



Video transcript

AM: Digitising the past

The National Archives in London is the official archive and publisher for the UK government, safeguarding more than 11 million historic documents created during the past 1,000 years, from the Domesday Book to modern government papers and digital files.

This video will take a behind-the-scenes tour of the archive, following the stages of a digitisation project with publisher Adam Matthew, from the initial assessment of materials for the project through to collection care and scanning. This short tour will show how this... [visual of physical document] becomes one of these... [visual of digitised document].

As the United Kingdom government archive, among our primary roles is the preservation and sharing of information. That means investing in the protection of the material we hold. It also means making that material available to interested audiences in the most appropriate way.

Our long-standing partnership with Adam Matthew has helped ensure we fulfil those aims. The digital resources they have produced have been integral to us moving in step with the rapidly changing landscape of information services. Researchers want to explore multiple resources quickly and comprehensively. Today, visitors to The National Archives and researchers around the world delve into our collections at the click of a button.

Adam Matthew's been working with The National Archives since the early 1990s. Initially, we focused on microfilm products but now we work solely on digital collections. Since 2009, we've been developing the Archives Direct portal, which is a series of standalone products focusing on Britain's political relationship with the rest of the world. Taken together, these comprise millions of pages of previously restricted and confidential information which now are an essential resource for any student or scholar of political history.

Adam Matthew is currently working with The National Archive on two new digitisation projects. The first is the digitisation of the series of Colonial Office files covering UK government interactions with colonial America. The second will make available all material held at The National Archives relating to South Africa during the apartheid years 1948 to 1980.

Before any digitisation takes place, a team of editors from Adam Matthew embark on a thorough assessment of the material, making several visits to The National Archives to carry out the necessary checks ahead of digitisation. We take account of every document, its measurements and physical description, and look out for any large foldout pages. All this information is passed to the scanning operatives who use this to calculate the size of scanner which will be used and the amount of material which will be passed through it. We do this for everything that we will be digitising and publishing. We work closely with the digitisation conservation team because we value the long-term preservation of these documents.

Working through the material in this way leads us to the discovery of real gems. This is the 1964 Foreign Office file for Rivonia. Rivonia was a key event in the history of apartheid. The trial lasted for two years and saw very prominent members of the African National Congress, including Nelson Mandela, tried and found guilty of committing acts of sabotage against the South African government. It's information like this that makes the apartheid



files at The National Archives so fascinating and shows that the eyes of the world really were on South Africa during this volatile period.

We often think of the advantage of digitisation being the preservation of the material in a new digital format, but the process also plays an important role in the preservation of the original document.

Every document is surveyed by our qualified paper conservators in order to ensure that their access to the text is clear or that they are stable enough to digitise. All of the conservation work is undertaken before the scanning operators image the documents. In providing researchers access to the digital document, there is less need to present them with the physical document, thereby reducing the possibility of further damage. There are various kinds of damage we face when conserving documents for digitisation but the most common are tears that are caused through repeated handling over time. The repair is an important step in the digitisation process. We do this by rejoining the two edges of the tear using a Japanese repair tissue and a coating of gelatin adhesive. It's vital that these documents are in a fit state to be scanned and we work closely with the scanning operators to provide training on how to handle these fragile documents.

Setting up an efficient scanning operation is probably the most integral part of any digitisation project. We want to minimise the amount of time that documents are out of the repositories. The scanning itself takes place in our main scanning room and is a three-way collaboration between ourselves, Adam Matthew and Capita Document Solutions. We each have dedicated individuals who work closely together to ensure that the work is carried out effectively. Adam Matthew currently have four scanners permanently positioned here at The National Archives, which are in constant use due to the many projects that we are working on with them. Before any scanning commences we must ensure that the correct technical setup has been achieved. What we are looking for are digital images that represent the original document as closely as possible. Depending on the material, we are able to scan thousands of images a day but obviously if the material is very delicate, fragile, brittle, that would reduce our output.

Most of the documents scanned here at The National Archives for Adam Matthew are uniform government documents which are typescript loose leaves. Some are tagged files, and also we have some which are bound volumes. The majority of them are in fairly good condition, compared to some of the medieval manuscripts also held at the archives.

Once the digital image has been captured, we then conduct our own quality control here at The National Archives. We then send to Adam Matthew who will then conduct their own checks.

Once the scans have been approved, the Adam Matthew team perform a careful analysis of each document, capturing key metadata. This supplements the data provided by The National Archives' own catalogue.

It's a pleasure to see the material brought to life in digital form and it's so straightforward to search, to browse the Archives Direct interface. They have all been arranged by collection type, plus we have the option of searching across all of the collections so that we can jump to any chapter within any document. It is particularly beneficial to be able to zoom into documents that are difficult to read in their original form.



Archives Direct is one of our most successful products, both commercially and in terms of our relationship with The National Archives. Demand for the Archives Direct content remains very strong and we'll continue to publish new modules.

The National Archive's commitment to commercial partnerships and their clearly defined digitisation strategy has meant that from the outset we've understood each other's goals and motivations. This has resulted in a partnership that can teach us how publishers and libraries can work effectively together and it's meant that we can offer fantastic digital resources to researchers across the globe.

We wouldn't have been able to digitise our collections and expand their reach to new audiences without partnering with commercial publishers, so the relationship we have with Adam Matthew is one that we wish to continue for a very long time.