

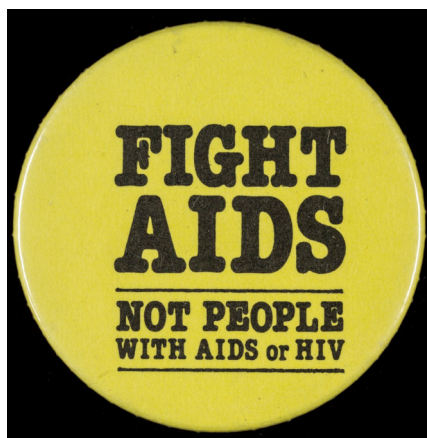


People With Archives:

A survey of HIV/AIDS records in the UK

Welcome to the 1st issue of the newsletter for the 'Documenting the HIV/AIDS epidemic: a survey of HIV/AIDS archives in United Kingdom' project which is based in the West Sussex Record Office (WRSO), in Chichester, West Sussex. The aim of the newsletter is to provide regular updates about the project, highlight some of the collections held in the UK, explore why HIV/AIDS archives matter, and discuss some of the issues associated with preserving and managing archival material. This publication is intended both for people interested in the history of HIV/AIDS but also for people who hold archival material associated with the epidemic, whether in public or private hands.

Title of the newsletter



Fight AIDS: not people with AIDS or HIV.
Wellcome Collection. In copyright.

For those of you who are not aware, PWA was the widely used acronym associated with an HIV positive person with an AIDS diagnosis. It was coined in the United States as a term of empowerment. The term has fallen out of use partly because people living with HIV who have access to effective treatment are highly unlikely to get an AIDS diagnosis, and because of the connotations of AIDS with suffering and death. By re-using the acronym, I certainly do not wish to offend or stigmatise those living with the virus or those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic. The purpose of reusing the acronym is to acknowledge the history of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and to recognise that the personal stories and memories of what occurred are often documented

by those who were there; the primary purpose of this project and survey is to raise awareness of this history and ensure that it is preserved for people in present and future generations.

About the project

The 2-year project is funded by Annabel's Foundation, set up by the founders of the HIV/AIDS charity, AVERT, whose archives are held at WRSO. The project aims to facilitate the study and research of the global pandemic of HIV/AIDS by identifying records of historical interest in archival repositories and private hands and advising, where requested, on their long-term preservation.

The survey will collect information about UK archive holdings through meetings, questionnaires, and site visits. The survey will include records dating from the origins of the pandemic up to the present day and will include archive material of multiple formats, including digital records, film and sound archives, oral histories, and ephemera.

The project has four distinct phases, starting with mapping the current landscape of HIV/AIDS records in the United Kingdom by surveying UK archive services. This work is due to be completed by June 2023 and will provide an overview of the collections held in archive repositories in the UK. Through analysis of the results of the survey, it will highlight the composition of the historical records held about HIV/AIDS in the country and where there are potential gaps in current collections.

The second part of the project, starting in summer 2023, will involve making contact with private holders of archives and surveying their collections. These records could be held by individuals, organisations, or institutions with private archive collections. The project archivist will, through meetings, email correspondence and questionnaires, find information about these collections and establish, where possible, the future plans for these collections and whether owners would appreciate any professional help from the WSRO team in looking after their collections.

Starting in 2024, the survey plans to make a series of site visits or remote viewings to those private archive collections which have requested professional advice or support, which could include an assessment of current storage, supply and advise on packaging archival material, listing and cataloguing material and providing advice and assessment of digital media. Finally at the end of 2024, the project archivist will publish a report of the survey providing details of the HIV/AIDS records held in the UK and recommendations on how best to maintain and support these archives and archive collections in the future.

The results so far...

The survey so far has contacted 101 archive services in the United Kingdom and has had responses from 74 archive services to date. The responses have chiefly been services filling in the online questionnaire about HIV/AIDS holdings and results have ranged from single items referencing the HIV/AIDS epidemic to archives sharing hundreds of pages of their catalogue data. As expected, most records are held in the London area, of which a large number are held within archive services based in higher education or charities, along with the considerable holdings at The National Archives. It has however been encouraging to see that there are local record offices across the country which hold some material relating to HIV/AIDS. These collections typically relate to local LGBTQ groups but there are some specific HIV/AIDS organisations, such as HIV/AIDS information projects and helplines and regional support services for people living with HIV. It has been particularly encouraging to find archival records in Wales and I would like to thank Archive Wales and the LGBTQ historian, Norena Shopland, for their help in finding them.

Most of the material reported relates to the UK epidemic and typically dates to the height of the AIDS crisis in 1980s-1990s. There is however some more recent material which can be found in some of the archives of the HIV services, LGBTQ+ organisations and within oral history and audio-visual collections. There are also significant holdings within NGO and charity archives relating to overseas humanitarian HIV/AIDS projects from the 1990s onwards.

Most archive collections reported have been catalogued, but there are still regular new accessions reported in recent years and personally I was delighted to hear that the Black Cultural Archives had recently received a donation relating to Blackliners, which was the first HIV service for black people in the UK. Survey respondents have also noted where there is likely to be more relevant HIV/AIDS material in local government, healthcare, charity, and business archives in their collections, but have not been able to identify individual documents as the collection as no detailed listing of the material is available.

The survey will remain open until the end of April 2023 to ensure that as many services as possible have time to respond. In the meantime, I have created some tables and a word cloud of the early results so far.

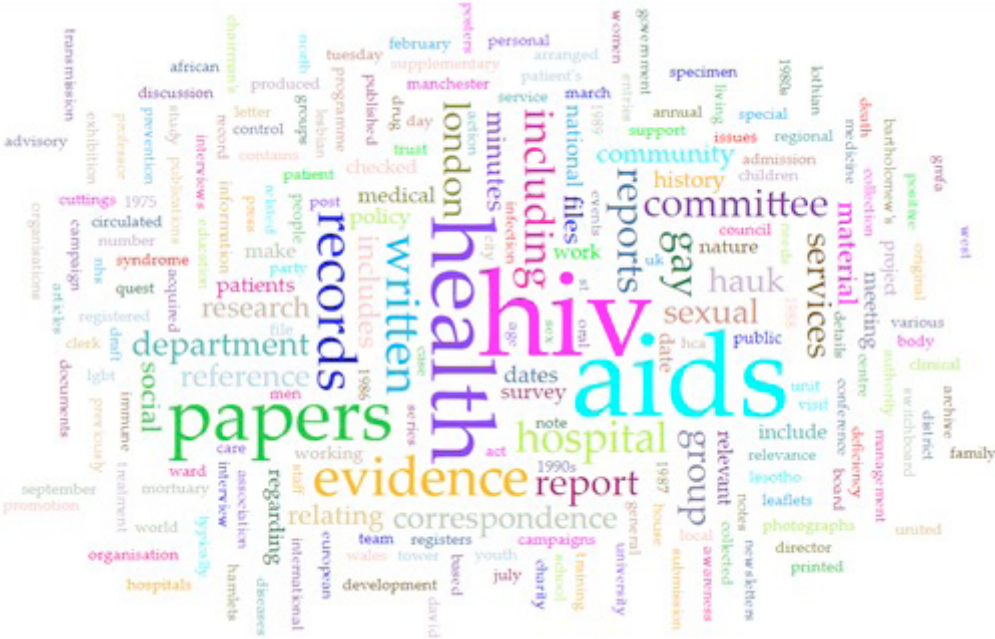


Figure 1: Word cloud of the top 200 terms used with the archive cataloguing data received from survey respondents produced using Voyant Tools.

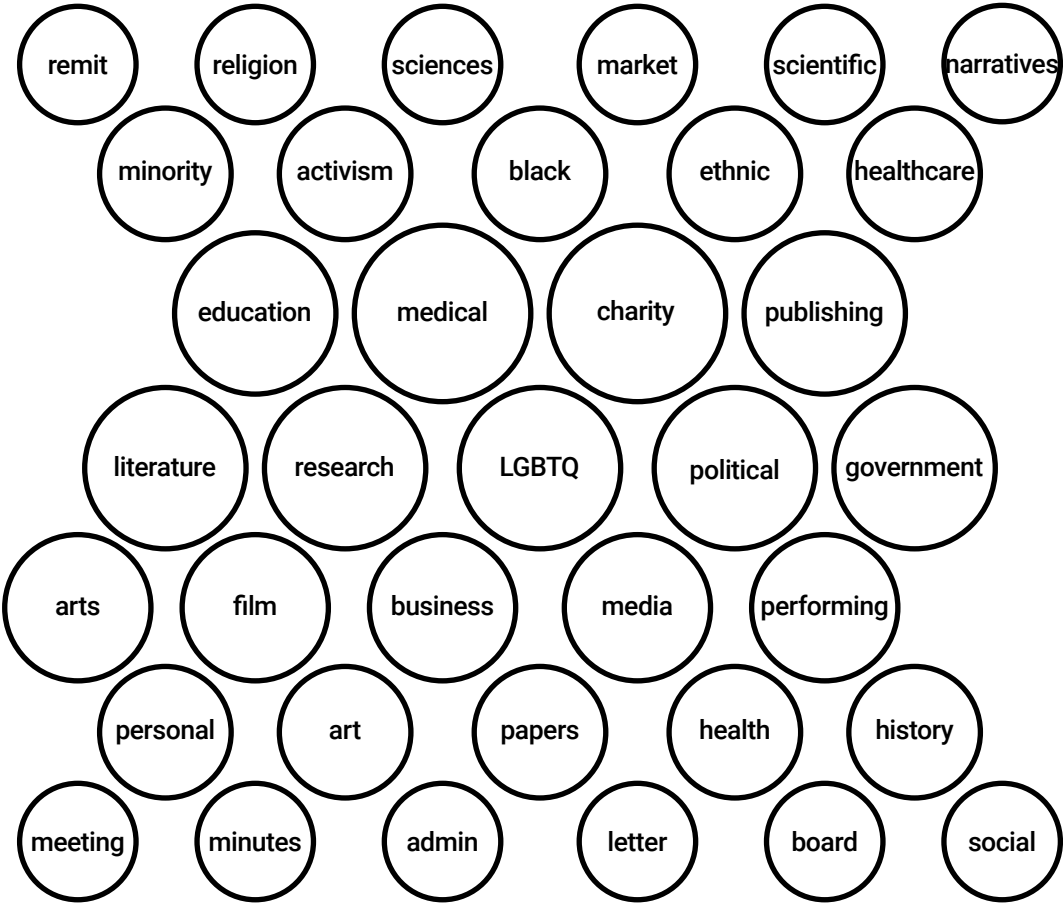
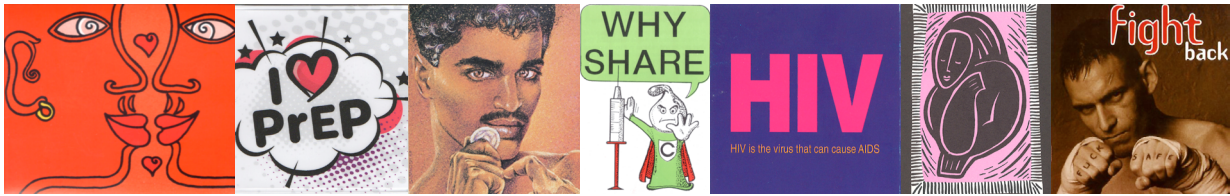


Figure 2: Subject headings provided for some of the HIV/AIDS record responses. Produced using Voyant Tools.



HIV/AIDS archive in the spotlight

Siân Cook, is a Graphic Designer and Senior Lecturer at the London College of Communication (UAL), She runs the resource www.hivgraphiccommunication.com, a historic visual archive of promotional campaigns and graphic ephemera.

◦ **What is the origin of your archive collection?**

OK, well, it goes back a long way. I began collecting when I first started volunteering with various HIV/AIDS organisations in the early 90s. I was doing bits of design work, and I started to get really interested in the things that were being produced by small local organisations in terms of visuals and communication.

Well, these were a lot more interesting than maybe things that were being produced by official bodies like, you know, governments and local councils. And I was noticing this disconnect in the sort of styles of imagery and language being used. So, I started just kind of collecting stuff for my own reference really. I was looking for examples of good practice.

And then over time, I suppose I just got more interested in it. I began a PhD at the Royal College [of Art] part-time in 1994. That's when I started collecting properly and wrote letters to 170 different HIV/AIDS organisations in the UK, asking for spare leaflets.

In 2013, I started to revisit the subject, and decided to create a website to display some of the ephemera I had collected. The website isn't an archive but a taster of the actual archive which I store in my home. I do not digitise whole items for the website, mainly covers and selected pages, as the website is primarily to display the design elements of the ephemera within the archive.

◦ **Could you describe the type of material in your collection?**

I guess my original criteria was to collect any information or items of visual communication about HIV/AIDS that were publicly available in the UK – so mainly posters, leaflets, postcards, condom packaging, badges, t-shirts etc.

There are over 1700 items on the website, with the earliest things being from the mid 80s. I haven't got anything really early – I actively collected when I started the PhD in '94, and the majority of the collection was made during that time.

I have carried on collecting since, but not quite so avidly, so I haven't been contacting people, I've just been picking up stuff as I've found things and obviously a lot is digital now.

◦ **Have you had any donations?**

Yes, I mean, a few people have contacted me and said 'I've got things', and one really lovely find was from somebody who worked for Terrence Higgins Trust South, who got in touch with me.

They were having a clear out and had a lot of THT campaign material for the Sussex area, including developmental work and early drafts.

◦ **Are there items in your collection which resonate with you?**

It's quite often just the really simple things from activists' group like ACT UP, in places like Leeds, Norwich and Manchester. Some of that stuff is just great because it is just like zine culture – it's just photocopied and passed on. And not like precious pieces of print. So some of those are really interesting.

There was also a really good designer working in Scotland who produced some really great stuff for Scottish AIDS Monitor. He always had a really nice playful sort of approach to the material. And he was one of the first who did something like using an action man figure to represent different types of sexual practices, for a really lovely little booklet. And, you know, it's just when you find those kind of solo designers – I guess I relate to them because I'm a solo designer too.

◦ **How does your approach to archiving differ from other archives?**

Bear in mind, I'm not an archivist, I'm a graphic designer. So, that influences everything that I've collected and the way I've chosen to categorize the information I've recorded.

It is quite interesting because I have the same items I've seen in other archives, but some of the information I'm recording about my items is very different in terms of description compared to what other people record. And sometimes I find I don't think other people's recordings are always accurate in terms of how a piece was produced or printed. Because I'm not sure that everybody always understands the difference between different types of print which you know, obviously I'm interested in. So yeah, just putting that caveat in, that the way I'm describing things is my own system. It's not like a proper archive system.

◦ **What are the future plans for your collection?**

At some point I would really like to be able to hand over all of the physical stuff and have it end up somewhere that would be appropriate. And I think it's quite hard trying to find appropriate places to deposit things actually because it can fit under a number of different headings, and it could fit in a number of different places. But one of the things I'm really keen about is accessibility of the material.

I think that one of the best models is the Interference Archive in New York, which is a public access archive and their whole thing is about they want people to use the material to inspire their own community work. So they're happy for people to come in who have their own activist groups or school groups to handle the material and work in the space.

I think that's such a lovely model because it's not being precious about the things but making it useful to people, not just researchers, and making those connections. So, I would love it to end up somewhere where it was accessible.

For more information about the project

If you are interested in finding out more about the project, then please do feel free to contact me. I am particularly keen to hear from people who may know of or are aware of possible private HIV/AIDS archives. I can be contacted on christopher.olver@westsussex.gov.uk or by telephone on 03302226284. You can also read more about the project on the WSRO blog which can be found here: <https://westsussexrecordofficeblog.com/documenting-the-hiv-aids-epidemic/>

