

The Private Affairs of Artists: Researching Private Archives

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When an artist's papers remain in private hands, how do you go about accessing them? What state will they be in once you have gained access? This paper explores the importance of relationship building and networking for researchers wishing to access private archives for the first time. Such collections present their own challenges in comparison to publicly held archives, such as the uncatalogued and unlisted nature of private correspondence, but exploring them can be beneficial to both researcher and owner. Private collections of papers often hold the key to filling in the gaps that exist in public archives, particularly for correspondence. The examples used in this paper include the complex relationship between the individuals involved in the post-war reconstruction of Coventry Cathedral, and the family papers of Sax Shaw, a celebrated tapestry and stained glass artist in Edinburgh.

Privately held archives are unpredictable: they are often uncatalogued and difficult to discover, and therefore underused. You are entering into the unknown without the luxury of a detailed catalogue or handlist from which to find the specific information you seek. They can be hard to find as suggested by their name: private. They are also one of the richest sources for researchers. This article will address the pitfalls and challenges involved in accessing private collections and will assist readers in developing some strategies to overcome such challenges. It will focus on two strands, the first of which explores the value of networking and relationship building. The second deals with private archives' ability to fill the gaps present in publicly accessible archive collections. These two strands are discussed in the context of a recent PhD on Dovecot Studios, providing a useful case study regarding the use of private archives.

Dovecot Studios (formerly known as the Edinburgh Tapestry Company from 1946 to 2001, and often referred to as Dovecot since 2001) was established in 1912 by the 4th Marquess of Bute. During a long and eventful history the tapestry studio has had a number of different owners, resulting in the dispersal of archives into different private collections. The company's name has also changed, causing further difficulties with regards to archival research. Dovecot Studios' main archive, the Edinburgh Tapestry Company (ETC) archive, is located at the Bute Archive at Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute. The studio's archive includes correspondence, marketing material, accounts, meeting minutes and receipts, in addition to tapestry designs and preliminary drawings. It forms a small part of an extensive private collection which has limited access for the public. The ETC archive at Mount Stuart covers Dovecot's history from 1912 to 2001 but is inconsistent in its coverage of each decade during that

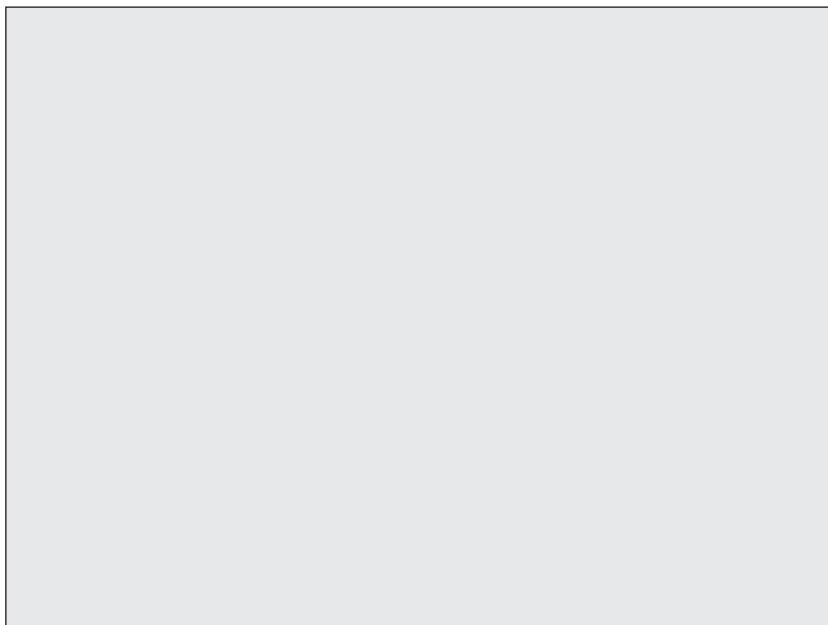


Plate 1 Selection of Sax Shaw archive in the Shaw family home. Photograph by Francesca Baseby.

period. For example, there is a large volume of business archives relating to the years 1945 to 1952, when the studio was run by a board of Directors from the Bute family: the 4th Marquess's brother Lord Colum Crichton-Stuart (1886–1957), the Marquess' children Lord Robert Crichton-Stuart (1909–76), Lord David Stuart (1911–70) and Lady Jean Bertie (1908–95), and his son-in-law the Hon. James Bertie (1901–66). However, there are limited archival sources for the remainder of the 1950s.

The absence of papers relating to 1953–59 in the ETC archive was disappointing as I was particularly interested in the 1954–58 period when Sax Shaw (1916–2000) was Artistic Director for the company. Fortunately Shaw's family held a large collection of uncatalogued archive material relating to his career. Approaching a family member in order to gain access to private archives requires a tactful and sensitive approach. Such collections often remain in the family's home and accessing them means an invitation into their private space. I had previously met Kevan Shaw, Sax's son, and was able to begin a conversation about accessing the papers. This included meeting Maisie, Sax's widow, who still lived in the family home where the archives were held. It is vital to form a good relationship with family members as they are placing you, the researcher, in a position of trust. It is also important at the outset to establish the expectations of researcher and archive owner: I had a responsibility to

keep Kevan informed of my findings and credit sources appropriately, and in return he did not use my research for his own purposes. It is clear that trust and respect play vital roles.

Researchers need to manage their expectations of what a private archive might hold. My first visit to the Shaw home revealed numerous piles of papers, sketchbooks and diaries distributed throughout the house (Plate 1). Factor in the extra time it may take to simply locate everything. For researchers used to carefully catalogued archives in conservation-friendly boxes it is very tempting to try to organise private collections, but do not do this without the permission of the owners. It is more useful to impose order on your own notes, though some owners may request cataloguing or listing as part of the access agreement.

Shaw's papers proved to be one of the most fascinating sources for my doctoral studies, proving the value of persisting in my search for relevant private collections. A key find was a notebook from Shaw's first visit to Paris in 1947. In it he wrote:

In all the exhibits the main point seems to be achieved by strict adherence to the limitations of each medium never going beyond the bounds and always sacrificing for the pure expression of an idea. Some of the wooden carvings of religious idols exceeds in this feeling for material where the figures seem to grow out of the particular piece of wood used, always they seem to be driven by this first limitation. It could be [...] because they are naturally limited by the tools used.¹

This is the earliest indication of the artist's interest in truth to materials. This design approach was a consistent feature of Shaw's work throughout his career, influencing his approach to painting, tapestry design, stained glass design and production, and teaching.

In addition to providing indications of Shaw's early artistic development, the family's collection also included tapestry designs and preliminary sketches directly relevant to Dovecot Studios. One such tapestry design was for *Fighting Cocks* (1950), in the collection at Mount Stuart. When I first viewed the tapestry I noticed an unusual design element that was not visible in reproductions of the images: along the left side of the central imagery, the red background changes tone to a lighter shade. I took the opportunity to examine its reverse and found that the colour change also occurs there, indicating that it cannot be attributed to an area of colour fading as the result of hanging in direct sunlight; if this was the case, the colour difference would only be apparent on the front of the tapestry.

Until I discovered the painted design hanging on the wall of the Shaw family home, I had been unable to compare the tapestry to Shaw's artwork for the weaving. The privately owned painting did not include this colour change. However, in a 1950 letter to Lord Colum (who commissioned the tapestry), Shaw indicated that this colour change was intentional:

¹ Sax Shaw Archive, Sketchbook, 1947.

Its [*Fighting Cocks*] most interesting feature is the colour change of the vermilion background from orange at the edges to crimson near the birds. This seems to give a liveliness to the birds which almost suggests movement. It is a quality often used in stained glass which I believe has tremendous possibilities in tapestry.²

If such a change of colour had been intentional, surely the lighter orange-toned red would have been used all around the tapestry, not on the left side only. Additionally, it would have made more sense had the line of change been in keeping with the design's composition.

A more likely solution is presented when we consider how the tapestry was woven. When the tapestry hangs correctly the warps run horizontally, indicating that it was woven on its side (meaning the image for the tapestry was turned 90 degrees). We could therefore suggest that the right side was woven first, with the weaving moving up towards the left. It seems most likely that the weavers ran out of the correct shade of wool and therefore changed to the closest shade available. Shaw's letter to Lord Colum appears to be covering a mistake made by the weavers in the hope that his patron would accept it as an intentional colour change. Without the discovery of the design in the Shaw collection, this argument could not have been asserted so positively.

Another example of the value of researching this collection relates to *Cycle of Life* (1958), also designed by Shaw for Dovecot. In 1948 Shaw began working as a part-time supervisor at Dovecot. In an unpublished autobiography in the family collection he wrote about the detailed instructions he left for the weavers when he was not present:

I had to visit the Dovecote from my work in college – two days [per week] and at 4pm each evening. Otherwise I had to leave as precise instruction as possible. My cartoons were numbered with each different colour related to the bobbins in the wool cupboard.³

This method of weaving by numbers was a technique borrowed from France, pioneered by French tapestry designer Jean Lurçat.⁴ Though Shaw mentioned using the technique, the ETC archives did not contain any examples of such practice. It was only while speaking to Kevan Shaw about his family's papers that he revealed they owned the only surviving example of a cartoon with numbers indicating the colours of yarns to be used. This was the cartoon for *Cycle of Life*.

Originally commissioned by Warriston Crematorium for a new Chapel at their site in Edinburgh, *Cycle of Life* is now owned by the City Art Centre, City of Edinburgh Museums and Galleries. The tapestry is 290 x 274 cm and was woven by Richard Gordon, Fred Mann and Harry Wright. The corresponding cartoon (a full-scale colour design for a tapestry, usually painted on paper) was

² Bute Archives, ETC Box 6, Letter from Sax Shaw to Lord Colum, 25 June 1950.

³ Sax Shaw Archive, Typed autobiography by Sax Shaw, unpublished.

⁴ J. Lurçat, *Designing Tapestry* (London, 1950), 38.

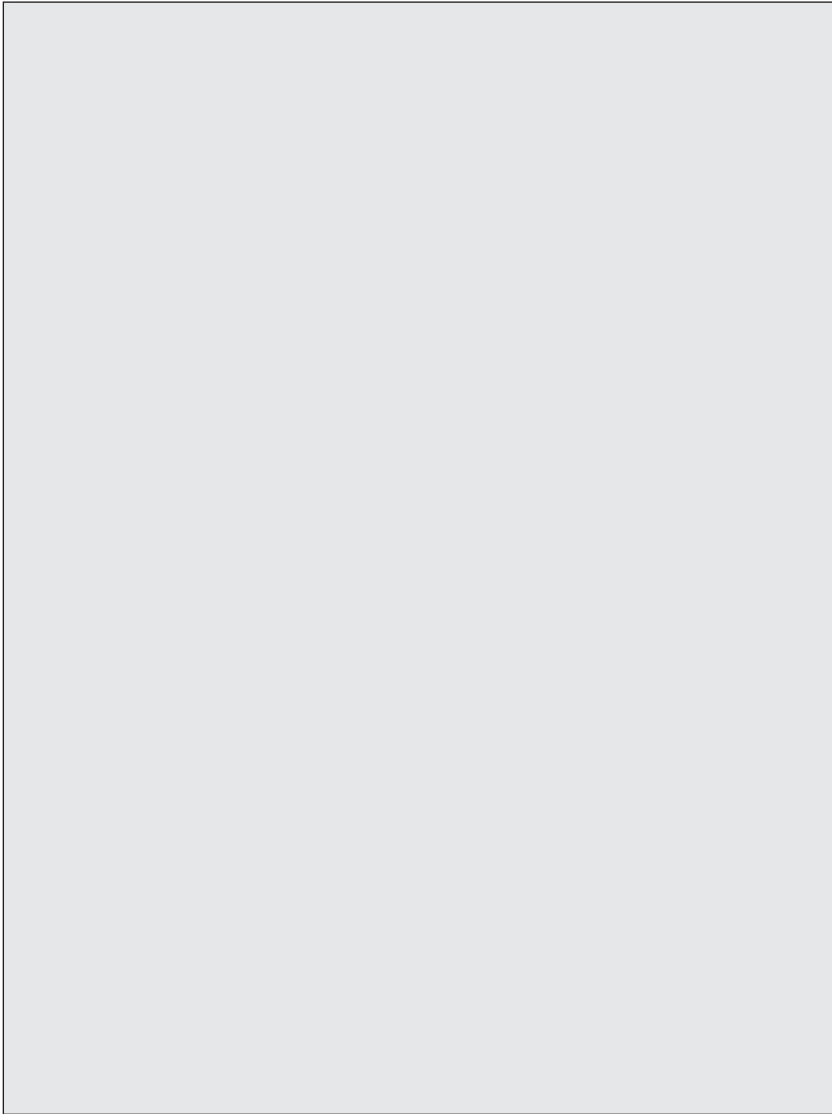


Plate 2 Coventry Cathedral. Photograph by Francesca Baseby.

the same size but had been cut into three strips and rolled, in order to store it. Each section of colour was clearly marked with a three-digit number indicating a particular stock colour of yarn. When undertaking a large research project, discoveries such as this can spark a moment of clarity; as Kevan unrolled the cartoon sections on his mother's carpet, the story of Shaw's involvement in the tapestry studio and his methods of designing started to take shape.

Archives are not simple items, containing complete records of information. They are often full of gaps or omissions and can reflect the subjectivity of the individuals who gathered the archive's contents together. This is particularly the case for private archives. If they haven't been catalogued or researched, the archive's owner may not know what the gaps are. A process of investigation is required to gather as much information as possible in order to obtain a fuller picture.

Christ in Glory, the monumental tapestry in Coventry Cathedral designed by Graham Sutherland, is an ideal case study for a multiple archive approach and reveals the benefit of bringing together private and public archive collections (Plate 2). Though Dovecot bid for the commission, the tapestry was ultimately woven by Atelier Pinton Frères, a tapestry studio in Aubusson, France. Dovecot's negotiations with the Coventry Cathedral Reconstruction Committee lasted from 1951 to 1955. Publications on the commissioning of the tapestry have consistently stated that Dovecot had been unable to gain the commission because they did not have a large enough loom. The most recent example can be found in *British Design from 1948*, published in 2012.⁵

My initial research at the ETC archives had only yielded one item related to the Coventry Cathedral tapestry saga. This was a memorandum of a meeting in October 1951 between Lord David Stuart, Basil Spence (architect of Coventry Cathedral) and R. Williamson, Edinburgh Tapestry Company's secretary.⁶ In order to develop a more complete understanding of Dovecot's involvement in the Coventry tapestry commission, I commenced a systematic search of relevant material in the Sir Basil Spence Archive at the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) in Edinburgh. Spence's papers included a wide range of correspondence relating to the tapestry commission, and immediately contradicted the assumption that Dovecot could not obtain a large enough loom; in October 1952, loom producer Arrol Young, a company based in Galashiels, wrote to the Curator at Coventry Cathedral informing them that Dovecot had commissioned a new loom.⁷ This collection of papers also indicated the complex nature of the project because of the number of people involved: Dovecot's Directors, Spence

⁵ L. Crowther, 'Coventry Cathedral', in (ed.) C. Breward and G. Wood, *British Design from 1948: Innovation in the Modern Age* (London, 2012), 94.

⁶ Bute Archives, ETC/7/1, Memorandum of a meeting between Lord David Stuart, Mr Basil Spence and R. Williamson on 11 October 1951.

⁷ RCAHMS, MS2329/ENG/9/8/24/8/65, Letter from Arrol Young, Galashiels to Curator, Coventry Cathedral, 29 October 1952.

as architect, Sutherland as designer and the Coventry Cathedral Reconstruction Committee. The commissioning process was further complicated when two new Directors bought major shares in Dovecot in 1953: John Noble and Harry Jefferson Barnes. Noble was Chairman of the Scottish Craft Centre, Edinburgh and Barnes was Deputy Director and Registrar at Glasgow School of Art.

Most of the items in the Spence archives are letters but provide only one half of the conversation. I was keen to find the missing pieces. This could only be done with private archives, each of which required a different approach in order to gain access. The Coventry Cathedral archive has no digital database of its collection and no email enquiry service. However, the collection is managed by a knowledgeable group of volunteers who were able to provide relevant research material when I visited. Archives run by volunteers require a longer planning period, as they are not open every day and rely on the volunteers having time to search for material.

At the time of my PhD, the papers of Harry Jefferson Barnes were held by his daughter, Janet. Approaching Janet Barnes was similar to approaching Kevan Shaw – relationship building and the development of trust was key. The process was facilitated by Dr Elizabeth Cumming, curator of Dovecot’s centenary exhibition in 2012, who had already been in touch with Janet. As with the Shaw archive, this private collection of papers was accessed in the family home.

Having established the combination of private and public archives that were consulted, there is an opportunity here to illustrate how they were brought together to explore Dovecot’s involvement in the Coventry Cathedral tapestry commission. I have selected four items which exemplify the value of bringing together research from four collections.

- *ETC Archives, Mount Stuart* – Memorandum of a meeting between Lord David Stuart (a Dovecot Director) and Basil Spence (Architect) on 11 October 1951.⁸ During this meeting, Spence informed Lord Stuart that the Cathedral Reconstruction Committee had been contacted by a number of foreign tapestry studios, but Spence believed it ought to be woven in Britain.
- *Harry Jefferson Barnes Papers* – Letter from John Noble (Dovecot) to Basil Spence, 28 January 1955. In his letter, Noble refers to a meeting that took place at Dovecot in Edinburgh between himself, Sutherland, Sax Shaw (in his capacity as Artistic Director) and Spence. Noble wrote that Sutherland seemed keen on Dovecot as weavers of the tapestry.
- *Coventry Cathedral Archives* – Letter from Browetts Solicitors to Captain Thurston (Coventry Cathedral Reconstruction Committee), 17 June 1955.⁹ The letter concerns a contract that is being drawn up between the Coventry Cathedral Reconstruction Committee and the Atelier

⁸ Bute Archives, ETC/7/1, Memorandum of a meeting between Lord David Stuart, Mr Basil Spence and R. Williamson on 11 October 1951.

⁹ Coventry Cathedral Archives, A2506/13/1/1, ‘Tapestry’.

Pinton Frères. Sutherland has requested that the contract names him as supervisor of the weaving so that he can maintain control of the weavers' artistic interpretation of his design.

- *Sir Basil Spence Archives, RCAHMS* – Letter from Basil Spence to John Noble, 13 August 1955.¹⁰ In a previous letter Noble had asked why Sutherland preferred the French workshop. In this letter, Spence explained that Sutherland preferred the weaving of the French Atelier because it was a closer copy of his design.

The correspondence between Spence, the Coventry Cathedral Reconstruction Committee, Sutherland and Dovecot's Directors, sampled here, reveals a tangled web of expectations not met, artistic difficulties and clashing personalities. The combined information from these archives also uncovers a complex explanation for Dovecot's failure to win the commission, challenging the argument that they simply did not have a large enough loom. In reality, Sutherland preferred the less expensive French studio because its weavers produced a woven imitation of his painted design. Dovecot's weavers preferred to retain a degree of artistic autonomy by interpreting a design, not copying it.

Taking a combined approach to researching both public and private archives also led to tangible discoveries. A 1980 exhibition catalogue *Master Weavers: Tapestry from the Dovecot Studios 1912–1980* included a list of all known tapestries woven by the studio, including *Coat of Arms* (1957) designed by Sax Shaw. There was no further information about this weaving. The Basil Spence papers revealed this to be a commission from the Cappers Guild for the Cappers Room, one of the few parts of Coventry Cathedral to survive the bombing of the Second World War.¹¹ When I visited the Coventry Cathedral archive, a volunteer archivist was able to provide further information in press cuttings and allow me to photograph the tapestry that still hangs *in situ*.¹² Members of the guild had originally wanted to commission an embroidered banner but Spence, commissioned to oversee the room's refurbishment, suggested a tapestry woven by Dovecot; unusually, the tapestry was the less expensive option.¹³

This article is intended to encourage the search for private archives and to present advice and ideas for accessing them. Though it deals with private archives in particular, the discussion of using multiple archives is also intended to emphasise the case for a multifaceted approach to artist research in Scotland and beyond. The research carried out on both the Shaw and Jefferson Barnes family papers had implications beyond my thesis. Sax Shaw's papers are a fascinating insight into the artist's design teaching at Edinburgh College of Art in the 1950s and 1960s, and are a rare example of teaching records from

¹⁰ RCAHMS, MS2329/ENG/9/8/24/8/27.

¹¹ RCAHMS, MS2329/ENG/9/8/2/6.

¹² 'Bishop Dedicates Restored Room of Cappers Guild', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 6 December 1957.

¹³ P. King, *The Mystery of the Coventry Cappers* (London, 2001), 129.

this period at the college. In 2012 the collection was donated to the Edinburgh College of Art Archives, University of Edinburgh. This was facilitated by my introduction of Kevan Shaw to Rachel Hosker, Merged Institutions Archivist. The Harry Jefferson Barnes papers have been donated to the ETC archive at Mount Stuart where they complement the collection's existing resources. Not only do these donations allow further public access to the archives, the Shaw and Jefferson Barnes families know that their relative's legacies will continue to be recognised.