – Aboriginal Liaison at State Records

I see my position as a first point of contact for Aboriginal people and other clients interested in accessing State archives relating to Aboriginal people. The job can be challenging and emotional but at the same time extremely rewarding.

My work includes assisting Aboriginal people in the reading room; organising events, such as NAIDOC activities each July; giving introductory talks and tours to TAFE and university students; and training in access to records, eg to Aboriginal women at Emu Plains Correctional Centre (see *story page 13*).

I work closely with the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs on policy matters and guidelines and am involved in the Australian Society of Archivists Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group (SIG). The SIG is really important for maintaining contact with other people working in the same area and attracting more Indigenous archivists to the profession.

In 2001, State Records conducted a consultation project to identify services that best meet the needs of Indigenous people. As a part of this, I had the opportunity to meet and discuss services with Aboriginal people across the state, from Sydney, Newcastle,

Wollongong and Nowra, to Broken Hill and Dubbo. We received some really important feedback from clients along the way, which has given us a basis for planning services in the future.

Indigenous people come from all over NSW to access the records. Can you describe what sorts of information they are seeking and their experience of the State archive

Indigenous people can often have such a conflicting relationship with archives and records. Looking at our history, it is obvious that many of the records that have been created have been written by non-Indigenous people. However, in many cases — whether for Stolen Generation members finding out details of family or for a community re-establishing language and stories — archives can be the only place that this vital information is held. So the experiences of accessing records can be really varied.

One of the most significant sources of information that clients come to view are the records of the former Aborigines Welfare Board. These records, although valuable for family and community information, often include racist comments which cause a lot of emotional distress for clients. People also find that extreme value judgements have been made about the 'morality' of their families in the records. Sometimes they leave State Records angry at what they have read.

Tell us about your cultural background and how it influences your life

My mum's mum (Florence Rose Newlin) was a Worimi woman from Port Stephens, NSW. She met my grandfather, a German-Australian man while he was working for the army patrolling Hawk's Nest beach. They moved to Singleton in the Hunter Valley, and raised their five children there.



My mum's family (on her mum's side) goes back to Florence Manton and Violet May Newlin. Mum's family had connections to Karuah Mission, Soldiers Point, went to school in Pindimar and eventually settled in Tea Gardens. My mum's grandfather was an American man from New Jersey.

Dad's grandfather was born on the 'high seas' and orphaned after his parents died in Sydney. He and his brothers were sent to the Benevolent Society and Dad's grandfather eventually ended up settling in Jamberoo, NSW. We recently discovered that his grandfather's mother was a Chinese and local woman from New Caledonia.

We have such an interesting combination of cultures in our background, but it is probably the experiences of Mum's family, particularly her mother, that have had the greatest affects on our lives today. You realise the impact of our history on people's well-being and future.

My mum's Uncle Norman has always been active in Aboriginal services in Sydney. My two sisters, Katrina and Khi-lee, are also working in Sydney. Katrina is a lecturer at the University of Sydney and Khi-lee is working for Boomalli Artists Co-op.

What kind of response do you have in the presence of the actual physical records?

When I first started working at State Records, I had a really hard time being in the same physical space as the Welfare Board records; even the sight of an AWB box made me uneasy. I suppose since then, I have tried to look at the positive side of why the records have survived.

I love working in archives and being exposed to the collection at State Records. I get great inspiration from seeing letters drafted or written by Aboriginal people in colonial times asking for rights and better living conditions.

What do you still hope to achieve or set in motion in your position?

Overall, just making it easier for Aboriginal people to access cultural and personal information. Letting people and communities know the valuable information that can sometimes be stored here. At the same time, creating the balance of protecting people's privacy and creating a place of respect for cultural material held within the various government agencies.

There are a lot of years of catching up to be done, getting Indigenous people involved in archives and being a part of everyday services. I feel that we are really on the way to making this happen.

What impact has having a child had on your sense of a cultural past, present and future?

Coming back to work from maternity leave, I had to adjust to being back in contact with the records. This time, though, it was much harder. It's hard to imagine the shock that parents and children must have gone through after being separated by the authorities.

Balancing work and family life is important to me now. I also have a real sense of being an archivist (I hope I don't go overboard), keeping important things of Sam's life, whether it is his favourite shoes, newspaper clippings or drawings he has done. I save them for him to enjoy and probably have a real laugh at when he is older.