

Community Archives at the Heart? A Health Check

Elizabeth Charlton

[Editor's note: the following recreates much of the conversation that took place at the 2016 ARANZ Symposium during the panel on Community Archives]

In his 2008 article, the British archivist Gerry Slater placed community archives at the very centre of the sector:

Community archives are not merely a desirable facet of the wider picture that constitutes archives today, but rather they sit at the heart of what archives are and how they relate to individuals, community, and to modern society as a whole.¹

This panel, consisting of Elizabeth Charlton, Reid Perkins and Gareth Winter discussed the health of the community archive sector in New Zealand. Their credentials for being on the panel stem from working in the archives of different communities. They do not put themselves forward as experts on community archives per se, just of their repository.

Please provide a snapshot of your archives

Elizabeth – I am the Province Archivist for the Society of Mary. The Marist Archives have been in existence since 1960s, with a professional archivist employed since 2005. We are an in-house archives which cares for the records that document the congregation's temporal and spiritual affairs as well as collecting the papers of members. The archives is open to external researchers of any religious belief. We get about 200 enquiries a year mostly distance, about half from researchers outside of the congregation.

Reid – I am the archivist at the Upper Hutt City Library Heritage Collections, which serves as a repository for a broad range of records documenting the history of our local community. Our mission statement explicitly aligns us with a particular model of community archives (by no means the only valid one) and that's one which is strongly committed

to being both user-focused and collaborative. This means we place a strong emphasis on access and outreach, seeking ways of getting our archives out of the storeroom and into our community where they can be actively engaged with. It also means we see ourselves as a community archives not just because our collections are about our local community, but also because they've been built through community participation in developing their content and description. There's a practical side to this as well in that we're a low-resourced organisation (I'm the sole full-time staff member) and so depend on volunteer input to get things done.

One of the main ways we've sought to foster access and collaboration has been by digitizing a large proportion of our collection and making this available online through Recollect, our interactive archival database. This website would be where most of our users engage with our records (the traditional 'reading room' model represents only a small side of our activities). We also undertake a huge amount of outreach work in physical settings (not just within our library but in other community locations). This involves things like giving illustrated talks, putting on exhibitions, etc. These activities not only serve as an important means of letting people see and engage with what we hold in our archives but also as a way of soliciting further contributions from them.

Gareth – At the Wairarapa Archive we are totally focused on the user, which means we focus on getting the records out. Ironically, this means that more come in. Our outreach includes giving speeches, publishing books, daily and weekly pieces in local newspaper, plus regular feature articles. We believe our users are the people who buy the books, read the newspaper articles, and come to our talks. As well as that, about 2000 researchers come into the research room per annum.

Elizabeth – At the meeting of the Archives of Religious Collections Section of the Society of American Archivists held in Atlanta in August 2016, a panel discussion occurred where they spoke about what Terry Cook in 2012 described as a paradigm shift in which the archival *raison d'être* shifts from the preservation of evidence to the definition of community.

Terry Baxter, archivist in Multnomah County, Oregon, presented another definition of a community archives. His presentation was entitled, "Community archivists as community outsiders" (<https://vimeo.com/179240918>). While listening to him live in Atlanta, I felt the title of his presentation fit my situation perfectly. As a lay person and particularly a female working for a male religious congregation, I am definitely a community outsider. There was one comment he makes,

which is, “Whose rules and whose tools? Resist telling the community what to do”. I then felt what he believes is a community archives is a structure completely different from the one in which I work. While I am a community outsider, the archives works to our rules with our tools [the archives’ sectors] and this is the job the community vested in me.

How do you interpret this comment?

Reid – I could relate to quite a bit of what Terry said, particularly his comment “tread carefully, remember you are not a community member. Do your research.” Unlike Gareth, who is a Wairarapa lad, I came to Upper Hutt as an outsider and initially had to do a lot of work to gain people’s trust. When setting up the crowdsourcing aspect of our Recollect website, I would constantly reiterate to the community that they are the experts (in terms of community knowledge). I was there to help them capture and preserve their history, not impose rules on what they do. Community members can be very protective of their local knowledge. For example if I ever put a wrong description on a photo, I can be sure someone will soon approach me with “Whaddarya? Anyone who lived in Upper Hutt during the 1960s would know what building that is!”

Terry mentioned the importance of doing research and I certainly had to do a lot of swotting up on local history in order to embed myself within the community. Unlike Gareth who was already totally embedded within his! It can be tough being positioned as an outsider and I definitely get where you’re coming from, Elizabeth, with regards to Terry’s “whose rules, whose tools” comment. But I also get his caution.

I think it’s also important to bear in mind that the term “community archives” is often used in reference to marginalized communities who feel that they’ve been misrepresented or ignored by “established” archives. If this type of group is setting something up, you can’t just go in there and say, look, this is how you do it. We saw a good example of this earlier in the panel discussion on Maori archives, where the Taranaki Te Reo archives explained how they feel that the information they want to collect, and the way they want to make it accessible, simply doesn’t fit within the traditional institutional archives model.

Gareth – I’m not so much embedded as embed-rocked! Taratahi is my mountain, Ruamahanga is my river. I was born in the shadow of the mountain. The oldest photo of me is in fact swimming in the river as a toddler. I’m totally embedded in my community.

We [on the panel] are talking about a mainstream archives. For me you could say we’re a tiny regional version of Alexander Turnbull Library.

Terry was talking about a completely different concept of a community archives that is found in the United States and Great Britain where marginalised groups, adopt our terminology in calling the collections of material an archives but it may not be an archive in the sense we understand it. They may be curating digital material or holding objects that we would normally exclude. I think Terry's point was you can't go into that community and say this is the way it has to be done. They may well say "It's our stuff and we don't want to do it that way."

We have some experience in working with iwi. In the Wairarapa the two iwi Ngāti Kahungunu and Rangitane don't always agree with each other, which can make it tricky for us but we have excellent relationships with both, in an advisory sense and also that they deposit records with us. The hapu formed to make a conglomerate made the first submissions to the Waitangi Tribunal and all those records reside in the Wairarapa Archive, so we're trusted to look after their records and they advise us on the terms that we do so.

Elizabeth – If we go back to looking at the types of archives Sarah Welland covered in her research (school, church, local history, iwi, interest group)² which are more formalised and Terry's definition which is more marginalised groups, Sarah called for us to create a definition for NZ.³ Gillian Oliver referred to Eichhorn in her talk this morning, the definition of "archive" continues to loosen.⁴

Should we be looking for those marginalised groups in NZ or do we keep the focus on the types of archives Sarah interviewed to keep it manageable? What do we want as our definition? That will impact on ARANZ's strategy and planning. Who do we help? How do we help?

Gareth – We have experience with scales of community archives. Like many archivists we have a backlog of material, understaffed, under-resourced and don't have enough space. But we are in a town of 20,000 people and get \$250,000 funding. Despite our concerns, we are in fact blessed by our level of support.

But 10 minutes down the road is the collection of the Carterton District Historical Society, which is largely undescribed. The Society itself is fractious – so much so that they're now two disparate groups. They have no archival training whatsoever. They are resistant to receiving any archival advice. They had a retired librarian working on the collection and when I suggested that maybe they shouldn't be rearranging their material into subject folders, she ignored the advice and carried on.

Even further down the valley, and down the chain, there's the Featherston Heritage Museum, which is a bunch of old guys who have gathered a bunch of stuff together. They are very resistant to even having it copied. Neil Frances, who works for me, has an avid interest in WW1, which has been very useful these past few years, as we have all had so much interest during the centennial commemorations. Featherston is hugely important in the Wairarapa and for national military history because of the WW1 military training camp and the WW2 prisoner of war camp. Neil wrote a history of the camp, and a smaller volume celebrating the famed march over the Rimutakas. The Featherston Heritage members have nationally important stuff shoved in drawers, undescribed and often unfindable. We've offered to make copies and return either the originals or the copies and have got nowhere.

Neil has a good relationship with these guys and we still can't get access to the material. They hold community records and archives – in fact, they are a community archives but they don't realise it. That's the sort of scaling down of issues that we have.

How do we give archival advice to someone who

- a) Doesn't realise they have archives and**
- b) Is resistant to the advice?**

Elizabeth – Sarah does bring up the issue of training. Admittedly only two of the five interviewees had been to an ARANZ or Archives NZ activity. She wrote,

The type of training they required varied, based on the gaps and needs they perceived within their own collections. Three did not think that any of the larger archival institutions were able to help, or that the professional associations or educational institutions provided the level of training that either community archivists or their staff required.⁵

We can quite clearly hear that there are places out there that have this need. But do these places feel there's a problem or is it us putting an overlay onto a problem that exists for us but not for them. Apart from the WW1 example, it's their records not our material.

Reid – I'm almost a little disappointed I don't have any similar horror stories to tell but I have to admit that my own personal experiences have tended to be different. I understand what Gareth says about how community groups can often be resistant about providing copies of material in their archives. But what we've generally found, through

having an emphasis on digital collections, is that if you offer to digitize items for people, give them their own digital copy and let them keep the original, then they'll usually be happy to let you put a fully credited digital surrogate up on your own website in exchange.

I'm sure there are archival preservation horror stories out there but I don't tend to come across them. Rather than people being indifferent to preservation of heritage items in their care, I've more often come across people approaching me for conservation advice, even though I'm no expert. While I'm not into trying to enforce who should or shouldn't be counted in the term 'archivist', it seems to me that one basic requirement is that they're committed to the preservation of heritage records. So people I've encountered who identify themselves as community or private archivists may often be inadequately trained and make mistakes in terms of properly conserving the items in their care, but they're not generally indifferent or resistant to advice on this matter.

Gareth – I think for us there's an issue that slightly different from other communities. Because the Wairarapa Archive has such a high profile in the community, it would be a weekly event for someone to come in with a personal item or collection, asking for preservation advice. We'll give them a folder or paper and it preserves the document.

We've done a lot of copying especially of WW1 material recently – in fact, I think we have too much WW1 material on our website now! I think digitisation as a process of acquisition and preservation works well within community archives. It's a good idea. I still think the problem goes back to people or institutions who have archives and don't realise they have them. How we go about finding and how we go about assisting these people, that's the real problem.

Elizabeth – That is something Sarah brought up.⁶ Getting the knowledge out there in ways that didn't make it sound so top down. Maybe it's the cup of tea level...

Reid – I remember I once had a small guide for community archives put out by the National Preservation Office that had some useful tips in it.⁷ More of that sort of thing would be good. There's also a very good 'Cataloguing guidelines for community archives' put out by the Community Archives and Heritage Group in Britain.⁸ What I liked about this was that it recognized that community archivists may not want, or need, to follow all the protocols or employ all the metadata tools that full-fledged professionals do. So instead of providing an introductory

manual to professional standards it focuses instead on providing a realistic and user-friendly guide to basic principles and procedures.

Gareth – A couple of points Terry made are well-worth remembering. Is it part of our institution's mission to help other people, to help foster other community archives? Do you know enough about the community? And he's talking about the more activist-style community archive. He said you can't be out there shopping for communities to archive.

Some of these things make me stop and think because we've done things like that at times. We have an extensive oral history collection recorded in the mid-1990s. The interviewers went and asked the same set of questions to a lot of old people. So I know there was no broccoli grown in the 1920s. I know in the 1942 earthquake, everyone's jams fell off the larder cupboard and that the chimneys fell down, were rebuilt and fell down again in the second earthquake. But that's basically all that I know.

We harvested oral histories from a broader range in the community during Masterton's sesquicentennial in 2004. We took a snapshot of the community – from the teen parent unit at the college, some boy-racers. When I proposed this to the District Librarian she was furious – what are you talking to those people for? Next you'll want to speak to the man on the rubbish truck. So we did! We've taken it further with the Maori community, the disabled community.

One other thing that Terry says relates back to the well-known whakatauki. If you're only about the records and not about the community, you will fail. So if you're only about harvesting their records and you're not about them, it will not work. He tangata, he tangata, he tangata – people matter more than records.

Elizabeth – We're back with the people, so the role of community-generated content. The community is generating the content which will go into the archives, which in the context of my archives is pretty much all of it. If it's not about the Marists, their influence on NZ society and the impact on them, then technically I shouldn't have it because the role of my archives is to document them. So that could also be considered the limit of my community-generated content.

How do you see the role and limits of community-generated content?

Reid – We've put quite a bit of effort into this. Community-generated content is a nice idea, but you do have to accept a certain amount of 'messiness', a lack of polish, in what you get. One of the things we've

done is made an effort to encourage people to contribute local anecdotes and stories – the sort of thing that doesn't fall within traditional notions of what counts as an archival record. We have user-contribution tools on our website where people can directly upload material of this kind. We also have people coming in to our library and telling us little anecdotes of things they think should be preserved.

We also often hold events where I visit community groups and take along these huge piles of reproduced photographs from our archives. People are invited to add their own information or reminiscences in relation to the images shown. It's the whole notion of archival objects as touchstones for people's memories. People look at the photos and suddenly these recollections come flooding back. They've got information in their head that they haven't thought about in years and this is the opportunity to capture it. How you capture this can be a bit difficult, though. People won't always write down their memories for you – they'd prefer to just tell you – and taking notes as they talk often misses important details. We have, though, undertaken a major oral history project this year using a digital recorder. That proved very successful. It was specifically about Upper Hutt in the 1960s. We did over twenty interviews and put these online.

A core part of my job – we don't get many researchers coming in – is going out into the community and showing them what we have. This generates comments. Councillors see value in what I do with the enthusiasm engendered in the community. It raises our profile.

Gareth – The Wairarapa Archive's key performance indicators include the need to generate six newspaper feature stories and give six talks per annum. We're over-achievers with having done over 50 of both and published a book last year. When I give a talk, it's virtually never about recordkeeping, it's always a story about the people. We hold the records of closed schools, religious groups, local associations.

Reid – I often offer custodial storage to community groups. I explain that if they let us hold their non-current records, they can still come in and consult these whenever required. This is of benefit to both parties. I find that when organisations don't see any current significance in what they hold, the records are not well looked after.

Gareth – Country Women's Institute is a good example of doing things right. They have a manual that includes record keeping rules to follow.

Elizabeth – You’ve given a couple of good examples there. Sarah wrote ... some [community archives] **are impeded** by a lack of focus, and a clear collection mandate [emphasis added].⁹

Last year in Auckland Verne Harris brought up Jacques Derrida’s discussion of hospitality is ethics in which Derrida finds the term “community” problematic. Firstly, he suggests a possible common etymology for “munition” and “community”. This aside, community simultaneously implies sharing and exclusion. **If we accept that a community naturally has limits, then is it ethical to take everything offered even if it wouldn’t survive if it wasn’t taken?** I have seen in some collection policies – “xxx in all formats” – eg taking 5.25” or 3.5” floppies but no way of accessing material or accessing in such a way that authenticity is compromised.

Reid – I’m not sure of ethical aspects. For us, it’s a space issue. We would take material that larger institutions would not consider but that is what we’re there for.

Sometimes when I’m offered things like scraps of old newspapers that I’ll take even though we’re unlikely to hold onto them long term. I never mislead the person by saying that we’ll definitely keep the items they’re donating but often I accept them for assessment. I explain that we may end up disposing of these items so they should keep them or find another home if that bothers them. More often than not, though, people just want the things to hand things over, make sure that ‘the right people’ have an opportunity to look at what they’ve got. You don’t want to mislead people about the likely outcome but you do want people to feel that they are contributing, doing the right thing by community heritage.

Elizabeth – That’s a different view of community archives. I do work for a club and they will take everything. I try to tell them that their primary function is not an archive and if you are taking things can you manage them? It’s trying to make them aware of those limits of their own community and what they can manage appropriately, otherwise it becomes a big mess.

Gareth – There are issues there around needing quite a refined collection policy. Say a rugby club goes out of existence and offers their honours board and cups. They can be seen as a record because they have information on them, but we can’t take them as they are outside our collecting policy.

Reid – How about taking a digital photo of the item?

Gareth – Yes, we do take photographs of them. What we do get offered is lots of is material relating to the royal family and that material we do decline. If it were about the Queen of Wairarapa – that's a different matter.

There's a deeper issue in that even community archives become places for the powerful. When you go through our records you will find the sheep farming families' records are over-represented and the dairy farming families aren't represented at all. We have to consciously make efforts to redress that balance. It's so easy not to do that.

It comes back to community and munition; there is an insider, outsider thing happening there. You have to make sure that the community that you harvest from is widespread, not just the elite groups of the areas. That's a particular problem for a regional archive even more so in a rural town where the wealthy have a disproportionate influence.

Reid – That also plays to a degree of active soliciting and collecting

Gareth – Largely because of our profile we have not needed to do that.

Reid – We do have enormous gaps in our collection. One thing we're targeting at the moment is the Asian community. We have a few photos but no records and no context to put the photos in. We're approaching people asking if there is material out there, can we have it or make copies.

Gareth – We do have the records of the Wairarapa Chinese Association but little else on the Asian community. We did a project on migration in the 1950s – an oral history project – and as part of that we wanted to interview the Pacific Island families but we couldn't find them. Sometimes nationally important issues play out differently when you translate them to a small rural community ... actually, I can remember the first Polynesian family arriving in Masterton. It's a difficult issue.

Elizabeth – **How are users finding out about community archives because the purpose for our existence is to have the material used?**

At the Marist Archives, we are online in two places – on the Society's website and an entry on the Community Archive website. I have more than enough work without expanding the Archives online presence.

Is it a two-edged sword – greater visibility, greater use, greater pressure on whoever is providing the service?

Reid – While I'm no digital evangelist and see many worthwhile benefits from working with physical archives, I have to say that having an online digital collection has been of a huge benefit to us. Because our collection is mainly accessed through our website, increased demand doesn't pose any problem for us as it would be if access was only via a reading room. Even when people come into the library with archival enquiries we often end up setting them up with our website on a computer, and so avoid the time-consuming aspects of having to retrieve multiple items from the store room. As far as we're concerned, the more people who want to use our stuff the better. A major downside of digital access, of course, is that you forfeit some elements of personal interaction. But it's certainly helped us avoid pressure on staffing.

Gareth – For us it is a problem, albeit a great one to have. Everything that we have processed is available through our database, which is accessible online. It is attached to the library database and has been configured so that you can do an "all resources" search across the library, the archive and the newspaper index, though most people choose not to search that way. We have 80,000 authorities in the database and follow Library of Congress.

Greater visibility does mean greater use. A lot of people want to look at photos. That's a given, so we've digitised over 20,000 of our photos. We received the Wairarapa Times Age photograph collection when they downsized their building space, so we have over a million taken from the 1960s through to 2005. There's almost daily demand to look at those.

I'm at the stage where I do very little arrangement and description. We're closed in the morning to do processing, we're open in the afternoon to deal to the public. I spend most mornings answering emailed enquiries and writing reports for council.

Reid – Just in terms of access, with an online collection like ours, one of the interesting things is how many overseas enquiries we get. Not just genealogists trying to track down information about family members, but train enthusiasts and other specialists who've come across relevant content in our collections through searching on the internet. Previously use of a community archives like ours was severely restricted by our small size and remoteness. Now, though, simply through being online, we have a national as well as international reach.

Gareth – The problem is when we go down that scale of size of community archives again. The problem of access to the Carterton Historical Society or Featherston Heritage records – there basically is none. I don't think the Carterton group have been open for the last year because of the in-fighting and Featherston might open once every few months.

Elizabeth – These places have the doors shut. How are they going to be managing their own material? Gareth and I had this conversation at the Digital NZ planning day last year. Here's this great aggregation, but they can't aggregate anything because they don't know what's in the collection. We were talking of a digital collection management tool of some sort.

Gareth – This has always been a worry for me. Digital NZ points towards digital records but in fact most archives records aren't digital. There is no national equivalent for analogue records...

Elizabeth – Within our own repositories, quite clearly for you Reid it's the mainstay with the Recollect platform, the key driver [Reid agreed]...

Gareth – I would say that ours is a key driver for external visitors, but for people coming in, it's a different set of users. Like quite a few organisations, maybe we shouldn't be called an archive, we're more a local history centre. We're physically separate from the library. Ironically we got the reference section from the library when they ran out of space, which is normally how we get the archives out of council. When people come from around NZ, they expect to see a cupboard of records, our stackroom is possibly the same size as the room we're in here today [downstairs meeting space in the National Library].

Elizabeth – **Within your own archives' practice, what other impact do you see digital technology having – risks, opportunities, threats?**
[big pause]

Gareth – There is no rush from community archivists to talk about born-digital records. They're a huge well of mystery and we have no clear pathway forward ... We do oral histories digitally, we take in digital photos and the like but apart from that we don't have the processes. We have some 3.5" floppies and a floppy drive in order to get the material off them, but we haven't done it yet.

Elizabeth – That for me in small archives is one of my pet passions. In my own situation with an ever-aging congregation, my digital media collection is growing. In 2013 I had one hard drive and about 31 floppies. I now have 5 hard drives waiting processing. They contain more gigabytes than I have server space, so it's hard to take action when I can't store anything. I spent a long time creating an action plan, so my next step is to get a bigger server.

Reid – There is a lot more we could do. One thing we've experimented a lot with lately is Facebook. As with other archives, people have been taking photos from our collections and posting them on local heritage Facebook sites where other people have then added their comments. We had an experience a few years ago, where this was going on with this one particular Facebook page using huge numbers of our photos. That was fine by us but we did approach them to get permission to retrieve the information their users were posting about these pictures. They were cool with that but, unfortunately, before this project could really get going the group collapsed and their Facebook page suddenly closed. All of the community heritage information that was there that we hadn't yet managed to record was completely lost. So we've now set up our own Facebook page and have a system for regularly harvesting information from the comments posted there. While people can also add comments about items directly to our Recollect website, this doesn't generate anywhere near the attention that the daily postings on our Facebook page does. On the other hand, though, simply having a Facebook page doesn't provide the kind of archival functionality that an online interactive database like Recollect does. We're trying to use the two together in a way in which both online presences complement one another.

Gareth – We also do Facebook and Twitter. Even though the advice at a recent NDF was not to give the youngest person this task to do, I did. With other young people on these platforms, it meant that material more applicable to them is selected and posted. We've also found it pays to put up things from the 1960s to the 1980s for the older generation.

Elizabeth – There is one other area to explore, supporting other community functions,¹⁰ which is something Reid brought up in our panel preparation.

I now want to add another section to my job description to include the **significance of the broader social or 'public policy' objectives**

to our work, an inspiration from Andrew Flinn.¹¹ In my own situation I don't have the Catholic and obviously priestly background, so I visit our men in retirement when I come across older material in order to understand their context. During a visit, conversation can wander over many topics and I learn a lot more about the congregation than just the material I'd taken along to show them. But I also see how invigorated the men are, that they feel that they are still purposeful within their community and I receive the benefit of this.

Reid – I identify as an archivist but so much of my job seems to stray into territory not traditionally seen as part of archival and recordkeeping practice. For instance, as an employee of a Library and a local Council, one of the main ways I'm expected to justify myself workwise is through the level of community engagement I achieve. In fact a lot of what I do might seem to have more to do with community work than record-keeping. And so, for instance, my finding ways of engaging with the elderly in my community or, alternatively, the young through making school visits, is considered just as important as my maintaining metadata standards and helping with research enquiries. It's about using archival content as social objects, using local heritage as a way of getting people making connections with one another and the history of their community, and in that way helping to improve their well-being.

Gareth – The council has a set of overarching objectives about community wellbeing, education and community health. We're quite justified in saying that we contribute to achieving those objectives. To me it lies at the heart of what we do. We're not there to get the records in; we're there to enable people to use them. We don't have a community of scholars; we have a community of people who want to have information about their community and about themselves. They want to see their community reflected back to them. The point is why would the community pay for us to be there if we weren't doing that, if we weren't providing a tangible benefit to them?

Elizabeth – Sean and I have already discussed training in managing born-digital material next year. **Is there something you'd like to suggest as an achievable goal for ARANZ in 2017?**

Reid – From the enthusiasm seen here today, it would be for ARANZ to champion community archives, by helping to raise their public profile and providing them with support.

Elizabeth – How about refocusing the old Archives and Records week as Community Archives week?

Gareth – I've long been an advocate for regional community archives along the lines of NDF's regional groupings. I know most people in the room and can tap in when I need it but people working in the next level down don't have that type of network so need the support.

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11. A. Flinn, "Chapter 2: Archives and Their Communities: Collecting Histories, Challenging Histories," in *Memory, Narrative and Histories: Critical Debates, New Trajectories*, ed. G. Dawson, Working Papers on Memory, Narrative and Histories 1 (Brighton, UK: University of Brighton, 2012), 21, accessed November 10, 2016, http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/68271/Chapter-2-Working-Papers-Journal-by-Andrew-Flinn-ISSN-20458304.pdf#.