

**Modernising the past:
Impacts of digitisation on the accessibility of
historical materials for the local community of
York**

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Funded by The Laidlaw Foundation



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Acknowledgements

This project could not have been completed without the ongoing support of Dr Catherine-Rose Hailstone and the generous funding from Lord Laidlaw and The Laidlaw Foundation. Thanks is also extended to the National Railway Museum and the Borthwick Institute for Archives for permitting the use of their resources, as well as to all the survey participants.

Introduction

This project has explored the impact that the digitisation of archive material has had on the accessibility of historical sources to local communities and the effect that this has on local attitudes towards their past. An archive is defined as ‘a collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people’.¹ They are therefore instrumental in the understanding of the history of a person’s surroundings, and provide knowledge that would otherwise be lost regarding historical narratives. However, the knowledge made available via archives is not always accessible to the general public due to the physical, financial, and temporal efforts involved in the visiting process and the social stigmas surrounding academia and its exclusivity.²

This is why the digitisation of material held within archives is of such great importance. The physical requirements for in-person visitations combined with social stigma surrounding archives’ connections to academia, prevents non-academics from exploring the history of their own surroundings, making it inaccessible and limiting the knowledge of their own community’s past. Digital accessibility was of prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic, when academics and non-academics alike were unable to physically enter archives, and a move to the online world limited the historical resources available. The growth of the internet provides an opportunity to increase the accessibility of historical narratives to local communities, and in an ever-increasing technological world, it is important to modernize how we access the past.

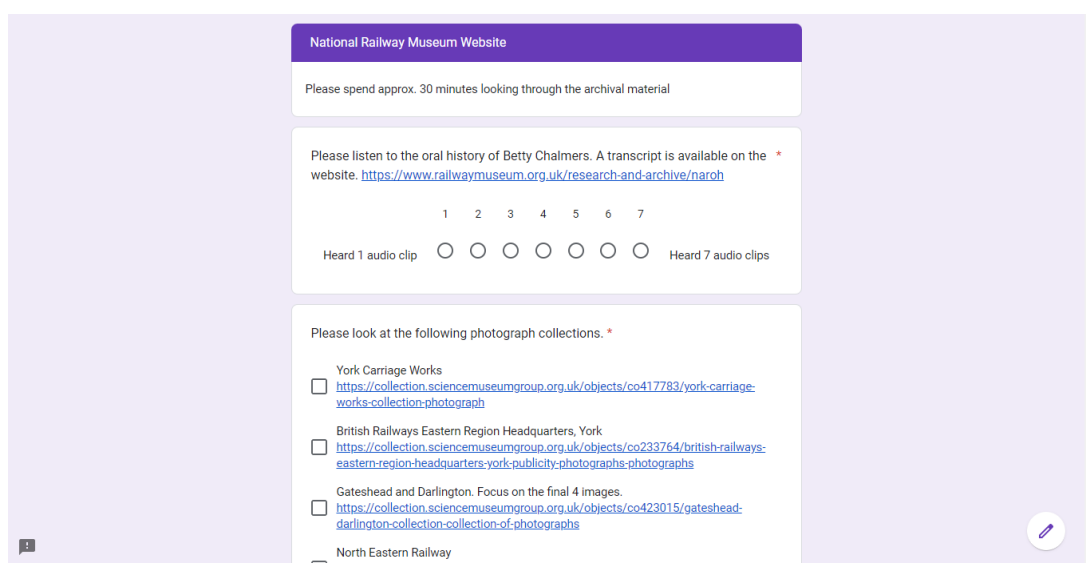
The recognition of this has led to an increase in the digitisation of archive material. But this growth in access raises the question of how effective this process has been for increasing accessibility to this material, and how much of an impact this has had on sharing the knowledge contained within archives with the local community. This project has sought to tackle these questions. In what follows, I argue that while the case studies of the National Railway Museum (NRM) and Borthwick Archives (BA) at the University of York (UoY) reveal that digitised material has a significant impact in increasing the knowledge of local community history, the awareness of the availability of these materials limits this impact.

¹ ‘ARCHIVE | Meaning & Definition for UK English | Lexico.Com’, *Lexico Dictionaries | English*, accessed 4 August 2022, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/archive>.

² Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Hazel V. Carby, ‘The Power in the Story’, in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015), 20; Steve Hoadley, University of York. Institute of Railway Studies, and National Railway Museum, ‘Perceptions of the National Railway Museum - Visitors and Non-Visitors’ (York: Institute of Railway Studies, 1999), 10.

Method

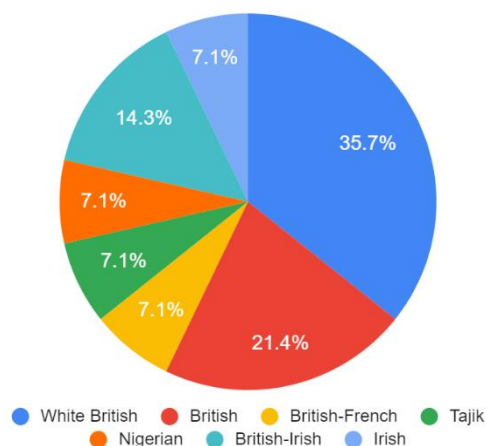
To analyse the impact of digitisation, I conducted a two-part survey within the locality of York, assessing community attitudes towards the history of local institutions before and after being exposed to archival material that had been made available online. The institutions chosen were the NRM and the UoY due to the similarities they held in the digital material available. Both had archival material available within the online public domain and respondents were directed specifically towards the oral histories and photographs available on each institution's website. The material chosen from the NRM archive related to York to maintain the local focus of the research.



A screenshot of the sources included in Survey 1: National Railway Museum

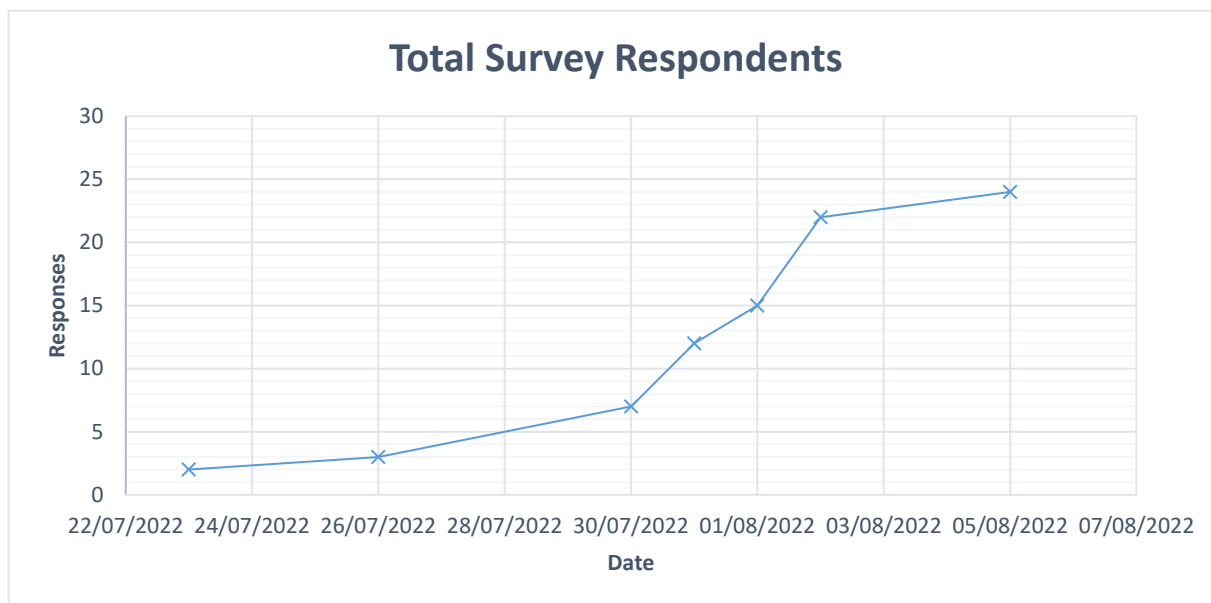
The survey was advertised via community Facebook pages, departmental social media accounts, and directly emailing members of the York community. An incentive of £10 was offered to complete both parts, originally in the form of an eVoucher for the Science Museum Online shop but changed to £10 cash in an effort to increase response rates.

What is your ethnicity or nationality?



Whilst diversity was a goal for responses, to reflect the accessibility of the history for minority groups, issues of low response rates were encountered. This can be attributed to a number of factors (e.g. the suggested time commitment of 1 hour per survey which could have been avoided by holding the survey in-person, rather than releasing the links online.) This caused issues with diversity with the majority of respondents being under-25 and identified as a denomination of British nationality. A sufficient analysis of the accessibility for minority groups cannot be made due to the limited data and its lack of

diversity. Nevertheless, the data collected does permit an analysis of the accessibility of history for the younger York community.



Oral History

The first genre of historical evidence that respondents were directed towards was oral history. Oral history refers to the recording of interviews for the purpose of adding to the historical record with the goal being to preserve spoken history.³ This methodology is promoted for its inclusivity, as it offers narratives otherwise silenced due to the imbalance of written perspectives.⁴ However, there is still debate amongst historians regarding the validity of oral history, with many expressing fears the written source will be lost if orality is accepted.⁵

The basis of this fear is severely flawed, as oral and written sources are not mutually exclusive, with written sources often documenting orality and oral histories producing transcriptions. Each omits an advantage of the other, such as tone or narrative consistency, and therefore should not be used in isolation.⁷ This also highlights the importance of the

³ 'About Oral History - Oral History Research and Resources - Library Guides at University of California, Santa Cruz', accessed 4 August 2022, <https://guides.library.ucsc.edu/oralhist/>; 'Home - Oral History Society', 19 September 2020, <https://www.ohs.org.uk/>.

⁴ Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop*, no. 12 (1981): 103, 106; Annelise Heinz, "'Maid's Day Off": Leisured Domesticity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States', *The American Historical Review* 124, no. 4 (1 October 2019): 1317.

⁵ Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', 97; Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, 'Introduction', in *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918–1963*, 1st ed. (1-60: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13.

⁷ Szreter and Fisher, 'Introduction', 6; Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', 98; Caroline Elkins, 'Alchemy of Evidence: Mau Mau, the British Empire, and the High Court of Justice', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 5 (December 2011): 737.

accessibility of the original recordings, allowing the authenticity of the speaker to be maintained without manipulation through translation or summarisation.⁸

Be that as it may, accessibility is still influenced by third parties, often with political or economic agendas. Digitisation as a concept is flawed if the community do not have internet access, applicable to 2% of the UK population in 2022.¹⁰ However, the city of York offers free Wi-Fi throughout, as part of the Digital York project, thus combating the issue in this specific locality for those who can access it.¹¹ Issues of funding also prevent digitisation, and thus the accessibility of the oral history and archival material, with the decline of funding for public libraries and archives effectively privatising the digital storage of knowledge.¹² Oral histories in other languages, for example, require interpretation and translation to increase accessibility, which comes at a cost.¹³ Bursaries such as National Lottery Heritage Funding help smaller archives overcome this economic boundary, such as the Cambridge Arts Theatre, who completed their *Behind The Scenes* archive and oral history project with such support.¹⁴

Political influence also impacts the accessibility of digitised archival material, with censorship playing a large role in what is made publicly available.¹⁵ Whilst censorship is not as severe in the locality of focus, it is still present in the UK, with companies paying organisations to edit or remove online material that is detrimental to their reputation.¹⁷ Similar can be said for oral histories, however from a more legitimate perspective, with participants holding the right to remove information from the recording under Article 7 of UK GDPR legislation.¹⁸

⁸ Joanna Bornat and Daniela Koleva, 'Working across Boundaries with Oral History', *Oral History* 42, no. 2 (2014): 36.

¹⁰ 'Digital 2022: The United Kingdom', *DataReportal – Global Digital Insights*, accessed 5 August 2022, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-united-kingdom>.

¹¹ Web Services, 'Free Wi-Fi in York', *City of York Council*, York, North Yorkshire, England, United Kingdom, accessed 5 August 2022, <https://www.york.gov.uk/community-innovation/free-wi-fi-york/1>.

¹² Richard Ovenden, *Burning the Books: A History of Knowledge under Attack*, Paperback edition (London: John Murray, 2021), 4.

¹³ Bornat and Koleva, 'Working across Boundaries with Oral History', 36.

¹⁴ 'Our Archive | Cambridge Arts Theatre', accessed 5 August 2022, <https://www.cambridgeartstheatre.com/ourarchive>.

¹⁵ See the example of the unofficial Museum of Oral History, Beijing [Paul Thompson, 'Changing Encounters with Chinese Oral History', *Oral History* 45, no. 2 (2017): 102–3.]

¹⁷ Ovenden, *Burning the Books*, 207.

¹⁸ Expert Participation, 'Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the Protection of Natural Persons with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data and on the Free Movement of Such Data (United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation) (Text with EEA Relevance)', Text, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/Eu-Exit/https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:02016R0679-20160504> (Queen's Printer of Acts of Parliament), accessed 5 August 2022, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/eur/2016/679/article/7>.

Research Findings

In the survey, respondents were asked to listen to oral histories of differing media. From the NRM, this constituted short audio clips of Betty Chalmers, an employee at York station during WW2.¹⁹ Few respondents listened to all of the clips due to finding the webpage difficult to navigate. Many suggested the audio should be embedded for better access: 'it would be a more positive research experience if each person had their own page with the audio clips embedded into the page itself.' This reduced the accessibility, as the audio files had to be downloaded and opened in a separate tab, limiting the ease of access. Merit was, however, granted to the provision of transcripts for accessibility as well as for the overall ease of the website, with people noting that it was 'easy enough to use for someone with reasonable IT literacy', despite the issues with the audio files. This indicates a larger issue of accessibility surrounding the digitisation of material held within archives, as members of the local community who are inexperienced in using the internet are at a disadvantage in accessing the material made available.

In regard to the UoY, respondents were directed towards four video clips, covering different areas of the University's history.²⁰ The audio-visual style of these oral histories is unusual, though not uncommon, and allows greater analysis to be made via the study of body language alongside orality. Although, this requires more technology and therefore greater funding which reduces its popularity.²¹ The majority of respondents watched all the clips provided, with many drawing comparisons to the NRM due to the embedded nature of the videos. This increased engagement is due to the site being relatively easier to navigate, as well as all respondents having a pre-existing relationship with the University, with many respondents commenting on an increased notion of the relevance of the material to them, particularly when compared to the material on the railways.

Despite this, 75.0% of the respondents who found exploring oral history the most enjoyable, held a preference for the audio clips, contradicting the assumption that audio-visual clips are more engaging to the respondents. This is most likely explained by the lack of previous knowledge on the York railway, meaning that more was learnt via Betty Chalmer's testimony. This implies that oral history is of greater value to the local community in areas with little pre-existing knowledge. In considering the accessibility, it is also worth noting no transcript was originally available for the videos, however autogenerated subtitles were a feature.

A major theme that was highlighted throughout the responses was the relevance of the material to the respondents. Whilst this did not impact upon the enjoyment of exploration, as already noted, it was significant in the future engagement with the archives. 35.7% of respondents were unsure as to whether they would explore the NRM's website again due to the lack of relevant interest or requirement for such information. When compared to the

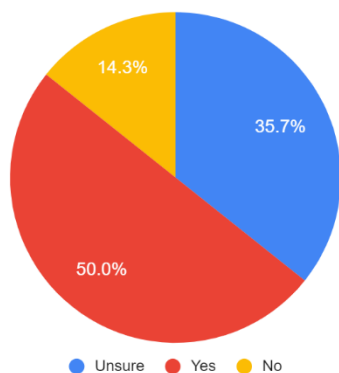
¹⁹ 'National Archive of Railway Oral History', *National Railway Museum*, accessed 13 August 2022, <https://www.railwaymuseum.org.uk/research-and-archive/naroh>.

²⁰ 'Oral History - 50th Anniversary, University of York', accessed 13 August 2022, <https://www.york.ac.uk/50/history/oral-history/>.

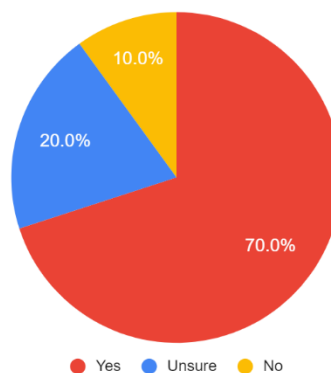
²¹ Thompson, 'Changing Encounters with Chinese Oral History', 105.

BA, with 70.0% stating they would use the website again, the relationship between relevance and engagement is confirmed despite both institutions contributing to York's local history.²²

Would you use the NRM website again to explore the archival material?



Would you use the UoY website again to explore the archival material?



Photographs

The second type of digitised material that was included was photographs. This type of historical evidence was chosen due to its capacity to record and document history without the need for literacy. The differences to be noted on photographs that have been digitised and those that were 'born-digital' (e.g. smartphone photographs) also provides reasoning for this inclusion.²³ The increasing accessibility of cameras also allows a wider range of perspectives to be reached, although the issue previously noted regarding computer and internet access for their digitisation still needs to be considered.²⁴

A large issue facing the digitisation of photographs is the acceptance of material culture within historical evidence. Material culture considers the context of the object, rather than solely the physical attributes, which for photographs would include the physical arrangement in an album or the reasoning behind being taken.²⁵ Like oral sources, material culture is a relatively recent accepted form of historical evidence, and is increasingly recognised as a necessary component within the study of history.²⁶ The debates raging

²² Sessions Book Trust, Provenance and Provenance Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, *The University of York: The First Twenty-Five Years* (York, 1989), 33; Handel Kardas, 'Museums, Visitors - and What They Expect', in *Perspectives on Railway History and Interpretation: Essays to Celebrate the Work of Dr John Coiley at the National Railway Museum, York*, by Neil Cossons, John Allan Patmore, and Rob Shorland-Ball (York: National railway museum, 1992), 144.

²³ Tina Campt, 'On Family Tales and Photographic Records', in *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*, 2012, 6; Ovenden, *Burning the Books*, 197.

²⁴ David Zeitlyn, 'A Dying Art? Archiving Photographs in Cameroon', *Anthropology Today* 25, no. 4 (August 2009): 23, 26.

²⁵ Karen Harvey, ed., 'Practical Matters', in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, The Routledge Guides to Using Historical Sources (London ; New York: Routledge, 2009), 3; Kylie Rees, 'Archiving, Conserving and Interpreting Photographs', *Australian Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Engineering* 4, no. 1 (January 2006): 9–10; Campt, 'On Family Tales and Photographic Records', 17.

²⁶ Harvey, 'Practical Matters', 1, 13.

around the use of material sources such as images, however, means that there has not been a universal drive to digitise the photographs contained within archives. In order to increase the accessibility of this approach, the process of digitisation becomes more complex, such as in the preservation of layout and provenance, and thus more expensive.²⁸

The solution to this is once again determined by funding. Many collections do not have online resources to locate objects within collections and without the appropriate support for search functions, the digitisation of archival material is of little use as the identification of material is so limited.²⁹ The goal of digitisation should be to improve the accessibility of the material, therefore the material needs to hold the appropriate search data to ease its recognition.

It wasn't explicitly clear that you could click on the photos to make them bigger. Might be an idea to make the collage, so that you can see the whole picture, could possibly make it more obvious that you can view a bigger picture when the mouse hovers over it.

On UoY

Wish there was more photos - there must be loads more in existence? If there are maybe clear signposting to these?

On UoY

The images as they're shown on the site would make great sources for students and more senior researchers. They are clear and, particularly useful, is the information on copyright and citation.

On NRM

This raises a further issue with the digitisation of photographs; what to do with the original after scanning? Kylie Rees recommends storing hard copies of all images, to guarantee their long term life, whereas Katlin Seagraves notes that not everything is worth keeping.³² Whilst the dates of these recommendations cause consideration of the technological capacities of the time - Rees writing in 2006, Seagraves in 2020 - the same issues remain. Digital storage does not guarantee safe or eternal storage, with Distributed Denial of Service and other attacks overwhelming public websites.³³ The issue of funding is once again raised, since to provide safe storage for physical archives comes at a cost as does protecting websites from such attacks.³⁴ One solution to this is the concept of bringing 'preservation to the people', encouraging individuals to donate their archives to public libraries to produce a sample archive rather than attempting to store everything, reducing the funding required for storage.³⁵ This method is particularly appropriate for 'born-digital' material, of which there is an abundance.³⁶

²⁸ Rees, 'Archiving, Conserving and Interpreting Photographs', 12.

²⁹ Harvey, 'Practical Matters', 16; Katlin Seagraves, 'Digitization and Personal Digital Archiving', *Library Technology Reports* 56, no. 5 (2020): 25.

³² Rees, 'Archiving, Conserving and Interpreting Photographs', 10; Seagraves, 'Digitization and Personal Digital Archiving', 27.

³³ Ovenden, *Burning the Books*, 198; Seagraves, 'Digitization and Personal Digital Archiving', 23.

³⁴ Ovenden, *Burning the Books*, 198; Rees, 'Archiving, Conserving and Interpreting Photographs', 12.

³⁵ Seagraves, 'Digitization and Personal Digital Archiving', 25; Ovenden, *Burning the Books*, 212.

³⁶ Ovenden, *Burning the Books*, 197.



LNER 'Sir Ralph Wedgewood', war damage, York North MPD. April 1942
 Science Museum Group
 ©The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum³⁷

Research Findings

The photograph collections respondents were directed towards were, in the majority, not 'born-digital', due to their age. For the NRM, this included images of York station during the bombing of WW2, linking with the oral history of Betty Chalmers.³⁸ A large majority of respondents looked at all of the images indicated and commented on the increase in engagement and ease of use. In particular praise was specifically given to the ability to click through the photographs, how this was signposted, and the referencing material made available for each image including copyright and citation. Copyright is an issue amongst historical material, particularly for photographs where permissions and possibly reimbursement is required for use in publication.³⁹ Providing this information improves the ease of use for academics, however, it is not often relevant for the general public. To improve the accessibility for this group, suggestions were given for the presentation of the photographs online, advocating a full gallery option and the numbering of images.

³⁷ 'British Railways Eastern Region Headquarters, York, Publicity Photographs | Science Museum Group Collection', accessed 14 August 2022, <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co233764/british-railways-eastern-region-headquarters-york-publicity-photographs-photographs>.

³⁸ 'York Carriage Works Collection | Science Museum Group Collection', accessed 14 August 2022, <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co417783/york-carriage-works-collection-photograph>; 'British Railways Eastern Region Headquarters, York, Publicity Photographs | Science Museum Group Collection'; 'Gateshead & Darlington Collection | Science Museum Group Collection', accessed 14 August 2022, <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co423015/gateshead-darlington-collection-collection-of-photographs>; 'North Eastern Railway Albums | Science Museum Group Collection', accessed 14 August 2022, <https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co422289/north-eastern-railway-albums-photograph-albums>.

³⁹ Rees, 'Archiving, Conserving and Interpreting Photographs', 12.



Students relaxing by the lake, 1980s
Borthwick Institute for Archives

As for the BA, respondents were asked to view a range of photographs of university memories dating back to the University's foundation.⁴¹ Similar to NRM, most respondents explored all the provided photographs, with a note on experiencing higher engagement with this form of evidence than with the oral histories. However, unlike the railway photographs, criticism was given to the ease of use of the website, lacking clarity on how to enlarge the images and the layout as a whole. Respondents had contradicting experiences using smartphone access, with some finding the layout incompatible but others finding the site well formatted. This discrepancy can be attributed to different phone models and screen size and is an issue that all websites face. It can be combatted by creating mobile sites or apps as an alternative to desktop websites, however this requires investment and the cost links once again to the role of funding in improving accessibility. Similar suggestions were given as before, such as a mini gallery or a collage of the photographs to showcase each individually, as well as a desire to be directed towards more photographs and provided greater information on the origins of each photograph.

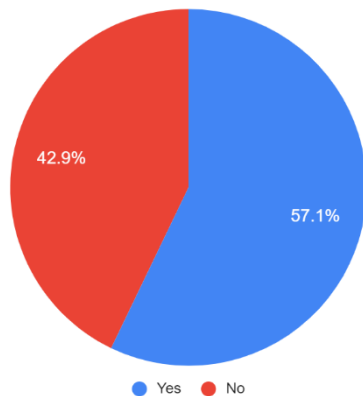
This desire to explore further images demonstrates another issue digitisation faces: the material is available but knowledge of it is limited. In the instance of York, the local community were not aware they could access the online material. Therefore the largest prevention of accessibility was the lack of awareness. Whilst 57.1% of respondents had knowledge of the NRM archive, 78.6% did not know they could access material online. And

⁴⁰ '1980s - 50th Anniversary, University of York', accessed 14 August 2022, <https://www.york.ac.uk/50/history/1980s/>.

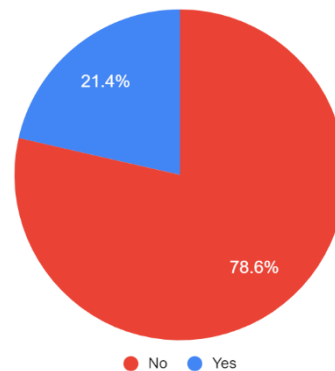
⁴¹ '1960s - 50th Anniversary, University of York', accessed 14 August 2022, <https://www.york.ac.uk/50/history/1960s/>; '1970s - 50th Anniversary, University of York', accessed 14 August 2022, <https://www.york.ac.uk/50/history/1970s/>; '1980s - 50th Anniversary, University of York'; '1990s - 50th Anniversary, University of York', accessed 14 August 2022, <https://www.york.ac.uk/50/history/1990s/>; '2000s - 50th Anniversary, University of York', accessed 14 August 2022, <https://www.york.ac.uk/50/history/2000s/>.

despite 70.0% of respondents being students at the University, 70.0% were unaware of the archive on site, despite 60.0% having knowledge of the online materials. This suggests that university's marketing of the online materials is more successful than that of its physical collections. Yet another issue of digitisation is therefore demonstrated: the relationship between awareness and accessibility.

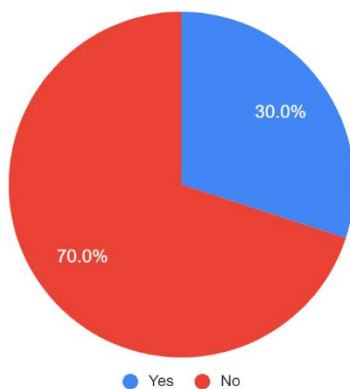
Are you aware the NRM has a library and archive on site? [Search Engine]



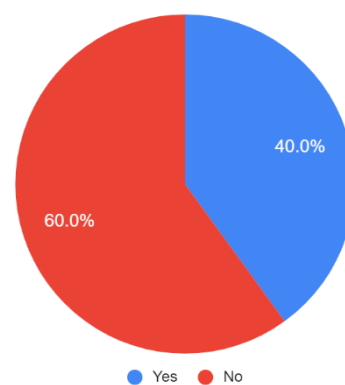
Are you aware you can access archival material through the NRM website?



Are you aware the UoY has an archive on site? [Borthwick Institute for Archives]



Are you aware you can access archival material through the UoY website?



Conclusion

Through this exploration of the impact that the NRM and BA's digitisation of photograph and oral history collections has had on the accessibility of history to the local community in York, it has been demonstrated that the digitisation of the material held within archives does permit a greater knowledge of local history to be shared with the local community. Increasing accessibility of digitised archive material, allowing respondents to explore historical material in their own time and when curiosity arises, results in a marked increase in the desire to explore archives. Being exposed to archive material via an online platform has a beneficial impact on the community interest in and use of local archives.

The survey data has also highlighted that social stigma did not play as big a role as originally assumed in limiting archive access. When asked what prevented them from accessing the NRM and BAs' digitised material, most respondents stated that they were simply not being aware of the archive's existence. Community awareness of the presence of archival institutions, and the material they make available online, is therefore an avenue that requires development as it acts as a barrier towards the accessibility of history for the local community. The reasoning behind this appears to be relevance to the individual, with respondents not seeing a requirement to explore the material. Although, as a member of the York community in this instance, both the archives in question held relevance: the foundation of the UoY was community driven, the NRM used York landscapes to encourage the usage of the railways.⁴² A circular problem is therefore created, as the desire to explore the material and learn more about local history is inspired by an understanding of the institution's relevance to local history. This might, nevertheless, begin to be combatted by an increase in marketing to raise awareness of the material available, such as with this survey, which resulted in newfound interests to explore the archival material.⁴³

It is the issue of funding that most greatly prevents these solutions from being enforced, limiting the accessibility not only for the local community but for researchers worldwide. In the process of digitisation, high costs impacts scanning, the digital format, online databases and website protection, in addition to marketing to raise awareness of the online material. This issue can only be combatted by an increase in awareness of the importance of non-written archival material, as without the acceptance of this there is no great impetus for funding to be granted, and the accessibility of history to be improved.

The impact of the digitisation of material held within archives on the local community is therefore positive, with an increase in the awareness of local history being demonstrated via the survey on the locality of York. The digitisation of material held within archives has been demonstrated as beneficial to the local community and improves the community interest and understanding in their own history.

⁴² Sessions Book Trust, Provenance and Provenance Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, *The University of York: The First Twenty-Five Years*, 3, 8; Katherine A. Webb, *Oliver Sheldon and the Foundations of the University of York*, Borthwick Paper 115 (York: Borthwick Institute, University of York, 2009), 30, 32, 63; Allen Warren, *Eric James and the Founding of the University of York*, Borthwick Paper 126 (York: Borthwick Institute, University of York, 2017), 14, 31; Kardas, 'Museums, Visitors - and What They Expect', 137.

⁴³ Hoadley, University of York. Institute of Railway Studies, and National Railway Museum, 'Perceptions of the National Railway Museum - Visitors and Non-Visitors', 20.

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