

Written in the Landscape: A project to catalogue Argyll's Family and Estate Archives

Project Summary

Argyll Estates, Dunollie House and Argyll and Bute Council Archives are developing a project to catalogue and conserve the family and estate archives in our care. Working in partnership with community heritage centres across Argyll, the project will also digitise records of special importance to local and family history, so that they may hold copies locally to support their own grass roots heritage projects. Many of the records are of national importance and we also wish to digitise a small selection of the most valuable of these – all digitised records will be made available online.

The project will run for two or three years. Professional archivists and conservators will undertake the principal cataloguing and conservation tasks, but these collections also present tremendous opportunities for volunteers to get involved and this will form a key part of the project.

The following collections are included in the project (others may be added). Geographically, they cover the length and breadth of Argyll, from Mull and Morvern in the North, to Coll and Tiree in the West, Kintyre and Cowal in the South and Glencoe in the East:

- The Argyll Papers (Campbell Family, Dukes of Argyll)
- Malcolm of Poltalloch
- MacDougall of Dunollie
- Campbell of Kilberry, Campbell of Craignish, Campbell of Braglen, MacTavish of Dunardry

Our community partners will be local heritage centres which curate their own archive and museum collections, and act as local tourist 'hubs' for family and local history research across Argyll:

- Partners will select papers of special importance to their local area for digitisation and hold copies locally to support their own activities (e.g. estate maps, building plans, photos, rentals, militia lists, other names lists).
- In response to requests for professional support and advice, a training and mentoring scheme will be developed with partners to support their curatorial responsibilities for their own collections.
- Other activities may be developed – suggestions are welcome.

Opportunities for other people (partners and non-partners) to participate in the project will also be offered:

- Volunteer opportunities to help with cataloguing and re-packaging the archives.
- Open days for members of the public to find out about the collections and learn about archives, in general.
- Talks to local history groups, introducing the collections and their research potential.
- A local history course introducing researchers to using archives, with emphasis on family and estate papers.
- Exhibitions – suggestions for appropriate venues are welcomed.

Further Information

The project is dependent upon securing funding from external sources and the involvement of community partners will be crucial to its success. Please get in touch if you think that your organisation and members may benefit from the project, or if you are interested in finding out more: Ishbel MacKinnon, Archivist, Argyll Estates archives@inveraray-castle.com
Also, see overleaf for further details.

Written in the Landscape: A project to catalogue Argyll's Family and Estate Archives

Family and Estate Archives

Family and estate archives are one of our most valuable resources for researching Argyll's history and investigating its rich cultural, built and natural heritage:

- They contain information about key historical events dating from the 13th to 21st centuries;
- They provide a unique insight into the lives of some of Scotland's most important historical figures, including their political and military achievements, their families and social circle;
- They record the daily activities of individuals and communities living and working in the countryside; the development of rural industries and towns; of roads, canals and harbours;
- They document the care and upkeep of many of our most precious historic buildings; and the changing face of our landscape, moulded and shaped by agricultural improvements in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The family and estate archives in our care appeal to researchers across the heritage spectrum and there is extremely strong demand to make them more accessible:

- They play a growing role in supporting our understanding of Argyll's built heritage and landscapes, underpinning the success of many tourist and conservation initiatives upon which our local economy increasingly depends;
- They contain many unique family history resources which attract visitors to Argyll from all over the world;
- They have always attracted high levels of interest from academics and professional researchers and there is great scope for the development of long term collaborative research programmes. The extremely successful Yorkshire Country House Partnership provides a model of excellence, embedding high quality academic research within a regional network of themed exhibitions and innovative visitor initiatives: <http://www.ychp.org.uk/who-we-are>

Project Context and Justification

Family and estate archives are large, complex collections and cataloguing is the first step towards making them accessible. Most are only partly catalogued and some, not at all – many of the catalogues were prepared in the early twentieth century and focus on events of national importance, underplaying or ignoring a great deal of very valuable local and family history material. Cataloguing all of the collections to current professional standards will facilitate access for existing researchers and open opportunities for new audiences.

Many papers are fragile or damaged and cannot be safely used until they are repaired – professional conservators will undertake appropriate and sensitive repairs, ensuring they remain accessible for future generations of researchers.

Digitisation will make some of the most in-demand papers available to as wide an audience as possible, whilst also reducing wear and tear on original documents. Argyll is a large, geographically fragmented county and this will have a tremendous impact on improving access to archives for remote users.

Local heritage centres across Argyll are widely acknowledged as major visitor attractions and centres of excellence. They also act as foci for community activities and services, but their survival depends upon the goodwill of volunteers and opportunities for specialised training are very limited. A professionally-backed curatorial training and support network has already been identified as a priority by Argyll and Bute Museums and Heritage Forum: this project will address that need and more, by providing opportunities for skills sharing and a stepping stone towards greater resilience for the future.