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Reflections in an Archive: The (im)possibilities of it all

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Dr. Justin Vickers at work in the Rosamund Strode Reading Room of the Britten Pears Arts Archive.

Reflections in an archive

The (im)possibilities of it all *By Dr. Justin Vickers*

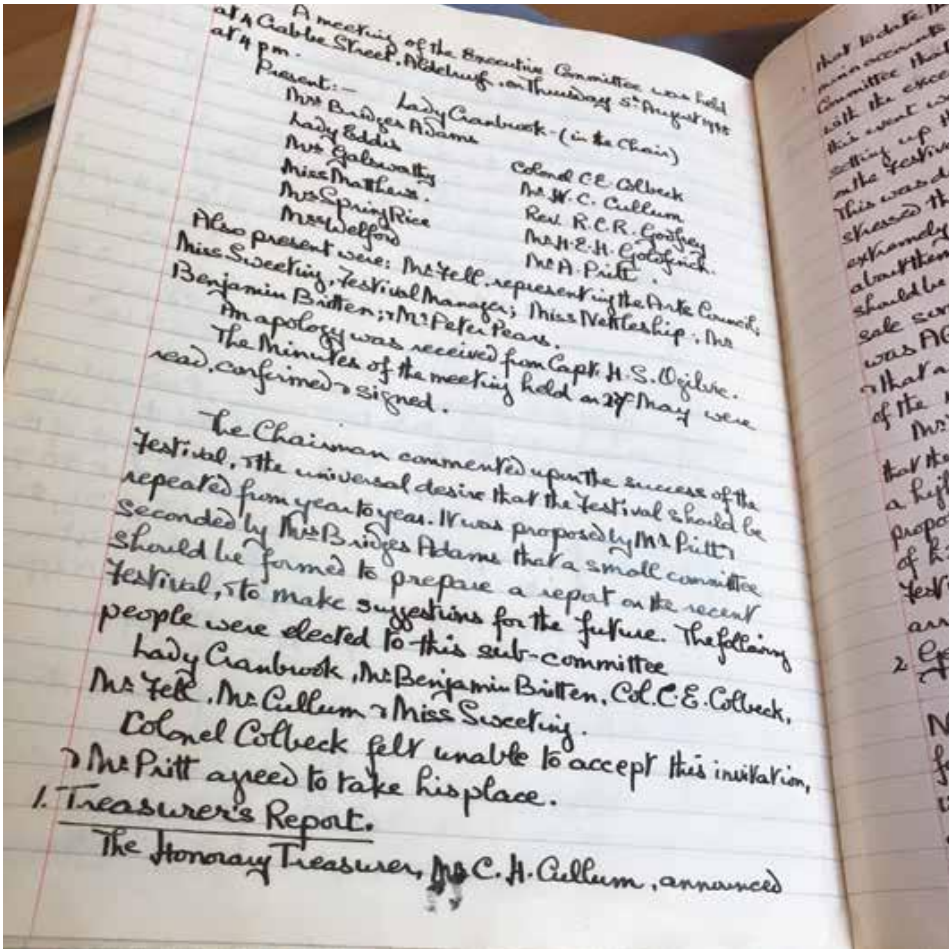
For much of the duration of my residency last year as a U.S. Fulbright Scholar to the United Kingdom, I was ensconced in Aldeburgh, a town two hours northeast of London on the Suffolk coast. The medieval fishing village is the home of the Britten Pears Arts Archive (BPAA), the largest archive dedicated to a single composer in the world. The archive takes its name from the lifelong romantic and career partnership of composer Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) and tenor Peter Pears (1910–1986), emerging from its first incarnation as the Britten–Pears Library

and situated on the grounds of their home, The Red House. A couple for nearly four decades, their collaborations were at the center of midcentury English music and culture. Just as significantly, Britten and Pears founded the Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts in 1948, and it is writing the history of this Festival—during their lifetimes—that has formed my primary Fulbright project.

My book, *The Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts: A History of the Britten and Pears Era, 1948–1986* (The Boydell Press), illuminates the richness and importance

of this endeavor. The Aldeburgh Festival played a paramount role in England’s musico-cultural reconstruction and renewal in the wake of World War II.

Writing such a history, however—perhaps more so when the research is heavily archive-based—still relies on the fundamentals of narrative craft, engaging with the reader in a meaningful, interesting way. Teasing out the story from a pile of documents is the task. But getting lost in an archive’s holdings is every bit as great a risk. While an extended period at an archive—six months in my case—holds



The *Executive Committee Minutes Book* has proved an invaluable resource during Dr. Justin Vickers' research.

untold opportunities for investigation that shorter residencies may not permit, it requires significantly more discipline than one might anticipate. The freedom to explore materials and continue ruminating on them over the course of many days or weeks, returning to examine any number of prospects and chase down further

leads, would be virtually impossible under other circumstances. My colleague Dr. Lucy Walker references Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* and discusses the tempting perils of the "everythingness" available in an archive and "the particular 'fever' of the researcher-historian when confronting a plentitude of resource" (Strocher-Vick-

ers, 2017). Quite. The (im)possibilities are infinite.

Nevertheless, sitting in the BPAA, it was not uncommon to have a heaving handcart beside me, surrounded by an array of extant internal primary source documents from the Aldeburgh Festival archives. An invaluable source is the *Executive Committee Minutes Book (ECBM)*, a hardbound ledger volume into which are glued the handwritten minutes of the organizational meetings from 1947 through 1955. The *ECBM* provides the only firsthand account of this period and represents the closest thing scholars will ever have to a live recording of the goings-on in those meetings. My process of daily cross-referencing could easily include pivoting from the various stages of Britten's compositions; related correspondence aligned with diary appointments for Britten and Pears; Festival correspondence associated with external agencies, especially governmental funding from the Arts Council of Great Britain; and coordination with the BBC for recordings and relay broadcasts from Festival concerts.

Frequently, having pored over files in other institutional archives, items at the BPAA offered the missing piece in an otherwise one-sided accounting. It all seems vital to read and incorporate into my writing. But with a 250,000-word contract, folding in all of those fascinating details does not necessarily translate into the same interest for a reader. This realization has to remain a guiding impulse: to clear the cloud of minutiae enabling a legiti

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mate ability to see the central themes.

Each new path of investigation presents countless possibilities. It requires a love of forensic detail combined with endless “What if ... ?” questions. The study of considerable unpublished correspondence inevitably contained previously unknown intricacies forming a fuller representation of events. Notably, the founders determined that every event for each Festival would be accounted for in a souvenir edition of the *Aldeburgh Festival Programme Book (AFPB)*, including essays about local concerns and history, notes on the performances, texts for major works, and so on.

These programme books offer a wealth of information for the researcher, but are increasingly difficult to come by. There are myriad reasons why the early *AFPBs* are not entirely reliable, particularly last-minute artist cancellations and repertoire substitutions; demanding print deadlines infrequently necessitated separate “throwaway” programmes. One complete set of Festival programmes exists in the BPAA, containing considerable annotations and salient details not otherwise accounted for in print. My own complete set contains marginalia that further augments the BPAA annotations, and still more *AFPBs* contain new information and ephemera.

How, then, do we achieve the closest approximation of accuracy? I appended an earlier Britten publication with an extremely long table collating the first decade of Festival performances. I set about to follow that model, correcting inaccuracies, and adding new details along the way. In 2019, with the assistance of Benjamin Sanetra, undergraduate music major at Illinois State, we continued the process of data input from 1958 through 1986. The result, after years of continued revision, is



Dr. Justin Vickers is professor of music and artist teacher of voice in the School of Music. He has edited *Benjamin Britten in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2022) and *Benjamin Britten Studies: Essays on An Inexplicit Art* (The Boydell Press, 2017). Vickers has been named a Visiting Fellow at New College, University of Oxford for Trinity Term in 2023.

The Aldeburgh Festival Database of Performances and Events: 1948–1986. Britten Pears Arts Archive has optioned my work to be hosted as a searchable database for scholars and researchers to study freely around the world. The database will be launched in 2022 and answers the need for equitable access to these data.

While any archive is teeming with possibilities, its collections are inanimate. We breathe life into them. That very energy that seems to beckon the researcher inward must also usher us out of the archive. And it seems impossible to leave the security of the archive, the embrace of being surrounded by its everythingness, believ-

ing that each answer is there. Who would want to leave? But in truth, we aren't meant to live in an archive: We're meant to access it, be inspired by some spark mingled with our own curiosity while engaging with its contents, and we're meant to leave. We're meant to accept that the vast majority of our research will stay in a file, merely informing that which is produced. We're meant to go face the more daunting challenge of distilling our research into a worthy vessel of our making. Discerning the impossibilities of it all is our journey along the way.