

Sharing knowledge and creating new partnerships: a new website for The Rothschild Archive

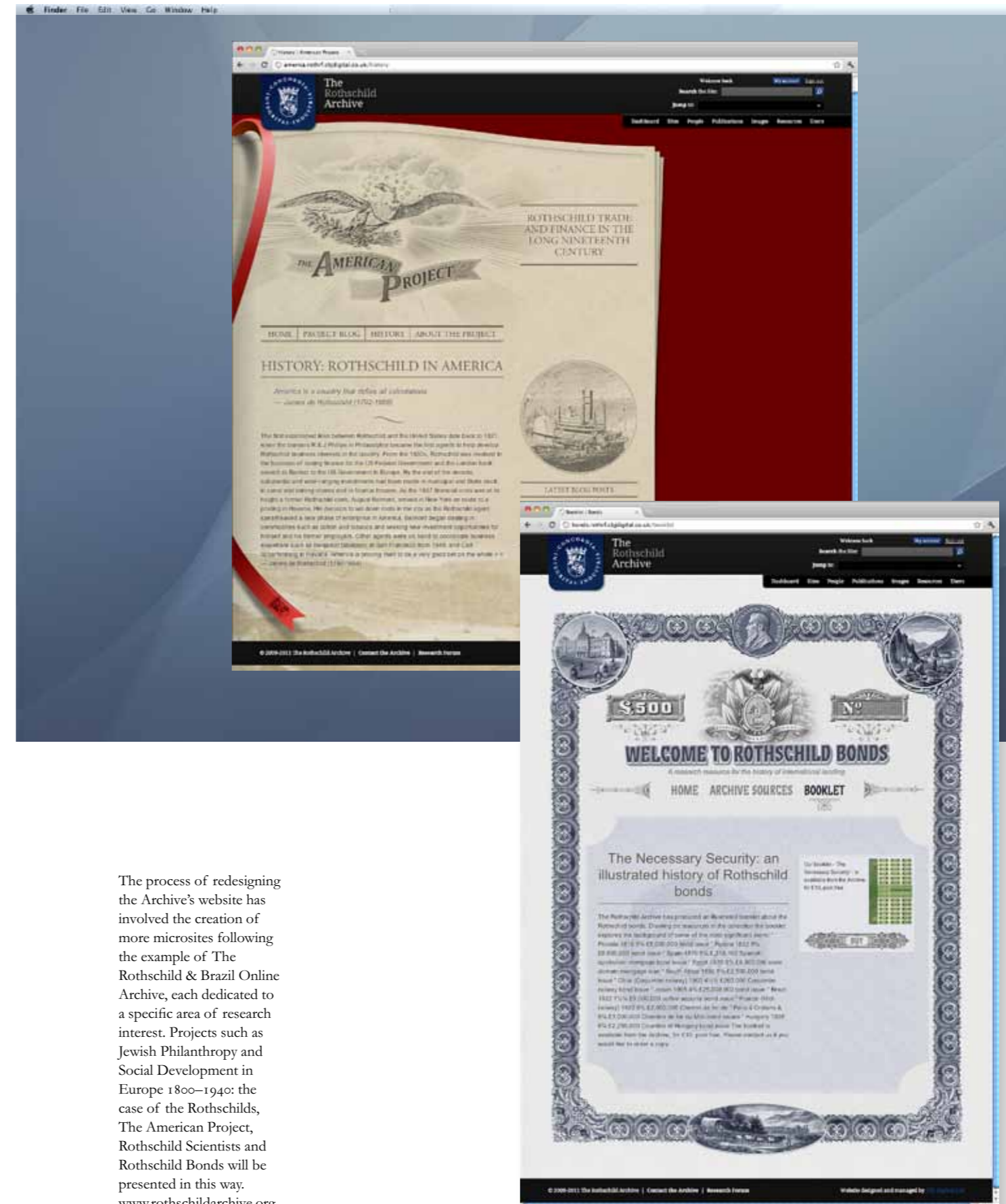
Justin Cavernelis-Frost introduces the new look to the Archive's website.

The unique collections of The Rothschild Archive are the documentary evidence of a family that for generations has been active in many spheres of society. As the world's leading bankers in the nineteenth century the Rothschilds were closely linked to governments and economies worldwide. As patrons and collectors of art, the family shaped a 'Rothschild style' and supported artistic creation. The Rothschild family is noted for its major contributions to educational, medical and social advancement. Threaded through these achievements are the interests of individuals in politics, science, natural history, horticulture, photography, technology, travel and wine. All of these activities have continued to be the subject of study by researchers across the globe, encompassing a huge range of academic disciplines and research methodologies.

One of the first objectives of The Rothschild Archive Trust when it was established in 1999 was the creation of a website to encourage scholarly use of the archives. The site was enhanced in May 2003 by the addition of The Rothschild Research Forum, established with our Forum partner The Rothschild Collection at Waddesdon Manor. Both these developments were a clear response to the use of information technology to enable the Archive to share its rich resources, and to create the means to allow researchers, wherever they may be in the world, to register their interests and to discuss their research. This is particularly true of the Forum, which has been viewed as a 'virtual' reading room: registration, supported by two written references, is required, just as it is for access to material in the Trust's reading room at New Court, London.

In the years since their creation, The Rothschild Archive website and The Rothschild Research Forum have both attracted a large and wide-ranging community of users. The Forum attracts many applications for registration and, to date, over 600 individuals have been enabled as Forum members. The content of the website has grown enormously, to encompass over 700 unique pages, including many images and downloadable files. Significant achievements in digitisation of the original documents from the collection have been made, with the development of the Rothschild Brazil Online website in 2007 which has made available over 25,000 digitised images of original documents documenting the extensive history of N M Rothschild & Sons' involvement with Brazil.

Website design has changed significantly in the years since the Archive's site was launched. Much more than just a shop window to present information, websites have become increasingly the means to create a dialogue with communities of interest. A deeper understanding of the needs of modern researchers, together with developments in website design and internet communication led to the decision to make changes to The Rothschild Archive website. The design brief was not only to give the site a fresh new look but also to create a robust underlying structure. The sheer quantity of material contained within the Forum demanded that a new intellectual approach be taken to configure the content clearly and to allow researchers to access material more conveniently. Most importantly the site needed to be able to grow and respond to changing needs. The Archive hopes that the end result of the redesigned site will create the essential online resource for all serious scholars of Rothschild history, offering a virtual space to transfer knowledge and to support them to share ideas and the fruits of their research.¹



The process of redesigning the Archive's website has involved the creation of more microsites following the example of The Rothschild & Brazil Online Archive, each dedicated to a specific area of research interest. Projects such as Jewish Philanthropy and Social Development in Europe 1800–1940: the case of the Rothschilds, The American Project, Rothschild Scientists and Rothschild Bonds will be presented in this way. www.rothschildarchive.org

So what are the major changes that visitors to The Rothschild Archive website can expect? Firstly they will be greeted with bold, eye-catching images embedded within an attractive new layout which creates the opportunity to illustrate the rich and varied range of resources held by the Archive. Visitors to the homepage will instantly be able to access information about new material, new research, events of interest and news about The Rothschild Archive. For the first time a range of basic information resources will be available on the 'open' pages of the website.² This will enable users to find answers to a much wider range of basic enquiries and information about Rothschild business and family history than ever before. New features on this part of the site include a visual representation of the Rothschild family tree, searchable by name, clearly showing the relationships between different branches.³ Future work will build on this to present biographical information about key family members.

The Rothschild Research Forum has been completely revised to give a new energy to this important online resource. The new look Forum will consist of core information about the Rothschild banking businesses, business sectors and activities, together with information and sources about the family's other interests. Complementing this will be a series of new self-contained microsites, each with its own distinctive design, look and feel. These sites explore in greater detail a particular topic, resource, or research project. Microsites developed, or in preparation include guides to the collections of The Rothschild Archive; The American Project;⁴ Rothschild Philanthropy;⁵ A Rothschild Bibliography; Rothschild Bonds; Rothschilds & Science;⁶ Rothschild Biographies; Rothschild Letters;⁷ and the Rothschild & Brazil Online Archive. Future developments within the microsites will include programmes to digitise key sources and the facility to enable researchers to contribute to blogs and add their own information about items from the collection to enrich our collective understanding.

The Archive hopes that the new site will contain information that can be used by a broad constituency of researchers. The new website reinforces the identity of The Rothschild Archive and is a reliable online repository of information, a library of sources, texts and news for anyone engaged in detailed research into aspects of the history of the Rothschild family or one of the many subjects with which their lives intersect.

Justin Cavernelis-Frost has held senior positions with The National Archives and the former Museums, Libraries & Archives Council. He joined the staff of The Rothschild Archive in 2009, and was previously Trust Archivist of St Bartholomew's Hospital.

NOTES

- 1 The new Rothschild Archive website has been developed in partnership with CBJ Digital Limited (www.cbjdigital.com).
- 2 These are the pages for which registration to The Rothschild Research Forum is not necessary.
- 3 The 2010 Rothschild Family Tree, showing the male line descended from Mayer Amschel Rothschild (1744–1812).
- 4 The American Project: Rothschild Trade and Finance in the Long Nineteenth Century explores Rothschild business in the Atlantic trade. This project is currently in development.
- 5 Jewish Community and Social Development in Europe, a research project examining the scale and impact of Jewish philanthropy and charitable activity across Europe, between 1800 and 1940.
- 6 A project in early development with partners including the Natural History Museum London and the Natural History Museum at Tring, looking at the Rothschild contribution to science, natural history, ecology and conservation.
- 7 Rothschild Letters is a project begun in 1989 to translate, transcribe and make available the letters written in Judendeutsch between the Rothschild brothers.

