

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS ARCHIVES AND RECORDS MANAGEMENT REPORT 2004

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The records of the early administration of the Virgin Islands with its political and constitutional changes form the nucleus of the national Archives. The very nature of the administration had a fragmentary effect on the records.

1.2 Those records, which remained in the Virgin Islands, have suffered many decades of neglect, They are housed in a small room (approximately 2.3 X 4.5 metres) in the Old Administration Building situated in Road Town, Tortola and although advice and guidance have not been lacking over the years, even the most basic recommendation made by Black in 1975, 'to air-condition the small Archives room and to close it to the public' was not implemented. Therefore 'most of the comparatively few surviving earlier records dating back to 1700 have been ravaged by the effects of climate and insects.'

1.3 Newer Archives, some of them more than thirty years old have accumulated with a large quantity of unorganized intermediate records in the basement of the Central Administration Complex and in off-site stores. The failure has been not to assign responsibility for the management of both active records and Archives.

1.4 With the appointment of the Chief Records Management Officer on April 1, 2004 some of the problems are being addressed. One month later, the Executive Council of the Virgin Islands Government approved her Action Plan to establish a National Archives and to introduce an integrated system of records management along the lines recommended by Lemieux, a Consultant from the International Records Management Trust (IRMT) in October 1998.

2. ACCOMPLISHMENTS

2.1 During the remaining eight months of the year the following activities of the Action Plan were achieved:

- i.) Conducted a Records Survey across the Government Service
- ii.) Renovated the Archives room to a fairly acceptable standard.
- iii.) Cleared and incinerated termite eaten and infected papers and non-records
- iv.) Appointed an ad hoc Archives Committee and five Sub-committees to advise on: Policy and Legislation; Appraisal, Disposal and Retention Schedules; Site and Building; and Automation requirements and Fundraising.
- v.) Formulated Archives and Records Management policy for submission to Council
- vi.) Established a net-work of Record Officers
- vii.) Circulated directions on relieving offices and records store of superfluous materials
- viii.) Assisting individual offices with implementing hints
- ix.) Acquired a stock of archival boxes and other materials
- x.) Issued Disaster Management hints for records and archives
- xi.) Draft Disposal and Retention Schedules for every type of record was sent to all departments for their input.
- xii.) Gave input on a) e-Government and b) Records Management for revised General Orders.
- xiii.) Presented the case for the post of Government Archivist to be established
- xiv.) Lobbied for up-grading the salary scale of Records Officers.
- xv.) Lobbied British Executive Overseas (BESO) for an Archives consultant to advise on conserving both old and new Archives.
- xvi.) Lobbied Commonwealth Foundation for technical assistance
- xvii.) Formulated paper to show how Archives could benefit the Government's Legislative Agenda

xviii.) Negotiated with the University of the West Indies to conduct workshops in Records Management for active records during 2005

3. DETAILS OF ACTIVITIES:

3.1. Records Survey. The survey included all departments throughout the Civil Service in order to establish: the provenance of the records; their location; their condition and how much space they occupy. Not surprisingly, the Survey showed up dire need for training and accommodation, namely, a Records Centre and an Archives Repository. A report with recommendations was circulated to the Legislative Council, Heads of Ministries and Departments. Some concluding observations were:

3.2 There is dire need for a central records building in which to store and manage the backlog of government inactive files i.e. the intermediate records (not yet 25 years old) which are still of administrative use but which are not yet Archives. The economy in information retrieval time and office space that would be gained can be measured in dollars and sense.

3.3 Whereas the focus should be on managing records (the backlog) in their native formats rather than pursue the scanning of all government records, the records management functions in all departments should be automated. Policy for managing both traditional records and electronic 'born digital' records should be made operable with urgency.

3.4 The Government Information Service audiovisual records should form the basis of a Sound Archives to be developed as the BVI National Sound Archives. Someone should be recruited and trained to manage this unit under the National Archives institution. A high percentage of the backlog of inactive files is more than 25 years old and are now Archives. The building of a National Archives to accommodate these and the older records that have been housed in miserable conditions in the Old Administrative building for over-half-a-century should be given high priority

3.5 Recruitment and training of staff to operate the integrated Archives and Records Management programme should also be of high priority. Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Departments should present the case for the placement of Record Officers on the nominal roll and should recruit suitable persons with a measure of urgency.

4. COMMITTEES:

4.1 All, but the fundraising Committee, met several times and advised according to their terms- of- reference. Hopefully legislation to institute the Integrated Archives and Records Management Service will be drafted and enacted during 2005. The Site and Buildings Committee members have already selected a site for the Archives Repository and submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Finance for funding the initial drawings and plans, in the 2005 Budget.

5. ARCHIVES ROOM (Old Administration Building)

5.1 The ante room (adjoining) and the Strong Room have been renovated- tiled, painted and lighted. The anteroom is air-conditioned and has some general effect but the Strong Room will also be done early in 2005. Two windows also need replacing.

6. ARCHIVES CONSULTANT (British Executive Services Overseas- BESO)

6.1 During Nov 1-18 Mr. John Cantwell a BESO Archives Consultant advised on the conservation of the older archives and on the way forward for the Archives institution and the Records Centre. (His recommendations are summarized below and the full Report is attached as Appendix 2)

* An archivist should be appointed in the near future, possibly from overseas, on a short-term contract, to enable a local person to be trained as successor (para 4.4).

* Legal and Administrative records to be brought under the same umbrella when new records legislation is introduced (paras. 2.1,4.5).

*Box list to be prepared of registered files, etc. Few personnel records need be kept (para. 2.4).

*Records in Old Administration Building to be kept in 'secure custody' for present (para 2.5).

*Guide to be prepared for reviewers highlighting significant events and developments (para. 2.5).

*Unregistered papers to be boxed but registered series to be reviewed first (para 2.7)

*Priority to be given to bringing semi-current records in the basement of the Government Administration Building under control. (para 2.8)

*Documents in the Records Centre to be stored in order of year of destruction or review and location given a distinctive reference (para 2.8)

*Gaps in holdings to be made good from United Kingdom and Leeward Island Archives when funds become available (para 4.2)

*Two officers thought necessary to run Records Centre. Proper accommodation to be provided as soon as possible (para 4.3).

*A part from the need for a purpose-built Record Office an Archivist *High Court material in Old Administration Building to be reviewed in due course (para 4.5).

7. CONCLUSION

- 7.1 The recommendation as proposed by the International Records Management Trust Consultant re using the Basement of the Central Administration Building, as a very temporary measure is not feasible. There are water and sewerage pipes overhead and the environment is stuffy and unpleasant. Furthermore, it is understood that the designers of the Building made it clear that the Basement was not intended for human occupation. Alternative accommodation for those stores of in-active files and archives in the Basement must therefore be urgently sought.
- 7.2 As outlined in Cantwell's Report if the work accomplished since the appointment of the Chief Records Management Officer is to be taken forward there must be put in place as a matter of priority, a few basic necessities, namely, the appointment of a Government Archivist and the training of a successor; Employment of two keen records persons to assist the work with the Older Archives in the Old Administration Building and intermediate records in the new Central Administration Building and out-stores; Legislation to institute the National Archives and Records Management Service and Funding for a proper Archives Repository and Records Centre.

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