

Q&A: Warwick Hunter

Introducing Warwick Hunter, Policy Officer, Public Access

Why an archivist?

I took many paths and was swayed by a variety of influences before winding up with my own Post Graduate Diploma of Archive and Information Management to frame. I think that growing up in the Bjelke-Peterson years in Queensland was crucial in cultivating a sense of the importance of heritage, accountability and good recordkeeping.

But, ultimately, the idea of being an archivist became interesting to me, because the person who introduced me to archives was interesting. She was an old friend from Queensland, who had done the archives course at the University of NSW. Strangely, the university lost my original application.

On the last day of offers, I rang to see what had happened, and they asked if I had ever failed anything. When I replied 'no', they said 'you're in'. I knew right then it was the recordkeeping course for me.

What were your areas of inquiry when you were studying?

There is a great sense of satisfaction in being part of a profession that values the importance of preserving and making available the raw material of history, without fear or prejudice. I like the idea of the archivist being detached, in a professional way, from the process of appraisal, preservation and access to records, so I thought I'd explore it further. I was interested in just how far that impartiality might go with records related to the more contentious issues.



So, I did my final paper on pornography and archives. I was interested in seeing if any Australian archives or libraries held records that would be considered pornographic and, if so, how they were stored, made accessible, and what policies were in place to manage and promote them. I found that institutions did have pornography, but weren't always comfortable having it in their collection. I don't think people saw it as a priority or a legitimate research resource at the time. So, I was very pleased when State Records presented the exhibition *In the Realm of the Censors* and published articles in *Vital Signs* to contextualise the pornography-related material in its own collection.

What was your career history as an archivist before you started work at State Records?

My first job as an archivist was on a project on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour. The Department of Defence was closing down the island's dockyard. It was a fascinating experience. The island had such an interesting history: penal establishment; reformatory; dockyard; even war-time aeroplane building. It was also a paradise of industrial furniture.

It was my initiation into pigeon lofts for record storage and the magic of bringing order to such chaos using archival theory and the art of folding the type 1 archive box. Our team of fresh-faced archivists was guided by one of the most thoughtful and thorough supervisors, Margaret Chambers. Standards were set on that island that I will always appreciate.

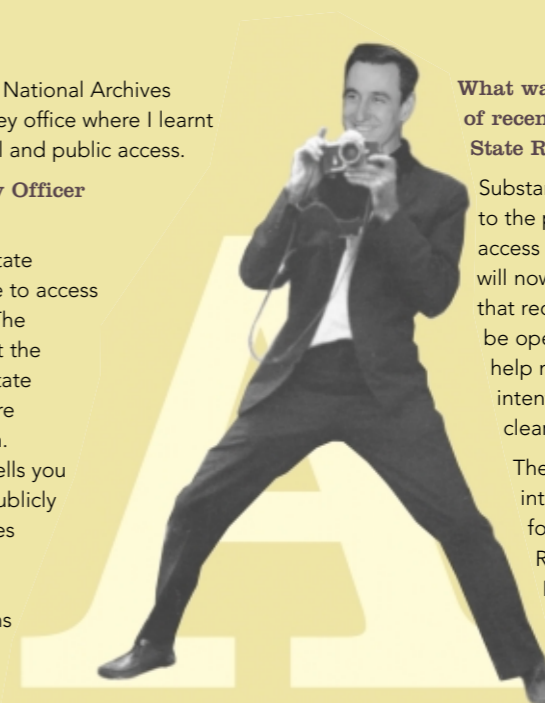
After the project was over, the National Archives kindly took me into their Sydney office where I learnt more about appraisal, disposal and public access.

Describe your role as Policy Officer at State Records

One that hopefully helps facilitate the act of someone being able to access a State record without effort. The primary objective of the role at the moment is to ensure that all State records over 30 years of age are covered by an access direction. Basically, an access direction tells you when a record can be made publicly available. Government agencies and other public offices, like hospitals, universities and councils, should have directions for all their records that are more than 30 years old.

My role sometimes requires dealing with public offices that have not yet made access directions. Authorising access to records is a simple process and we have guidelines, procedures, forms and personal coaching to help them. The help mainly comes in assisting agencies in balancing the rights of access with protecting records that contain sensitive personal information or information relating to security.

As an advocate for public access, the role sometimes involves dissuading agencies from making unusual or restrictive decisions relating to public access. In an age of unalarmed alertness there is always the possibility that ensuring safety and security may not appear to be in the public interest when it comes to records.



What was the significance of recent amendments to the State Records Act?

Substantial changes have been made to the provisions relating to public access to records after 30 years. There will now be an explicit presumption that records over 30 years old should be open to access. This will certainly help me and agencies by making the intention of the open-access period clearer and stronger.

The amendments also include the introduction of a review process for access directions. State Records can now request the Minister for the public office in question to review a direction if we feel it is inconsistent or is contrary to the guidelines.

Who's that teddy sitting in your work bay?

When you rarely win at competitions, and then you do, you win big! That 'England' bear was the first prize in a Rugby World Cup draw. It was organised by a colleague who is now an archivist in the Cayman Islands. Did I say before that being an archivist is, if you have the stomach for it, a passport to travel and adventure?

↳ Warwick Hunter as he is and as he imagines himself!

