

Inhouse or outsource? Two contrasting case studies for the digitisation of 20th century photographic collections

## #1: Digitising the David Knights-Whittome Photographic Collection **Inhouse** at London Borough of Sutton Archives

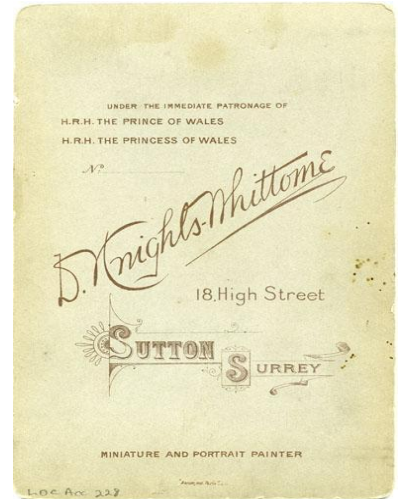
Abby Matthews



Increasingly, cultural organisations are coming under pressure to make collections more accessible via digitisation, but this is not only a logistical and financial challenge for many organisations, but one which highlights a skills gap for many in our sector. When it comes to assessing the various options available, how can we decide which is the best fit for our organisation, or for our collections. What considerations do we need to make about capacity, funding, technological infrastructure, timeframes, the collation and verification of metadata, the physical and digital space required, and about training, ongoing support and the legacy of digitisation projects?

Through the presentation of two different approaches in UK cultural organisations, Julia Parks and myself, Abby Matthews will briefly present our own individual experiences of project managing photographic digitisation projects both as in-house and out-sourced enterprises in UK cultural organisations. In doing so we will attempt

to demonstrate both the challenges, and benefits of each solution based on the needs of our collections and taking into account the limitations and objectives of our organisations and will demonstrate that when it comes to digitisation, there is no magic one size fits all approach.



- Mar 2014 - UK National Heritage Lottery Fund awards Sutton Council £95,900 to clean, conserve, digitise & research c.11000 glass plate negatives and to make them available online via a Non Commercial Creative Commons license.
- Project is first major digitisation project to be undertaken in-house by Sutton Archives. No inhouse experience among existing team. Quotes obtained to outsource the work were prohibitive. This decision was based not just on the one off costs of external digitisation, but also on the acknowledgement that any work undertaken by a third party would not embed any sustainable skills into the service
- Limited staff capacity and an understanding that we are unlikely to secure funding of this scale in future means there is a strong will to develop a volunteer led model that will feed through to future work, and create a sustainable framework for future digitisation work.
- Award is granted on basis of a 2 year volunteer led

- programme, led by one paid Project Coordinator, and in-kind support from the Archivist to aid project management, an informal understanding that the fund will consider a second application to complete the work is in place..

Background to the collection: The collection comes from an Edwardian shop owned by photographer David-Knights Whittome, situated in the main shopping high street a short distance from railway station. It is operating between 1904-1918.





### High Street, Sutton, 1908 Christmas Decorations

At No. 18,  
'D. Knights-Whittome  
Photographer to HM The  
KING'



Photographers such as these were often situated close to transport hubs to take advantage of passing trade, and as a result of its convenience, and a period of Royal Patronage when DKW was commissioned to take portraits of the British and of European royalty, the clientele ranged widely from working class residents to members of the aristocracy.

The collection is mainly portrait based but it is unique in that it offers a very democratic snapshot of a towns population at a key moment in history. Amongst the 11,000 images, DKW photographed around 1400 soldiers, stationed at a nearby training camp, or local boys and men in uniform on their way to active service on the front. He also took around 6500 images of women and family groups, undoubtedly many captured as mementos to be sent to, or carried by men at the front.

The timing of our funding application, as we commemorated war in Europe from 2014-2018, was timed specifically to coincide with this anniversary and take advantage of public interest in records pertaining to WW1. Undoubtedly it contributed to our successful

bid.



Example collection items



Example Collection





The collection upon discovery in the basement of 18 High St. Sutton, 1978

The collection was in a very poor state when discovered in the basement of a local shop. At some point water damage had caused the wooden shelving on which it was stored to collapse

Plates had suffered breakage, adhesion to paper envelopes or blocking, and also delamination. In some cases, all three.

Damage caused issues not just for long term preservation but also for process of digitisation.

Plate were too unstable for handling, and required individual assessment. We did not have resource to assess all in advance, so we had to take a sample, extrapolate up to obtain a likely conservation estimate and then work through systematically, setting aside negatives that required attention as we went.

Over 20% of the entire collection required stabilisation or extensive conservation.



Mr Baker, 1908, remnant of paper envelope attached to plate at bottom of image.



Mrs Badcock, undated - marks on plate caused by adhesion to paper envelope

Conservation Issues:  
Water Damage leading to Adhesion to Paper Envelopes



Miss Alston, 1912. Discolouration in shadow (dark) areas due to oxidization of silver nitrate emulsion - positive and negative scans.

Silver mirroring, silvering: Bluish or shiny discoloration in the shadow (dark) areas of a photographic image caused by oxidation of the elemental silver, creating a mirror-like appearance. (The Getty Conservation Institute)

### The Collection Comprises:

- Over 7500 Intact Glass Plates
- Close to 2500 Damaged plates
- Photographic proofs
- Prints
- Albums
- Ledgers
- Publicity Materials

### Project Aims:

- To stabilise & digitise the collection
- To make the material **relevant** to **defined audiences** through research, dissemination, story-telling and creative collaboration
- To enable access to the collection, through inclusive online platforms & outreach





**A limitation is just  
an opportunity to be  
creative**

The project offered many challenges to me as a project officer who arrived after funding had been made. The award was based on a set of promised outcomes, devised by a service who had no experience of digitisation; who had already purchased equipment; who had no additional staffing capacity, funding and limited technological infrastructure - for example, we had no space on the server for backing up project assets and data, and had to make do for the first 18 months working directly to external harddrives. We had limited physical space, not enough chairs or desks, not enough appreciation of the challenges of recruiting volunteer help or the physical limitations/skillsets of the volunteers we would attract, of the detail and type of metadata we would need to collate, and about training the team would need to understand how each part of their contribution, whether it was in appraisal, scanning, repackaging, cataloguing, research, contributed to a wider whole, and so needed to be followed through in a systematic and

regulated way in order to assure quality and consistency across the team and the outputs.



## Working with Volunteers

### Challenges & Considerations:

- Technical ability
- Physical Ability (eyesight/ladder work)
- Strengths/Weaknesses - how identifying these effects workflow
- Consistency across team: implement standards and workflows. **AUTOMATE EVERYTHING**
- Consistency of attendance/investment in training
- Subjectivity (with regards transcription/interpretation/instruction!)
- Saying thank you

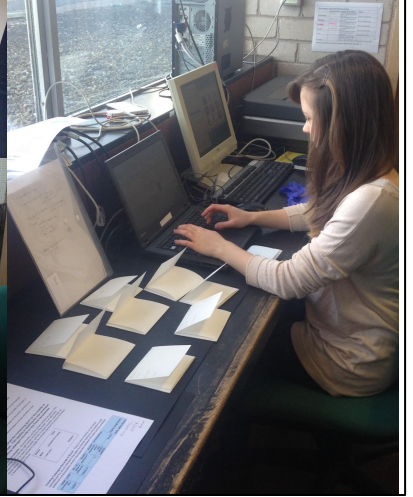
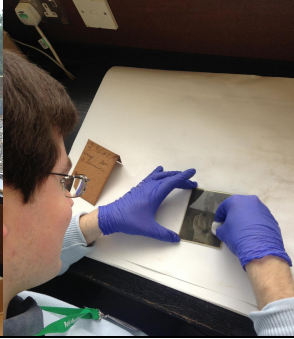
Volunteer challenges ended up informing our strategy quite significantly, and in the limitations they posed, they also offered us freedom to be more creative in the solutions we chose.

We could not sell our scanners, and replace them with overhead cameras as recommended by many other projects because many of our volunteers had mobility issues which precluded the climbing of ladders.

We had to mitigate against damage of our equipment as well as the plates themselves, so we abandoned traditional advice to scan the plates emulsion side down, and opted for a safer method which avoided the need for a mylar barrier, and extra cleaning of the scanning plate on the understanding that any particularly bad cases of Newton's Rings that occurred would be dealt with on a case by case basis.

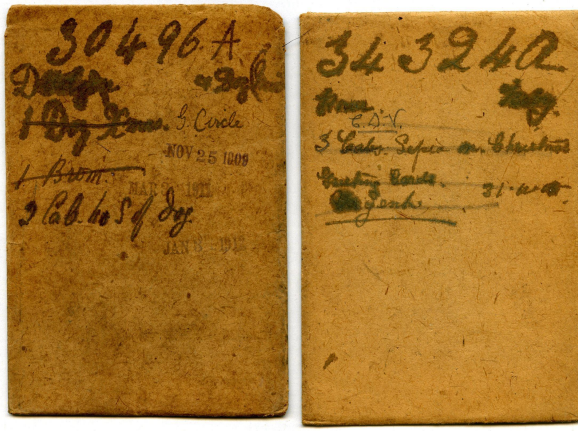
We devised workflows and kit that worked for our team - using a clarinet reed for example to level negatives off of the scanning plate, and making custom cardboard masks to allow for the multiple scanning of up to 12 plates at a time on our a3 Epson 10000XL scanner. In the absence of ability to display the images on the

official council website, to set up our own Flickr profile, and to publicise this via a number of hugely popular social media platforms and a blog, all of which had the unexpected benefit of drawing users into the wider archive and heritage service.





## Understanding the Challenges of your Particular Record Sets



Challenge: In an ideal world, individuals would have taken responsibility for one record and seen it through from appraisal to publication online, undertaking every element of the digitisation process, from assessment, repackaging, cataloguing, scanning, research, upload. The reality was that not only were volunteers very much interested in just one part of this process, but the physical record consisted of two parts, a very dirty and fragmentary paper housing, containing almost all the known metadata about that image, and the plate itself. Because we needed to remove the plates and clean/store them separately in photosafe four flap enclosures, these two elements were separated fairly early on in the process, and it so transpired that those who were interested in transcribing and cataloguing and researching the plates were not always those interested in scanning and the more technologically driven elements of the process, so from the start, opportunity arose for the image and its associated metadata to become detached, either by mistranscription, differing transcriptions, the transposition of numbers or misspelling, or by the confusion of numbering and naming errors on the part of the photographer

himself; poor record keeping, differing spellings across related record sets, misfiled records.

The process of having to break down our workflow into such a number of small stages meant that we had to be incredibly careful about our checking and review processes, and even with these we ended up with a huge data cleansing exercise at the end of the project.



**Damage to plates caused by damp & collapse of shelves: breakage, cracking, delamination, blocking**

Plates had suffered breakage, adhesion to paper envelopes or blocking, and also delamination. In some cases, all three.

Damage caused issues not just for long term preservation but also for process of digitisation.

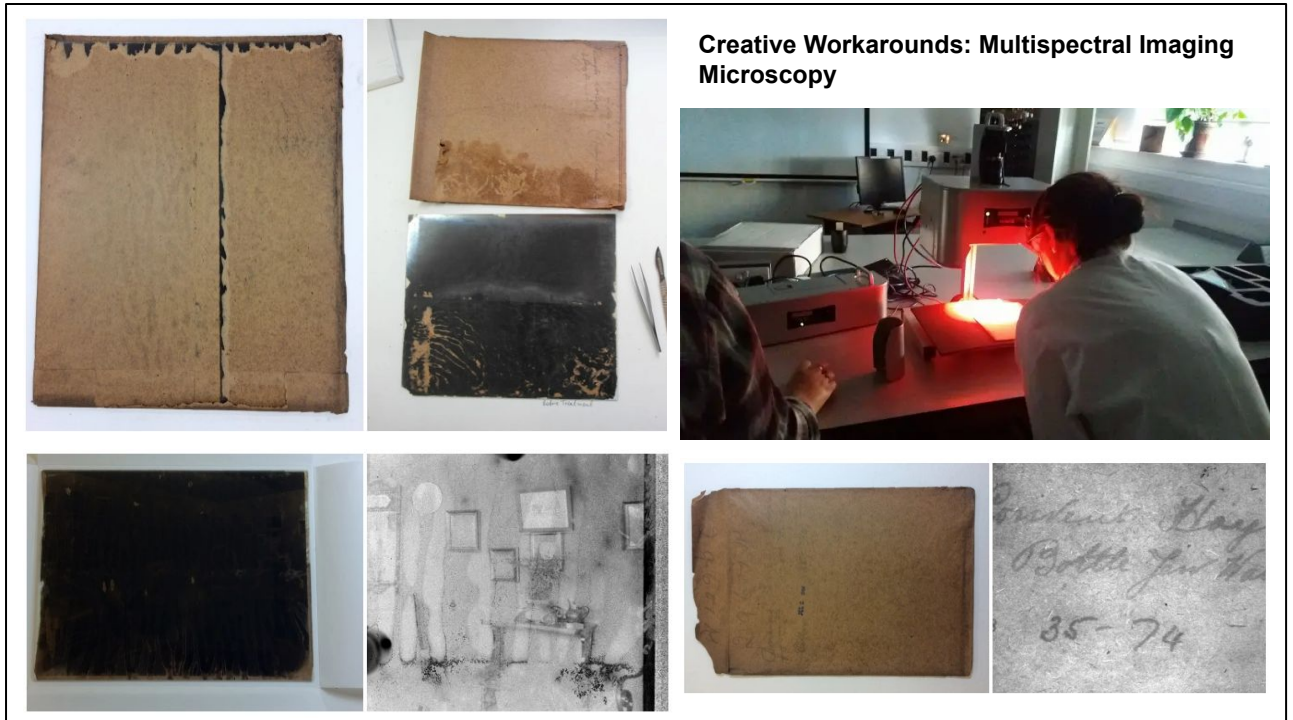
While we had estimated over 40% of our overall budget would be taken up by conservation, it soon became apparent that we could not manage even a fraction of what we had hoped to achieve within this amount. Conservation cost between around £30 per plate to apply a pressure binding to cracked plates to over £300 to remove an envelope from a blocked plate, stabilise the remaining emulsion and cracking - and this was without knowing if any of the image has survived the water damage and was not irreparably dissolved, rendering the work a waste of time.





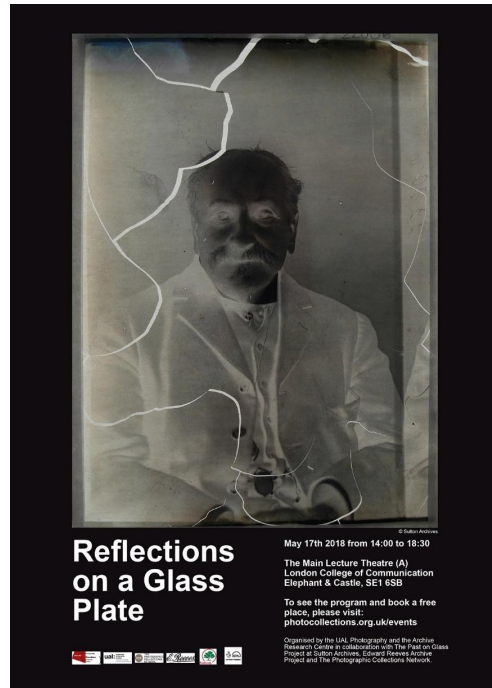
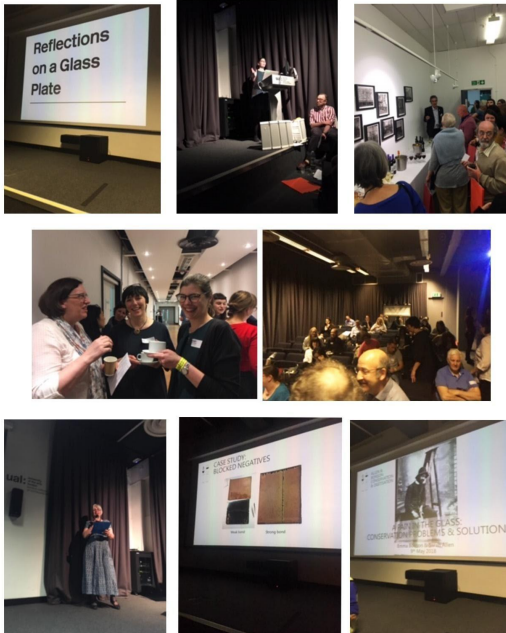
This huge challenge caused us to think more creatively about how we could maximise our available funding and ironically this lack of budget led us to generate better outcomes for our funder by forcing us to work collaboratively with groups that we may never ordinarily have engaged.

In the UK there are no, or there were no, specific photographic conservation programmes on offer. By approaching the University of Lincoln's BA and MA programme in conservation, we were able to secure studio space and employ a number of students to help with the more basic conservation tasks but offering them hands on experience with our collections, under supervision of our professional conservator. This benefitted her, as it established links with the university and increased her teaching experience. It enabled us to effectively complete all outstanding conservation required, within the available budget, and it gave over 50 students hand on experience in working with materials they would otherwise not have been able to handle at that organisation.



Similarly, collaborations with industry allowed us to take advantage of technologies using multi spectral imaging to help us prioritise those plates of most interest, or uncover valuable metadata that we otherwise would not have found. This technology filtered back to the student labs and informed their own work and training, whilst also saving us a significant amount of money conserving plates with little informative value intact.

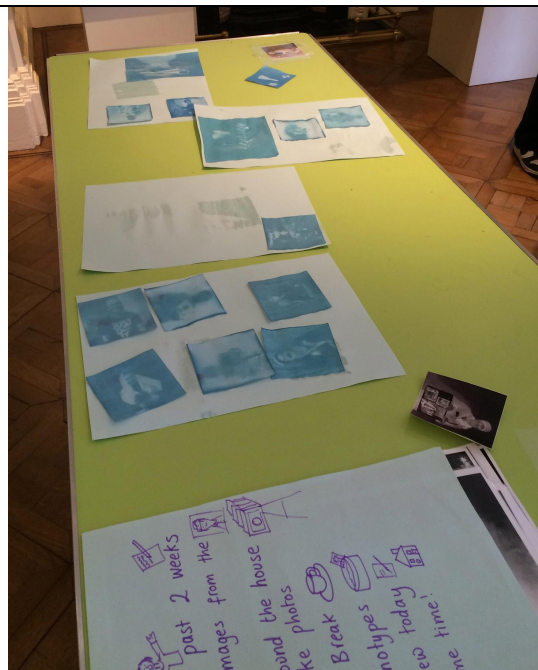
## Partnerships: Skills Sharing



Undertaking the project inhouse enabled us to realise what value our own experience would have for others. Our own work had been hugely informed by the experience of others, either to encourage us to follow suite, or to take our own path, and publishing our experiences online and seeing the positive response and questions we received meant that we were able to use our own journey to establish a forum of professionals undertaking similar work who came together for a one day symposium at the University of the Arts to share skills and knowledge - a hugely beneficial event and a great source of pride.



## Outreach: Community Projects

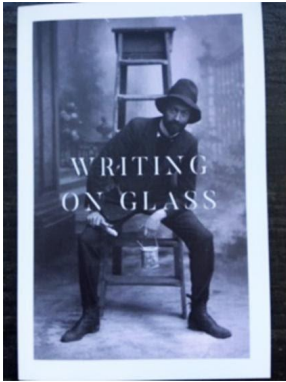


And working with the plates day to day , seeing how they sparked the imaginations of volunteers and of visitors to our blog as they followed the process led us to develop our own interest of the processes of photography and the issues around identity and hidden stories to develop some truly collaborative and fulfilling workshops, exhibitions and events.



Creative Writing  
Workshop at  
St Philomenas  
School, Carshalton  
with Sutton Writers  
  
26 June 2017









- **Over 7700** volunteer hours logged & counting

**48** in-house & **8** remote volunteers

- **Over 3050** followers on social media

**8** work experience placements

Over 700 subjects and sitters fully researched & hundreds more identified by public on Flickr

**1** 12 month postgraduate intern placement

- **1 Symposium/Day Conference** joint hosted with PARC, PCN at University of the Arts, London attended by over 120 delegates

**1000** copies of a creative writing anthology published and distributed to local community groups and schools

**2528** glass plates stabilized & conserved

**£191,400** HLF funding over 4 years

**2,157,028** views on Flickr during the life of the project

**67** blog posts with a total of **53074** views by **17166** visitors

**2** exhibitions brought over **12,850** visitors to our local museum & library

**8** BA/MA Students from Lincoln University volunteered over **112** days collectively to improve their professional knowledge and conservation skills.

- **10,889** plates cleaned, rehoused, digitised & made available online

Over **950** people attended public talks given during the life of the project

## Summary Statistics

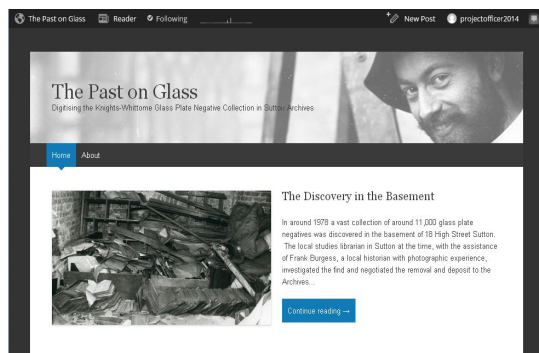


## Summary Considerations

- What are your **objectives/who are you targeting?** How will the digitisation of your collections make an impact?
- Maintain an **open dialogue** with community partners at all stages. **Ask and act on advice. Be flexible. Look for opportunity in all encounters/conversation.**
- Think about **making best use of in-kind contributions** and **think how you can trade skills and knowledge.**
- Approach design of an activity plan in a **holistic** way. It is impossible to anticipate all challenges but be **ambitious**. Realise your **limits** and use them to **inform how you work.**
- Build **evaluation** into your plan from the start.
- Research and factor in **realistic costings** for freelancers/professional services.
- Don't forget **the small costs** – tea/coffee for volunteers/travelcards/extra chairs – they add up quickly.
- Think about **legacy**. What **Impact** will the project have on your wider business. Can work be **sustained?**

# Abby Matthews – London Borough of Sutton Archive Manager

abby.matthews@sutton.gov.uk



[pastonglass.wordpress.com](http://pastonglass.wordpress.com)



[flickr.com/photos/pastonglass](https://www.flickr.com/photos/pastonglass)



[@suttonarchives](https://twitter.com/suttonarchives)



Past on Glass

