Primary sources reimagined

Advancing accessibility in digital collections

Speakers

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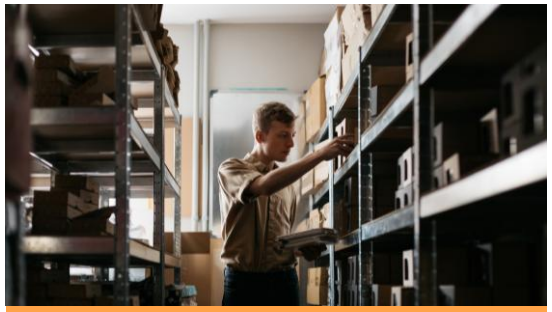
ABOUT

AM's digital collections and technology platforms enrich the study, research and teaching of primary sources.

For over 30 years AM has been working with libraries, archives and heritage institutions to digitise the world's historical and cultural knowledge.

Purpose-led publishing

What makes AM different



Stewardship

We help partners reinvest in and preserve their archives for future generations, often taking on complex projects others avoid

Access

We work with and provide free access to the communities who created or are represented in our collections

Quality

We take great care to provide context and work with scholars on relevancy; each project is shaped by an editorial board and input from libraries

Transparency

As part of Sage, our independence enables lasting partnerships and sustainable publishing models

Committed to innovation

1990 — Microfilm

1998 — CD-ROM

2001 — Online collections

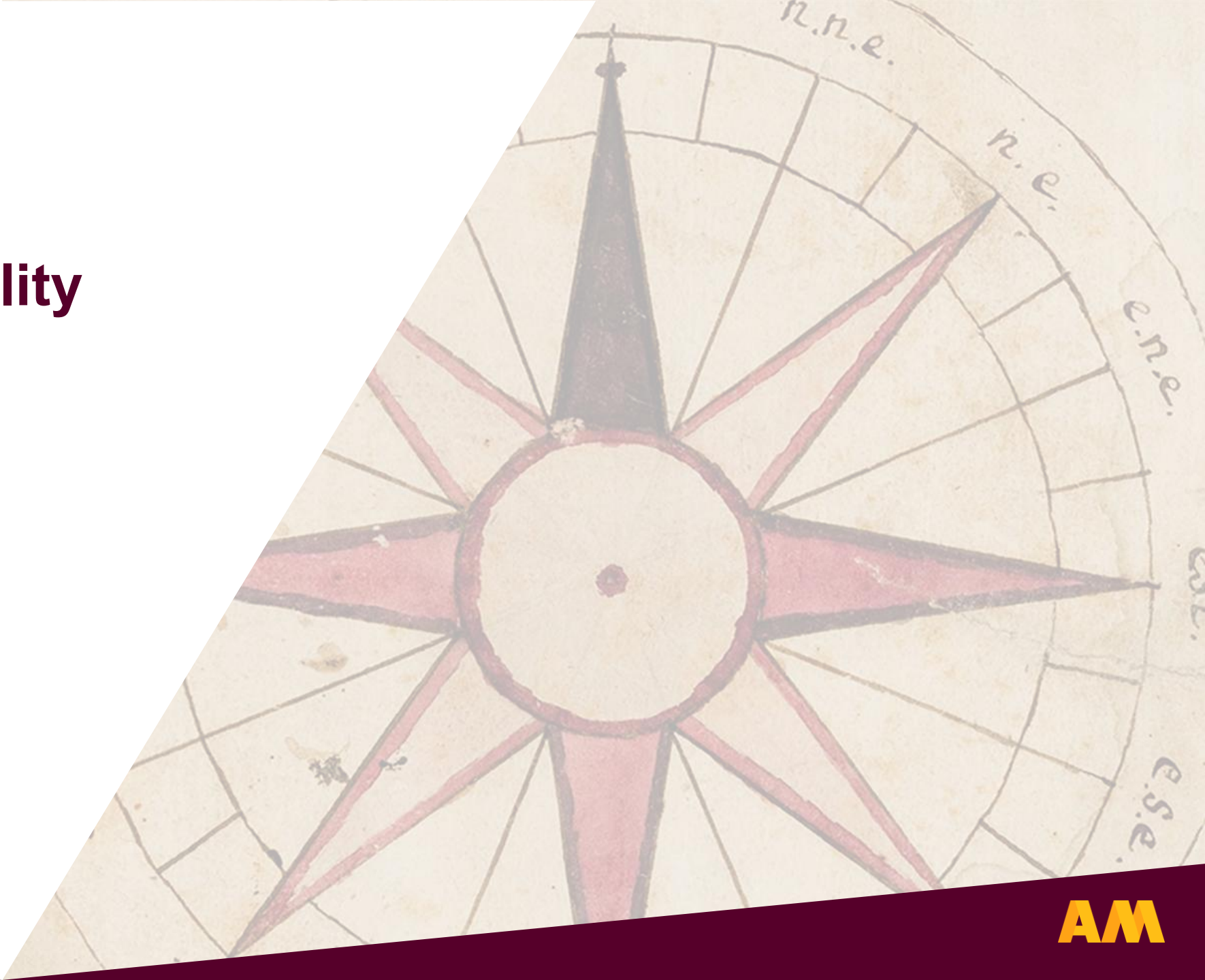
2017 — HTR technology

2018 — SaaS platform

2021 — Audio description

British Library: Digital accessibility

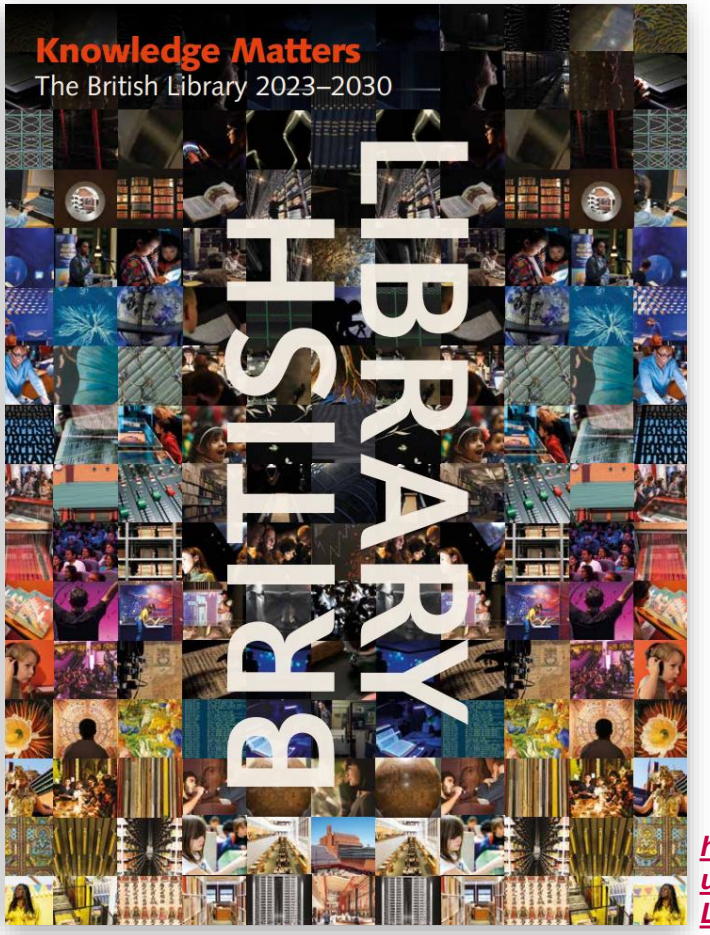
Joe Gilling
Licensing Manager,
British Library



British Library commitments to accessibility

‘Our task of opening up knowledge means that improving access to everything in our collection is more vital than ever. We will make it easier for people to access the collection, do research on any subject, and develop information literacy skills to confidently evaluate what they discover.’

British Library Knowledge Matters 2023



https://www.bl.uk/about-us/Knowledge-Matters-British-Library-Strategy-2023-30.pdf/

Enabling access to digital content

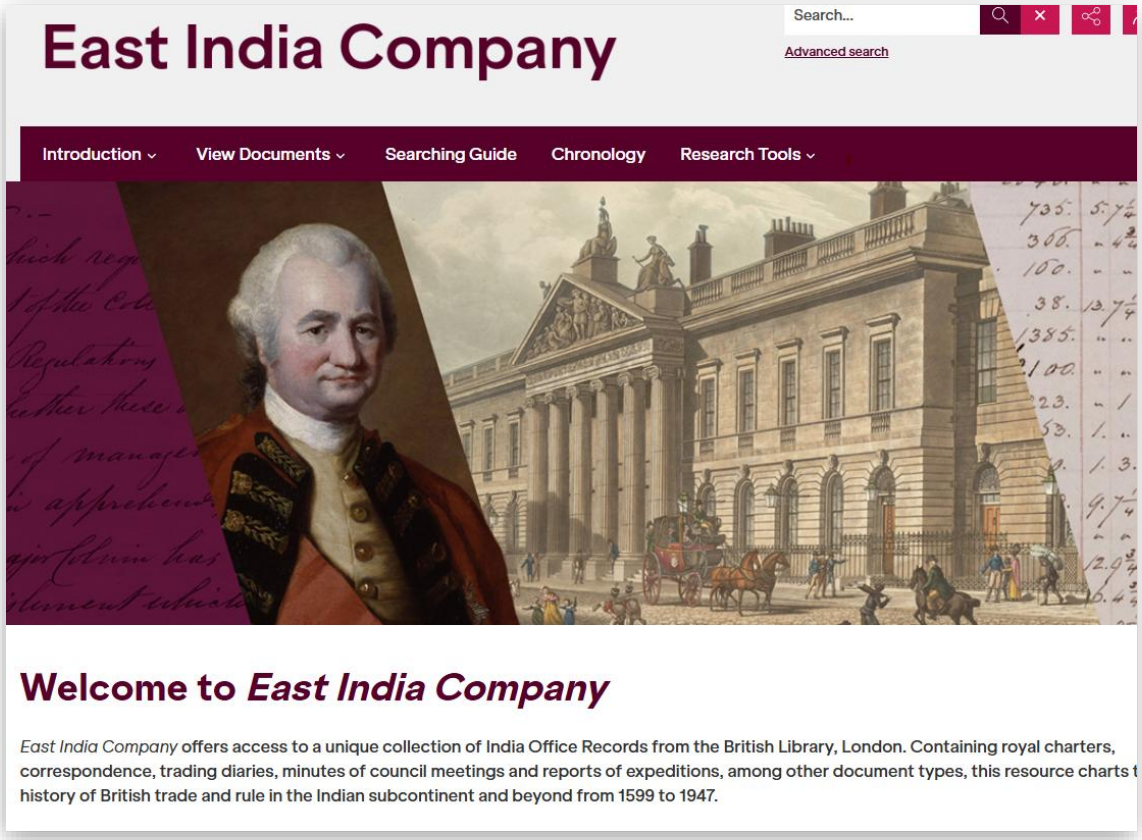
- Remote reader registration and renewal of reader passes
- Staff mediated access to digital resources in reading room
- Proxy access to digital resources by a carer
- Remote access to digital resources (subject to agreement with the supplier) and access to digital resources on users' own devices with assistive technology.
- Making accessible copies of digital resources in line with the exceptions set out in the Copyright and Design Protection Act.

Benefits of digitisation partners

- Global dissemination
- Remote access
- Contextual supporting material
- Complimentary collections from other institutions
- Technological developments:
    - Alt Text
    - Discoverability
    - User Experience
    - Text Recognition Software

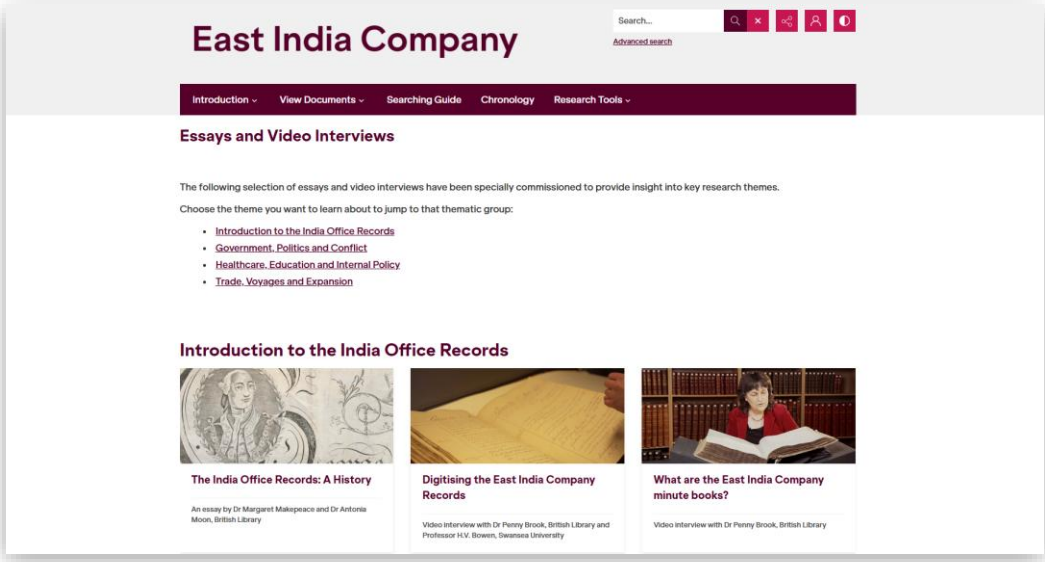
BRITISH LIBRARY

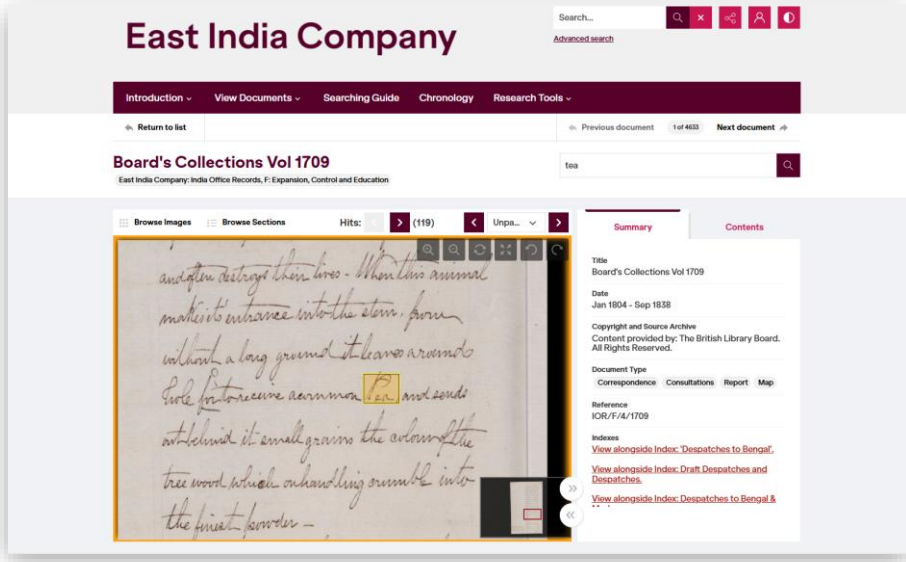
Case Study - East India Company



- Digital archive of the famous India Office Records
- 5 million images of British Library collections
- Project started 2015
- One of the British Library's key strategic partnerships

BRITISH LIBRARY





Anjengo (G/1)		Anchuthengu; Anjenga
Armagon	Miscellaneous (G/40)	Armagaon; Durgarazpatnam; Dugarazpatam; Duraspatam
Arracan		Arakan; Rakhine
Attinga	Miscellaneous (G/40)	Attingal
Ayutthaya	Siam (G/33)	Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya
Azimgurh		Azamgarh
Baghdad	Persia and the Persian Gulf (G/29)	Bagdad; Bagdat
Bahawulpore		Bahawalpur
Balambangan	Borneo (G/4)	Felicia Island; Balambanghan
Balasore (G/2)		Baleshwar; Baleswar
Bandar Abbas		Abbas; Bandar-e 'Abbās
Banjarmasin	Sumatra (G/35)	Banjar
Bantam	Java (G/21)	Banten
Basra	Persia and the Persian Gulf (G/29)	Basrah; Bassara; Bussorah; Bussora
Beauleah	Miscellaneous (G/40)	Rajshahi; Rampur Boalia
Behar		Bihar

Find People

To uncover narratives about, in reference to, or authored by people outside of the dominant perspective presented by these documents, consider the following points:

- The language that would have been used to refer to these people:

For example, searching for 'sepoys' or 'natives' can provide useful search results for South Asian people who served in the East India Company's military apparatus.

- Filter options:

Use filters along with these search terms to narrow down the date or region in which you are interested.

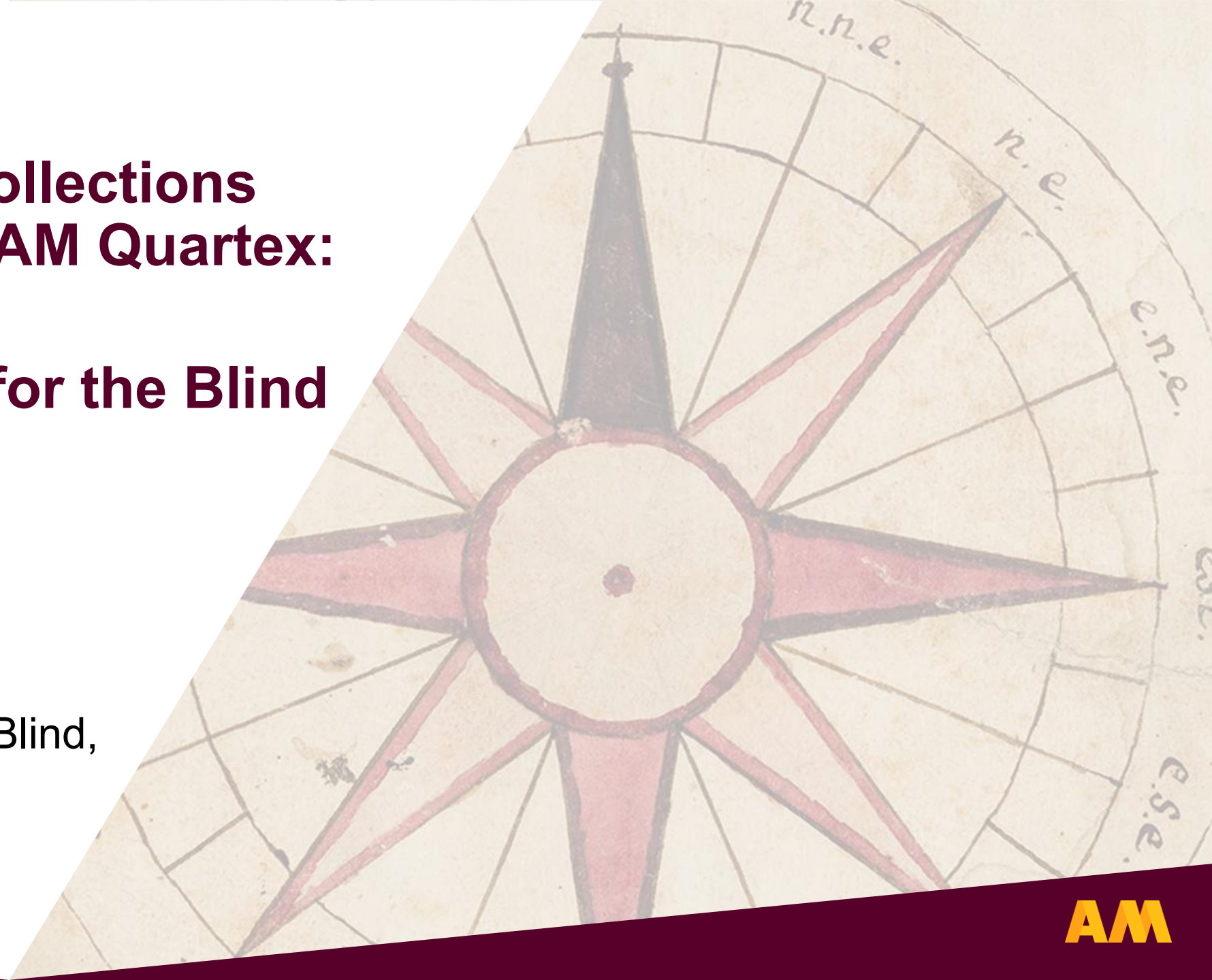
The Document Types filter can also be a useful means of further narrowing down search results:

  - Consider which *types* of documents might contain information about people whose narratives you are researching. For example, correspondence from a specific governor might contain information about the peoples living in the area they administered.
  - Consider what touch points might exist between subjugated groups of people and those writing the documents included within this resource. For example, treaties that were signed between the East India Company and Asian polities.
  - Evaluate gaps or silences depending on what material has been or has not been included within this resource. For example, the documents within *East India Company* were mostly written by East India Company officials or civil servants; they present this particular perspective and bias. As a result, there are very few accounts directly from the peoples of South, South East, and East Asia.

- See David Veevers' essay on *Unearthing Colonial Encounters*, and Beverly Lemire's essay, *IOR/E/1 Miscellaneous Letters Received: An Introduction* to support your research.

Making digital collections accessible with AM Quartex:

Insights from Perkins School for the Blind



Susanna Coit

Archivist,
Perkins School for the Blind,
Massachusetts

Inclusive access

Whether it's making education, library services, or online access accessible, **inclusion through accessibility** is at the core of Perkins School for the Blind's mission.

For the Perkins Archives this means providing access to our digital collections through image description, transcription, and accommodations.

User needs guide our strategy

- Idea that things that are truly accessible are “bare-bones” and look different

- Differing needs
  - Experience of users with disabilities and non-disabled users
  - Ability to request more accommodations

Using Quartex

- Transcription strategy
  - Published text
  - Manuscripts and handwritten text
- Image descriptions
  - Different levels based on asset type
- Accessibility of DAMS

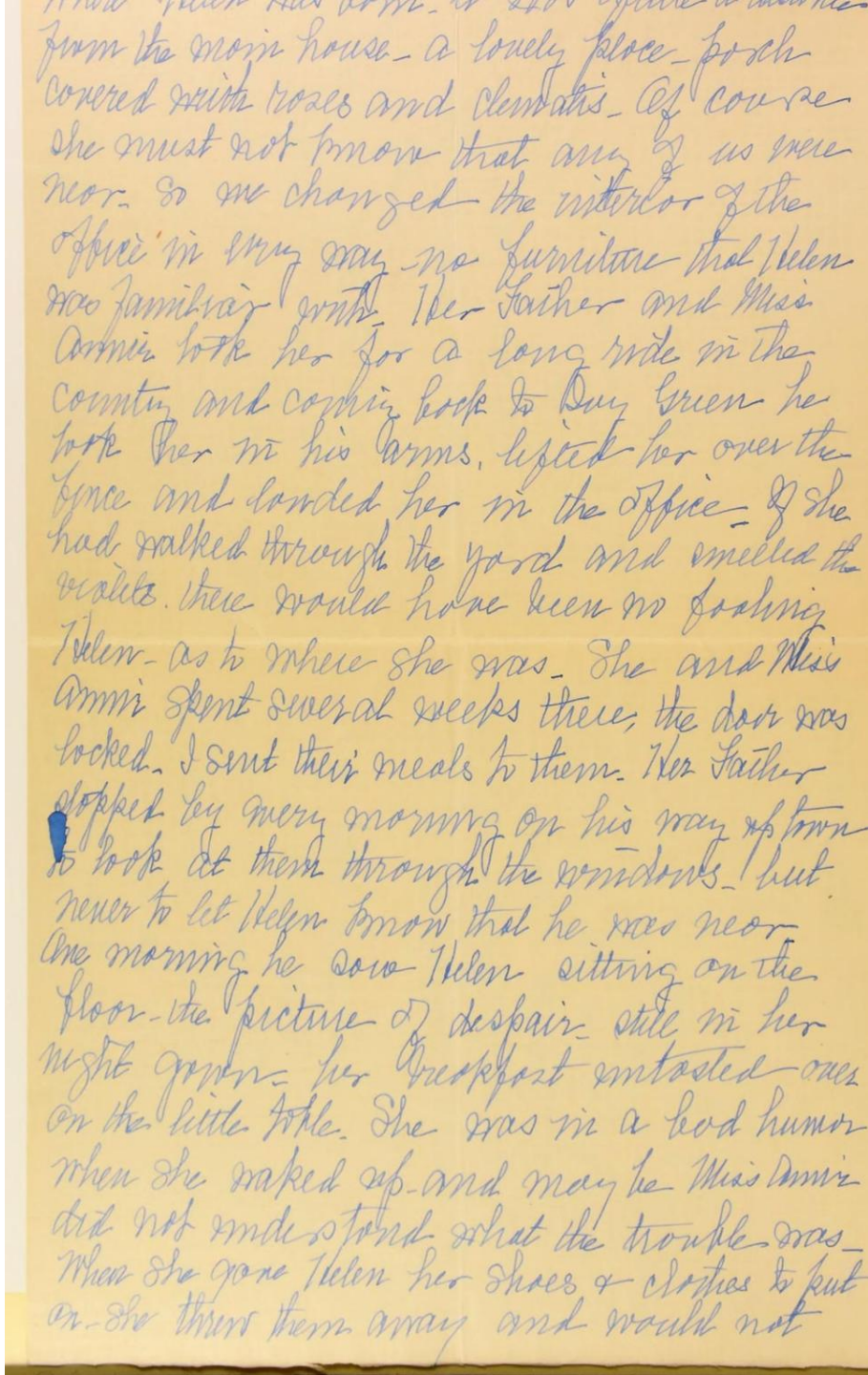
Transcription

Standardised practices

- Providing transparent transcription practices
  - What we're doing ("Practice")
  - Why we're doing it ("Reasoning")
  - Increase awareness of accessibility issues

- A-Z list format

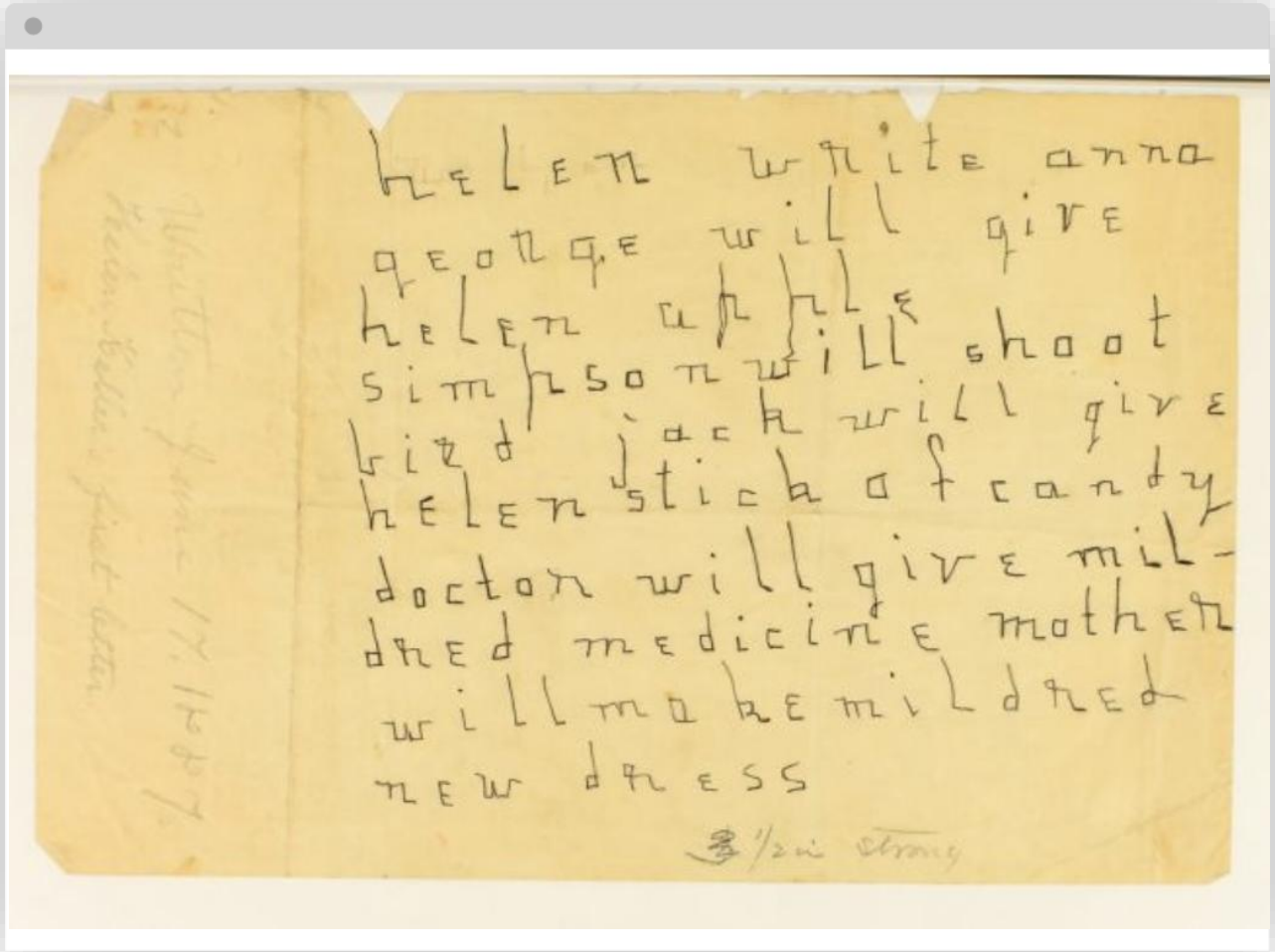
- Linked examples from collection materials



Transcriptions

Standard practice

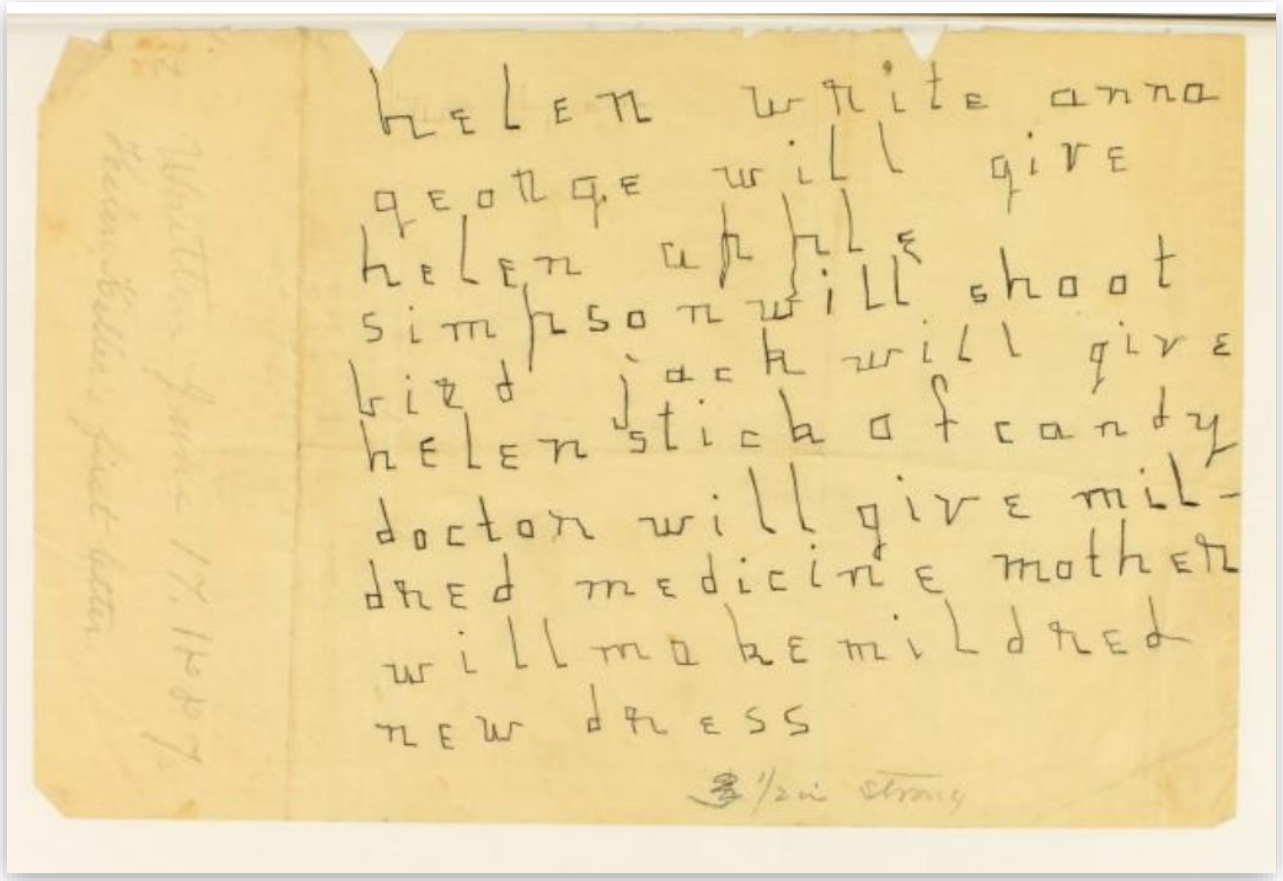
- Optical Character Recognition (OCR)
- Manually corrected or transcribed by hand
- Original text presented as is, with added information in brackets (based on Transcription Practices guide)



Example of transcription for handwritten text

[Written in a different handwriting on the left margin of the page, perpendicular to Helen Keller's writing]

Written June 17, 1887, Helen Keller's first letter



[Handwritten by Helen Keller, in square hand]

helen write anna

george will give

helen apple

simpson will shoot

bird jack will give

helen stick of candy

doctor will give mildred

medicine mother

will make mildred

new dress

["3 1/2 in. strong" written in a different handwriting]

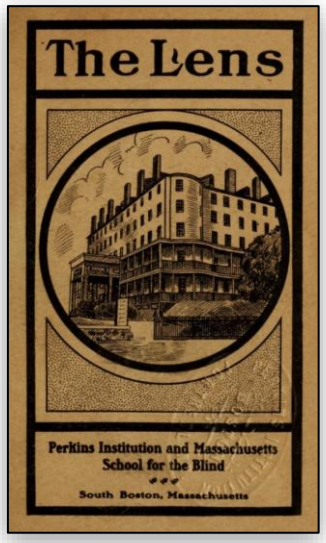
Accessible image descriptions

Asset

- The description field in the asset level is used to describe image-based resources such as photographs

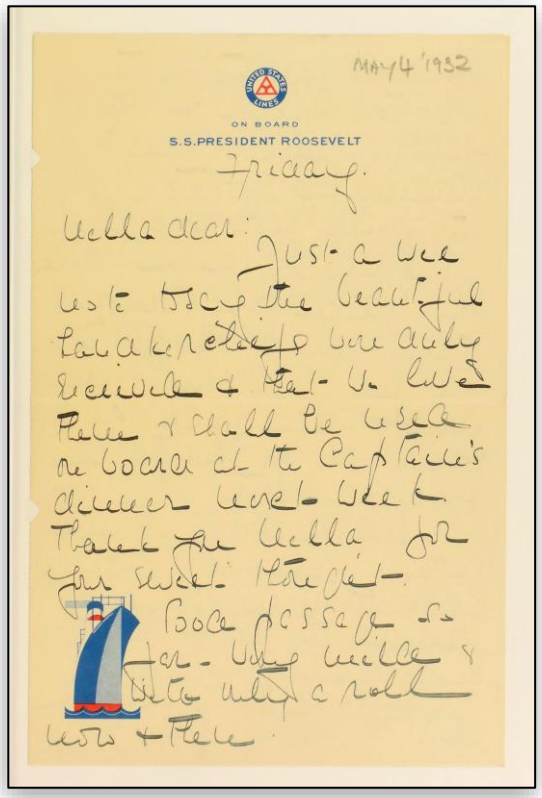
Complex asset

- The description field in the asset level is used to describe the group as a whole
- The description field in individual file labels are used to describe images in that file which is duplicated inside the transcription page in brackets



Asset outliers

- Assets that are primarily text but may have an image incorporated somehow are described in the transcript in brackets



What we can do

The Perkins Archives is leveraging Quartex to enhance digital collection accessibility and using the migration as an opportunity to implement more robust standards and practices.

- Unifying digitised collections
- Apply more consistent and up-to-date accessibility standards and practices
  - Customise metadata and fields by asset type
  - Facilitate navigation of complex assets

Find us at….

Email: Archives@Perkins.org

Instagram: @PerkinsArchives

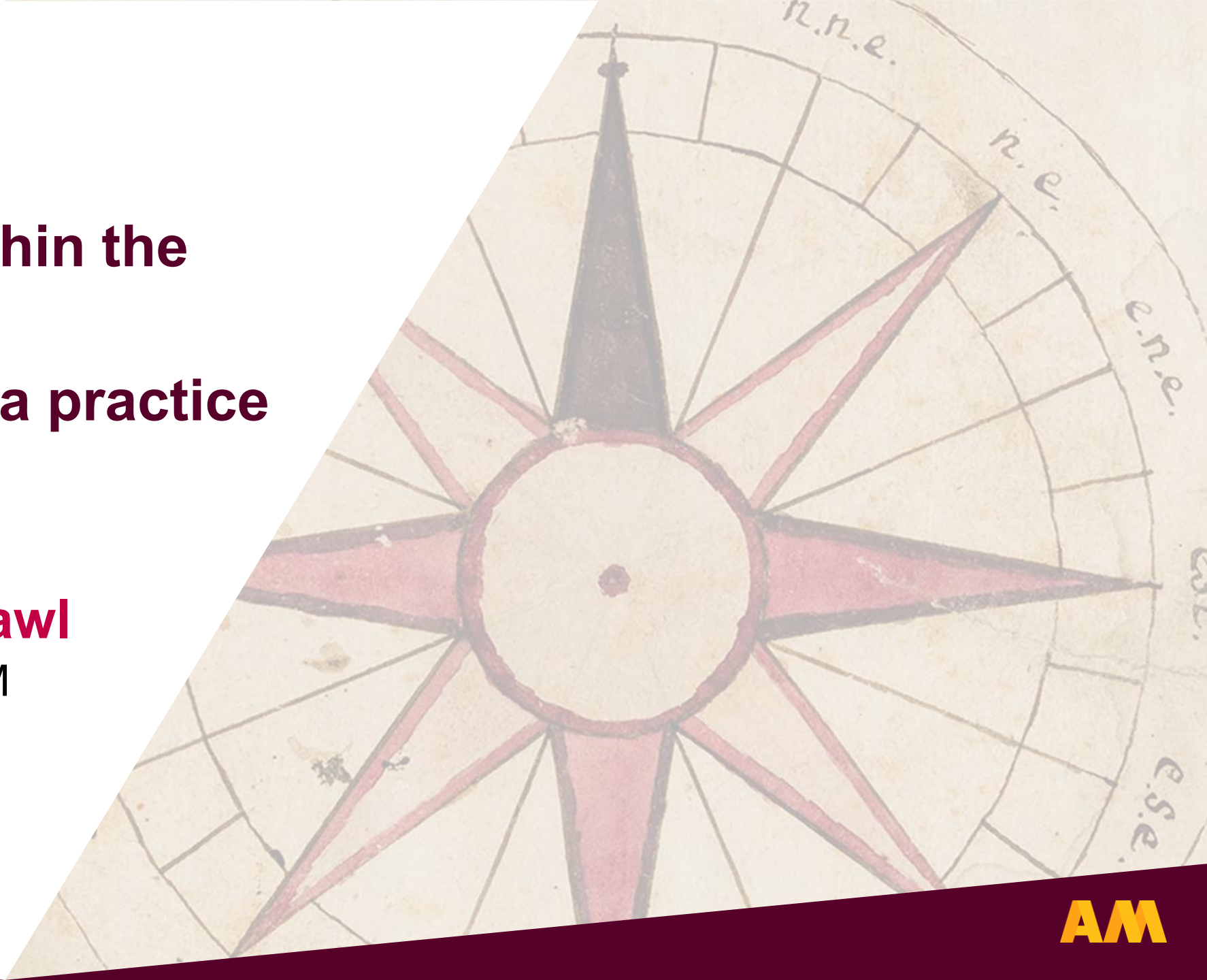
Digital collections: digital-archive.perkins.org

Web: www.perkins.org/archives

Accessibility within the technology:

Accessibility as a practice

Yasmin Burton-Lawl
Senior UX designer, AM



What accessibility means to us at AM

Accessibility as a process

Accessibility embedded

Training and accreditation

Reflect and review

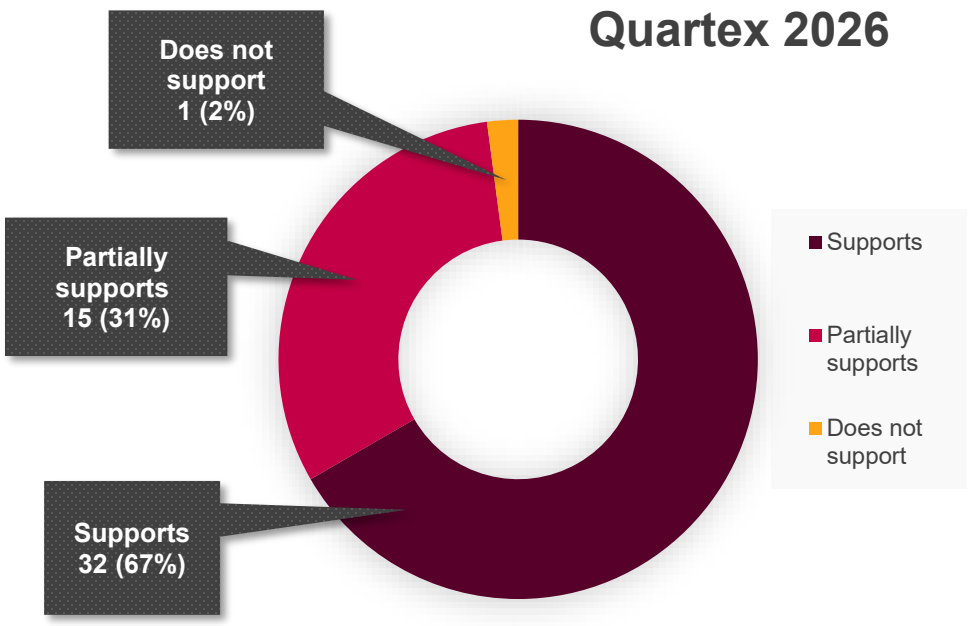
Accessibility as a practice

- Designing to WCAG standards from the outset
- Accessible patterns and components by default
- Ongoing collaboration with engineering
- Structured testing and issue prioritisation

Where we are today

Current platform accessibility

- The Quartex ACR is rated against WCAG 2.2 AA
- Improved the percentage of fully supported criteria by **17%** since the start of 2025, with more updates coming shortly
- We now have a prioritised list of improvements to make in future



Where we’re going next

Our approach

Follow WCAG (2.2 AA)

Incremental updates

Process improvements

Why this matters to us

Site creation and editorial practice at AM:

Accessibility by design

Rosie Threlfall

Site Creation, Publishing Manager, AM

Working collaboratively: UX and Editorial

UX provides the foundation

- Component behaviour
- Accessibility standards at platform level

Continuous collaboration

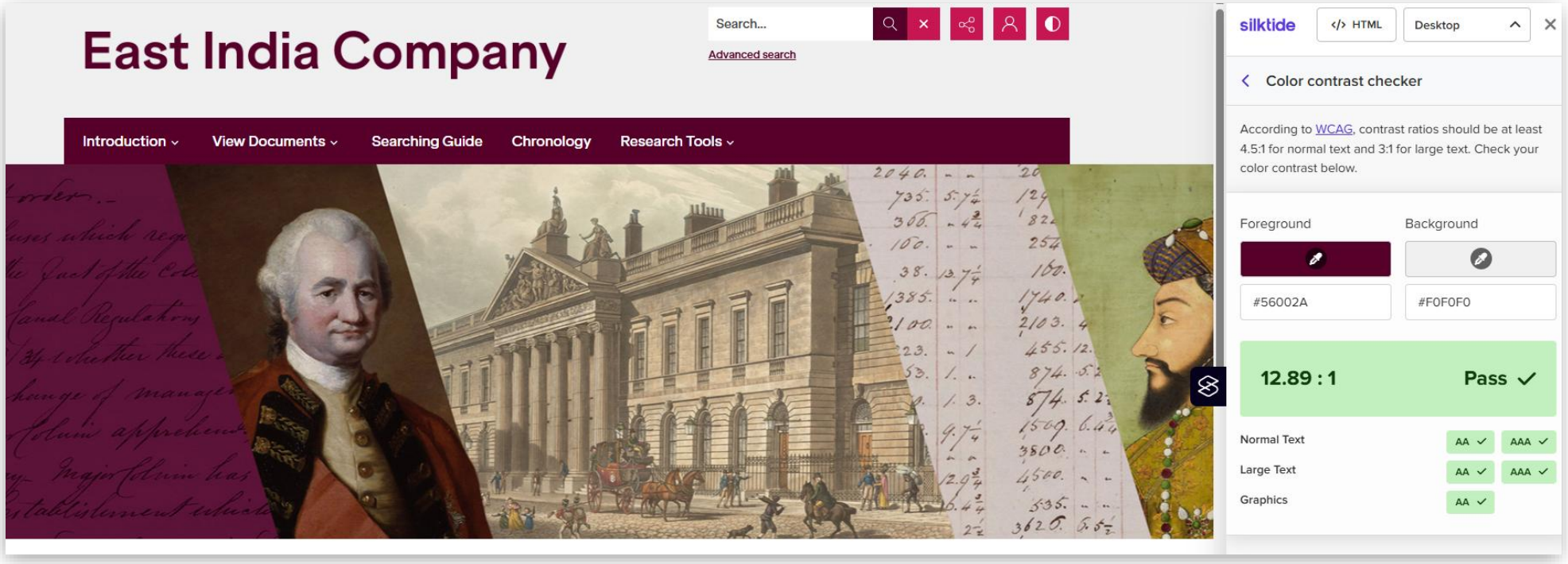
Editorial builds on that foundation

- Reinforce UX intent
- Don’t introduce barriers

Site Creation: crucial for accessibility

Making intentional decisions

- Dedicated Site Creation team
- Content, structure and user experience coming together
- Intentional decision making
- Accessibility by design



Editorial patterns create accessible digital experiences

Examples of what good editorial accessibility looks like in practice

- **Clear information hierarchy:** Using consistent structures so users can predict where to find things and how content is organised.
- **Meaningful labelling and plain language:** Titles, headings, filters, links and descriptions need to make sense out of context—especially for screen reader users.
- **Consistent navigation:** Repeating patterns across collections helps users build familiarity.
- **Editorial restraint:** Avoiding unnecessary complexity in layouts or language that might look impressive but makes content harder to use.

Workflow: how accessibility is built, reviewed, and continuously improved

Built

- During site planning and structure decisions
- When editorial patterns are established
- When content is first configured and reviewed

Reviewed

- During acceptance testing
- As part of broader site reviews

Continuously improved

- As accessibility standards evolve
- As user expectations change
- As our own understanding improves over time

Q&A session

Which part of your process has made the biggest difference to you and your audience?

How do you decide which steps to prioritise and how does customer feedback influence your accessibility roadmap?

How do each of the panel feel that changing developments in technology, and specifically AI, will impact the accessibility of digital collections?