Life stories

'So many people have a connection to Girlguiding, its a privilege to help preserve their history'

We've been chatting with Girlguiding HQ's archivist Hannah, to learn more about her role, the projects she's been working on, and some of the interesting items she's found.

You might be wondering...what's an archivist or an archive?

Hannah helped us to understand, telling us that 'archives are collections of information created as part of everyday activity and kept for their ongoing value.' Things like photographs, films, ledgers and magazines are 'primary sources that provide us with firsthand information.' When people talk about an archive it's a term used for where this archive material and records are kept and an archivist is someone responsible for 'helping to preserve, grow and promote the records in their care.'

Why did Hannah want to be Girlguiding's archivist?

Hannah described how she instantly knew she wanted to work for Girlguiding and was extremely excited at the thought of being able to use her experience to lead the development and delivery of an outstanding archive service.

'As a former young member, I wanted to play a role in rediscovering the stories and historical record of Girlguiding and use them to engage and inspire.'

And, just like Hannah girls across the UK know they can do anything and embrace their passion for history. Girlguiding supports girls to ponder the past and imagine the future. Through interest badges, girls can trace their family tree, dig into archaeology, discover guiding history and learn about genealogy.

Hannah and her sisters as Brownies

Hannah with 'The Girl Guides' railway engine name plate

The Girl Guide railway engine, no. 2168, 1930

Find out more

How did Hannah become an archivist?

Hannah has been an archivist for 15 years. Having always been interested in history 'it was natural for me to study history at university.' This was where she first experienced the realm of archives as a researcher.

After university, Hannah worked in various roles but continued to pursue her passion by volunteering at different organisations with an archive, such as a national museum, local authority and a well-known retail brand.

'The experience had me hooked!' she reflected, and her professional archivist journey began with a traineeship at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. She even went on to achieve her masters in Archives and Records Management.

Why does Girlguiding have an archive and what's the national archive project about?

Hannah explained that archives have many benefits to both Girlguiding and the wider community. 'The collection represents the story of young girls and women over 100 years, making it a collection of national importance too. So many people have a connection to the organisation, and it is a privilege to help preserve their history.'

Girlguiding's national archive project aims to thoroughly review the collection of items that have been in storage since 2013. They all need to be checked because 'sometimes items can become very fragile, particularly older items. A conservator can help make these items more stable so they can be used or prevent further deterioration.' When items are found to be in a good condition Hannah will be making sure these are preserved and catalogued 'to help make them more accessible for research.'

So far, the project has processed about a quarter of the original material in Girlguiding's collection and for Hannah this work has

'reinforced to me what a special and unique collection the national archive is, and how much potential there is for its future use.'

What does Hannah's day as an archivist look like?

Hannah told us that one of the best things about being an archivist is that each day is different and there are many different tasks you need to do.

She's currently locating, organising, researching and cataloguing items from the Brownie programme which include badge books, handbooks and syllabuses. This work will help create a history on the Brownie section.

'Another thing I enjoy about being an archivist is learning new things on a daily basis' as she often helps research items for colleagues, regional and county volunteer archivists and even members.

Hannah with a collection of badges from the archives

'Volunteer archivists are so passionate and dedicated to what they do. I'm enjoying working with them, and whilst I can support in areas such as collection skills development, I have a lot I can learn from them too.'

Discovering items from Girlguiding's archive...

'Every time I work on a new part of the collection, I seem to find a new favourite item.'

There's an item that Hannah shares regularly when showcasing the collection. A logbook from 1912 that documents the activities of 1st Lone Company, compiled by their captain Nesta Maude. These homemade records show the real experience of guiding at that moment and are often beautifully illustrated too.

This particular logbook demonstrates how girls were involved in guiding even when they weren't able to join a local 'Guide company'. Known as 'lones' and they even had their own promise badge in the style of the Guide badge but with the letter 'L' in the center.

1st Lone Company log book

by company captain Nesta Maude in 1912

larger view

The Guider magazine, March 1951 Guiding in the Frozen North

larger view

Hannah has been fascinated by a story from a 1951 article published in The Guider, titled 'Guiding in the Frozen North'. It details the journey of Beth Riddoch who visited Brownies and Guides in the northern territories of Canada, an amazing journey of 4,000 miles! Hannah explains that the article's small but detailed map

'Demonstrates how remote and isolated many of the communities are, but they are connected to each other through the experience of Girlguiding.'

As someone who always enjoys reading recipe books Hannah was delighted to see recipes regularly featuring in the guiding magazines. A tradition that continues today. Ranging from campfire recipes to celebrations of national dishes these recipes

'Reinforce the unifying role that food can have in bringing people together and creating recipes.'

Hannah confessed to having an extremely sweet tooth which means she's usually drawn to dessert and pastry recipes. A recent discovery in a 1920 Girl Guides' Gazette, caught her attention because of its 'intriguing description of measurement' by calling for '1 breakfastcupful milk (warm)'. A measure Hannah had never seen before, speculating it may have been a standard measurement of the time 'I think it sounds rather lovely.'

A collection of recipe books

The Girl Guides' Gazette January 1920

larger view