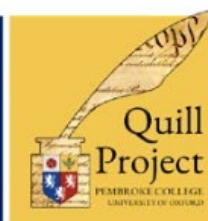


Project Report July 2025



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Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation

Project Report July 2025

Ruth Murray and Antoine Yenk

Summary

The Writing Peace project at Pembroke College has been working with archives across Ireland to gather and digitize primary sources relating to the Good Friday Agreement. The project's unique visualization of the primary sources allows users to better understand the context within which key decisions and compromises were made, the origins of particular phrases, and the developing roles of individuals and political parties, celebrating the full constellation of peace makers involved. By modelling not just the successful outcome in 1998, but a decade of Talks, the project aims to help users explore points of difficulty and intransigence and better appreciate how trust was built and the ongoing importance of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) as a stabilizing template for peace and wider relationships between Ireland and Britain.

The project was awarded funding from the Government of Ireland Reconciliation Fund in July 2024 to launch the Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation programme of research with the aim of mapping the archival landscape, identifying challenges, and promoting collaborative solutions. Through extensive engagement with archives, libraries and other heritage institutions over the past twelve months, the initiative has:

- Reached over sixty participants from more than twenty institutions through a survey and series of workshops;
- Documented common needs and good practices across the archival community;
- Facilitated a spirit of trust and cooperation;
- Produced practical resources that will support ongoing work in the sector;
- Launched the Writing Peace Index, an innovative tool to make archival materials relating to the conflict and peace process more readily accessible to researchers, teachers, and the general public.

Background

Writing Peace is part of the Quill Project ('Quill') at Pembroke College, University of Oxford. Quill's digital editions allow for a rounded view of negotiation processes, capturing the information available to participants at different points in time and illuminating the context in which key text is agreed and compromises reached. Recreating this context requires access to a large volume of primary source material from a range of parties and perspectives. As the project embarked on its study of the peace process in Northern Ireland, both governments were making a concerted effort to declassify files to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement ('GFA'). However, much important primary source material remained in private collections. The project was informed of boxes of documents languishing in garages, attics, and spare rooms, and where archival material had been deposited, little had been digitized. In addition to concern around historical records being inadequately stored and inaccessible, the deaths of several key figures in the peace process highlighted how precarious the documentary record of this period in Irish history had become and pointed to the need for a more collective and collaborative approach to accession and presentation of collections.

Quill was awarded funding from the Government of Ireland Reconciliation Fund to launch the Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation programme of research, conducting a survey of archives and convening a series of workshops with the goal of enhancing collaboration. It would not be appropriate for Oxford University to acquire papers relating to the peace process, but it was hoped that Quill's interest in displaying and

analysing archival material, rather than acquiring it for university collections, supported the project's role as a facilitator.

The opportunities enabled by the fund have furnished us with a deeper understanding of the archival community in Ireland and the rich expertise within that community, as well as highlighting an appetite for more collaborative activities and professional development. They have also provided insights into some of the challenges of working with archival material in the context of recent contested and troubled history.

The project was overseen by a Steering Group, composed of representatives of Quill, Queen's University Belfast, University College Dublin Library and Archives (UCD), University of Galway, the National Archives of Ireland (NAI), and the National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA) as well as Frank Sheridan, a former diplomat acting in a personal capacity. Antoine Yenik, a doctoral student from the University of Tours, was employed on a casual basis as a research assistant.

Surveying the archival landscape

Designed and disseminated in August 2024, the Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation survey reached twenty-one archives across Ireland and the UK. It gathered insights into institutional mandates, collection foci, current cataloguing and digitization practices, collaboration history, resource needs, and training gaps. The project's survey clearly demonstrated a widespread appetite for deeper collaboration. Respondents cited the need for:

- Shared cataloguing and digitization strategies
- Standardized metadata practices
- Training on dealing with politically sensitive and traumatic materials
- Networking and knowledge exchange to support smaller archives

There was a consensus that increased collaboration could lead to more efficient use of resources, better visibility of collections, improved public and academic access, and the development of joint strategies for acquiring and digitizing materials.

The survey highlighted that the archival community preserving records on the peace process is diverse and highly decentralized. It comprises national institutions such as the National Archives of Ireland (NAI), the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), and the National Archives (TNA) in the UK, alongside university libraries, political foundations, religious archives, community-run projects, and independent collectors. Some institutions are fully professionalized and well-resourced; others are small and volunteer-led, often with precarious funding. Sometimes papers are held close to the communities they reflect; at other times hundreds of miles away. It was widely reported at our workshops that private collections—usually completely uncatalogued and retained in the family home by political actors, diplomats, campaigners, or their families—continue to make up a substantial portion of material relevant to the peace process. This landscape explains why researchers often encounter a patchwork of holdings, with little visibility or consistency in metadata, access procedures, or collection development priorities.

This fragmentation results in a number of problems:

- (a) **Barriers to research:** Researchers struggle to locate and contextualize material. Even when documents are cited in published work, it is not uncommon for them to be labelled as “seen by the author” without clear archival references, making it difficult to build upon existing research. This situation favours those with strong personal networks, and means that some collections are only accessible to and therefore mediated by a few well-known academics and journalists.
- (b) **Duplication and competition:** Archives sometimes compete to acquire high-profile collections. Without shared standards or a central index, there is a risk of duplication or significant gaps in coverage.

- (c) **Imbalance in the historical record:** There is a need for the archival community as a whole to be aware of gaps across the sector and to actively consider which institutions would be the most suitable home for a particular collection. Failure to do so means that political parties or individuals with an eye to legacy have an opportunity to control the documentary records passed on to future scholars by ensuring their collections are safely deposited.
- (d) **Preservation risks:** Without a proactive and coordinated approach, materials may deteriorate, be lost, or remain inaccessible. In such situations, it is often minority or disadvantaged groups whose records are lost.
- (e) **Inconsistencies in practice and duplication of effort:** The archivists and librarians working in this area are qualified professionals, and there will be legitimate variations across institutions. However, resources are stretched and a less fragmented approach to issues such as digital preservation, metadata standards, and public access policies has potential to generate efficiency savings for the sector as well as greatly facilitating users of these collections.

Promoting a dialogue

The findings of the survey were used to shape two major workshops. In designing the workshops, the committee was very conscious of the existing expertise and experience within the community. It sought to create a forum for dialogue and collaboration, with opportunities for participants to share past successes and failures and to learn from one another. The events were to be opportunities for professionals to network, to receive support, and to have work that is usually carried out behind the scenes celebrated and recognized.

The February workshop focused on professional development, and included presentations and roundtable discussions relating to:

- The survey of archivists and how to respond (Antoine Yenik, Ruth Murray);
- Opening and closing sensitive material (Wesley Geddis, Frank Sheridan, Catriona Crowe);
- Trauma-informed practice for archivists (Andrew Payne, Barry Houlihan, Eliza McKee);
- Developing relationships with potential depositors (Kate Manning, David Donoghue); and
- A draft style guide (Annabel Harris, Mary Mackey).

The June workshop shifted to broader engagement. Dialogue sessions explored the role of archives in:

- Education and youth engagement;
- Public exhibitions and outreach; and
- Digital access and sustainability.

External guests, including academics, journalists, and former and current civil servants and politicians, were invited to join the final session, a panel discussion during which Eliza McKee, Caoili O'Doherty, Kate Manning, Sam McBride, and Nicholas Cole highlighted the importance of archives as repositories of our collective memory that can help societies to understand their past by preserving community voices, including those of victims and marginalized groups.

Both workshops fostered open dialogue across a diverse group of archival practitioners and encouraged participants to contribute to a long-term strategy for improving access, resilience, and relevance of their collections. We are grateful to the Director of the National Archives of Ireland and to the Northern Ireland Office and Historic Royal Palaces for making available Dublin Castle and Hillsborough Castle as wonderful venues for these events.

A number of key themes and conclusions emerged from the dialogues at the two workshops:

(a) Professionalism of the sector

Across the archival landscape, whether in state institutions, universities, or private collections, materials relating to the Northern Ireland conflict and peace process are, where accessioned, being managed by highly trained and dedicated professionals. Archivists and librarians in these settings bring not only technical expertise but a strong commitment to upholding both professional standards and statutory obligations. Their work ensures that collections are preserved with care, described with precision, and made accessible in ways that respect both legal requirements and ethical considerations.

This highlights a key principle reinforced throughout the Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation project: placing historically significant documents in the hands of professional custodians is critical to their long-term survival and responsible use. Archivists are uniquely equipped to navigate the complex intersection of preservation, access, and confidentiality. They manage depositor expectations, respond to evolving data protection legislation, and ensure that materials are stored under appropriate environmental and security conditions.

Furthermore, professional archivists serve as mediators between the past and the public. Their stewardship makes possible not only the physical safeguarding of records, but also their interpretation and responsible presentation—essential tasks in politically sensitive and emotionally charged contexts. Their role becomes especially vital in balancing the wishes of depositors, such as conditions on use or delayed release, with the broader public interest in transparency and historical understanding.

As such, continued investment in the archival profession through training, infrastructure, and cross-sector collaboration is essential. A strong, well-resourced professional community will ensure that materials of historical and social value are not only preserved, but meaningfully integrated into the processes of education, reconciliation, and democratic dialogue.

(b) The importance of item-level catalogues

Item-level cataloguing is a foundational step in making archival collections accessible, both for researchers on site and for future digitization efforts. This granular form of documentation provides the descriptive depth necessary to understand individual records in their proper context, link related materials across collections, and support meaningful historical analysis. It is particularly important for archives dealing with complex or sensitive subject matter, such as the Northern Ireland conflict, where each document may carry significant weight and require careful handling.

Throughout the Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation workshops and survey responses, the time-consuming nature of item-level cataloguing was frequently emphasized. Unlike broader-level finding aids, itemized catalogues require significant labour, subject-matter understanding, and administrative oversight. Respondents noted that processing and cataloguing just 1,000 pages of late 20th-century political material could take anywhere from several days to ten weeks, depending on the complexity of the content and the level of detail required.

Despite the high value of this work, many archival institutions lack the resources to carry it out consistently. The result is that potentially significant records remain under-described, under-utilised, and at risk of being overlooked by researchers. As such, funding bodies and research institutions must recognise item-level cataloguing not as an optional enhancement, but as a core component of archival accessibility and scholarly infrastructure.

Ensuring that archives are adequately supported to undertake this work is essential. This may include targeted research grants, collaborative cataloguing initiatives, and shared technical resources. It also demands a long-term investment mindset: item-level cataloguing is not a one-off task, but an ongoing commitment to making collections visible, usable, and meaningful. Without it, even well-preserved materials remain essentially hidden from view.

(c) Archivists and knowledge production

It was also noted that archivists develop considerable expertise in the collections they catalogue and manage. There was a desire for this expertise to be respected and for the role of archivists in knowledge production to be properly acknowledged and cited in publications. One group mentioned the need to “bring equal benefit to the different collaborators” when referring to collaboration between academia and archives. Participants also underscored the responsibility of universities in bringing the technical capacities required for such collaboration to take place.

Archivists determine not only what enters the archival record, but how it is described, accessed, and interpreted. Through cataloguing, metadata assignment, redaction, and digitization, archivists impose intellectual and ethical frameworks on the raw material of history. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concept of “silencing the past”¹ is particularly relevant here: archives are not neutral repositories, but sites where power is exercised, often invisibly, in decisions about inclusion and omission. As such, archivists contribute directly to epistemological questions about what counts as knowledge and whose voices are heard.

The project's findings corroborate this perspective. The survey responses and workshop discussions revealed that archivists often work in isolation, make difficult decisions about politically sensitive material, and balance legal obligations with ethical responsibilities toward both donors and users. In many cases, archivists themselves are members of communities shaped by the conflict, and their personal and professional identities intertwine with the material they steward. As one of the workshop groups summarized it, “Language and terminology in describing those collections remain challenging, especially when led by people who might describe their own experience in a variety of ways.”

Finally, the project raises fundamental questions about archival authority. Who decides what is preserved? Who has the right to interpret sensitive material? Whose history is being told and who is telling it? These questions are not easily answered, but the project has made one thing clear: archivists are central to the intellectual and ethical scaffolding of historical knowledge. Their labour enables (and constrains) how society remembers, forgets, and reconciles. As the archival profession moves further into the digital age, its epistemological and political responsibilities will only deepen.

The Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation project has offered a powerful reminder that archives are not neutral spaces, and that archivists are not neutral actors. They are deeply embedded in the processes of memory-making, historical interpretation, and knowledge creation. Their role is especially vital in contexts marked by conflict, where records are not only contested but imbued with the potential to hurt, heal, or transform. The future of reconciliation depends in no small part on how archivists choose to interpret, preserve, and open the past.

(d) Sensitive material

Engaging with archival material from a contested and traumatic period such as the Northern Ireland conflict presents profound challenges—both technical and emotional. Unlike other archival contexts, many custodians of these collections are personally connected to the events, people, or communities reflected in the records. As such, the work of archiving becomes deeply personal and ethically charged. Archivists' personal connections with the events emerged as one of the most prominent themes in both the survey and the facilitated dialogues. Several participants shared personal stories of the emotional impact of reading accounts that involved a family member or a familiar location. These experiences highlighted the need for comprehensive training on this issue. As one participant put it: “A full day [is] suggested to address the complex area of working with sensitive materials (for example, being personally connected to tragedy and working with the related materials)”.

Archivists consistently voiced a need for greater institutional support to manage the emotional toll of their work and to navigate the complex process of presenting sensitive collections to the public. This support must take two forms: the provision of subject-matter expertise to help contextualize material responsibly, and professional development opportunities in trauma-informed practice. There is a growing awareness that archival labour is not purely administrative or curatorial—it also involves significant emotional and psychological dimensions. Structured opportunities should therefore be

¹ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph (1995) *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.

provided to reflect on emotional impact, to develop ethical approaches to closure periods, and to explore the language used when describing conflict-related collections.

This need was echoed throughout both workshops, especially in the session led by Andrew Payne, Barry Houlihan, and Eliza McKee at Dublin Castle, which emphasised that archives documenting conflict must embrace trauma-informed principles. These practices are essential not only for the protection of researchers and visitors, but also for the well-being of archivists themselves. As Payne and others stressed, trauma-informed practice is increasingly being integrated into the archival profession, drawing on insights from therapeutic disciplines and human rights frameworks. Reflective exercises, engagement with survivors, and education around trauma exposure have become key elements of emerging professional standards. Participants greatly valued this session, explaining that ‘standards for preservation/trauma-informed practices/legal treatment are evolving and it is beneficial to have on-going training in these issues, not only at a beginner/degree level but throughout the career’.

As discussions highlighted, archivists are increasingly being called upon not just as custodians of knowledge, but as stewards of collective memory and facilitators of reconciliation. Working with sensitive material requires not only legal compliance (e.g. with data protection and freedom of information laws), but also an empathetic, community-centred approach. Collaborative learning, access to trauma-informed training, and peer support are vital for navigating this demanding and deeply human facet of archival work.

(e) Isolation

A recurring theme in the workshops was a sense of isolation experienced by many archivists. Even those in larger institutions reported this: as one participant put it, despite being part of a wider archival team, they felt like they were “working in silos” with colleagues working on completely different kinds of collections. This professional isolation is particularly acute for those managing sensitive or complex collections related to conflict, where decisions about description, access, and ethics are frequently made without external reference points. In this context, the Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation workshops were widely valued for creating space to connect with colleagues working with similar material in order to exchange ideas and build confidence in one’s own practice.

Participants welcomed the opportunity to learn how others approached challenges such as redaction policies, donor relations, and trauma-informed cataloguing. One concrete suggestion that emerged was the organization of structured professional visits to other archives. These would allow archivists to observe workflows, develop new strategies, and benefit from informal knowledge-sharing. This would be particularly useful for smaller or volunteer-led institutions with limited exposure to sector-wide developments.

There was also strong support for continuing the momentum established by the workshops. Many expressed interest in future gatherings focused on professional development, collaboration, and problem-solving. As the archival community grapples with shared challenges, the need for ongoing dialogue and mutual support has never been clearer. Encouraging cross-institutional engagement is essential for building a cohesive, informed, and resilient sector capable of safeguarding complex collections and making them meaningfully accessible to future generations.

(f) Education

Archives participating in the workshops demonstrated a strong commitment to facilitating the use of their collections for research and education, but many reported significant operational pressures that impeded them from developing their own materials. Even some of the largest and most well-resourced archives had only fledgling educational programmes. Although archivists have access to a wealth of primary source documents with significant pedagogical value, they lack the necessary expertise to present this material effectively for use in the classroom. Participants at the workshop also expressed uncertainty about which documents would be ‘suitable’ to use.

Former teachers in attendance at the workshops reported concurrent pressures in the teaching profession: time and resource constraints, compounded by apprehension about tackling contentious and divisive topics with their students. These factors underscore the need for educational materials that are ready to use, accompanied by comprehensive contextual material and guidance for addressing sensitive subject matter.

Andrew Payne, Head of Education at the National Archives of the UK, presented example lesson packs at the Hillsborough workshop, demonstrating how an internal government letter could provide a window into the complexities of the peace process when appropriately presented and contextualized. The discussion that followed also reflected on the value of personal correspondence and private documents in engaging students. One example cited was Queen's University's substantial collection of letters written to David Trimble in the closing stages of the talks process, encompassing a range of both pro-agreement and anti-agreement perspectives. Institutional policy typically defaults to closure to avoid General Data Protection Regulation complications. However, participants wondered whether it might be feasible to obtain appropriate permissions for a limited selection of documents to shed light on the pressures faced by negotiators during critical periods. PRONI's engaging Prisons Memory Archive was also considered as an excellent example of sensitively presenting differing perspectives on the same period of history, and of the willingness of people to have their documents and recollections shared for the purposes of education.

It was agreed that the production of educational materials represented an ideal area for collaborative endeavour. Each individual archive is constrained by the limitations of its own holdings, requiring time-pressed teachers to select materials from a range of archives to ensure a nuanced presentation of the diverse source material available. A collaborative approach, supported by universities and educational experts, would enable the production of high-quality resources that promote the work of archives across the islands.

(g) Born-digital material and digital sustainability

The growing presence of born-digital material—emails, word-processed documents, websites, social media content, and digital photographs—presents both an opportunity and a challenge for archival institutions. As more records of political, social, and personal significance are created and stored digitally, the long-term sustainability of this material has become an urgent concern across the archival sector.

During the Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation workshops, participants consistently highlighted digital sustainability as an emerging area of vulnerability. One group noted bluntly that “archiving born-digital material and social media feeds is going to be a new challenge,” pointing to the lack of standard practices and the need for sector-wide collaboration. Others flagged the issues of format obsolescence, digital decay, and the complexity of ensuring long-term access to materials that may never have existed in physical form.

Unlike traditional paper archives, born-digital collections demand continuous attention to evolving technologies. This includes ensuring appropriate file formats, metadata integrity, storage protocols, and cybersecurity. Some institutions are beginning to adopt specialist tools or digital preservation platforms, but the level of preparedness remains uneven, particularly among smaller archives with limited technical capacity.

Furthermore, the sustainability of digital collections raises practical and ethical questions. How can archives guarantee future access to material stored on outdated media or under proprietary formats? Who decides what is worth preserving in an age of digital abundance? And how can institutions develop approaches that remain resilient in the face of changing infrastructure, funding constraints, and shifting public expectations?

Addressing these challenges requires not only technical investment but also strategic foresight. A number of workshop participants called for shared approaches—such as collective investment in infrastructure, collaborative training, and coordinated planning around standards and workflows. There was broad agreement that without such efforts, significant born-digital records of the peace process and post-conflict reconciliation risk being lost before they can ever be studied.

In short, ensuring the sustainability of born-digital archives is essential if we are to preserve the documentary record of the twenty-first century. This includes recognizing that preservation is not only about hardware and software, but about policies, partnerships, and long-term institutional commitment.

Resources for archivists

An important output of this project has been a style guide for archivists and other information professionals working with material related to the 1966–1998 conflict. The aim of the guide is to highlight and recommend some strategies for increasing the findability and discoverability of archival materials accessed in a range of digital formats, whilst respecting the range of institutional and personal positions on the conflict held by those involved in descriptive practice. It also includes appendices which provide a brief reference guide to some of the key people and institutions involved in the conflict and in the peace process.

The guide can be viewed and downloaded [here](#).

A first draft of the guide was presented and workshopped at the Dublin Castle symposium. It was then further edited based on individual feedback from participants and other people working in the sector. The team is keen to continue this collaborative work.

The Writing Peace Index: collaboration and accessibility

The Writing Peace Index (‘the Index’) is not simply a catalogue; it is a strategic platform for cultural memory, education, and reconciliation. It serves as an exemplary model of how archival initiatives can merge digital innovation with ethical and collaborative principles to support peacebuilding. By making the fractured documentary legacy of the Northern Ireland peace process more accessible and coherent, it not only preserves the past but actively contributes to the work of shaping a more informed and reconciled future.

As a key output of the Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation project, the Index represents a significant leap forward in the quest to make archival materials relating to the Northern Ireland peace process more accessible, visible, and integrated. This index is not merely a digital catalogue: it is a strategic tool designed to unify fragmented archival holdings and provide researchers, educators, policymakers, and the public with a coherent, user-friendly means of navigating complex documentary landscapes surrounding the peace process in Northern Ireland.

The tool was conceived to address several fundamental challenges in the archival field related to the peace process:

- (a) **Fragmentation of collections:** Materials relevant to the peace process are dispersed across numerous archives in both jurisdictions of Ireland, the UK, and in private hands. The Index aims to centralize discovery without centralizing ownership.
- (b) **Unequal visibility:** Smaller archives, especially community-based or volunteer-run initiatives, often lack the resources to publicize their holdings. The Index levels the playing field by offering all contributors a platform for visibility.
- (c) **Improved discoverability:** By mapping collections to institutions and aligning them with thematic and chronological frameworks, the Index enables users to understand how records interrelate across locations.
- (d) **Enabling digital analysis:** The Index is designed with digital tools in mind, particularly integration with the Quill Project’s software suite, which enables nuanced exploration of the negotiation processes and documentary context of the GFA.

Methodology and structure of the Index

The Writing Peace Index is both a *directory* and a *discovery* platform, created to unify and illuminate the vast and fragmented archival landscape of the Northern Ireland peace process. Users are able to search for relevant archival holdings across Ireland and Britain in a single place. It is a centralized access point to an array of resources scattered across institutions, regions, and political contexts, offering researchers, educators, and the public a gateway into materials of profound historical importance.

The Index is structured to support different ways of exploring material:

- (a) **Item-level views:** Each entry in the Index includes descriptive metadata—title, creator, date range, institutional home, and scope of contents—with embedded links to digital versions where available. A record such as the Papers of Dermot Nally includes notes on its role in shaping the Downing Street Declaration, the hosting archive, and pathways to related collections.
- (b) **Timeline functionality:** The platform offers a chronological interface enabling users to situate items or collections within key political milestones such as the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1985), the Downing Street Declaration (1993), the Good Friday Agreement (1998), and more recent reconciliation initiatives. This design allows researchers to trace thematic and institutional developments in parallel, and makes archival research much more accessible for younger scholars, including undergraduates and Leaving Cert/A-Level students.
- (c) **Interactive institutional mapping:** Researchers can browse by institution, visualizing what is held at repositories such as the National Archives of Ireland, Queen’s University Belfast, UCD Archives, PRONI, and others. This function clarifies the geographies of knowledge and fosters greater transparency in where materials are stored.
- (d) **Collaborative input:** The platform is built to scale. A straightforward entry form allows collections to be added by those closest to them, ensuring sustainability, decentralization, and continuous enrichment over time. The metadata collected closely mirrors the kind of data archivists already hold about their collection and can be supplied either through the data entry form or via a spreadsheet to minimize additional workload.

Building the Index

Creating the Writing Peace Index has been a major undertaking, involving months of dedicated labour, negotiation, design iteration, and collaboration. The ambition from the start was not only to compile an accurate and expansive listing of relevant archival material but also to ensure that the platform could serve as a durable and extensible infrastructure for long-term use.

(a) Mapping the archival terrain

At the heart of the Index’s development was a rigorous process of archival reconnaissance. This entailed identifying and analysing a wide variety of collections, both institutional and private, through time-intensive outreach, research visits, and digital exploration. Tremendous effort was spent navigating:

- Institutional databases with inconsistent or limited metadata;
- Legacy finding aids in outdated or incompatible formats;
- Physical inventories of uncatalogued materials;
- Archival websites with variable search capabilities; and
- Informal networks and personal contacts, especially for unpublished, private or under-publicized collections.

In many cases, the research team had to piece together scattered references and incomplete catalogues to determine the contents and significance of collections, often contacting archivists directly to verify details or uncover hidden fonds.

(b) Standardizing and organizing the data

Once information had been gathered, the next phase involved systematic cataloguing. A master spreadsheet was created in Excel, containing over 2,000 entries representing fonds, series, and individual items. Each row was assigned consistent metadata fields—title, description, institution, archival hierarchy, time period, conditions governing access, and related documentation.

This phase demanded careful editorial judgement to ensure clarity, consistency, and neutrality, particularly given the political sensitivities surrounding the content. The spreadsheet became a cornerstone resource—both as a research tool and as a data backbone for the online index.

(c) Platform design

Following the consolidation of the data, development of the Index entered an intensive collaborative phase. A Quill software engineer attended the February 2025 workshop in Dublin Castle to gather initial thoughts and input from the archival community on the concept and functionality of the Index. This feedback informed the early design of the platform, which was then presented at the Hillsborough workshop in June as well as to a small group of journalists invited to a workshop at Pembroke College. The presentation of the Index's proposed structure, features, and interface prompted valuable discussion. Feedback gathered at both events directly shaped subsequent development, as the research assistant, archival practitioners, and Quill's technical team worked together to transform the static dataset into an interactive, user-focused platform tailored to the needs of the archival community.

This period of stakeholder engagement was followed by several rounds of prototyping to determine:

- How the timeline should function visually and semantically;
- How users should be able to browse and filter by location, institution, or theme;
- What metadata should be surfaced immediately versus housed in expandable panels;
- How to maintain accessibility and mobile compatibility without sacrificing depth.

The team adopted an iterative design model, progressing through alpha and beta testing phases involving wider members of Quill. These stages were crucial in identifying bugs, assessing usability, and incorporating user feedback into a more intuitive and responsive interface.

(d) Planning for longevity and decentralized maintenance

One of the most critical design principles underpinning the Index has been its future sustainability. From the outset, the team committed to building a backend architecture that would not require intensive oversight from Quill developers or researchers to remain functionality. This meant creating an administrative interface that would allow archivists to directly add to or update their own collection and enable bulk upload using familiar formats (e.g. spreadsheet imports). These steps will ensure that the Index continues to grow, reflect new acquisitions, and remain up to date as the field evolves.

Strategic value to the project and the reconciliation mission

The Writing Peace Index is not only a practical research tool—it is a strategic instrument aligned with the Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation project's deeper goals. It enhances archival cooperation, facilitates access to primary source material, and empowers researchers and educators to explore the complexities of peacebuilding through a new lens. In particular, the Index:

- Directly supports the creation of common standards for cataloguing and metadata;
- Enhances transparency and awareness of underutilized collections;
- Helps prevent duplication of effort and promotes strategic acquisition;
- Encourages the digitization of neglected archives by making them discoverable;
- Serves as a bridge between archives, academia, policy-making, and public discourse.

By enabling institutions, regardless of size or resourcing, to share in a common platform, the Writing Peace Index reflects the spirit of reconciliation: collaborative, inclusive, and future-oriented.

Next steps

We are grateful to the Reconciliation Fund for the opportunities and research that have been enabled, and we are proud of what has been achieved in a short period of time with a very limited budget. The Archiving Conflict and Reconciliation initiative has facilitated cooperation among archives, provided professional development for archival professionals, and taken clear steps to ensure that the history of conflict and peace in Northern Ireland is accessible for research, policy, and public education.

We have identified a number of key areas for future work.

(a) Development of the Writing Peace Index

The Index promises to be transformative but requires further development through additional stakeholder engagement rounds to ensure achieves its full potential. A number of areas have been identified for further development:

- **Stakeholder engagement:** Co-design has been central to our approach, and we would value the opportunity to receive further feedback from archivists on the working prototype of the Index.
- **Enhanced timeline functionality:** This feature will improve chronological navigation and provide users with better contextual understanding of archival materials. By incorporating a wider timeline of the peace process, it could become a useful educational tool.
- **Search:** Improving search capabilities will significantly enhance user experience and research efficiency. There is also the possibility of using AI-enabled knowledge discovery tools to improve search outputs.
- **Map view:** There is a possibility to supplement the index with a map view, showing the locations of holdings.
- **International collections:** Researchers would value the inclusion of further collections of material held internationally, particularly in US archives.
- **Ensure sustainability:** A critical design principle has been future sustainability: an administrative interface allows archivists to directly add or update their own collection entries. An opportunity to train archivists to use this feature would be invaluable.
- **Promotion:** As the Index is developed, work is required to promote its use more widely.

(b) Continued dialogue creating a platform to showcase the work of archives

Building upon the collaborative framework that has been developed, we would like to offer on-going workshop and dialogue opportunities. These initiatives will foster continued partnership and knowledge sharing. The workshops should be co-designed with the community, responding to emerging challenges within the field. However, we also see value in also using them to increase the profile of archives and archivists in the public square, through public sessions such as the panel at Hillsborough Castle. Our research has reinforced the central role of archivists in shaping historical knowledge. As stewards of memory, archivists mediate between the past and public understanding, determining not only what is preserved but how it is described and accessed. This intellectual and ethical labour deserves greater recognition and support—both within academia and the wider cultural heritage sector.

(c) Development of educational content

To support public engagement and education, the project identified the need for accessible, classroom-ready materials based on authentic primary sources. Teachers and archivists alike acknowledged the potential for archives to enrich learning about the peace process, provided such materials are well-contextualised and curated with care. The project has laid the groundwork for future collaborations in

this area, bringing together historians, educators, and archives to co-create resources that resonate with younger audiences and reflect diverse perspectives.

(d) Academic outputs

Several of the themes that emerged through this project deserve closer attention, and academic articles are being considered or are forthcoming, addressing the question of state papers and the agency of archivists in knowledge production. Former Irish diplomat Frank Sheridan has already produced an article, *The Travellers*, as part of this project, exploring how Irish diplomats gathered and reported information during the Troubles, highlighting the role of archival records in understanding state strategy and unofficial networks.

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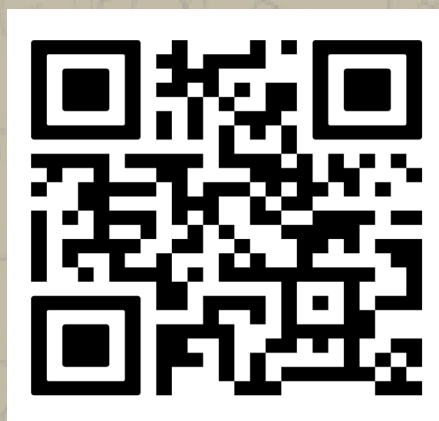
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