

Working with the AHDS: benefits of collaboration for smaller organisations

A case study on the partnership between the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust and AHDS Performing Arts

The Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust (STDT) is a national organisation which exists to promote and encourage participation and enjoyment in all traditions of Scottish dance. From its offices in Stirling it runs a diverse programme of educational outreach and supports communities by collaborating on festivals and project work. The ultimate aim of the Trust is to have a Traditional Dance Artist in every Local Authority in Scotland to increase participation in the arts among people who have had few or no opportunities to take part. Understandably this work generates a wealth of valuable records. The Trust's aim is for these records to be the foundation of a National Archive & Resource Centre for Scottish Traditional Dance. The first stage of this resource centre is now in place in Stirling following a successful bid to the Heritage Lottery "Your Heritage" Fund, which allowed the Trust to appoint a professional archivist for a one year period. This case study examines the potential for smaller organisations like STDT to work with the AHDS, exploring the benefits to be gained from AHDS' technical expertise and its ability to provide a more financially viable solution to digital preservation.

The archive

The Trust has a considerable collection of archive material accumulated from its various dance development projects from the last 10 years including oral histories, artefacts, books, manuscripts, memorabilia, music scores, photographs and video clips. The appointment of Jennifer Duffy as project archivist has allowed this material to be sorted and catalogued. Moreover she has been able to digitise the oral history collection with the hope of it being made accessible online in a later stage of the project. The 150 hours of oral history holdings, stemming from the "dance! Dance!! DANCE!!!" project, have been digitised using open source software to create master files in .wav format and MP3s for delivery. These recordings provide a fascinating insight into folk cultures and society in the 1990s. While the subject matter is ostensibly Scottish dancing, many of the interviewees speak more widely on their viewpoints, families and lifestyles, making this an excellent resource for several user groups. Examples from the oral history recordings are given below. The archive also includes around 30 videos of dance festivals. It has not been possible to digitise these in the time provided for the first stage of the project but the Trust recognises the importance of digitisation to avoid loss through obsolescence or media degradation, and is currently submitting bids to fund this work.

"The Pas-de basque is the Pas-de-basque, but the Strathspey mobile step, one tends to put a little bit in instead of just a skip and passing through with your moving foot ye know as opposed to the one that's on the ground. But you can also do, what I think is called, a ball cut, which is by tapping your calf with your heel as you go through, makes it more eh, more interesting." (SD/2/3/1/1/1)

“Well, that was at the temperance, you see, they played about every Setterday, at the Temperance, but that would have been maybe the 1930’s or afore the 1930’s maybe... .. they jist had about £2 in a night onywey, for playin’. They didna’ hae muckle money.”
(DDD/A/1/35)

“Miss Mary Douglas.....she's been demoted, in St. Andrews when we were dancing it was Lady Mary Douglas but now it's Miss Mary Douglas.”
(DDD/B/1/1/14)

“How did the Spanish Waltz go?

Four, you danced it in fours and you went round, you see, and then you turned and came back again and then the man swung the lady across to the other side and another man swung you across until you were back to your original placing and then you did a Waltz wi' your partner and joined up again and that was how the Spanish Waltz went.”
(DDD/B/1/2/16)

“The first dance that I can remember was the Mrs. McLeod of Rassay, that was the first dance and Jenny's Baw Bee, very old dances and Jessie's Hornpipe”
(DDD/B/1/2/20)

“And what about the costumes, where did they come from?

“They were made in Lauder by a tailor. The skirts were what they called drugget, it was a sort of coarse linen. And the blouses were, you know, a little frill over the waist and they were called Garibaldis, the blouse, and the straw hats were Ugliers, they were to protect you from the sun. And we were ugly in them. And Betty's Granny made the frill for the hat which was called ruchings. You know you teased out ... that was a bit that went round the hat.” (DDD/B/1/2/30)

Preservation

As soon as the sorting and cataloguing had been finished the priority was to digitise the oral history collection as the tapes were already quite old. Since the storage conditions were not ideal the longer the tapes remained as they were the greater the chance of loss. Digitisation had the added benefit of removing the risk of damage to the originals through overuse when the Resource Centre opened. Once the digitisation was complete the Trust had to decide how to store and preserve the new digital versions. Establishing a repository with the correct temperature and humidity

controls for digital media requires significant investment and, as the Trust is a registered charity, this was not financially realistic. Moreover the transitory nature of funding meant they were unable to employ a permanent archivist so any commitment to digital preservation would have to be covered during periods without an archivist by one of the three permanent members of staff. Resource constraints limited what the Trust could do: the investment of time, money and skills needed to establish a comprehensive preservation plan for their digital archive was out of their reach. Initially the Trust had planned simply to back up the digital oral history files on a weekly basis until further funding could be secured. After discussion with AHDS Performing Arts, however, it was decided that a more sustainable solution would be to deposit the digital data with the AHDS so it could be professionally managed and preserved. This guaranteed the longevity of the oral history recordings, ensuring that researchers would still be able to access them in the future and that copies could be provided to the Trust should anything happen to the original files.

Access

The Trust used DS CALM software to create a fully searchable database of the archive holdings. Since it is possible to export data directly from CALM into XML, the Trust hoped to place its archive database online so that researchers worldwide could find out exactly what resources were available without having to travel to Stirling. Until a website could be set up the access benefits of having the oral history collection digitised could not be exploited. The archivist contacted AHDS Performing Arts for advice and during an outreach visit to the offices at Stirling the options were discussed. As the Trust did not have the technical expertise or capacity to add their catalogue and digital material to their website it was proposed that AHDS would preserve the collection and design a basic user interface so that the resources could be accessed immediately.

The Trust hoped that increasing their online presence would raise their profile. Despite being a national organisation they have very limited resources and find it difficult to raise awareness of the records they hold. Having the collection searchable online will allow them to increase their user numbers, linking their holdings with related collections from other dance and folk organisations. The cross-search nature of the AHDS catalogue will also bring researchers from different fields to the Trust's records, truly fulfilling the potential usage of the oral history recordings.

Copyright

Given the nature of the oral history recordings there were obvious copyright and confidentiality issues that needed to be addressed. Interviewees had originally signed a consent form permitting the Trust to hold the recordings in its archive and make them available for educational purposes only. Since digitisation is a form of copying and placing the recordings online would widen the usage, it was necessary to trace the interviewees and their families to ask if they had any objections to this taking place. As several of the recordings provide confidential information on religious beliefs and family circumstances it was crucial to re-establish consent. Some of the recordings begin by recording the interviewee's personal details such as addresses. The Trust

decided it was best to remove these parts from all the derivative versions before providing them to AHDS to be placed online.

Depositing

In the case of the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust the volume of material was not too large so they were able to send it through on disk. As AHDS agreed to preserve and disseminate the oral history recordings the master files (in .wav format) and the derivatives (in MP3 format) were provided. These were sent to the AHDS Executive for preservation, accompanied by a document transfer form that provided the necessary technical details to allow the records to be verified on ingest and preserved. A catalogue form providing wider contextual details and a licence granting AHDS the right to preserve and disseminate the recordings were also completed and returned to the centre in Glasgow. Once all the data and documentation had been received AHDS were able to set to work preserving the recordings and making them accessible. This valuable collection can now be seen at:

<http://www.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/collection.htm?uri=pa-1046-1>

This case study highlights how AHDS were able to help the Scottish Traditions of Dance Trust preserve their digital archives and gives an insight into the deposit process. The methods of deposit and licence agreement are negotiable though so if you're interested in finding out more about depositing with us please contact the collections staff in your relevant AHDS subject centre to discuss your particular needs or look at our deposit pages at:

<http://www.ahds.ac.uk/depositing/index.htm>

Sarah Jones, Collections Development Officer, AHDS Performing Arts
Jenny Duffy, Project Archivist, Scottish Tradition of Dance Trust