

Invitation to tender: Project Archivist for the ‘Archives Revealed’ cataloguing project at the Bluecoat, 2025-26

The Brief

Introduction

The Bluecoat was recently awarded an ‘Archives Revealed’ grant from The National Archives. This will enable us to create a single cataloguing system for our archive through the appointment of a professional archivist on a freelance contract who will work with in-house expertise, volunteers and Liverpool Record Office.

The grant will help preserve the archive, enhance its digital presence and extend its reach. With a recent report on developing the Bluecoat archive, produced by Janice Tullock Associates, as our guide, our ambition is to bring our building’s story – of an eighteenth- century charity school transformed into a centre for the contemporary arts – to more people, from historians, academics and curators to local history enthusiasts and schools.

Background to the Bluecoat

The Bluecoat is Britain’s first contemporary arts centre, with a century-long history presenting the arts, from Picasso and Stravinsky to Yoko Ono and Sonia Boyce. Housed in central Liverpool’s oldest building, it also has a 200-year heritage as a charity school, founded by the church and merchants involved in transatlantic slavery. Today, as a popular tourist destination and social hub, the building houses a ‘creative community’ of artists and cultural organisations and stages exhibitions, events and participation programmes. As the building’s custodians, we look after archive collections relating to its rich three-centuries’ history, particularly the last 100 years. Selections from this material are regularly displayed.

The Bluecoat archive

Archival material relating to the arts centre and its various iterations - Bluecoat Society of Arts and Bluecoat Arts Forum - is housed at Liverpool Record Office (367 BLU) alongside a collection relating to the Sandon Studios Society, the organisation that was instrumental in transforming the building into an arts centre (367 SAN). LRO also has a collection relating to the original occupants of our building, the Blue Coat School,



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before it moved to Wavertree, while the school has its own archive on site, some of which is accessible online: <https://www.bluecoatschoolliverpoolarchives.org.uk/>

The focus of the 367 BLU collection is on exhibitions (1970s-2004) and governance, with the engagement activities, live art and music that we're so well known for barely represented. Most of the collection at LRO is fully catalogued and, although available online, it is not very discoverable, and the cataloguing project will help address this.

The focus of this project however is on the significant amount of other archival material physically housed in our building, which remains uncatalogued. This material relates to our artistic community, programmes of visual, performing and participatory arts, organisational development, and architectural changes the building has undergone. It comprises posters, flyers, invitation cards, brochures, publications, programmes; photographic and slide documentation including the building's tenants, wartime bomb damage and postwar reconstruction; architects plans; a press archive dating from 1925; Sandon Studios Society material; film and audio documentation; files of correspondence, minutes of meetings, policies, governance and other reports; a small number of artworks, historic maps and objects; research into the building, the school, the arts centre and its programmes.

Generally in good condition, this material at the Bluecoat doesn't need major conservation but mostly requires packaging and boxing to archival quality to protect and prolong its life. A recent archival survey resulted in a high-level box list for much of the material, but the collection lacks a comprehensive, searchable catalogue. There is an index to the press cuttings but not other parts of the collection. Some material has been digitised and made available via our online Library (www.thebluecoat.org.uk/library). This information will provide a basis for developing a more detailed catalogue. Digitised material is currently stored on a server but is not subject to any digital preservation activities.

Scope of the Project Archivist brief

- Deliver the project to the agreed timetable.
- Review the project plan and schedule.
- Collate and appraise material to be catalogued including material already prepared as a box set inventory.
- Set up cataloguing systems and processes to dovetail into LRO's existing structure for Bluecoat material, addressing any issues around copyright and digital assets.
- Prepare catalogue material to file level, International Standard of Archival Description standard (ISAD [g]) and LRO guidelines: individual descriptions to comprise: Reference code; Title; Creator



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(of item); Date; Extent (of material); Level of description; and two additional fields when time allows, Description & Significance, and Keywords.

- Prepare an online catalogue.
- Manage collections information.
- Recruit and supervise volunteers to help on the project.
- Contribute to design and delivery of an audience engagement programme, including archive drop-in days and family weekends, to ensure communities are involved through workshops, family weekends and heritage activities (this will be led by Bluecoat participation staff).
- Feed into two funder progress reports on the project and quarterly reports to the Bluecoat Board.
- Attend four meetings of the Steering Group.

Timescale and fee

This is a freelance contract for 130 working days, to be completed by November 2026.

The fee, inclusive of VAT is £26,000 (based on the Archives and Records Association recommended figures for this level of work) to be paid in monthly installments. You will be responsible for your own tax and NI contributions.

Other information

The work will be carried out primarily at the Bluecoat, in its library where much of the archive is housed, as well as hotdesking and offsite.

The project will be managed by Bryan Biggs, the Bluecoat's Director of Cultural Legacies, who has extensive knowledge of the organisation and has been instrumental in developing the archive from scratch, including the first deposit of material at LRO, building up collections at the arts centre, curating archival exhibitions and public events, and developing the online archive. He will work closely with the Project Archivist, identifying material and advising on its provenance and significance.

A small Steering Group will act as a sounding board for the project and will include representatives from Liverpool Record Office and the Blue Coat School.

Our project partner is Liverpool Record Office. Currently without a policy covering care and storage, material on the Bluecoat premises will be subject to LRO's Collections Care and Conservation Policy.



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The project should align to the Bluecoat's commitment to reduce its carbon footprint, as outlined in its Environmental Policy and to relevant action plans and policies to make the organisation more inclusive, such as its Race Equality Action Plan.

To tender for this opportunity

Applications should comprise:

- A covering letter
- Your CV, giving details of relevant qualifications and experience pertinent to this project.
- No more than two sides of A4 indicating:
 - What interests you about the project
 - How you would approach it
 - A proposed schedule of tasks
 - Any challenges you foresee

To apply, please email your completed application to bryan.b@thebluecoat.org.uk with the subject 'Bluecoat Project Archivist Application'.

If shortlisted, you may be asked to attend an interview.

Deadline for tenders: 23 September. Decision by 3 October

The 'Archives Revealed' programme is funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Pilgrim Trust, the Wolfson Foundation and The National Archives.

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