

Eiríkur Guðnason: Central bank collections in a small society

Speech by Mr Eiríkur Guðnason, Governor of the Central Bank of Iceland, at the European Association for Banking History (EABH), Lisbon, 15 December 2004.

* * *

I would like to begin by pointing out that my talk will deal with central bank collections not only in a small society, but also in a young bank. The Central Bank of Iceland is only 43 years old. Even so, its collection activities have gained recognition in Iceland, however they might stand up to an international comparison.

The Central Bank of Iceland maintains three collections: its archives, library and numismatic museum. They are partly housed in the Bank's headquarters in the centre of Reykjavík, and partly in separate premises in another area of the city, which is almost entirely devoted to the collections. In the Bank's organisation chart the three collections have until recently belonged to a single department under joint management, but have now been restructured as I shall mention later.

The history of banking in Iceland dates back less than 120 years. Iceland's first commercial bank, the state-owned Landsbanki Íslands (or the National Bank of Iceland), was established in 1886 while the country was still under Danish rule, although by that time it had just gained fiscal autonomy. In the second half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century Iceland achieved full sovereignty and independence in successive stages, culminating in the establishment of the Republic 60 years ago, in 1944. The process towards independence was more peaceful and civilised in Iceland than has generally been the case elsewhere. When the Republic was declared, Iceland's population was only 130 thousand, while today it has grown to almost 300 thousand – although that could still be the size of one suburb in many other countries!

Over this period, the institutional infrastructure of a modern society was gradually built up in Iceland. Domestic central banking activities began in the 1920s and were assigned to Landsbanki, which was also the largest commercial bank at that time. In 1961 the Central Bank was established as a separate institution.

Archives

When this milestone was reached, the Central Bank was assigned the role of storing the archives held by its predecessor. This means that the Central Bank's archives in effect cover a period three times longer than the Bank's own history. Reflecting this fact, the Bank's other collections have always had a somewhat wider scope than meeting its own immediate needs.

The Central Bank's archives preserve more than the 120-year history of banking in Iceland, because they also include records from various public sector funds that have been under the Bank's administration or leadership over the years – together with documentation from the Bank Inspectorate, which operated as a unit within the Central Bank until 1998.

In addition, the archives contain the personalia of several leading figures from the history of Icelandic banking. Some of this material is owned by other institutions but the Bank has undertaken to preserve it in suitable form, catalogue it and make it available to academic researchers. This material includes some of the documents that are most frequently used by visitors.

The Bank's paper document archive currently occupies 2,300 metres of shelf space. Like everywhere else, its growth is slowing down with the increasing prominence of electronic documents. Sometimes it is difficult to say who plays the greater role in record management these days – the archivists or the computer technicians.

One emphasis in the Bank's archiving is to be able to trace every matter from the moment it arises, and examine and keep track of it until it has been fully dealt with and the documents concerning it are stored for preservation. This is mandatory under Icelandic law. To fulfil this legal requirement, the Bank uses an electronic record management system and centralised archiving. In other words, all mail is opened and recorded in the system at the archive unit, which also sets rules about how employees should record documents created within the Bank.

The archives have four roles: to promote innovation, keep up to date with new techniques and formulate rules for document storage; to supervise the use of the Bank's record management system; to provide instruction with training courses and user manuals; and to handle preservation of the Bank's paper documents.

The archives' remit extends beyond the preservation of documents and access to them. The unit also cultivates the form and appearance of the Bank's own documents, to ensure a respectable, harmonised and pleasant look for them. On one level, human contact depends upon maintaining a consistent character – in our daily business, our appearance or the form of what we produce, including documents. So the appearance of its documents is in the Bank's direct interest. The archives' role in designing a smooth appearance for documents, harmonised fonts and font sizes, column width and other factors that affect their readability, should not be underestimated. Some of the archives' tasks have been to produce a style manual, design templates and promote their use.

Although the most important aspects of an institution's history will always be embodied in physical documents, there is an increasing awareness that history cannot be recorded in texts and figures alone. Photography has long been such a prominent historical resource that it must be addressed alongside text documents. Accordingly, the archives' mission of collecting and preserving visual documentation has recently been given a sharper focus. A catalogue system has been set up for storing photographic images in digital format. The same applies to video and audio recordings concerning the history of the Bank. A project is also being discussed and prepared for taping documentary interviews with selected employees of the Bank – mostly older and retired staff – about their experience.

The Central Bank's archiving activities are overseen by the National Archives. In the National Archives' view the documents at the Central Bank are well preserved and it does not seek to take them into its own safekeeping.

It is impossible to set absolute rules about the Central Bank archives' user services. Among other things, they are shaped by the provisions of the current Information Act and the confidentiality required of an institution of this kind. It also tends to be difficult to assess requests by users and how likely they are to honour the conditions imposed about the use and handling of sensitive source material. We have not yet insisted on reading a work based on our archive material before it is published – as is the case in some places.

Throughout the Central Bank's forty-year history, the archives have been linked with library services in the organisation chart. The rationale was that for most of this time, paper documents were involved in both cases. Library cataloguing is in many ways simpler and more accessible than archive registration, if the formal features of the material allow this to be done (author, title, title page). As a result, various material has tended to be catalogued in the library that, somewhere else, would have been archived. The grounds for doing so have changed with the declining scope of paper documents and corresponding increase in electronic documents. The special administrative features of electronic record management are the main reason that the archives have now been separated from the Bank's other collections and incorporated into the Operations Department.

Library

The Central Bank Library is another storage place for resources. From an early stage it was assigned a joint purpose which probably makes it unusual in the central bank library world. One purpose is acquisitions connected with the Bank's day-to-day activities: printed books and journals, as well as electronic materials. Experts at the Bank are consulted about which publications are selected. Its second purpose is as a preservation library for books on the economy, business, social issues, history and natural resources of Iceland. The Central Bank Library now has an extensive and valuable collection of books on these topics. The term "preservation library" means that measures are taken to ensure that the collection is permanently preserved for future generations. This is done both by storing the material in suitable bindings, et cetera, and sparing it from the wear and tear that could threaten its preservation.

Some of you might be wondering whether this should not be a task for the National Library, one of whose main roles is to make exhaustive collections on national subjects and ensure their preservation. This is a large and complex task, and its complete success can never be certain. To fulfil it, national libraries rely primarily on the legal deposit laws that have been passed in most countries to facilitate the complete collection of material from domestic printing works. Legislation of this kind was relatively

easy to implement while the reproduction of material from books was confined to the printing industry and public photocopying services. In recent decades we have seen radical changes in the production of research literature as numerous institutions have been equipped with various types of printing facilities. A considerable part of this product goes through the closed channels of interchange gifts between research people and related institutions. This makes a national library's goals for collection very hard to achieve. It is more difficult now to haul in a national collection. Therefore, we have found that institutional libraries will become increasingly important for the completion of the national collection. The Central Bank Library belongs to this group. Obviously, specialist libraries that have been successful in their fields can quite often supplement the National Library. This refers to institutions that deal with social and economic issues, domestic resources and the cultural heritage. All these institutions either produce or receive large amounts of specialist material which constitutes part of the national collection but to varying degrees slips through the mesh of legal deposit.

This is the philosophy behind the second role which has been given to the Central Bank Library – along with the fact that the Bank has managed to keep it fairly well appointed. Inspired by this philosophy, a decade ago the Central Bank made an agreement with the National Library under which its preservation section is regarded as part of the national collection. The National Library is granted special access to this collection and can regard it as a reserve.

The agreement with the National Library is an original effort to ensure the preservation of documentary resources. Just how seriously the Central Bank Library takes this task is shown by the fact that for many years it has employed a bookbinder who handles various aspects of preserving its collection. Such a facility at an institutional library has been brought to the public's attention and often had positive consequences. Certainly the availability of this service means that more people who need to rid themselves of good library material want to have it preserved at the Central Bank. In this way the library has acquired an assortment of material, even whole subjects.

One of the largest and most noteworthy collections at the Central Bank Library consists of Icelandic newspapers and political papers. Besides its size, it is also better preserved than any other collection of such material in Iceland – newspapers suffer some of the worst wear and tear of all resources in open libraries.

Another noteworthy special collection is *Islandica extranea* – foreign works on Iceland. This is built around a private collection that the Bank acquired by several decades ago and has maintained.

The Central Bank Library has acquired an excellent collection of old maps, which is currently roughly as large as the National Library's own map collection. Maps from the Bank's collection have often been exhibited in public, sometimes as the main exhibit. The National Library has set up an impressive website devoted to Icelandic maps with information about their history and context and digital images of every old map in its collection. As part of their cooperation, at the request of the National Library the Bank's map collection has been included on the website to complement it (www.bok.hi.is/kort).

It is not the Central Bank's absolute intention to preserve all its special collections under its own auspices for the foreseeable future. Thus it has been decided to deposit certain materials in the National Library to form special collections there.

The Bank Library is first and foremost an institutional library and is therefore not prepared to serve the public in general, although all reasonable requests from external users are dealt with positively. It is made easier to use by being linked up with the National Library and a number of others with an electronic union catalogue. The catalogue is accessible worldwide over the Internet (www.gegnir.is) and is a good gateway to our holdings. Inclusion in the catalogue draws attention to the Central Bank Library and gives scholars easy access to resources not found elsewhere. The Central Bank Library now accounts for around 24 thousand entries in the union catalogue. Within our facilities we can offer both isolated study rooms and less private areas for our guests, mostly academic people. A number of important historical works have been written by authors who have been given research facilities at the library.

Access to the preservation section of the library is based on the principle that the material is not put at greater risk than would be considered acceptable at a national library. Two risks should be mentioned in particular: the valuable newspaper collection and demand for photocopying, for example from the collection of commemorative editions. Our sort of library must avoid offering ordinary guests cheaper photocopying services than more open libraries. Such a situation must not cause demand to be channelled towards the library's services. We have therefore set a rule that for any request for photocopying of more than six pages, the same fee is charged as at ordinary libraries.

By far the greatest expense item in library operations is subscriptions, which now account for four-fifths of its funding for acquisitions. A larger share of this funding is now allocated to electronic document access, both through contributions to shared subscriptions and independently. Such access is increasingly used by individual employees at their workstations, rather than being centralised.

Numismatic Museum

I have mainly dwelt here on archives and library collections. Archiving and library services for the Bank's day-to-day needs are the core operations of the Central Bank of Iceland's collections. Peripheral activities are the preservation library and special collections, and a third unit, which I shall now discuss briefly: the numismatic collection.

The Central Bank began cooperating with the National Museum of Iceland at an early stage to set up a numismatic collection focusing on the currency of Iceland and its main trading partner countries. Under this project, the National Museum has deposited all its numismatic material into a separate joint collection, which the Central Bank operates on behalf of both bodies and meets the costs for.

For almost twenty years, the numismatic collection has been open to the public in a 125 square-metre exhibition room presenting the history of Iceland's currency and other numismatic material. The exhibition has suffered from the narrow and specialised appeal of numismatics, and also from the fact that the Bank's collection premises are not ideally located for this purpose. For this reason, plans have been proposed for arranging a different type of exhibition which would highlight the mechanisms of the economy in a wider context, and even current economic and monetary issues. The exhibition of notes and coin would then form one part of a larger exhibition. It is aimed to mount the exhibition in the Central Bank's main premises.

For obvious reasons, limited attention has been paid to numismatics in Iceland. The collection unit has published a few works on numismatic topics, including a history of the Icelandic currency.

Just as the Bank's library has been included in an electronic union catalogue, the collection of notes and coin is now being incorporated into a similar catalogue of all museum resources in Iceland (www.sarpur.is). The National Museum has a similar leadership role to the National Library's role in the electronic union catalogue of books. It is even more natural for the Central Bank to participate in this project because the National Museum is the joint owner of the numismatic collection.

From all the above it is obvious that the Central Bank of Iceland's collection activities extend well beyond simply meeting the Bank's own practical needs. It takes into account the wider perspective of the collection community and the social role of such activities. Likewise, the Central Bank strives to work in close contact with main national collections, the National Archives, National Library and National Museum. Cultivating these relations is a fundamental part of the Bank's collection activities, because we consider this a particularly important task in a small society. We try to ensure that we do not compete with national collections, but can provide as much assistance as the framework of the Bank's activities allows. The Central Bank feels it can rightly claim that it has succeeded in safeguarding cultural resources that otherwise would most probably not be under public ownership.