Welcome to the Spring 2018 edition of the Bulletin

This edition of the Bulletin reports on the latest news from the Archive and provides information about our current projects and activities.

I am happy to be back as the Bulletin Editor after a year off on maternity leave. I can see, from reading the 2017 editions of the Bulletin, that Joe Williams, Kirsty Pattrick and the rest of the MO team, were busy as ever!

In the article below, Kirsty Pattrick (Mass Observation Project Officer) reports on the 12th May diary project. We are collecting diaries again this year and everyone is welcome to take part. Details about how to contribute your diary can be found here: www.massobs.org.uk/write-for-us/12th-may. We look forward to receiving your diary.

Jessica Scantlebury
Mass Observation Bulletin Editor

Delving into Mass Observation
What the 12th May Day Diaries can tell us about health
By Kirsty Pattrick

The joy of the day diary is being catapulted into someone’s life for that brief moment. With a fascination of people, their lives and behaviours, this always feeds my sheer nosiness.

Delving into the 12th May day diaries is a treat. They come from people of all ages across the UK and leave me hanging, wanting more. All we know of these writers is their age and gender, some give further biographical information but for the purpose of this collection, that is our only request. I read of the mundane to the life changing and the utterly personal, feeling touched and richer from the experience. Issues of health and wellbeing arise in so much of Mass Observations collections. These diaries capture the minutiae; the small, the repetitive, the routine. Yet, what I see in a number of them are how daily events and actions are intertwined, led by, or are the result of peoples health and wellbeing.

‘Today was a typical day as far as the last three months is concerned but not for my ‘normal’ life. I was diagnosed with breast cancer for the second time in December 2016. This time it has spread to my neck. The Oncologist arranged for me to get a three-week course of Radiotherapy. Since then I have suffered greatly with fatigue and can quite easily sleep for 16-18 hours a day.’ Female, 49

In The Keep Reading Room I’m moved as I read of grief, loss and healing. Lost in the writing, unaware of the public space I sit within. The value of friendships, of family and loved ones shared. The reflectiveness from those who wrote last year and the changes their lives have seen. For some life can turn on its head far too fast.

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While there have been many books about the military side of the war, there has been no full-scale account of what it was like to be a civilian between September 1939 and August 1945 ... This book is an attempt to tell their story and to tell it largely through their own memories.

This is how Norman Longmate described How We Lived Then to potential contributors in 1967. The book was the first of a series covering different aspects of life on the Home Front. The books were not intended as academic tomes, rather truly popular histories written using testimony submitted by individuals who had lived through the war. Longmate hoped that this would let the civilian experience speak for itself.

Although he wrote at a time of growing interest in social history, Longmate's research method owed more to his work at the BBC than to historians like E.P. Thompson. His conclusions were based on recollections sent to him by members of the public. These were responses to a broadcast appeal on the Radio 4 magazine programme 'Home This Afternoon' and notices that he inserted in around 300 newspapers, newsletters, and magazines.

The Mass Observation Archive has recently acquired the 35 boxes of material that Longmate collected while writing these books. The collection includes testimony from, well over 1,000 respondents, of whom around three quarters were women.

I was given early access to some of the material as part of a project on the history of wartime recycling. My broad sweep through the collection has cemented my impression that they contain a unique archive of social and cultural history.

The letters themselves provide a window into the past. Most arrived handwritten on a variety of forms of paper (from fancy writing sets to scraps ripped from exercise books). There was a similar diversity of styles. Some responded using Longmate's instructions as a framework, while others were much more personal; some of the submissions were very short, others ran to multiple pages; some were written chronologically, others were thematic; and many were appended with press-cuttings, extracts from diaries, photographs, pamphlets, old ration books, recipes, and doodles.

The materiality of the collection distinguishes it from later attempts to collect wartime memories, such as the digital BBC People's War project that ran between 2003 and 2006. Indeed, one cannot help but be struck instead by the parallel with Mass Observation, which itself sought to build up an archive of everyday experience during the Second World War. It was fascinating to discover that Longmate actually wrote to Mass Observation Ltd in March 1968 to enquire about the organisation's wartime publications, but turned down an offer to consult its treasure trove of raw material.

What, then, is the collection's historical value? Although I used it to scan for information on a particular subject, the real value of the material lies in the collection as a whole. The recollections provide an insight into both the everyday life of Second World War and the way that its history was constructed. It is a study in memory and recall. Combining humour, tragedy, and mundane grumbles, the letters show how the idea of 'a people's war' was translated from wartime propaganda into post-war memory. It is a very apt addition to the Mass Observation Archive.

Henry Irving is a senior lecturer in public history at Leeds Beckett University. The Norman Longmate collection will be open for research in summer 2018.
Delving into Mass Observation continued...

At the Macmillan Centre ‘we all benefit from the companionship – and the delicious cakes and refreshments.’ Female, 74

The 12th May 2017 was a Friday and a wet day for many. Getting into the garden, was seen not only as a hobby for some but a form of therapy for others; for health, for healing and for the serendipitous fun of seeing what food growing skills they can master. Something I definitely identified with, reflecting on my sweetcorn harvest and cauliflower failure.

‘Life became unbearable due to his alcohol abuse and entanglement with someone else. My garden is my slave and I, it’s slave – a willing one.’ F, 70

I saw similarities in routines; our use of media, commutes to school, work, exercise classes and duties of care, as well as food shopping, diet and financial worries. Yet within this, ran a thread of how our daily lives impact our health and how our health has an impact on our daily life; from those in bed with colds and coughs, to injuries and then those managing illness, for some life-limiting and life-threatening.

My friend ‘has dementia and over the past 4/5 years it has resulted in a personality change, sad. She forgets what she has ordered by the time it arrives, and actually thought she had already had lunch. He is very patient and calm, and lets some of her wilder statements pass.’ Female, 87

I read of Cancer, the NHS, carers and the managing of medication along with the exploration of alternative therapies; the hope, the fears and the lifelines given.

‘My husband gave up work 16 years ago because of M.E. so he holds everything together at home and keeps the ship sailing while I go to work.’ Female, 55

Conversations with family, friends, groups or the local shop owner showed in scale of from everyday actions; providing pleasure and happiness to others where it led to feelings of a burden, a frustration or an upset. For some, these events provided a beacon of support and the boost of mood.

My friend ‘wanted to introduce me to another friend whose child is self-harming and has recently made a suicide attempt. My older child did the same 5 years ago, so we chatted about that and what had helped in my child’s situation. It was all quite rany and sweary and much more fun that its sounds as we were all pretty honest about some quite difficult subjects and it felt quite cathartic.’ Female, 45

‘I sit on a table with three ladies who always make me laugh. I needed that today because my overall mood today was down. I woke up missing my children and my mum and I know I will go to bed feeling the same.’ Female, 55 Sutton Park Prison

The diaries provide multiple windows of observation on the lives of individuals, families, communities and groups on the same date across Britain. They can give a lens into how people’s health and wellbeing, their feelings and emotions can guide their day and their actions and the resulting impact of this. Ways of managing, overcoming and avoiding health issues explored and explained; from medication and meditation to exercise and regular companionship.

The parallel lives on this one date are compelling. We share a lot of love for porridge, for morning exercise, tea in bed and for hiding back under the duvet. We are also habitual in grabbing for our devises before we rise, checking the news, e-mails and Facebook. It was the end of the week for a lot of our writers and pizza was on the table in quite a few households. Concerns and worries were heavily linked to politics, to the next general Election and to Trumps Presidency. Towards the end of the day there were also thoughts and reflections upon the NHS cyber attack.

One thread that ultimately runs through is the action of recording, of writing, sharing and reflecting. This process itself; cathartic, healing, purposeful and productive for many.

As closing time hits the Reading Room, I spend time reflecting on the diverse lives I’ve shared today and as ever am in awe of the time our writers dedicate to Mass Observation.

This year the Archive is working in partnership with Action for M.E to record the experiences of people living with the chronic neurological condition myalgic encephalomyelitis (M.E). Check www.massobs.org.uk for more information.
Beyond Boxes
An update from Anthony McCoubrey
Beyond Boxes Project Coordinator

In previous editions of the Bulletin, we have been keeping you up to date about the Beyond Boxes project. Here is our latest news:

Since the project began in 2016, the Beyond Boxes team has delivered over 50 workshops within the local community promoting MO and the use of archives. We have also been busy collecting material to add to the Archive. Many of you have helped us with this, by responding to the Homelessness (2016) and Prison (2017) Directives. Thank you to everyone who sent in their responses. Beyond Boxes have also commissioned part two of the current Directive, on the topic of disability. We look forward to receiving your responses.

Since the last edition of the Bulletin, the Beyond Boxes team have continued to work with our project partners; The Brighton Housing Trust, Blind Veterans UK and HMP Lewes. At the beginning of March, we held an exhibition at Lewes Prison library. The exhibition included personal writings by the prisoners, such as diaries, letters and creative writing.

Looking ahead, Beyond Boxes have a number of outreach and engagement activities taking place. This will include delivering May 12th workshops with each of our project partners. We will also be holding an exhibition at the Keep in early May to showcase the project and exhibit material that has now been added to the Archive. It will be a busy few months, but we will be sure to keep you updated.

Friends of The Archive
The Archive depends on donations for many of its special activities. Since 1991, the Friends of the Archive scheme has provided essential financial support for the Archive's activities. Without the support of the Friends scheme, the Archive would struggle to collect new material from ‘ordinary’ people documenting everyday life in Britain. To become a friend visit: www.massobs.org.uk/support/friends

New Book: The Changing Nature of Happiness
An In-Depth Study of a Town in North West England 1938–2016

This book build on the work of Mass Observation Worktown study from 1938 to show how perceptions of happiness have changed over the years for the people of Bolton, UK, and reveal major difference between its definition then and now.