

## Nomination Form

### ARA Archive Volunteering Award 2020

Required fields are marked\*

**1. Title of the project \***

Anne Lister Diary Transcription Project

**2. Institution conducting the project \***

West Yorkshire Archive Service

**3. List of key partners involved in the project (if applicable)\***

N/A

**4. Names of team members working on the project**

Dan Sudron (Archivist – Project Lead)  
Jenny Wood (Archive Assistant)  
Judith Boardman (Archive Assistant)

**5. Final year \***

Ongoing

**6. Project start date \***

July 2019

**7. Project end date \***

Ongoing – requiring an estimated 16,000 to 20,000 volunteer hours.

**8. URL link to project website**

<https://wyascatablogue.wordpress.com/exhibitions/anne-lister/anne-lister-diary-transcription-project/>

Project Twitter hashtag #AnneListerCodeBreaker

## **9. Description \***

WYAS is carrying out a ground-breaking project to transcribe the diaries of Anne Lister of Shibden Hall, 1806-1840, often known as the 'first modern lesbian', and the inspiration for the BBC/HBO drama 'Gentleman Jack'.

Anne's diaries, which consist of around 5 million words, cover all aspects of her life in intimate detail; her relationships with women, her business dealings, politics, estate management, education, and her personal health and well-being. She also records local and national events; such as attending society soirees, her thoughts on the Peterloo Massacre, and meeting Royalty on her extensive European travels. Anne's diaries were inscribed in UNESCO's UK Memory of the World Register in recognition of their substantial cultural significance. However, the true extent of Anne's diaries remains hidden in her abbreviation filled handwriting and her coded 'crypt-hand'.

Our aim is to make Anne's diaries increasingly accessible and extend their world-wide impact by making complete transcripts available on our online catalogue. To achieve this we are asking volunteers to help transcribe Anne's diaries. There are currently over 140 volunteer 'Code Breakers' globally with an active social media community sharing advice on transcribing, stories from the diaries, and their own personal and emotional interactions with Anne Lister.

## **10. Target audience**

The project is open to anyone and is designed to be carried out by volunteers working remotely. A digitisation project has allowed digital images of Anne's diaries to be made available on the WYAS online catalogue since April 2019, ahead of the transcription project commencing in July 2019. This has opened up the project from local volunteers able to visit our search room to volunteers from anywhere around the World.

The diaries of Anne Lister have a particular interest for the LGBTQ+ community and for women. Anne's diaries were inscribed in the UNESCO UK Memory of the World Register in recognition of their substantial cultural significance, in particular their importance in the field of Gender Studies and Women's History.

The BBC/HBO drama 'Gentleman Jack', by BATFA award winner Sally Wainwright, increased awareness of Anne and her diaries. WYAS was able to develop links with these audiences using social media prior to starting this project helping to ensure an increased project audience.

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed and developed this audience. The project has allowed our audience to volunteer on a project while being restricted to their own homes and to interact with other volunteer 'Code Breakers' on social media.

## **11. Aim \***

*Who was the project for and why did they need this?*

The project aims to create complete transcriptions of Anne Lister's diaries. These transcripts will be made freely available on our online catalogue. The project will increase accessibility, engage an enthusiastic audience of Anne Lister fans, and extend the impact of Anne's diaries to a world-wide audience.

In her diaries Anne records her relationships with women, homosexuality in early 19<sup>th</sup> century society, and how her religious beliefs and sexuality fit together. She records how she ran her estate and business in a man's world, learning coal mining and estate management rather than allowing others to undertake this work.

Anne's diaries also provide a wealth of information about politics, business, religion, education, science, travel, local and national events, medicine and health. Anne's diaries have the potential to be a significant resource for a wide range of researchers on a huge number of topics.

The project is of particular significance for gay women. Anne has become an important historical figure within the LGBTQ+ community whose stories are often absent from the historical record. The project allows individuals to learn more about Anne and interact with her story on an emotional level. It allows us to engage with this community both locally and internationally

## **12. Process \***

*How did you consult, work towards the aims and evaluate your work? Which resources did you use? What processes did you put in place, etc. Try to be concise. Reflect and focus on those elements that make your project stand out from similar projects.*

The subject of the diaries, Anne Lister, and the extent of the diaries themselves make the project unique.

The project has been undertaken in a way which engages as wide an audience as possible. The complexity of Anne's handwriting, and her coded 'crypt-hand', means that volunteers are massively important to the project, with volunteers developing the extensive skills needed to transcribe Anne's diaries.

Online access to the diaries allows us to offer a broader volunteering programme than ever before. There are no geographical limits and great flexibility on the time volunteers can commit to the project.

The assignment of pages to volunteers is managed by Archive staff with each page assigned to two volunteers to help ensure the accuracy of the final transcripts.

The project was launched to capitalise on the surge in interest created by the 'Gentleman Jack' drama. The project webpage was created to promote the project, seek volunteers and explain how to get involved, including a test transcription page. This was further developed through our social media channels using our project hashtag #AnneListerCodeBreaker. A huge level of interaction and support has been developed, between the volunteers and the Archive Service, and amongst the social media community.

### **13. Number of participants in the project or visitors to date \***

The project has so far engaged over 140 volunteer 'Code Breakers' in transcribing the diaries of Anne Lister.

Volunteers are located around the World, including across Europe (United Kingdom, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Republic of Ireland, Russia, Spain, Sweden), North America (Canada and USA), and Australia.

As well as over 140 individuals (and couples) who have engaged as volunteer 'Code Breakers', the project has engaged a lecture group based at a College in Virginia, USA. The College lecturer used the project to set a transcription assignment for the LGBTQ+ history and literature classes with the students providing transcripts to the project.

WYAS created a Twitter hashtag (#AnneListerCodeBreaker) to allow the creation of an active social media community where the volunteer 'Code Breakers' can share advice on transcribing, stories from the diaries, and their own personal and emotional interactions with Anne Lister and engage a wider audience of potential Anne Lister researchers and volunteers.

The transcription project webpages have received 24,000 views since July 2019 as part of 126,000 views of our online Anne Lister exhibition since its launch in April 2019 (<https://wyascatablogue.wordpress.com/exhibitions/anne-lister/>).

### **14. Impact and outcome of the project \***

*Outcomes tell us effect of our outputs on people. Impact tells us effect of our outputs and outcomes on organisations and/or society in general.*

It is hard to overstate the impact that Anne Lister's diaries are having on a significantly underrepresented and under-documented section of society, namely gay women. The massive uptake in a 'transcription project' helps to highlight this and has arguably never been seen before.

The project is engaging many woman who have never used archives before. They are now our most engaged and enthusiastic users – in the work they are carrying out and the stories they are sharing with others, both of Anne's life and how this reflects their own lives.

Living as gay women, often means living in difficult situations, hiding their sexuality, dealing with discrimination, and have often been underrepresented or negatively portrayed in media and culture. Anne's diaries are of huge importance in correcting this bias.

The project is making the diaries globally accessible, allowing us to engage a larger and more diverse group of volunteers than ever before. The project, using the collective ability of our volunteers, is bringing the diaries to life and into view for those people who need them most.

As an organisation, the project has enabled us to realise our capabilities to run a large volunteer project and opened up opportunities to develop similar projects.

### **15. Evaluation \***

*Is there anything that didn't go as expected, or that you could have avoided? Is there anything that helped you achieve your goal? What evidence do you have from your evaluation of beneficial impact? Will the project be continued or rolled out? Has it led to recognition or further opportunities?*

The way people have interacted with Anne Lister has been remarkable. Many have felt a strong personal connection to Anne's story and been emotionally moved by gaining access to her diaries.

The level of interest has been much higher than expected. The number of volunteers has allowed us to progress more quickly than anticipated, undertaking work that we would not be able to undertake without them. This has meant increased pressure on Archive staff to fulfil the enthusiasm for more pages to transcribe, however, this is a fantastic challenge to have. Progress updates are included on the project webpage. We are now starting to create finalised transcripts, with the first to be available online soon.

The project webpages and social media have been central to the project, allowing us to publicise the project, share information and a test transcription for potential volunteers, handle the level of interest, and facilitated the volunteers in forming a strong online community.

The project was chosen as a case study for 'A Year in Archives 2019' (TNA) to demonstrate how "Archives enhance and enrich our society intellectually, culturally and economically"

(<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/year-in-archives-leaflet-2019.pdf>)

Yorkshire Post published an article talking to volunteers about what the project means to them (<https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/meet-army-code-breakers-around-world-working-transcribe-anne-listers-diaries-1745675>).

## Feedback from volunteer 'Code Breakers';

- *"I am very much enjoying reading and transcribing Anne's utterly amazing diaries!"*  
(Code Breaker email, April 2020)
- *"I will be continuing with the transcriptions, as I enjoy not only the validity of what I am doing but the challenge itself. Why spend hours on word searches, sudoku or word games? Deciphering Anne's texts are just as much fun, but have something worthwhile to show at the end of it."*  
(Code Breaker email, March 2020)
- *"How lovely to hear from you! I wasn't sure if you would still be working. Thanks so much for sending me this double batch of transcripts - this will probably keep me sane over the next few weeks. I've so enjoyed the last batch following Anne's adventures in Paris! Thanks so much for the great job you and your colleagues are doing on this project - its a wonderful thing to be part of and I'm so very grateful to you for answering my email so promptly and positively at this very very weird time. Stay safe & healthy."*  
(Code Breaker email during Covid-19 lockdown, March 2020)
- *"I adore being part of this project #AnneListerCodeBreaker"*  
(Twitter comment, April 2020)
- *"This is the most fascinating, challenging, and fun adventure I've ever had. Besides, with the lockdown transcribing gives me an excuse to avoid cleaning the house....again. Hope you are well. Take care."*  
(Code Breaker email during Covid-19 lockdown, April 2020)
- *"The students have enjoyed this exercise but also found it challenging"*  
(College Lecturer email, USA, October 2019)
- *"In my office, transcribing in my boxers as I can't fit my busted Knee into trousers, while everything is a bit shit, has made me even more emotionally invested in being an #AnneListerCodeBreaker & I am so grateful AL felt so strongly about her journal. I am having FEELINGS."*  
(Twitter comment, March 2020)
- *"~Q2\| 756, o2/ - Thank you, Dan, for your brilliant work on the transcription project! You've brought us all together from around the world to bring Anne's words to light and to life. It's an honor to do this! #AnneListerCodeBreaker"*  
(Twitter comment partly in Anne Lister's code, April 2020)
- *"Good to know that if/when some of us need to isolate we'll be able to continue working on transcriptions, and turn to Anne's journal for some relief or distraction (not unlike herself)."*  
(Code Breaker email, March 2020)
- *"Following the series 'Gentleman Jack' I have been fascinated by the story of the amazing Anne Lister - a courageous inspirational woman who defied convention and blazed so many trails... I have only just become aware of the fantastic opportunity to participate in the transcription of her journals. To contribute to a work recognised by UNESCO as worthy of being on the UK Memory of the World register would be unbelievably worthwhile and help the*

*world understand and recognise the singularity and importance of Anne Lister. I hope, therefore, I am not too late to participate, and attach my transcription of the sample diary pages SH:7/ML/E/7/0055 as requested. I am so excited about the possibility of contributing to the project that I find sending this off more nerve racking than emailing a job application letter - although, being retired, I am thankfully no longer required to do that! I must confess to being more excited at the idea of contributing to this project than I have been by anything for a long time."*

(Email applying to become a volunteer, January 2020)

## **16. Tips \***

*For example, how things could have been done differently*

Social media is an important tool, allowing improved contact with volunteers, allowing volunteers to contact each other and create a project community. It also allows others to follow the project and makes it open and accessible for a wider audience. #AnneListerCodeBreaker was created to allow an area of the project to be controlled by the volunteers. For such an important subject the story of Anne must be allowed to grow naturally, while Archive staff manage the project and focus the work and enthusiasm of the volunteers.

The project management ensures a systematic approach to a large transcription project. This focusses the combined power and abilities of volunteers to transcribe the 5 million words rather than disparate sections. This has been an important aspect of such a large project and will influence future projects.

Clear transcription guidelines are needed from the outset. These were published on the project webpages, however, as the project proceeds some alterations or refinements may be needed.

Handwriting recognition programmes may be suitable for other transcription projects, with simpler handwriting. However, this would not gain the same level of engagement as a volunteer project, through which your volunteers can become important ambassadors and advocates for your service.

## **17. Future Developments \***

*How will this work be developed in the future?*

The project will continue to provide opportunities for volunteer involvement transcribing Anne Lister's diaries. As the project progresses we will look to create further volunteer opportunities in the next phase of the project, helping to check and create final edited transcripts.

WYAS is planning an exhibition to show Anne Lister 'in her words' based on the transcriptions produced by this project. We intend to engage the volunteer 'Code Breakers' with the exhibition to explore their personal connections with Anne, how the project has impacted them personally, and provide insights into the qualitative impact, particularly in terms of wellbeing, mental health, community cohesion and diversity.

As a result of this project WYAS will look at carrying out similar projects using its collections. A project to transcribe the diaries of Lady Amabel Yorke has already commenced from our Leeds office. The feedback from the volunteer 'Code Breakers' will be used to shape these future projects.

We have had a number of other organisations in the archives sector seeking advice on how the project was set up. We will continue to share the project as an example for the archives sector, including our experiences and learning developed by undertaking the project.

## **18 Domain \***

*Select (using underline) one or more from the list*

Archives

Arts organisations

Historic environment

Libraries

Museums

Other:

## **19. Role in developing the sector**

*Select (using underline) one or more from the list.*

Advice

Advocacy and strategic marketing

Commissioning

Evaluation

Funding

Liaison

Partnerships

Policy

Research and Evidence

Standards

Other:

## **20. Social groups**

*Select (using underline) one or more from the list.*

Children and young people

Older people

Disabled people

Ethnic minority groups

Homeless people

Prisoners and ex-offenders

Looked-after children and those leaving care

Lower socio-economic groups

Refugees and asylum seekers

New communities

Unemployed people

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender

Other: Women



## 21. Social outcomes

*Select (using underline) one or more from the list.*

Community cohesion & inclusion

Celebrating local identity

Local economy

Health & well-being

Learning & skills

Local infrastructure & regeneration

Tourism

Community empowerment & active citizenship

Raising participation

Positive outcomes for vulnerable groups

Other:

## 22. Higher level geographical coverage \*

*Select (using underline) one or more from the list.*

International

Europe

Ireland

UK

Wales

Scotland

Northern Ireland

England

East Midlands

East of England

London

North East

North West

South East

South West

West Midlands

Yorkshire and the Humber

## 23. Main person leading the project \*

*Enter as many details as possible*

Name	Daniel Sudron
Organisation	West Yorkshire Archive Service
Phone number	0113 535 0151
Email address	daniel.sudron@wyjs.org.uk

**24. Alternative contact**

*Enter as many details as possible*

Name Anna Carter / Teresa Nixon  
Organisation West Yorkshire Archive Service  
Phone number  
Email address anna.carter@wyjs.org.uk / teresa.nixon@wyjs.org.uk

**25. Estimated budget\*** Zero budget – existing staff time only

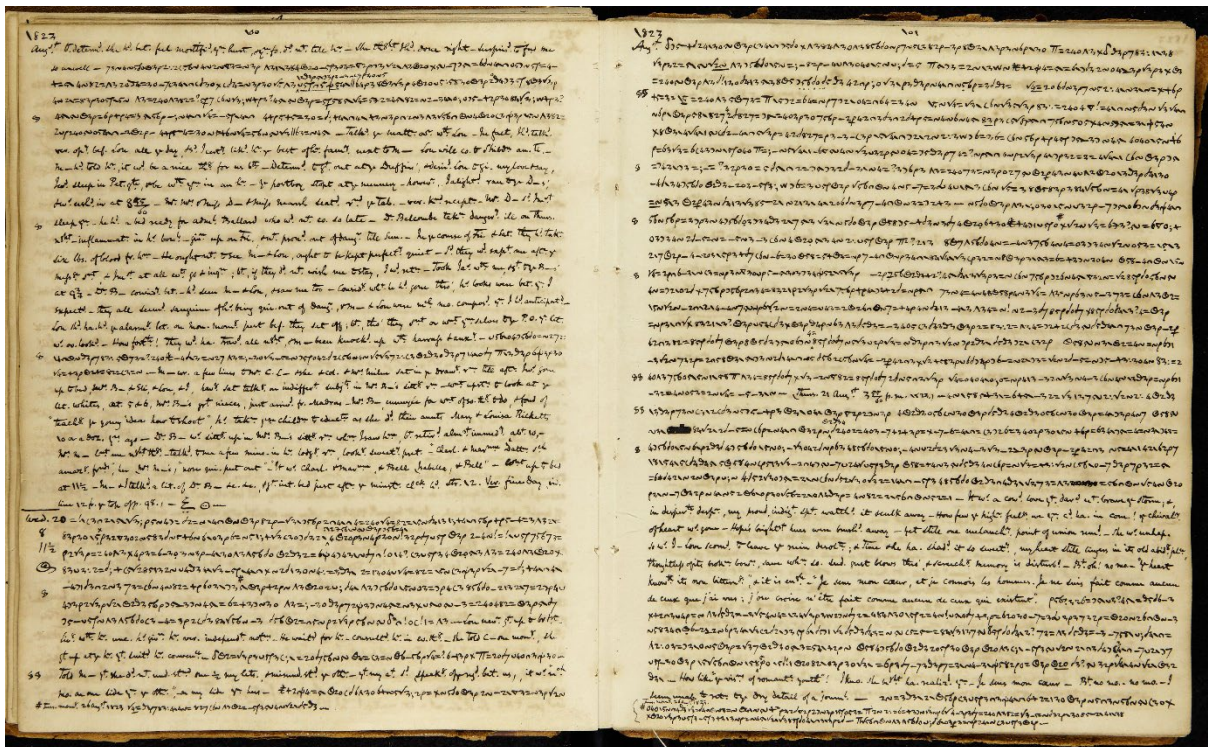
**26. Final budget**

**27. Funding source(s)**

**Supporting Images**

- 1) Page of the Diary of Anne Lister, showing Anne's small handwriting, with extensive abbreviations and her unique code (crypt-hand).
- 2) Code used in Anne Lister's diaries included on the project webpage for volunteer Code Breakers transcribing Anne's diaries.
- 3) Volunteers and supporters attending a talk on the diaries of Anne Lister given by West Yorkshire Archive Service. Display case contains one of Anne's diaries with the diary quote "I can tell my journal what I can tell none else".

Anne Lister Diaries – Photos



The code used in Anne Lister's journal

A	2		
B	(	bb	= f
C	)	cc	= 7
D	o		
E	3	ee	= ;
F	v	ff	= φ
G	n		
H	p		
I	4		
J	4		
K		ll	= :
L	δ		
M	-	nn	= λ
N	\	oo	= !
O	5	pp	= ‡
P	+		
Q		rr	= P
R	P	ss	= ?
S	=	tt	= †
T	~		
U	6		
V	g		
W	8		
X	w		
Y	7		
Z	9		

Mr	x
Mrs	æ
Miss	œ
th	✓
sh	^
ch	∇
and	x

Underlining of a letter } = repetition  
 Dot above a letter }

