

CASE STUDY:

Royal College of Nursing

Nursing union & professional body, Edinburgh

In 1982, the Business Archives Council (BAC) for England & Wales undertook a records survey at the Royal College of Nursing. The RCN was then 66 years old, and a group of members interested in the history of nursing had formed a Society. Together those members lobbied the RCN to have the BAC survey undertaken in 1982-1983. At the time many of the records were held at the London headquarters, with the RCN having country headquarters in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, with additional offices across the UK. By 1992 the RCN Scottish Board were purchasing a new building which could accommodate archive staff and storage space, which is what happened in 1994. The survey list still sits in the Archive office in Edinburgh forming the foundations of a corporate memory that was to grow and develop.

The BAC Survey emboldened the RCN History of Nursing Society to lobby for an Archivist, and then an Archives Team. As a membership body the RCN Archive is the record of member activity, of their decision making, the development of their profession and their clinical practice and of their campaigning. Their Archive is their 'Voice of Nursing' past and present, informing their future. Having close ties to a member Forum has ensured the RCN Archive actively collects across the four countries of the UK, reflecting the diversity of care settings, specialisms and workforce. Our Archive team has an enviable position of trust with the membership which is reflected in the range of nurses' personal papers and oral histories which have been deposited alongside the corporate records. The expectation of access was laid down in those early years – appropriate access by our members and by external users has always been encouraged and supported.

In the 43 years since the Survey the record keeping landscape has transformed. The [RCN Archive](#) boasts an online catalogue with associated guides with significant amounts of digitised material available to view online. A [Digital Archive](#) was set up in 2017 to preserve the born digital records of the RCN, ensuring the Archive collects key documents, emails and our biggest publication - the RCN website. Access to digital records requires nuanced and innovative solutions; records may be completely closed or completely open – but as a trade-union we also enable 'member only' access.

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Teresa Doherty
Head of Archive & Records Management
Royal College of Nursing

Digital has also allowed us to pilot 'virtual reading room' sessions for researchers who need access to physical records at a distance.

Along the way the team has changed but the vision of a well-managed and accessible archive remains at the heart of what we do. A commitment to professional archival practice has resulted in a fantastic legacy, with external commendations such as Archive Accreditation. The resulting Archive has both enabled the RCN to celebrate its centenary in 2016 in style but also forms the evidence-base used to represent members such as in the current COVID-19 Inquiries.

The latest initiative is to survey the organisation's records since the RCN's move to Microsoft Teams, and to set up an interoperable process to move key records to the Digital Archive. This is ground-breaking and exciting work in the sector that offers a heartwarming return to the basics of archival practice. A 'Records Survey' remains the key to knowing what treasures you have and where to start your archival journey - the BAC's gift in supporting organisations to take that first step is transformative.

