

ART & THE BUSINESS ARCHIVE: The Bartholomew Archive

The Bartholomew Archive, held at the National Library of Scotland, records the business activities of the Edinburgh-based, map-making firm, John Bartholomew & Son Ltd. Material in the collection dates from the 1820s to 1995, when the company was de-registered. The Archive is composed of 110 metres of business records, 3000 copper printing plates, 6000 glass printing plates, 16,000 proof maps, 177 volumes of printed maps as well as hand-made tools, photographs, oral history recordings and original artworks.

In 2012/13, the Library mounted a major exhibition of material from the Bartholomew Archive. As part of the programme of events we invited a Writer in Residence and an Artist in Residence to work with the collection over a three month period. We hoped the archive would be a rich source of inspiration for our artists who would in turn help us to widen access by promoting business archives and maps to new audiences, in innovative ways.

The Residencies were advertised through our website as well as via specialist groups including Creative Scotland, Craft Scotland and the Textile Study Group. Funding came from private donors, corporate sponsors and charitable trusts and amounted to an award of £3000 for each artist. From the 35 applications received we appointed Tom Pow as our Writer in Residence and textile artist Diane Garrick as our Artist in Residence.

After handling and conservation training, the artists were encouraged to explore the archive; to delve into drawers and to open volumes. We hoped the freedom of this period of discovery would lead to two main outcomes. Firstly, to afford Tom and Diane the inspiration to produce new, original works and secondly, to offer inspiration for a number of outreach activities which they would lead. In the end, the outreach activities Tom and Diane created were targeted at three main groups; primary school children, adults with visual impairment and members of Library staff.

Good examples of some of the positive and unexpected outcomes of the Residencies come from the workshops run for adults with visual impairment. The workshops included lino cutting, as a way of developing a deeper understanding of the map making process, and poetry writing. The poems were inspired by memories of place and mental maps of places, and were transcribed by sighted members of the group, recorded and later added to SoundCloud. Tom and Diane developed these workshops in collaboration with Artlink, who offered advice on how to develop activities that would work well with this audience. Members of staff were offered training in audio description, a technique of describing items in exhibitions in a studied and meaningful way. The training was led by Anne Hornsby of Minds Eye Description. The feedback from these workshops was extremely positive and the links between the Library, our artists, and groups such as Artlink, as well as the skills taught to staff by Anne, have proven to be enduring and transferable.

Our artists' ability to engage with people in an original and creative way allowed them to connect with groups who can feel marginalised by the complex, visual nature of maps and archives. It was exciting for us to see our collections used in new ways, and it allowed us to see our collections in a different light. The workshops resulted in staff gaining new and practical skills whilst the impressive artworks and collection of poems, which formed the main creative output of the Residencies, attest to the inspiration that can be found in a business archive.