

A National Treasure

Posted on



A chronicle of a nation lies in stillness; invaluable records dating back from 16th Century Ceylon up to 21st Century Sri Lanka await within the Department of National Archives in Colombo to reveal their stories to the inquisitive explorer.

Words Dinali Sugathadasa Photographs Prabhath Chathuranga

A natural habitat for the student and professional researcher the National Archives contains a treasure-trove of documented, audio and visual records available for examination.

A simple proof of identity is the key to unlocking this national treasure; through the PR Department we're directed to the Search Room where the list of Archives Holdings is made available to the visitor. Once the needed information codes are jotted down from the Holdings it can be handed over to the Search Room officers who will then deliver the required sources to the researcher.

The Search Room as we enter is occupied by two researchers; one enthralled in a pile of Portuguese maps of Sri Lanka, the other immersed in two gigantic bindings of the Sinhala newspapers of the year 1975.

Flipping through the Archives Holdings shows you a list that goes on forever on what information is contained in the Archives and available for viewing. Records from the Dutch Administration (1640 – 1796), papers from Senarath Paranavithana on the Sigiriya project, the HCP Bell collection (17th to 20th century), the first Government Gazette of 1802, records from the State Film Corporation, Hansards, Geoffery Bawa collection, a Wesley College Old Boys Union newsletter from 1979, 20th Century Impressions of Ceylon by Arnold Wright, an H R Jothipala collection... eminent and ordinary, it's all there at your fingertips.

By law, copies of all publications of a Public Office need to be submitted to the National Archives, which may include annual reports, statement of accounts, postage stamps, post cards, specimens of currency notes and coins, copies of maps, charts and plans, election literature and any other publication. For private publications those that are deemed unique and valuable will be deposited in the Archives. In such circumstances it will be either purchased or the publisher will voluntarily submit a copy to the Archives.

Conservation And Repair

Collection and preservation of a treasure-trove of information, and making it available to the public is no easy process.

Old and damaged documents are cleaned and strengthened by the Restoration Branch. It includes a careful process of removing acids from the paper, measuring PH levels and strengthening documents using specialised materials and chemicals. Finally documents are stored in a controlled environment where lighting and temperature are moderated for longevity. The Department also provides these services to external parties and the officers speak of the Tsunami and flood affected documents they dealt with in the past and the precision with which they handled them.

Microfilms are produced of documents so that researcher can examine them and at the same time avoid damaging originals in the case of aged documents or delicate handwritten records. Printer-Reader machines are provided for viewing these microfilms and the Archives provides facilities of print outs on request of the needed sources.

Flipping through a microfilm of the 1914 Times of Ceylon, it strikes me how priceless

something as ordinary as a daily newspaper could be almost a hundred years later. To each his own, and for me from the countless publishings to be perused the most intriguing were the newspapers. As advertisements for steamer tickets to London and back at 875 rupees covered the front page of the 1914 Times of Ceylon, the 1975 Dinamina revived a golden era of Sinhala cinema with page after page plastered with announcements of the cherished “Awa Soya Adare.”

Life and lifestyles, value of money, Governments, laws and regulations, technology and innovation; it all alters as the clock ticks away, yet within the walls of the Department of National Archives the history of our Island nation lives on, frozen in time, as still as the day it was written, to be perused by you and I.

ARCHIVE HOLDINGS •
PUBLIC RECORDS • DUTCH
PERIOD RECORDS
1640-1796 • BRITISH
PERIOD RECORDS
1796-1947 • RECORDS
SINCE INDEPENDENCE
1948 AND
AFTER **NEWSPAPERS**
PRINTED IN SRI LANKA •
SINHALA SINCE 1862 •
TAMIL SINCE 1864 •
ENGLISH SINCE 1832 •
OTHER SINCE 1869 •
PUBLICATIONS PRINTED
IN SRI LANKA 1885
ONWARDS

PRIVATE MANUSCRIPTS
AND BOOKS OF
INDIVIDUALS AND
INSTITUTIONS •
HORAGOLLA LIBRARY OF
THE BANDARANAIKE
FAMILY • TIMES
COLLECTION OF PAPER
CUTTINGS AND
PHOTOGRAPHS •
HISTORICAL
MANUSCRIPTS FROM
TEMPLES AND OTHER
PRIVATE
INDIVIDUALS **MAPS •** MAPS
OF THE PORTUGUESE,
DUTCH AND BRITISH
PERIODS 1505-1947 •
SURVEYOR GENERAL'S
MAPS OF SRI LANKA
SINCE INDEPENDENCE

GOVERNMENT
PUBLICATIONS •
GOVERNMENT GAZETTES
1802 ONWARDS • BLUE
BOOKS 1821-1837 •
SESSIONAL PAPERS 1862
ONWARDS •
ADMINISTRATION
REPORTS 1867 ONWARDS •
HANSARDS 1870
ONWARDS **AUDIO-VISUAL**
MATERIAL • COLOUR
SLIDES OF TEMPLE
PAINTINGS • CASSETTES
AND TAPES OF FOLK
MUSIC AND SELECTED
SINHALA MUSIC TAPES •
VIDEOS CONTAINING
SPEECHES OF EXECUTIVE
PRESIDENTS AND ON THE
CULTURE OF SRI LANKA •
MICROFILMS AVAILABLE
ON CERTAIN ARCHIVE
HOLDINGS

Department of National Archives 7, Reid Avenue Colombo 7.
Opening Hours: 8.30am to 4.15pm, Monday to Friday

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