

Viewpoint

Aberdeen Harbour Board: Audience Engagement in the Time of Covid

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If 2020 was in no way a normal year for anyone, in our industry it was especially jarring for Project Archivists. As a general rule, we arrive in a new archive, complete a discreet collection and move on; we are creatures of planning, strict timings and focus. National lockdown severely affected our ability to work with collections and deliver outreach in person and, therefore, an entire workforce had to become creative. The pandemic showed that people working in the archive industry are resilient and innovative which has led to projects all over having a positive impact in communities.

This article will focus on the work completed on the Aberdeen Harbour Board collection deposited at Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives. The Archives Revealed post began in late December 2019 and ended a year later – a true project of the pandemic. The paper will take an overview of the collection which is so valuable to Aberdonian heritage as well as looking at the outreach opportunities created as a direct result of the Covid-19 restrictions. Despite the lows experienced in 2020, there were definite positive outcomes.

The Archives Revealed project was undertaken to catalogue and make accessible the records of the Aberdeen Harbour Board; a business at the heart of the City. Aberdeen Harbour is reportedly the oldest existing business in Britain, established in 1136 by King David I of Scotland.¹ The harbour is an intrinsic part of life for Aberdonians and has been for centuries. It has been an essential port for trade with Scandinavia and the Baltic as well as a hub for fishing and shipbuilding. In more recent times, Aberdeen experienced a boom in the offshore oil and gas industries, and has become widely known as the oil capital of Europe. This evolution continues today with the development of the South Harbour in Nigg Bay, which will help to increase trade and act as a port for cruise liners. The harbour has always been and continues to be a huge employer and an integral part of the city.

¹ Aberdeen Harbour Board, 'Aberdeen Harbour History', <http://www.aberdeen-harbour.co.uk/about-us/history/>.

The Harbour Board itself is one of around a hundred Trust Ports in the UK. A Trust Port is independent and run by a Board for the benefit of its stakeholders. It is not controlled by a local authority and does not have shareholders to pay dividends to. All profits made from operations are reinvested into the operation, maintenance, and administration of the port. One of these investments is the development of the South Harbour to create deeper and stronger quays to accommodate larger vessels.²

As part of the new development, the Aberdeen Harbour Board supported the bid to appoint a project archivist through the Archives Revealed scheme, as supported by The National Archives and the Pilgrim Trust. The intention of the project was to include the records they deposited in 2019 covering the period from the early 1800s to 1960, which highlight the story of how the harbour, its employees and the city operated throughout this period. The creation of publicly accessible catalogues was to be a great asset to the Aberdonian public as well as historians and maritime enthusiasts alike.

Despite a significant roadblock in the form of Covid, it is safe to say that the collection is currently in a usable condition. I was hired as the Project Archivist in December 2019 and was able to familiarise myself with the collection before the Christmas break. Given the logical organisation of the collection I was able to create comprehensive file lists covering the majority of the collection before the March lockdown. Although this was not as detailed as desired, it has made the collection accessible.

The Aberdeen Harbour Board archive itself is reminiscent of other business collections and contains records concerning administration, finance, operations, legal papers, property and staff as well as photographs, negatives and scrapbooks. Prior to the pandemic, this had been catalogued by function.

There was also a great number of boxed files which had originally been housed with the Harbour Master. This section had been kept alphabetically in a filing cabinet which had been absorbed as part of the administration series and the order maintained using the red index card files which were found in the boxes with the files. This series is particularly fascinating because of its eclectic nature, with files regarding wide-scale operations as well as small details such as state visits and Canadian cattle imports. A large part of the collection is from 1940 to 1950 and, therefore, the Second World War features quite heavily. One of the standout files from this series is called 'immobilization' and it contains all the information required for action in the event of an enemy attack on the harbour and explains who oversaw what. It is incredibly informative and lists the final drastic action should Aberdeen be overwhelmed: petroleum stocks were to be destroyed, block ships sunk and telephone and electrical power disrupted.

There is also a significant amount of material in the collection relating to the fishing industry. Among this is a run of ninety-three ledgers starting in 1881 which document the salmon sales made in the local fish market. They

² Aberdeen Harbour Board, 'Project Background', <http://www.aberdeen-harbour.co.uk/south-harbour/project-background/>.

contain information on sales equipment, inventories, staff contracts, wage bills, correspondence and pamphlets. These ledgers are a great resource because they show us how the fishing industry was faring in Aberdeen over a long period of time and allows researchers to draw comparisons through the years.

These fishing records, as well as many of the other five hundred-plus ledgers including arrivals, departures and accounts, are largely standardised. They record information in columns and rows, and are chronological, which lends itself very well to data manipulation and is something that gave way to a significant and ongoing outreach project.

Like most archivists during 2020, I had to rework plans several times and this was definitely the case with public engagement. We had some grand plans including a heritage open day, exhibitions and a rum-tasting evening. Another project we had in the pipeline was a collaboration with Code the City, which was intended to be a two-day workshop using ledgers to harvest data that could then be displayed and manipulated.

Code the City is a local charity which promotes using data to improve knowledge about Aberdeen and the Shire.³ It runs hack weekends, workshops and community events which bring together coders and history enthusiasts to improve skills and online content. We were approached by the team to take part in their nineteenth hack weekend (CTC19) in April 2020, aptly named ‘History + Data = Innovation’.⁴ The initial proposal was that the archive would take a number of the arrivals ledgers to the event where attendees could digitise the pages and work with the data.

It was decided that a sample of the 151 volumes from the arrivals ledgers for 1831 to 1957 would be perfect for the event (for example see Plate 1). They record the ship’s name, home port, master, the port from which it has sailed, the cargo and the day’s weather. They are a great way to understand how commerce in Aberdeen has changed over time and can also reveal key trading and sailing routes. This would prove interesting from a data perspective but also useful for the archive to better understand how our records could be used in other ways.

When the world started to shut down, it became very apparent that the event would be cancelled. However, the archive and the rest of the project leaders were excited about the weekend and we decided to go ahead with the event in an online format.

The main focus in that time was the digitisation of the ledger pages from which we would collect the data. As the ledgers span such a large period, only a few were selected to be transcribed. The run chosen was from 1914 to 1920 because they contained the addition of daily comments written in by the ledger clerk which recorded the events of the First World War, both on the continent and in the city; this was a great resource in revealing more about the impact of the conflict in Aberdeen. In the week before national remote working was

³ Code the City, <https://codethecity.org>.

⁴ Code the City, ‘Code the City 19: History + Data = Innovation’, <https://codethecity.org/what-we-do/hack-weekends/code-the-city-19-history-data-innovation/>.

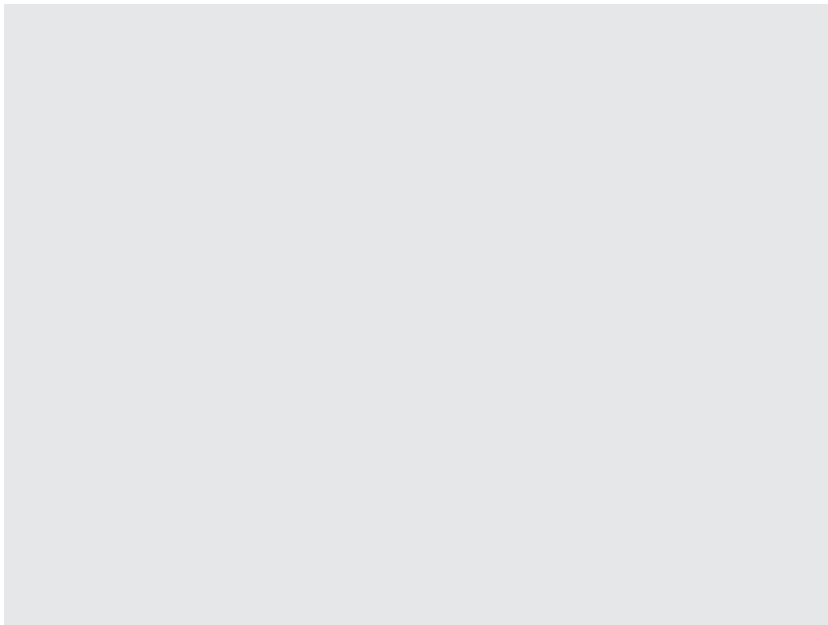


Plate 1 Page from an arrival ledger showing 26 and 27 September 1917.

announced, I photographed each individual page (all 649 of them) and uploaded them to an Excel sheet on Google Docs. This provided a large amount of material which could be worked on for an extended period. At the time we were unsure of how long we would be away from the repository so it was decided that six ledgers would probably keep the project going should it prove to be popular and should homeworking become the norm.

As this was a wholly online project, it was recognised that people would require a certain level of guidance. The archive created a set of guidelines regarding transcription protocols and Code the City provided more technical advice in terms of spreadsheets. We also set up an open Slack group where transcribers could ask questions and talk about their progress. This was used often and proved invaluable in reporting issues.

The public were invited to work on transcribing and checking entries from March 2020. As the online CTC19 event was scheduled for 11–12 April, this allowed two weeks to create enough data to be useful to the coders over the official weekend. Transcribers used two Google sheets – one to log participation and one to transcribe data. Each page was transcribed by one user and then checked over by another to catch mistakes and give a second opinion with the tricky palaeography. When an image had been transcribed and checked we locked off the entries to prevent them from being changed. We had a great

start with almost four thousand records transcribed and checked by the end of the weekend.

The data transcribed in March was used as part of the CTC19 weekend. At the event, we broke into project groups and delegated tasks. Myself and another participant were happy to focus on checking the existing data whereas those interested in coding set to work creating visual representations of the findings. By the end of the weekend, we had a fully operational website and interactive graphs created using Power BI. This was a particularly interesting experience for me because my technical skills had been limited to Excel and PowerPoint graphs. It was fascinating to see what could be done with raw data and even more rewarding to see that people enjoyed working with it. The project was originally intended to last those two days but, like everything in archiving, this didn't happen and we ended up continuing till mid-December 2020.

After the event, people continued to contribute to the transcription sheets and this data was added to the website to create even more detailed graphs (Plate 2). We were delighted to be invited back for the twentieth hack weekend in August 2020 to continue the arrivals project.⁵ As expected, the team working on the project was made up of both avid coders and history enthusiasts which brought a great range of skills and knowledge to the weekend. As many of the attendees had been at CTC19, the main aim was to clean up the data. A second spreadsheet was created to input adjustments and this allowed us to make data more presentable while keeping the accurate ledger transcriptions intact – a must when dealing with archival material. This data cleaning also allowed us to create a more presentable website which is easier to understand and navigate. For example, the HMS *Daniel Stroud* was recorded under six different variations (Plate 3). While it was important to maintain the original record, it was skewing the data output and required regimentation.

The adjustments spreadsheet also included the addition of a new column of information sourced externally from the original transcription documents. As we continued to transcribe, people began to notice the recurrence of codes. One member of the team recognised them as Fishing Port Registration Numbers from when boats were registered. Where known, that number was added and will hopefully allow the cross-referencing of vessels with other sources at some point in the future. Although this information was not consistent, we could use Excel filter options to group together vessels and add in missing data.

Initial steps were also taken to create a better understanding about the various vessels, particularly their history and purpose. Many of the vessel names contained prefixes relating to their type (e.g. HMS – His Majesty's Ship for a regular naval vessel or HMSS for a submarine). These were extracted and a list of definitions was built up with the help of a former ship's captain. Decoding these prefixes highlighted just how much military naval activity was taking place around Aberdeen during the First World War.

⁵ Code the City, 'Code The City 20: History and Culture', <https://codethecity.org/what-we-do/hack-weekends/code-the-city-20-history-and-culture/>.

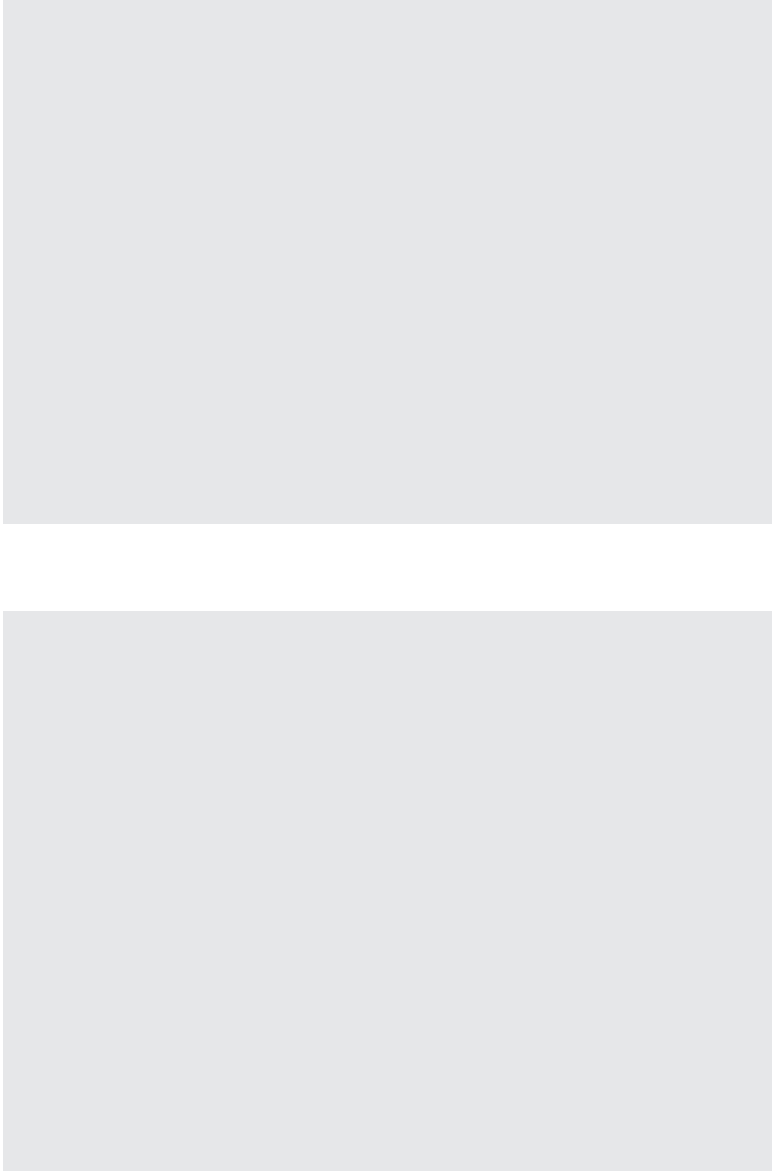


Plate 2 Screenshots of the Harbour Board Arrivals website showing the 'on this day' feature and graphs showing vessels arriving more than three times during 1916.

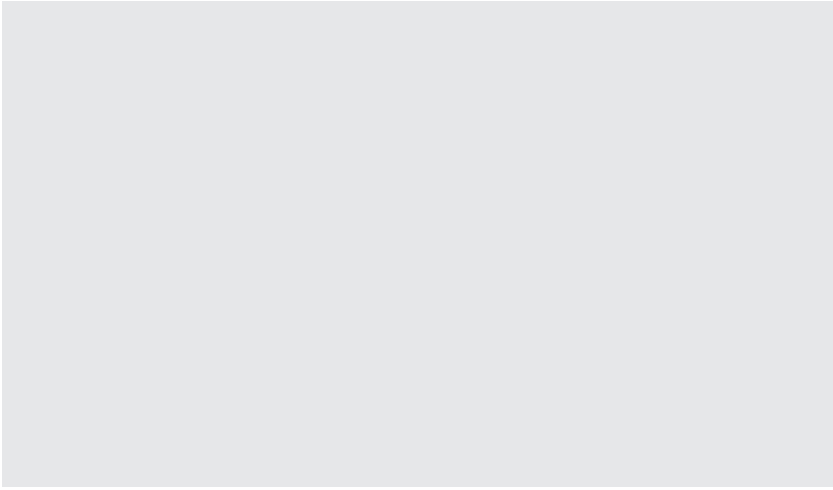


Plate 3 Screenshot of the adjustment spreadsheet.

As before, the weekend was a great success. We learned more about data and the coders benefited from having over 15,000 records to play with. It also allowed them good scope if they wanted to develop the project to incorporate Wikidata, something in which the Code the City team specialise.

As mentioned previously, the project continued until December 2020 and overall we transcribed over 25,000 records from 638 pages. We had students, members of the council, maritime enthusiasts, archivists and even a former ship's captain contribute to the transcriptions. We ended up with a great picture of what was arriving in the harbour during the First World War, a fabulous daily running commentary by the clerk describing events in the city and on the Continent, and a website which translates the information from the spreadsheets into something more visual. We have graphs of vessels, an 'on this day' feature and we can even trace the weather. Perhaps most importantly, we created a good connection with a local group and members of the community.

The lockdown was extremely debilitating to many people. For archivists and other heritage professionals it particularly impacted hands-on working and public engagement. However, I'm not sure that this project would have gained as much traction without it.

As with all online projects, we faced difficulties. One of the major disadvantages was that we were unable to meet face to face, yet for some people this is the preferred method of working. Another was that the people working on the project were unable to view the physical records in person and were relying solely on some very rushed photographs taken by myself. Although this did not affect the data harvesting, it would have been a good experience for collaborators to see the records at first hand.

Despite these issues, overall, I do believe that the project worked better online. While the in-person session was an exciting and different prospect, it was confined to a small and discreet moment in time. It had limited scope and barriers to accessibility due to location and date. Moving the project online meant that more people from varied backgrounds were able to join; for example, one member of the team contributed early in the morning to fit around family commitments. We also had people contribute from other areas of Scotland who may have not been able to make the commute to Aberdeen. It also meant that we could work with a much larger pool of data to create a more meaningful output.

Looking back on the project, I believe it was valuable to step away from the classic records used for outreach and explore data harvesting. I had become aware of the idea from online sites such as Zooniverse⁶ but I had not considered implementing something similar with records I had worked with. Exploring the data in the collections was a relatively cost-efficient exercise and worked incredibly well as an online collaboration project. It was accessible as we did not rely on niche palaeography skills and it was volunteer-friendly as it did not require a large commitment: for example, some people were happy to do one page whereas others wanted to complete a hundred.

The project has a wide-ranging worth to several stakeholders. It was useful to the archive as it offered a good framework for other projects. It was useful to researchers as it supplied a great amount of data and visual representations to assist with maritime and local history. It was useful to Code the City and their coders to provide a large existing data pool with a wide range of angles. And it was useful to the Aberdeen Harbour Board to promote their history and outreach with the community.

The collaboration with Code the City was also a great exercise in relinquishing control. Often with outreach projects archivists have complete command of a project whereas with Code the City it was very much being led by those with the knowledge. The archive had set a clear aim but the way we arrived there was very much up for debate. This project was significantly directed by those with superior digital knowledge and I was happy for them to use and shape the data in the ways they felt most appropriate.

My time with Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives was not what I had expected. I gained a colleague I never worked with in person, I discovered that I do not like working at home and, most importantly, I learned that I can be creative during adverse times.

Working with Code the City showed me the great opportunities in the sector for more collaboration with digital-based skill sets. Archives, especially business ones, have significant records which lend themselves to statistics and there are many people out there who love working with raw data. Perhaps it is time to move away from traditional records for outreach and explore a more technical outlook.

⁶ <https://www.zooniverse.org>.

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The project itself also became a great outlet for creativity and gave those with unexpected spare time some purpose. It was a particularly welcome project for me to focus on when my usual routine was disrupted and I hope that it also helped others too. It was hard time for archivists and it is easy to feel like we achieved less than usual but it is important to celebrate the small victories.