BAPTIST ARCHIVES

How to organise & manage your Church or Denominational Archives

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The Importance of Records and Archives for Churches and Denominations

Every organisation has an obligation to create, collect, preserve and manage records associated with its activities. Some of the main reasons are:

1. Legal – you need records to document various important issues – eg, property, employment, insurance claims, maters subject to (potential) court action
2. Planning and Administration – you need to know details of what has been decided and done in the past in order to make good and informed plans for the future
3. Family, church and local history – you need to preserve the documentary heritage of your church so you can present the story of your church, its members, organisations and its place in the community.
4. Testimony and witness to the grace of God – most important of all, your church is 'His story' so you need to be able to tell the story of God and his grace and mercy

An Archives is generally the collection of records created by a particular organisation or person which need to be retained for a lengthy period of time, or in practice, in perpetuity.

The records have meaning because they have been created within a particular context by your organisation, rather than being independent productions (like a book or newspapers). Therefore an understanding of the structure and life of your organisation is an important part of setting up and managing your Archives. It

follows then that a structural history of your organisation (in text and/or in diagram form) will be of great assistance in giving proper meaning to the documents in your Archives and the way you manage them.

Your Archives should have a 'Collection Policy' which specifies what type of material it will collect. Any material offered to the Archives must fit within the criteria indicated, or else it cannot be accepted. This policy may set standards for the condition of material as well as the nature and source (eg: badly deteriorated or soiled material or photographs that are not identified may be excluded, or material from certain sources may be considered not acceptable.)

Most Archives will also contain material from more than one organisation or person, and will even include material that is not strictly related to any particular organisation. It will also likely contain material that would be more appropriate in a library or museum. However, this document relates as much as possible to the narrower sense of 'Archives' as the permanent records of a particular organisation.

The Nature of Records Created

The particular records you create and retain are determined by the purposes listed above. Some records only need to be kept temporarily, others for a reasonable length of time, and yet more, in perpetuity.

See below ('What records to keep') for some detailed suggestions of the types of material that would be retained for a church Archives and for a denominational Archives.

The archival process should be controlled by a well thought out set of policies and procedures (including accession, retention and disposal, management and access) with provision of adequate finances, personnel and facilities to carry out the tasks effectively.

Records can be traditional *paper* records (such as Minute and financial books, printed publications, photographs, recordings, etc) and also *digital* records (including both those originally created digital ('born-digital'), and also digital versions of existing paper documents produced by scanning or photographing them.)

Paper records are, by their very nature, only able to be located in one place at a time. So while they are still needed for reasonably regular reference, they should be retained as current records within the organisation's administration. Then when they are no longer needed for current use, they should be transferred to archival management and storage. Policies and procedures are needed for accessing current records and for their transfer to an archival location.

On the other hand, digital records can be in more than one place at the same time! So they can placed in an archival location immediately upon creation as well as being available for current use. For this reason, they will need a different set of policies regarding access, and they will need procedures for their long term retention.

Processing Traditional and Digital records - a comparison

In general terms, the aims and procedures for archiving of traditional paper records and of digital records are the same. That is, records created by an organisation need to be preserved, managed and made accessible, according to the policies in force, whether they are paper or digital. But because of the particular nature of digital records (e.g., they are invisible, can be easily multiplied, shared and modified or destroyed, etc), particular kinds of procedure and policies are needed, and of course the mechanism for managing and storing them is different.

Unless your organisation has a good IT system and is able to maintain that system in perpetuity, it is better not to rely wholly on digital records for archival purpose, but to produce traditional hard copies as well. The digital records that are produced in the normal course of operation can, of course, be used to advantage for regular reference, convenient searching and retrieval, and other appropriate usages. However, it is most important to realise that once the transition has been made to a fully digital environment, the storage and management of these records needs to be maintained for ever.

If your organisation cannot be 100% sure it can do this, do not commit to the process in the first place.

Separating early (paper) records and recent (digital) records

Generally, older records will be traditional paper, while recent ones will be born-digital. The dividing line may well be now 10 to 20 years – around say 2000. Because of this age difference, and because the relevant archival processes are physically different, it is probably worthwhile separating the material into two separate collections.

If the paper collection is older than, say, 10 to 20 years, it will probably not be referred to very often anymore, so it can be treated as a closed collection. (Some key basic documents may need to remain easily accessible or removed and retained at a convenient location. One way of doing this is to digitise the most important documents and include them in your organisation's regular digital archive.)

The newer digital data should similarly be stored in a secure and accessible environment where it can be managed appropriately. A professional 'electronic document/record management system' (ED/RMS) should be installed and documents managed by this system instead of being left in the normal office computer environment.

Note that it is essential for any IT system to have a fully implemented 'backup' and 'archiving' system to cope with equipment breakdown and other disasters. This IT system of 'back up' and 'archiving' while essential for good IT practice, is in itself **not** suited to the management of digital records in the sense of 'Archives' as discussed in this document. An ED/RMS is required for this purpose.

Digitising Records

Digitised records are those that have been created from existing original paper records by scanning or photography. Once digitised, the files are moved into the regular digital record system (see above) and are treated in the same way as other digital records.

The process of digitising the (often large volume) of paper records of an organisation is like to be time-consuming, complex and costly, so it is important to consider the reasons for embarking on the project. The benefits of digitising a collection of paper records include:

a) saving storage space and costs (on the assumption that the paper records are destroyed afterwards or removed to off-site storage);

b) providing a back-up copy of documents;

c) ease and efficiency of searching for information (especially where the documents can be made readable with OCR technology – but this is possible with hand-written records);

d) convenience and efficiency of access and retrieval of information (in digital form);

e) ease of sharing and publication of documents (via PDFs and other file formats).

These advantages must be weighed against the time and costs involved in the digitising process.

For the process of digitisation itself – see our *Guide to Digitisation* available at http://dparker.net.au/dig-guide-c.pdf.

Digitised records are created by scanning or photographing paper originals, using a scanner or camera. This process can be carried out in two possible ways – first by outsourcing to a commercial company specialising in such work, or second, by doing it in-house (which will mean buying equipment and assigning staff time for training and the actual work. To achieve good results, home level equipment would not be fully adequate.

The files produced should be of high resolution (usually 300 dots per inch) and saved as PDF/A (the archives variant of the familiar PDF format) or in the case of photographs, both TIF (for the mint copy which can be placed in a reserve area of the storage) and JPG (for working copies.) The digital copy should be in colour if colour is a significant part of the original, and/or if legibility is likely to be an issue. It should be as close as possible to an exact representation of the original, especially where legal and other vital documents are involved. The files should be clearly identified by name, content and date, and the collection should be arranged in a structure that mirrors that of their paper originals.

A policy decision needs to be made about the disposal of the original paper documents after scanning – either to place them in permanent storage in case they are needed again, or to destroy them completely (to actualise on the savings of space and management)

Policies on accession, access and management

Each organisation needs to develop a set of written policies and procedures suitable to its own operations covering the creation, collection and management of its records and access to them. These policies should be approved at the highest administrative level and be reviewed regularly. They should be communicated to all personnel and especially to new staff, to ensure consistency and continuity. There should be adequate training for all personnel involved in their implementation. There should also be adequate funding to ensure that the policies can be implemented effectively.

Policies should cover the following (and other matters):

> *What records are to be created; who is responsible for creation and care of records; the retention and disposal policies of various types of documents; privacy of documents; access to the documents; physical aspects of paper documents and IT aspects of digital documents; access by end users.*

Accessioning new material

When new material is being acquired by the Archives, it needs to assessed first of all against the collection policy of the Archives – does it fit within the Archives or should it not be accepted?

There are 3 broad types of sources for new material: regular or occasional transfers from the organisation creating the records; special gifts from third parties; miscellaneous acquisitions.

Regular or occasional transfers should be treated under the established policies and procedures of the organisation.

For special gifts from third parties, when material is considered acceptable, there should be a clear understanding on the part of both the Archivist and the donor, about the ownership, future use, and access to and disposal of the material. If the donation is substantial (in volume) or specially significant, there should be written documentation of the terms and conditions of the transfer. Material may also be accepted on a 'use or dispose' basis, ie, if the Archives considers the material acceptable, it is accessioned in the normal way, but if not, it is disposed of at the convenience of the Archives. Another possibility is 'use or return'.

Then, there needs to be an understanding about the ownership of material transferred to Archives from donors. Is it the property of the Archives, or does it remain the property of the donor with the Archives merely caring for it; if the latter, under what conditions? If the former, it is treated in the same way as any other material in the Archives.

Again, when material is added to the Archives, can it be used in the same way as other material or are there any restrictions or special conditions (eg regarding publishing or display or copying and digitisation).

Finally, how can it be disposed of in the future – at the discretion of the Archives or are there limitations?

Physical storage requirements

Physical records of an organisation should be stored in appropriate secure, fire-proof facilities controlled by the organisation. It is not appropriate for a church records to be stored at the private residence (eg, of one of the officers). If the organisation cannot provide storage of this kind in its own building, consideration should be given to commercial solutions.

For paper records, the main physical dangers are dust, heat and fire, damp (even water/flood) and humidity, light, mould, insects and vermin, mechanical damage or vandalism, and pollution (especially the acid content of paper, containers and environment). So store material in secure, cool, dry, airy, fire-proof conditions on steel shelving, using strong lidded boxes and strong folders; wooden shelves should only be used if fully treated (to avoid damage from moisture and chemicals). Ideally, acid-free paper, interleaving and containers should be used; if paper is already deteriorating, have it scanned, photocopied or micro-filmed before it is

too late. The ideal environment is one that is stable without any undue fluctuations, set at approx. 20 degrees Centigrade and 55% relative humidity .

Avoid mechanical damage caused by such over-tight or over-loose packing, crushing of papers due to weight of material stored above, pressure from heavy (minute or financial) books, and tearing etc caused by routine (or worse, rough), handling etc. Remove pins, clips and staples that may rust, "scotch" tape and rubber bands that may deteriorate and stain/damage the paper. Unfold all papers, remove them from mechanical binders and place material in suitable identified envelopes or folders instead.

Data and IT including digitisation

Electronic records are similarly open to many problems which are likely to destroy them and their value. These include lack of tagging; failure to select, save and store records in an systematic manner or to use standard file formats; deterioration of media; obsolescence of hardware and software; failure to migrate to current media and software etc.

It is important that a document be authentically what it claims to be, and that it has not been altered in any way since creation (integrity). For many documents, it also needs to be unchanged in its format (ie, that it looks the way it did when created), although for some purposes, it is only the text or content, (not the format) which is important.

It therefore requires sophisticated IT support when relying exclusively on digital archiving, and similarly when digitising existing paper documents.

Financial records

The minimal retention requirements of financial records are normally covered by legal conditions such as those of the tax office and the Australian Charities and Non-Profit Commission, and normal accounting practices.

For archival purposes, detailed day to day financial documents such as receipts, invoices, bank statements, ledgers, cash books etc are not usually required for long term retention. Similarly periodic reports are not required if their content is covered by an annual report or such like.

However, a few typical sample records of these kinds may be retained as part of an archival collection for historic purposes, especially when they cover events or organisations of some special importance, or are significantly old.

Organising records – cataloguing, accessioning

To be accessible, records, both paper and digital, must be well organised, carefully stored, dated and identified. It is also necessary to produce an overall guide to the contents of the Archives and how it may be accessed.

If it is not possible to produce a fully detailed listing of all the material in your Archives, it is important at least to carry out a full audit, and make a listing of the overall contents. This list will provide a general understanding the extent of the material, and provide a basis for more detailed work as time permits. In the process of developing this listing, the first appraisal and culling may take place, removing obviously unwanted material and also basic conservation (cleaning, straightening of documents, removal of pins, scotch tape, rubber bands etc). The result is a batch of material which is clean and whose content is known, thereby making it usable in a basic sense while it awaits final processing.

An example of such a listing might be the following:

> 20 Minute books (church, deacons and Sunday School); Annual reports (1930-1990 approx); 15 Financial books (many not clearly dated); 3 Roll books (1920-2000); 1 box photographs; bundle Church bulletins (1980-1995 approx); unsorted letters and other papers

An archives collection is not like a library which is arranged by placing all material on the same or similar subject matter together and using a classification system (eg Dewey Decimal, Library of Congress) to

describe it. Neither it is like an administrative office where the filing is usually determined by current activities.

Instead, because documents in an archive are the unique product of a particular organisation's activity, the key factors are *provenance* and *original order*. That is, who created these documents (and in what circumstances)? And, What is their chronological relationship to each other?

Eg, there might be a series of annual reports created by the general secretary, or a some correspondence over a period of years relating to a particular project or to a certain person. Even though these items may cover a variety of topics, they are not grouped with other material on those topics but they are identified by the creator (organisational unit or person), the type of item, and the date.

This is a fundamental principle of archival work which cannot be emphasised too much - respect the provenance (origin) and order (date of creation) of the material.

In practice, you can sort the material in descending order – creator, type, date – with whatever additional sub-divisions you need. Identify each item and record the description for it in your Archives Index/Catalogue (on which, see later)

Example:

Classification Scheme	Sample 1	Sample 2
Organisation or Person (or Record Group)	Baptist Union	Beechfield Baptist Church
Agency (sub-section of organisation)	Youth Department	Secretary
Series (type of items)	Department Minutes	Annual Reports
Item or File (description of item with dates)	Book 1, 1940-48	Annual Report 1975

> **Note:**
> The '**organisation**' or '**record group**' refers to the main top level organisation responsible for the records in your Archives – such as a Baptist Union or a particular church or a person who has originated the documents.
> The '**agency**' (where needed) refers to a sub-section of the Organisation- such as a department of the Baptist Union or the Sunday School or the Church Secretary in a local church.
> '**Series**' in Archival terms is understood as a group of files, items or documents with something in common, such as their relationship to a particular activity, project or subject, or their common function. Examples would be a set of Minute books or reports, or a set of papers relating to a particular project or ministry.
> '**File or Item**' refers to those documents making up the Series, where a **File** may be a folder of correspondence, or a personnel file, and an **Item** may be a Book of minutes or a Directory.

If your Archives contains material from more than one organisation, or it is a complex organisation with several sub-sections, the top two levels (as shown above) will be necessary, but if you have material from only one organisation, you may not need them.

You may need to sub-divide Series and/or Item to cope with different types and dates of material (see below under Catalogue), but be careful to maintain the hierarchy, working down from the most general to the most specific.

Catalogue or Index

To maintain control over the Archives and to provide access to its contents, it is necessary to use an up to date catalogue or index. This can be a spreadsheet (such as Excel which is popular, relatively easy to use and flexible) or a database (such as Access) or dedicated archival software (although many commercial products are not geared for a church settings); a simple word processing document may suffice for a static closed collection, but it would not be flexible enough for a dynamic situation; it would also form the basis for a Finding Aid.

The catalogue can be maintained on a computer and may also be printed out for convenience.

Because the catalogue is the key to the location and contents of your Archives, be sure to maintain adequate and secure back-ups on a regular basis.

Suggested columns or fields@ are as follows

> Accession number; Date of Accession; Box Number (for sequential box number scheme B below), or Box location if using scheme A below); Organisation/Person; #Agency; #Series; #Item/File; Dates covered; *Author; *Title; *Publisher; *Date; Comments.

Notes:

@ These fields correspond with the above classification scheme, but with extra fields, meaning that the catalogue can double as an Accession Register, unless you want to maintain a separate Register.

add extra fields if you have sub-divided these, as above

* These fields are for books if you have these in your collection. Some material, other than books, may also require an 'author' field.

An Example:

- Accession number – 0035;
- Date of Accession – 04/11/2013;
- Box Number (for sequential box number scheme B below) – 056;
    - or Box location if using scheme A below – Bay 6, Shelf 4, Position b);
- Organisation/Person – Baptist Union;
- Agency – Youth Department;
- Series - Department Minutes
- Item/File – Minute Book No 1
- Dates covered – 3 Mar 1948 – 31Oct 1948,
- *Author, *Title, *Publisher, *Date (*an example: Higlett, W, Early Australian Baptist History, BUA, 1926*)
- Comments – From batch of material obtained from Rev Bill Smith a former Department Member; deteriorated condition

Physical Arrangement and Storage

Mechanical

For a small collection of records which are not going to be accessed very often, typical of a local church or other organisation, a combination of metal filing cabinets and metal stationery cabinets will probably be most effective. They are relatively economical, readily available and are lockable (although the keys are easy to duplicate so they not fully secure). If kept closed, they provide some measure of protection against dust and excess light. Be sure to place them in a location in your office which is cool and secure.

For larger collections, stand-alone metal shelving or even a compactus is ideal. However, as these shelves are not lockable, they will need to be installed in a dedicated room or at least be located in a area which can be supervised and secure.

Adjust the spacing of the shelves in the stationery cabinet to suit the size of your material and provide easy access without having to move material aside to access other items. This also provides some air flow/ventilation to counter-act the possibility of mould.

Use hanging files in the filing cabinet for ordinary office files. Ideally, bound volumes (such as Minutes books etc) should be stored vertically on a shelf (like books in a library), or they can be placed flat (but not in big stacks which will create too much pressure on the lower ones); alternatively, place them vertically in the filing cabinet draws with spines up (labelling makes them easy to manage). Make sure they are adequately supported laterally (use spacers if there is any danger they will lean at an angle.) Ensure that material is not squeezed tightly. Larger or bulky items can occupy an entire drawer. Provide suitable labelling to identify items easily.

Label the material in accordance with the indexing scheme above. Be careful to avoid anything destructive (eg, use pencil instead of felt pen; do not use scotch tape to stick notes to items).

Loose papers such as correspondence or reports should be placed in order in envelopes or manila folders, but do not punch holes and place in lever arch binders or similar.

Place material in medium sized archive boxes (39x26x17 cm approx)– preferably acid free. Label the box with its contents. Larger boxes (39x26x33 cm approx.) or other appropriate storage may be used for oversized and awkward items.

Boxes on shelves: There are two options for arranging boxes on shelving.

Scheme A: for a closed static collection in which you do not expect to add any more material. Place the boxes on shelves with box containing related items together, and note the location on your catalogue. Thus, all the material from Beechfield Baptist Church would go together, with Church Minute books in one box, reports, rolls and visitors books in another, according to size. The advantage of this system is that there is no wasted space, and the location of material is usually quite clear. But the disadvantage iis that if more material needs to be added, much work will be needed to shift boxes to make room, unless initially space is left between boxes which is likely to be a waste.

Scheme B: for a dynamic collection in which you expect to add more material continuously – use the sequential box numbering scheme. Place a number on each box commencing from 0001. When you need to add new material, simply place the new box next to the last one and mark it with the next number in sequence. Note the box number in your catalogue against the items contained in it. The advantage of this scheme is that there is never any wasted space, and no need to shift boxes around. But the catalogue is the all-important key to the location of material, and needs to be kept up to date and perfectly safe.

Photographs and newspaper cuttings

Photographs can form a valuable part of the historical record of an organisation, but they need appropriate management.

Older photographs may vary widely in format (from large framed portraits to very small 'box brownie' snaps), which makes them awkward to manage. The condition of photographs may vary from excellent to damaged, faded or broken. Many may not be (properly) identified. A policy needs to be established regarding the retention of those less than ideal condition. For convenience, unidentified photographs may be retained in a separate sub-collection in the hope of later identification.

Newer photographs (see below for digital images) are more likely to be identified. They are also likely to be in colour, but colour photos are often deteriorate after a few years, so print all important photos in black and white, and, if possible, keep the negatives with the prints.

Physically photographs should be labelled with identification (date, place, occasion, participants etc) placed in non-toxic sleeves, folders or pouches, and arranged by topic and date, where known; do not use 'magic' photo albums which damage the photographs. Storage can be in regular archive boxes, filing or stationery cabinets or special purpose space. If the collection contains photographs which vary greatly in dimensions, group them according to size. Work out a feasible location identification system

Cataloguing: Photographs can be included in the main Archives catalogue but if there are many, it is best to have a separate index. Fields are needed for the main points of identification (see above) and also for location.

Digital images should be included in the archiving protocols as for other digital records. Full identification and dating is important, as is grouping into appropriate categories. A policy for culling of excess copies and examples is important.

Newspaper cuttings can be grouped according to subject matter, date, newspaper and housed in sleeves, folders or pasted into scrap books.

Movie films and audio-visual material can be treated similarly to photographs but in separate storage areas and with their own catalogue.

'Museum' items

Most Archives will also accumulate non-documentary material such as banners, plaques, advertising material, furniture. A policy needs to be established to cover this type of material. For example, it may be decided not to accept any or to accept such items selectively, or to place any such items in a separate section of the facility.

Items of this nature should be identified and described as fully as possible with appropriate labelling and entries in a custom catalogue or index to match.

Using Records - publicity clients publishing catalogues/guide sheets

Material collected in an Archives should be available for access by bona fide end users under relevant conditions. Appropriate policies should be developed and made available on request to potential users.

Some categories of users include: officers and members of the organisation (current and past) including those who created the material; students (primary, secondary, tertiary); family historians; journalists; researchers; members of the public; members of other historical societies and kindred organisations.

Set up a list of relevant conditions for access to the Archives. It is important to indicate if access to any material is limited (eg, for confidentiality, or fragility), and under what conditions researchers may use and publish information obtained from the Archives.

It is recommended that an **Application to Use the Archives Form** be available to those seeking access to the Archives (giving details of the researcher, the reason for the research and intended use) and/or a **Researcher Agreement** (confirming the researcher agrees to any conditions of use, including privacy and copyright/publication clearance). In the case of academic research, a clearance be obtained under the code of ethics of the institution concerned.

To assist users, Guides or Searching Aids (print and on-line) should be prepared indicating the main contents of the Archives, conditions for use and points of contact.

Material in Archives is not on open access, as in a public library. All material should be handled by the Archivist and made available to researchers in controlled conditions to ensure it is managed properly and for reasons of confidentiality.

Privacy of Records and Users

Privacy is an important issue for Archives. Each organisation should set up its own policies regarding access, while also working within the framework of any public regulations that may be applicable, such as the Australian Privacy Principles (2014).

Personal details of users of the Archives also need to be safeguarded, according to the general conditions covering such information as implemented by organisation owning the Archives.

Some documents may have information about people other than that primary subject of research, and as such need to be kept confidential. Some of the information in Archives' documents may be sensitive because it is of recent origin (eg Minutes of key decision making bodies).

Staff of the Archives need to maintain confidentiality of documents and information. They should be required to indicate their acceptance of confidentiality conditions before taking up duties.

A distinction should be drawn between users requesting their own or family information, and researchers seeking information about unrelated people. Information that may be sensitive for legal reasons also needs to be safeguarded.

Some samples of privacy and restriction of access to documents:

Top level administrative documents (Board, Executive) may be on restricted access for a specified length of time; personal information about staff or church officials may be restricted for a longer period; access to information about births, deaths and marriages should be coordinated with conditions imposed by state authorities.

What records to keep permanently

Deciding which records (paper or digital) to keep permanently is dependent on the historical, legal and administrative context in which they were created and used. One way to answer this question is to think backwards from some point in the future and ask: what information (and documents) will be needed to deal with issues arising at that time? In general terms, what would be required to answer a question about the history of the church, some administrative decision, or a legal matter (relating to property or a court case)? While any document produced by an organisation could be helpful in answering these types of questions, in practice, it is the important documents that would be required, and so these are the ones that should be retained.

For a local church, the key documents are Minute Books and other documents recording the decisions of the leadership and membership of the church and its key organisations, annual reports (including financial matters), membership rolls, selected publicity materials especially about important events, building and property matters, key correspondence (including emails), important legal and other documents (including constitutions, by-laws, property papers etc), reports and other documents on key projects and building developments, Registers (marriage, infant dedication, marriage, death/burial), staff appointments and other key HR papers.

Photographs and digital images, and audio-visual recordings of key people, property and events (must be identified as to date, place, event, people involved).

Day to day items such as financial material (dockets, invoices, statements) do not need to be kept any longer than required under normal financial administrative rules. Similarly operational documents related to ancillary organisations such as an op-shop or kindy do not need to be kept permanently.

At the denominational level, the same general principles apply as above, meaning that key Minutes, reports, legal documents etc. should all be retained permanently. In addition, major publications such as newspapers, directories and reports should all be kept (some of these will also be subject to Legal Deposit requirements). Others to be included minutes and reports of the Assembly, pastoral and church files, constitutions and by-laws, papers related to key projects and ministries, land and property documents, foundational documents (constitutions, by-laws, Acts of Parliament, etc) Another important group are documents relating to the appointment and dismissal of key staff.

For other information

Managing Church Records – a Guide   http://www.dparker.net.au/d-MangChrchArc.pdf
Guide to Digital Archiving   http://www.dparker.net.au/d-dig-archiving.pdf
Digitising Church Records   http://www.dparker.net.au/dig-guide-c.pdf
Archiving Emails   http://www.dparker.net.au/d-emails.pdf