

HISTORYLINKS ARCHIVE

In the closing remarks of my presentation at the museums' meeting in Alness on 12 March 2020, I acknowledged that the 'Dornoch Historylinks Image Library' was showing the signs of age and, whilst Plexus Media remained proud of the popularity of the software, they were no longer marketing the original version. They had indicated they would be prepared to undertake an upgrading but the costs involved suggested this would only be viable for Highland museums as a collaborative venture. Obviously, with the complete Historylinks collection available on-line, with up-loads now matching the cataloguing of new acquisitions, there was a museum vested interest in any means of future-proofing our website.

Hot on the heels of the March meeting we were all subjected to the Coronavirus 'Stay at Home' restrictions, including museum closure. The Historylinks Museum Committee took an immediate decision to enhance the museum's 'virtual presence', particularly focusing on making available on-line our archive of films. We hoped this would help retain public interest and, in parallel, provide activity for volunteers to undertake on-line working from home during 'lock-down'. Peter Wild immediately undertook upgrading and conversion work on the film archive. In parallel, with the benefit of browser access to 'Image Library' website Administration, initial homebased volunteer activity was directed at website 'polishing', undertaking a host of tweaks and reorganisation tasks that had been 'on-hold' for some time, whilst routine activity was focused on keeping pace with the weekly cataloguing of acquisitions.

The announcement of the Museums Galleries Scotland 'Digital Resilience Fund' prompted the Museum Committee to submit a project application for the upgrade of the Image Library. Preliminary investigation with Plexus Media had determined that updated software would enable the website to be enhanced, not only in terms of capability to provide direct access to our film archive but also, as a result of the elimination of the previous limitation on upload file size, improved access to pdf and audio files. Furthermore, Plexus Media was able to provide assurance that the tailoring of software to our requirements, plus bulk transfer of images and data, could be completed within 2-3 weeks. With this timescale and the promised enhancements, it became clear that an upgrade project would confer multi-volunteer, home-based involvement during lock-down. We were delighted, therefore, when our grant application was approved on 8 May and, in keeping with the Plexus Media promised time-frame, we had on-line access to a beta version on 21 May and the upgraded website went live on 26 May 2020.

There has been no change in website URL but we seized the opportunity to change the title from 'Dornoch Historylinks Image Library' to the more descriptive 'Historylinks Archive'. There has been a significant facelift and the website is more mobile friendly. The previous limitation of image uploading at 735 pixels no longer applies, with automatic system resizing of images to the preferred archive page width of 1152 pixels and user access to a larger image if desired.

Prior to the upgrade, Jerry Bishop, DHSCIO Chair, had been involved with the addition of films to the principal Historylinks website. This involved the opening of an account with Vimeo, to which the film files could be uploaded. At the outset it was recognised that, with relative ease, the Vimeo links would be the means to make the film legacy accessible direct from the Historylinks Archive.

We have retained the website sponsors panel but this now appears at the foot of every page as opposed to taking up space in a side-bar location on the homepage. The homepage header tabs have been reduced to those which, from experience, have been the most used, and the 'Tools' tab now provides advanced search options.

On first access to the Historylinks Archive the user is once again presented with an 'Introduction', which may be hidden and, as necessary, reopened by a link at bottom right of the footer. When using a PC or laptop, hovering the cursor over an image on the homepage reveals the initial wording of the object description.

When viewing any archive page, the 'turning-the-page' facility, achieved by system indexing of catalogue numbers, has been retained with left and right arrowheads adjacent to the 'Cat No:'. Additionally, below the blue bar at the foot of the description on each archive page, there is a new facility to move forward and back within 'Albums' and 'Groups'.

As previously, the 'Albums' tag provides access to images by museum cataloguing 'keyword'.

The 'Groups' tag provides access to the collections of photographs, postcards and documents, archaeological finds etc by subject. In the initial lock-down 'polishing' of the old Image Library, mentioned above, it was within 'Groups' that there was significant addition, review and refinement.

The limitation in the previous Image Library of c 4MB for linked pdfs was frustrating. In the 2006 era a great deal of volunteer effort was applied to pdf scanning of document bundles, loose leaf files and booklets, with the resultant files well in excess of 4MB. Although the extant museum Adobe Acrobat 7 program had a 'Reduce file size' facility, this had little effect with direct pdf scans, which were effectively photocopy pages. At the outset of the archive upgrade, the Museum Committee agreed that a licence should be obtained, with the acquisition of new Adobe Acrobat Pro software, to permit the program installation on my home laptop as the Historylinks Archive Level-1 administrator. (As a specific pre lock-down action, I had updated my portable hard-drive with a copy of all museum photos and pdf files.)

Inter alia, Adobe Acrobat Pro provides an enhanced range of options for pdf file optimization, notably the ability to 'Optimize scanned pages'. This was found to be the answer to the large 2006 era pdfs, not only significantly reducing the file size but also providing word search capability. To date 294 files have been optimized reducing their size, in the majority of cases comfortably below our target of less than 13MB, considered a moderate size for user downloading. A

wealth of documents from our archive are now available on-line. As one example, at last we have been able to link to the pdf copy of the fascinating transcribed version of 'Sgt Donald Sutherland's diary 1801-1807' (see Groups/'Military'). There have also been significant pdf additions within the Groups/'Document Collections'.

With denial of use of the museum-based cataloguing PC, during lock-down 'reverse cataloguing' of acquisitions has been achieved. Whereas the standing routine remains the uploading to the Historylinks Archive of images and cut-and-paste copying of data from the Adlib, as an expedient during lock-down working from home, the process has been reversed. New acquisitions, basically forming a 'Dornoch Coronavirus Chronicle', have been 'catalogued' to the browser-based Historylinks Archive for cut-and-paste of data and upload of image to Adlib when circumstances permit a return to the museum back-office.

Out of unprecedented circumstance, we have been able to maintain volunteer interest with on-line activity and achieved an upgraded Historylinks Archive with enhanced content of films and pdf files. We have also been able to keep pace with acquisitions, albeit modest in number. Overall future 'virtual presence' looks bright!

We hope you may be able to gain some added amusement in these restricted times by spending some time perusing our new Historylinks Archive, including some, if not all, 28 films (Groups/'Film').

With all good wishes, stay safe,

John Barnes

4 July 2020