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Editorial

Hon. Editor Martin Bellamy

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Editorial

In common with most other professions, the Internet has transformed the practice of history. Sites like Google Books and archive.org have made the discovery of sources incredibly easy and specialist projects such as MarineLives, which is putting large numbers of digitized documents from the High Court of Admiralty online, are creating extraordinarily rich resources for maritime researchers. The availability of historical records online has not only helped professional historians, but has also democratized the process of doing history. No longer do you need to set aside days to visit far off libraries or pay for costly inter-library loans. Instead you can simply access much of this material in the comfort of your own home.

Having said that, archives are still the lifeblood of a historian's craft and nothing can beat the sense of excitement and the connection to previous lives that handling historic material provides. And not everything is digitized. It is therefore worrying that physical libraries and archives, particularly those in museums, are becoming increasingly difficult to access.

A library at the heart of the museum sends out a powerful symbolic message that it values historical enquiry and scholarship. Sound historical knowledge should lie at the heart of every museum and their libraries provide the means by which curators can understand the true significance of their collections. They also provide visitors with first hand access to historic material that allows them to explore and develop their understanding of the past in a way that is not possible through even the best curated displays. It is therefore lamentable that there are currently two major museum libraries of great maritime importance that are making their archives less accessible.

The Imperial War Museum library was saved from closure a few years ago, but now the opening hours have been reduced and stock moved off site so that only pre-ordered material can be viewed. Sadly this will affect most users, many of whom travel from afar, and creates real problems for serious research. The Phillips Library at the Peabody Essex Museum closed for improvements in 2011 and it has now revealed that it will not re-open, but will instead be moved to a site 15 miles out of town. The users of both these libraries, it is fair to say, are outraged. They have been highly active in alerting the changes to the wider research community through social media and there is a groundswell of support to fight these moves.

Making access more difficult goes against the very spirit of a library and inevitably favours those who have the time and the money to travel. Let's hope that this modern trend does not return us to a time when history was only written by the privileged few. No matter how good online resources are, it will be a sad day indeed if the practice of history for most people is simply reduced to looking up things on the Internet because it has become too difficult to access the original material.

Martin Bellamy
Hon. Editor