

The Churchill Archive

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Anybody remotely involved in 'Churchill Studies' or even interested in the great man to the extent of reading books by him or on him must have encountered references in the footnotes to the considerable amount of written material which he left. A large part is now deposited at the Churchill Archives Centre at Churchill College, Cambridge – and available to the public. But of course one has to go there – hence the brilliant idea behind the website under review (<http://www.churchillarchive.com/index> [2]), which gives access to scans of the actual documents to the subscriber from any computer. Nothing can replace the feel of the real thing, but facsimiles are the next best option. The system is already well tried with newspaper collections, among others.

Besides the documents themselves, the site offers a number of sideshows whose value will be rated differently by different users. One may imagine that the *Action this Day* box on the home page was modelled on the Life of the Day offered free to non-subscribers by the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: every day, clicking on the box leads to a different document originally written on the same date. A section is specifically devoted to information intended for librarians, and why and how the Archive can be of use to their public.

The home page also invites the visitor to use *Teaching Resources*, divided into two sections: 'For lecturers' and 'For teachers'. As of August 2012, 'For lecturers' is comprised of two essays, 'Churchill: the young statesman, 1901–1914' by David Thackeray, Lecturer in History at the University of Exeter; and 'Churchill and empire' by Richard Toye, Professor of Modern History, also at the University of Exeter, and a familiar name associated with 'Churchill Studies'. A unique feature of these essays is that practically all the footnotes refer to documents in the Archive – with of course a hyperlink to the photostat.

Yet some irksome navigation is required to access the precise passage quoted in the essays. If we take the example of Churchill's famous phrase, 'I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire', Professor Toye gives in the footnote: 'Speech of 10 November 1942, CHAR 9/158/56-68', with 'CHAR 9/158/56-68' being 'hot'. Clicking on it does not lead one directly to the sheet in Churchill's preparatory notes in which the phrase appears, but to the whole of the sheets, fourteen in

all, covering the entire speech; and one has to use the tiny 'filmstrip' discussed below to access the page – after clicking and looking for the phrase eight times in vain - to find the passage on the ninth sheet. If a passage is on page 99 of a document with 100 sheets, one has to use this tedious procedure all the way through – a very crude method of access. Of course the reward is enormous: the scans show whether Churchill hit the right phrasing first time or deleted the original version (dictated to and typed by one of his ubiquitous secretaries), scribbling the definitive text next to it (which he very often did). In the case of 'I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire', one can see that it was a 'first hit': the original typed text remained intact after he read it over.

The 'For teachers' section currently includes four 'Lesson plans' : (1) The 'Iron Curtain' speech; (2) 'Defence of Freedom and Peace' speech (16 October 1938 – broadcast to America from London); (3) 'The Truth About Hitler' article (*The Strand Magazine*, November 1935); (4) Winston Churchill's rhetorical devices (based on Churchill's essay of 1897, 'The Scaffolding of Rhetoric'). The first three appeared excellent to me, but I was particularly impressed by the fourth. If I understand 'AP' correctly, this lesson is intended for high-flying American pupils leaving high school to enter college. The level of critical analysis seems amazingly high for students that age – I am sure many European postgraduates would benefit from this highly sophisticated de-construction of the mechanism of rhetoric.

The home page also has a tab leading to material on the *Churchill: The Power of Words* Exhibition held at the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, from June 8 to September 23, 2012, with a link to the Morgan website which provides full details. This is of course not surprising, since the Churchill Archives Centre was a major partner in mounting the Exhibition, loaning many original documents. Specialists in 'Churchill Studies' would evidently have already been made aware that this exhibition was on by other channels – but interested laypeople may find this kind of 'current Churchill events' column useful.

But all this is only peripheral to the online archive's main reason for being – providing access to the Churchill papers located at the Churchill Archives Centre from one's armchair. The proof of the pudding being in the eating, I tested the archive from references and topics that I had seen in various circumstances.

The Churchill Chat facility run by the (international) Churchill Centre recently included a fascinating exchange on how the wartime authorities suspected that gifts of cigars and chocolate might be poisoned, and Allen Packwood, who is in charge of the Churchill Archives Centre, contributed an excellent short article, 'Protecting the premier', in which he indicated in a final note: 'The original correspondence cited in this article is reconstructed from file CHAR 2/434 in the Churchill Papers collection and can be viewed at the Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge'.

Here was an excellent reason for using the electronic archive. I found CHAR 2/434 all right in the 'Explore' heading. But then the only information I got came from a box on the right which appeared when I clicked on an unknown symbol, which read as 'Show details' when I passed the mouse over it. The box included a short passage on my particular field of interest in this vast array of '149 folios, Dec 1940–Aug 1942': 'It includes some correspondence on gifts made or offered to WSC, although there was also a series know (sic) as Gifts which dealt with this topic and has been preserved'.

Another unknown (and equally unexplained on the Home page) symbol, next to the one which opened the box, read as 'View in image browser'. I duly clicked on it, expecting to have a list of letters and other papers from which to choose. It is here that things started to go hopelessly wrong for me. The page which opened was overwhelmingly full of boxes (called 'panes' in the 'Help - how to use the image browser' section – which I did not find helpful at all) and headings, horizontal and vertical (whose function and use are not explained in that section), with a wide band at the bottom showing tiny, illegible photographs of documents, all with hyperlinks to the actual full-size reproductions, which is called the 'filmstrip'. A hopeful heading on the top left corner read 'Public and political: general: correspondence on gifts to WSC, A-C, especially cigars'. When I clicked on it, it duly led to a box which repeated the heading in slightly different form: 'CHAR 2/434. 1 bound file (149 folios). Public and political: general: correspondence on gifts to WSC, A-C, especially cigars'. Then came a text, however indigestible, which confirmed that I was indeed on the right

track:

Correspondents include: [3rd] Lord Rothschild of MI5 (8), Sir Norman Kendal [Assistant Commissioner], New Scotland Yard (2), Senior Official Analyst to the Home Office Roche Lynch (2), Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes, British Minister at Havana, Cuba (4), [John] Balfour (3) and [Cecil] King of the Foreign Office, and [1st] Lord Cherwell [earlier F A Lindemann, Prime Minister's Personal Assistant] on cigars and the possibility of them being poisoned; Sir Henry French, [Secretary] Ministry of Food, on a gift of tea from the Dutch East Indies [later Indonesia]; [Henry] Tai Mitchell sending a ceremonial staff and Maori greetings (2); [Saville] Garner [Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for the Dominions]; Major-General John Kennedy [Director of Military Operations] (War Office) sending on a box of snuff from Colonel [Richard] Stapleton-Cotton. Also includes notes and copies of correspondence from Prime Minister's Private Secretaries John Colville, [Francis] Brown, [John] Martin, [Edith] Watson, John Peck, [Leslie] Rowan, and [Eric] Seal, Major [Desmond] Morton [Personal Assistant to WSC], [Walter] Thompson [WSC's detective], WSC's secretaries [Kathleen] Hill and [Sheila] Minto, and [Nevile] Butler [Head of North American Department in Foreign Office]; and from WSC to some of those mentioned above and to Cuban Ambassador to Britain Don Guillermo de Blanck and Cuban Minister of Agriculture Dr Andres Rivero Aguero.

Other subjects include: other gifts including a cigar box from Auckland [New Zealand] and a painting from Brazil.

Also includes: MI5 report on cigars presented to WSC by the National Tobacco Commission of Cuba; extracts from New Zealand papers; photographs of the presentation of a cabinet and cigars for WSC to Ogilvie-Forbes in Cuba.

All tantalisingly tempting stuff, of course – but how was one to access it? This text is not ‘hot’: it is no use clicking on ‘photographs of the presentation of a cabinet and cigars for WSC to Ogilvie-Forbes in Cuba’, hoping to see the first ever photograph of the famous cabinet (now in Chartwell’s Studio).

On the other hand, it is followed by a list which has links to (charging) outside resources (the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography [ODNB] and Who’s Who [WWW]) and internal index links :

Places

- Cuba
- Indonesia
- Brazil
- New Zealand

People

- Lindemann, Frederick Alexander, Viscount Cherwell ODNB WWW
- Watson, Edith Margaret WWW
- Garner, (Joseph John) Saville [Joe], Baron Garner ODNB WWW
- King, Cecil Harmsworth ODNB WWW
- Martin, Sir John (Miller) WWW
- Morton, Sir Desmond John Falkiner ODNB WWW
- Seal, Sir Eric WWW
- Rowan, Sir (Thomas) Leslie ODNB WWW
- Churchill, Sir Winston Leonard Spencer ODNB WWW

- Colville, Sir John Rupert ODNB WWW
- Peck, Sir John (Howard) WWW
- Brown, Francis David Wynyard WWW
- Hill, Kathleen
- Thompson, Charles Ralfe WWW

Periods

- 1941
- 1942
- 1940

Topics

- Gifts
- War Office
- Food and Drink
- Foreign Office
- Police
- Smoking

Going back to the left-hand 'pane', it had three tabs; 'File', 'Item' and 'Transcript'. The text had automatically come under 'File'. I tried 'Item': nothing appeared – only a blank space. Then 'Transcript', which gave a disappointing 'Files in the archive consist of collections of document items, sometimes quite a number of documents. If you would like us to prioritise any particular documents in our transcription programme please [contact us](#) [3]'. No use to me in that particular quest, of course.

A vertical tab on the side of the box, 'Current selection', only led me back to the 'Explore' page, from which it took forever (it seemed) to go back to 'Public and political: general: correspondence on gifts to WSC, A-C, especially cigars'. I then tried the vertical tab in the middle of the page, 'Image'. It only gave me a poor photograph / scan of the title page, 'CHAR 2/434', of the actual file, and I did not understand how the zoom facility worked – I was never able to master its capricious will from when I first accessed the site (with Internet Explorer 9 – more on this below). The only possibility left of seeing the coveted documents was using the lower band / 'filmstrip' at random, a tiresome task in perspective since 'CHAR 2/434', the title page, was marked as '1 of 180'.

Try as I might with this trial-and-error method – the opposite of a rational, scholarly approach, of course, but a drowning man will catch at a straw – I was never able to see the famous cabinet. As it was mentioned towards the end of the text, I tried the postage-stamp images around the end of the band, but to no avail. All I got was partial glimpses of letters, in various degrees of reduced scale, totally illegible when handwritten, some with relevance to cigars, some with none.

A few days later, a friend having told me about the conference which he is organising next May at King's College, London on the Battle of the Atlantic, I thought this theme would provide another excellent test. I duly followed the steps indicated under 'Explore by topic': 'War and conflict', then 'Named conflicts', 'World War, Second (1939–1945)' and finally 'Battle of the Atlantic (1939–1945)'. With increasing frustration, I clicked and clicked on this – to no avail. It is only after extensive brain-searching that I realised one should then (1) Tick the adjacent box (2) Click on the 'View selected results' tab at the top of the table. Then a full list of the files deemed relevant by the machine or the designers of the software appeared, 129 in all. The first, 'CHAR 19/3/1 (04 Sep 1939–30 Sep 1939): First Lord of the Admiralty's printed minutes, September 1939. Includes texts of minutes from WSC (sometimes annotated with additional printed information) to: various naval directors; the Sea Lords, particularly', with again the useless 'filmstrip', was as the name indicates a photostat of a (31-page) pamphlet, with material of variable relevance and interest –

but of course this would be the case with the ‘real’ archive: nothing to do with the online version. Things started to go really wrong, however, when my curiosity was aroused by the sixth file offered on the list:

CHAR 20/15/9 (03 Nov 1939). Printed paper by WSC for the War Cabinet entitled ‘Statement by the First Lord to the French Admiralty’; discusses the uses of ‘asdic’s [anti-submarine detection indicator], the necessity of defeating... Official: Prime Minister: copy of a letter from [11th] Lord Lothian [earlier Philip Kerr, British Ambassador to the United States], War Cabinet papers by WSC, and printed telegrams and letters exchanged between WSC and President [Franklin] Roosevelt.

I found three pages connected with the French all right – but none of the promised material on Roosevelt. Not to be deterred by this inexplicable mishap, I tried the next one:

CHAR 20/15/13 (Sep 1939-May 1940). Printed copies of telegrams and letters exchanged between ‘the Naval Person (WSC) and President (Franklin) Roosevelt’: 11 Sept 1939 Letter from Roosevelt to WSC congratulating him on his return to the... 1 5, [1]p Official: Prime Minister: copy of a letter from [11th] Lord Lothian [earlier Philip Kerr, British Ambassador to the United States], War Cabinet papers by WSC, and printed telegrams and letters exchanged between WSC and President [Franklin] Roosevelt.

Then I got the first exchanges between the ‘formal Naval Person’ and President Roosevelt – from the first fascinating ‘My dear Churchill’ letter of 11 September 1939 to the ‘My dear Mr President’ letter of 7 May 1940 promising him a copy of the official report on the Battle of the River Plate. The great disappointment, of course, is that this is third-hand material, if one accepts that the first hand would be the handwritten MS (which probably never existed in ‘hard copy’ as both leaders dictated their letters to an aide) and the second hand the actual typewritten letters. My conclusion was that if one was prepared to spend the necessary time (much more than it takes to browse through actual archive boxes) and accept the often hit-or-miss process which comes with lack of familiarity with the logic behind the software, one would necessarily find plenty of useful material on the Battle of the Atlantic.

My third and final test – a short one because it immediately aborted – was also connected with a lead which I got from the Churchill Chat list. Members were discussing whether ‘OMG’ (Oh, My God!) originated in Churchill correspondence – with the editor of *Finest Hour*, Richard Langworth, tracing the occurrence to a letter from Lord Fisher to Churchill dated 9 September 1917 and Elizabeth Courtney, Archives Assistant at Churchill College, Cambridge giving the precise reference: FISR 1/25/40–41. On the strength of these indications from the most reliable authorities possible, I went to the site again, and entered ‘FISR 1/25/40–41’ in the search window provided on the top right-hand corner of the home page, hoping to see the letter, or at least the file where I could find it. All I got was ‘Sorry, but your search has returned no results. Please try again or alternatively go to Explore via the navigation bar at the top of the page to browse using either our dedicated taxonomy or the Churchill Archive catalogue’. Is it because ‘FISR 1/25/40–41’ is not in the *corpus*, or is it because I did not follow the correct procedure? I still wonder.

No doubt the professional computer science specialists who designed the site would easily and laughingly point to the gross mistakes which I must have repeatedly made at all stages in my clumsy, amateurish navigation efforts. In fact, after hours of despairing of mastering the whole thing when I looked at CHAR 2/434, I tried another browser (I first used Internet Explorer 9), Mozilla Firefox. Then the zoom facility worked, and I was able to see large-scale images of the scans, though I still had to play the hit-and-miss game to try to see the cabinet photograph which by then had become the legendary inaccessible Holy Grail in my eyes.

But this is beside the point. Their site is not intended for fans of highly sophisticated computer games, or

even people who know the name of their browser (incidentally, Internet Explorer 9 is not an ‘obsolete’ or ‘exotic’ version: it must be one of the most common browsers on earth). It may be that a present-day child of five (say, twelve, to be honest) would immediately and ‘intuitively’ understand the ‘architecture’ of the archive, and that he would have accessed the cabinet photograph in less than two minutes. But these highly ‘computer-literate’ schoolboys are not the potential users of the core functions of the site. Most will be mature teachers and staid academics with no special competence in computers except the bare minimum needed for their professional requirements. For them, the online archive would only be a means to an end: easy access to easily legible scans of the documents in the Churchill Archives Centre at Churchill College, Cambridge.

For this reviewer, this end was unfortunately never achieved when a precise search was undertaken in file CHAR 2/434, and a verdict of ‘please try harder – this is not good enough’ can only emerge from this very disappointing experiment – all the more frustrating as one senses that there are nuggets to be dug up if only one knew how. To paraphrase Churchill’s jocular mannerisms, I would say that I found access and navigation tiresome, irksome and therefore not awesome. Fortunately, we are told that this was only a ‘beta’ (trial) version: no doubt all these irritating teething troubles will be overcome and a ‘user-friendly’ version allowing trouble-free navigation even for the ‘computer-illiterate’ with common browsers in this outstandingly rich archive will be fully developed before subscriptions are offered to the public. In the present state of the facilities proposed, though, I would not take one, however cheap (I understand anyway that the service will only be available to institutions, not to private individuals, which is a pity for independent scholars and keen members of Churchill societies). Unfortunately I would not recommend the service to my Chief Librarian, either, the more so as I have absolutely no clue as to the likely cost, since by a curious post-modern reversion to practices which take us back to pre-modern village markets where prices were determined by fierce haggling between buyer and seller, there is no advertised standard charge. Evaluating any service relies, I believe, on a careful examination of exact cost and likely benefit – but the first factor in the equation has become so opaque that this has now become impossible for online facilities of this type.

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Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/34201>

[2] <http://www.churchillarchive.com/index>

[3] <mailto:churchillarchive@bloomsbury.com>