

Black & Asian Studies Association

Natalie Ceeney
Chief Executive
The National Archives
Kew
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25 September 2009

Dear Ms Ceeney,

THE CUTBACKS AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

BASA is very concerned to hear about National Archives proposed cuts in the services and staffing. We have worked closely with TNA and its predecessor the Public Record Office for many years, collaborated on the Moving Here and Black History website, and we are represented on the User Forum. We were very pleased that TNA agreed to host the CASBAH Project website, which BASA had been closely associated with. The increased work on the Black and Asian presence at TNA has been very welcome, and we note how information about it is cascading outwards, as for example mentioned in a BBC Radio 4 programme on 14 September about Anglo-Indian history and genealogy.

BASA is sympathetic to TNA's difficulties in ensuring it can have a balanced budget and not go into deficit. With the future cut backs in public spending it holds no hope that the Government will increase its investment.

Obviously the proposed closure on Mondays is a major reduction in public accessibility. It is difficult to assess whether this is the appropriate reduction in opening hours. Given some people from outside London may plan their TNA visit as a long weekend, the Monday closure will reduce their ability to research, unless they compensate by starting on a Thursday or a Friday, which could increase the demand pressures on those days. Researchers from overseas may also be adversely affected given they need to spend short concentrated time periods at TNA.

It is also difficult to assess what the effect of the reduction in staff will have. Could it lead to long waiting times for document collection and return? Will it increase the waiting time for documents to be reproduced? Will it decrease the number of staff available to advise researchers? Will it decrease the number of staff able to produce the various user guides, or to work on new developments to go on the website? Will it increase the time documents are not available because they are being conserved? Will it reduce the continued detailed cataloguing without which efficient research cannot be carried out? While digitisation is very important, much more important is to ensure that everything is catalogued in detail. Could savings in not proceeding with future digital projects be made that would reduce the need for some of the cuts?

BASA is particularly concerned about the possibility that the reductions will mean that less resources are available to continue to develop the work on the Black and Asian presence, and to undertake similar work on the histories in Britain of the diversity of other peoples who have and are moving here.

BASA has always had reservations about the commercial partnerships TNA has become involved in, since this reduces public access to public documents for people who cannot afford to pay the

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costs of using the commercial services. It wonders whether investment directly by the TNA might have significantly increased the revenue stream, which is now going to the commercial partners. BASA wonders whether TNA's agreements with the commercial companies is inclusive of appropriate and competitive TNA revenue gains.

It may appear that BASA's field of interest is just one of many competing minority histories and should not have preference over others in the coming years. However, if the DCMS targets for increasing audiences among low income, BME and long-term ill health groups are to continue to be met, then they need to be looked at in an integrated way. The second two groups are disproportionately represented in the first. Further the more that is found out about the various diasporas suggests that the interlinks are greater than expected, as evidenced again in the BBC Radio 4 programme on Anglo-Indians on 15 September.

There is an increasing case for work on the English diaspora. This cannot be told without examining colonialism, Empire, interaction with Black and Asian and other peoples around the world. Before the end of Britain's large scale involvement in Empire as George Orwell wrote in 1939 (see *History Today* October 2009) the greatest part of the British proletariat was in Asia and Africa.

BASA's perspective includes the need for the work on Black and Asian history to be part of the effort to combat the growth of racism. With increasing xenophobia about other Europeans, especially those from Eastern Europe, it is equally important for TNA to be involved in work on the historic links and the contribution made by East Europeans here in Britain over the centuries.

BASA hopes that a guiding criteria for all future projects will be the identification of material on the Black and Asian presence. This needs to be integral within a strategy on the continued development of detailed catalogues.

A cataloguing strategy should attempt to meet a variety of priorities of which diversity is one. Relevant material can be found in a wide variety of seemingly unlikely places. For example material about a habeas corpus for two Africans held as slaves in Bristol in 1773. was found in virtually unlisted record series which was therefore under used. It was pure luck that someone identified it as containing material about slavery, and providing evidence to negate the traditional view that the Somerset case had established that there was no slavery in England. Attempts to legislate for slavery in the 17th century have been found as a result of a cataloguing exercise on the papers of Robert Boyle. Who would have thought that important material on attitudes to race and slavery would turn up in the papers of a 17th century scientist? In addition to the need to improve the catalogue of modern records, including colonial ones, material about migration - of people of African descent, Jews and other groups - is scattered through much more. An emphasis on the continuation of detailed cataloguing is crucial and should be key priority of TNA's work.

In relation to digitisation programmes, census records are wonderful for studying migration but the concentration on digital access via name searches makes it very difficult to use them that way. This needs to be subject to debate on how to improve the searchability of future digitised records

We note that TNA has entered a national strategy agreement on business archives. BASA regards it as essential that in its collaboration with specific business archives the involvement of businesses in colonialism, slavery and empire, and in employing Black and Asian labour over here and in the colonies, is integral to the work on those archives.

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BASA would appreciate being informed of how TNA's work on Black and Asian History will be protected and continued to be worked on, including continued discussion and partnership with BASA.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Sean Creighton
Secretary