



THE PORTMAN ESTATE

[From Private to Public](#)

Richard Bowden shares his work of raising the profile of the Howard de Walden and Portman Estates.

The Howard de Walden and the Portman Estate are privately owned estates, with histories dating back for centuries and deep roots in their communities. Each is run as a major business concern from an office in Marylebone, London. This article shows how these organisations, of necessity practical and hard-headed, have come to realise that their legacy from the past has in fact a special contribution to make to their role in the 21st century.

[The Howard de Walden Estate](#)

When I first began to work for the Howard de Walden Estate as an archives consultant, they had never employed an archivist before and I had always previously worked in the public sector. Therefore, there was a learning curve to negotiate on both sides. (Having worked for many years as the City of Westminster's archivist at Marylebone Library, by a curious twist of fate, I suddenly became archives consultant to both the major private estates in the area). Initially, they wanted me to list their collection of architectural drawings - over 13,000 of them! Working part time, this was a job that took 3 years to complete. Fortunately, I was also given a wide variety of historical enquiries to deal with and an interesting collection of older archives to list.

Gradually, one thing led to another. With a growing interest in history, the Estate agreed that my list of their archives could join the AIM25 archives gateway where it continues to attract a respectable number of hits every month. It generously sponsored an exhibition at the Soane Museum on the work of the Adam brothers, and started an ambitious free magazine for residents of the Estate, one of the main features of which is the history of the area. After putting up a section on the history of the Estate on the company's website, they were intrigued to find that these were among its most popular pages.

Meantime, I embarked on another major index, giving immediate access to details of the dates of alterations to every building on the Estate. As well as being useful to me in dealing with historical enquiries, this has proved of considerable benefit to the Estate in meeting leasehold reform claims. Its archives are in active use in every sense.

[The Portman Estate](#)

Pursuing a slightly different route, the Portman Estate took the decision to follow up in more detail a Historical Manuscripts Commission report of 1989 on its historical records. It quickly became apparent that, although reduced by wartime bomb damage, the Portman Estate's archives would require a considerable amount of sorting and cataloguing.

The Portman family originated in Somerset, and some of the records relate to its former West Country property as well as the London Estate. For example, they contain a group of early charters relating to Canonsleigh Abbey in Devon, almost the only surviving documentary record of it. It was an exciting moment for us all when we uncovered the two original 16th century deeds by which Sir William Portman acquired the Marylebone estate - no one knew that they were still in the collection.

The Estate at once took an enthusiastic interest in its history. When it became obvious that there were a number of difficult conservation issues to be faced, they had no hesitation in inviting a specialist paper conservator to deal with these. They also provided an excellent new strongroom, which doubles as an office when either of us is there, and opened up a small permanent exhibition area where some of its archives are on view to visitors. A display of some of the archives has also become a regular feature at the Estate's annual reception.

Now that most of the collection is listed it has become more accessible to the Estate's surveyors, and can be used much more easily for marketing purposes. Unfortunately, when the archive staff is limited and working on a part-time basis, things move slowly. For the moment, the Portman Estate has felt obliged to limit public access to the collection so that the job of listing it can be completed. The Estate's most recent request is for a history of the family and its estates, so public access will have to wait a little longer but, all being well, it will come about eventually.

Not long ago, both these estates were still very private, and there was virtually no public access to their records. However, they have been helped by the explosive growth of new technology: for example, digitisation is now a completely accepted practice at both estates, and one that has helped in a major way to reshape their views. Also, the new interest in history has brought about a transformation in their approach to the past. Happily, both estates have had the vision – and the funds – to make fuller use of their archival heritage.

[Richard Bowden](#)

The Howard de Walden and the Portman Estates

[This article was originally published in the October issue of ARC Magazine, the monthly newsletter of the Society of Archivists.](#)

[Copyright of the Society of Archivists 2008.](#)

[For more information www.archives.org.uk](http://www.archives.org.uk)