



**Written by**  
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## How I cleared my attic



*This article has been syndicated.*

As you read this, be aware that, wherever I am in the world (just back from my first-ever wine trip to India if all goes well), a major part of me is now in California, as I explained in [My transatlantic archive](#) and amplified in [Winiarski underwrites Davis writers' collections](#). Below is the background to the nuts and bolts of it all.

It all began with my friend Hugh Johnson. Like Nick and me, Hugh and Judy recently moved from their family house (in their case a massive Jacobean manor house and garden in the Essex countryside) to a smaller domicile in central London. I remember three or four years ago Hugh spending weeks and weeks sorting through his accumulated paperwork and then in February last year he took part in a ceremony at the University of California at Davis to celebrate the arrival of his professional archive in the famous Shields Library there.

Fast forward to last July, four months before we were due to pack up our four-floor Victorian family house to move to a brand new apartment only about two-thirds the square footage. Hugh called me and invited us to dinner saying MacKenzie Smith, University Librarian at Davis, was keen to meet me. Over dinner this bookish young woman proposed that she acquire my archive too, to join Hugh's on the other side of the Atlantic. (They also have the papers of Robert Mondavi – I wonder how much editing they needed? – and the likes of American wine scientists Maynard Amerine and Harold Olmo.)

I was very surprised to be asked, to think that my scribbles might be of some interest and value, but of course I was honoured and, as a northerner with a frugal streak, I was delighted to think that there was an alternative to simply throwing out 40 years' worth of papers.

One of my main motivations for setting up JancisRobinson.com in 2000 was to provide a permanent, accessible alternative to my old records of tasting notes: suitcase after suitcase stuffed with scribbled tasting sheets. So these printed and handwritten souvenirs of tastings back to 1976 comprised a substantial part of what I could offer Davis, chronicling the changes in the sort of wines regularly shown at professional and private tastings in Britain in the last quarter of the 20th century. Australian, and California, wines were still a novelty, for instance, when I started out as a wine writer – and Italian wines were considered fit only for basic trattorie. As editor of a wine trade magazine, as I was between 1976 and 1980, my most frequent destination was Jerez, so important was the sherry business then.

On these 'business trips' I always took copious notes, generally scrawled in difficult circumstances – while walking in dark cellars or being driven over rocky tracks – in reporter's notebooks, so I had hundreds of these battered old things to offer too, hoping I was not too indiscreet in them, and that Davis has a team of crack graphologists on staff.

I invited MacKenzie and her mathematician husband Steven Wegmann to dinner later that week so that we could examine together just what my archive might comprise. As well as representative tasting sheets and notebooks, I was able to show her about a decade's worth of smart Bollinger diaries in which I had noted all the wines I drank that were not described in my notebooks – generally rather smart wines sipped at dinner tables. (These, along with my personal engagement diaries, which I have from 1975, had been invaluable when I was writing my 1997 professional memoir *Confessions of a Wine Lover* – entitled *Tasting Pleasure* in the US.)

As well as all this I had lots of publicity material, many a photograph of wine luminaries, and cuttings books with just about every article I have ever written in them (starting with my very first published article, on fashion in the *Cumberland News* in 1965, followed by my restaurant reviews in Oxford University's unfortunately named *Isis* magazine). There were dozens of scrapbooks, which morphed into unruly piles of articles about me and my books and television programmes. I had already tried to tidy up the detritus that languished in our attic of many a TV series that Nick and I had produced via our independent production company so was able to hand over quite a few tapes, scripts and correspondence pertaining to them, including our TV profile of the food writer Elizabeth David. Plus that ancient medium, DVDs, of some of my work.

Hugh had apparently kept a number of his manuscripts but I'm afraid I was only too delighted to be able to throw out these bulky piles of paper as soon as the actual book was published. I also forced myself to throw out most of my awards and the collections of cards for special events such as our engagement (there were lots of lovely, perhaps relieved, well-wishers from the wine trade, I noted), our wedding, the birth of our three children and my OBE from the Queen. What I did keep was some of the more significant professional correspondence from the era when we

used to write letters and faxes. I can't remember exactly what has made its way to Davis but I do remember the odd communication from the publisher of *Wine Spectator* Marvin Shanken signalling the end of my column there, some lively correspondence about the probity of British wine writers with Robert M Parker Jr, and some observations about wines we had shared with novelist Julian Barnes.

As it happened, we had already invited Julian and eminent publisher Carmen Callil to dinner the night that MacKenzie came to look over my archive. Both of these literary figures had already very profitably sold their archives, to the University of Texas and the British Library respectively. 'So', Julian turned to MacKenzie at our dinner table, 'I hear you're buying Jancis's papers.' The Californian blanched and immediately corrected him. 'We are *acquiring* them but we will pay for shipping, cataloguing and storing them.'

Thus it was that professional archivist Richard Taylor of York spend much of a week labouring creakily up and down our attic ladder and recording just how many scrappy bits of paper were to be packed into the 13 bankers' boxes that had been ordered from FedEx.

Future generations will presumably just copy their life's work on to a USB stick.