

Collections Care Conference 2013

British Library, 14-15th October 2013

About the event

The British Library hosted a 2 day conference to discuss and highlight emerging trends in collections care and conservation. The conference was principally aimed at physical preservation but significant issues of digitisation and digital preservation were also raised, as were themes close to DPC strategic goals of advocacy and workforce development.

These notes are intended to provide an informal briefing for members of the DPC not able to attend in person. They only represent the sessions that WK was able to attend was able to make notes. For an authoritative and comprehensive report, readers are encouraged to contact the organisers or speakers directly. A number of DPC members were present in their own right – Gordon Read (LSE), Sally McInnes (NLW), Heather Stanley (PRONI), Maureen Pennock and Michael Day (BL), Bill Thompson (BBC) and others.

Keynote

Bill Thompson (BBC) – Giving the Enlightenment another 500 years

(Arrived at the end of this presentation)

Session 1: The health of the provision of care

Kenny Aitchison (ICON) Shaping the Future of Conservation: desirable ends and available means

Icon has developed a national strategy for skills in conservation. There are 68 actions based on three main strategic aims ...

- Understanding that responsibility for training is shared by all working in the sector
- Developing pathways in careers, and careers that are accessible and sustaining
- Advocacy for the development of conservation and conservation itself

The first step towards this has been a labour market intelligence survey which shows things like the median salary (26K) which is below the median for professional roles. Almost all are in permanent positions and many (23%) have been in post for more than 20 years. So it's not very well paid and not very dynamic in terms of churn. The skills strategy is moving forward with the appointment of a skills strategy manager. Items of work include developing work on qualifications. ICON has private awards but is not able to be an awarding body because the thresholds are very high. Qualifications are essentially private but could be moved to formal recognition via the 'QCF'. University qualifications should be measured against a QAA benchmarking statements – but there is no such statement from QAA about conservation so this can be moved forwards. Some things on the agenda are too challenging in practice – like assessing university curricula or giving an academic benchmark. Other things are still in hand – just researching the current provision of education and training, and

investigating the ‘non-bench’ skills that conservators need like leadership and management. The strategy flags up particular deficits in some areas, like digital preservation, but it doesn’t explicitly deal with skills in the digital domain.

Cath Dillon (UCL) Collection Demography: Stakeholders’ views on value, change and lifetime

UCL has completed a major project to examine the impact of decay processes of collections, to model the health of a collection over time. This ultimately helps predict the extent to which a (paper) collection remains fit for purpose over a given period and thus helps established the value and lifetime of a collection. Users of documents were interviewed to establish what they thought was important with collections and how they might be used. The contexts of use vary tremendously such as TNA, EH historic properties and Library of Congress. Users were asked to rate a large number of statements about paper collections, which was then subject to factor analysis. They were asked what represented the ‘end of life’ of a collection – whether it was still readable or whether it was no longer needed. People said they were a lot more interested in the contents of the document than the documents themselves so actual presence of document was less important. The project also ran a series of workshops to help measure the fitness of a document for use – putting actual metrics on this. The conclusion of these damage workshops was that missing pieces were more important than discolouration of the documents. Missing text or missing components were more worrisome. Based on a sample collection and modelled with appropriate pH and RH, 80% of the sample would remain usable for up to 500 years.

Session 2: An evolving profession

Annie Petersen (Tulane University, USA) The Evolution of Collection Care Professionals in Academic Libraries

A recent survey of conservation skills in the US pointed to a strong demand for digital skills, and a background for many in the sector coming from liberal arts – especially history. So there’s a significant skills gap. Digital preservation often sits outside the practical remit of conservation even in institutions which make a significant commitment to digital objects such as via institutional repositories. Preservation education must evolve better to prepare new professionals and keep moving the field forward. It is possible to assemble preservation training and a preservation career but the routes into the profession are not currently sustainable.

Robert Payton (Museum of London) Benchwork to Benchmarking the face of conservation and collections care

A more flexible approach to conservation has made it possible for the MoL to do considerable amounts of conservation in a series of small and major projects over the last two decades. The collections are large and diverse and spread across a number of sites. Collections care was not a primary concern in the early days of the museum, up until the 1990’s. Beautifully conserved items were all too often moved back to low-quality storage where they degraded again rapidly. Broadly the amount of interventive work has reduced while large scale collections care and storage has grown across the whole collection. This has enabled better access and conservation for the collection. Poor stores have been closed and better premises and storage standards have been

developed. Monitoring of light and humidity is now on-going and strategic consolidation has been carried out. Improvements in handling, packaging and transport also make the collection more accessible and usable. Collections care reports a complete audit of the collection every year. It has engaged senior managers with the collection and made fundraising easier. Increasingly, benchmarking of collections has replaced 'bench-working' for the MoL's conservators. There are too few staff so conservators are expected to work flexibly across the department. The change of role has been good for the collection as it creates a sense of ownership for all staff.

Prue McKay (National Archives of Australia): Seeing the Forest and the Trees

National archives formed first in the 1960's from the parliamentary library, with a specific role to gather government records. Mostly the collection is paper and around 4% have been digitised and around 2 million records were viewed online last year. Conservators are engaged with all the different parts of the service who now increasingly recognise collections care as everyone's responsibility. Work is more visible and accessible and this has had an impact on funding: so much of our planning is in our own hands. Conservation training previously was very hard to obtain but now there are 2 degree courses in Melbourne and Canberra are now available. However the Canberra course is only a component of a wider degree so needs a lot of additional practical work for the graduates to be really employable. The number of requests for physical documents has remained largely stable but online access has grown significantly. Intercepts and referrals used to consume all the effort of the team which means that most work was responsive. But a new prioritisation method was introduced in 2008 which means new kinds of reporting and recording. Splitting the workload has meant that conservators are more stretched and the collection is managed more strategically. The service now has a 'just in time' approach to prioritise action: significance, potential use and practical condition help decide whether conservation is required. There's not a large number of conservators in Australia so the needs to do training when opportunities arise is well understood.

Session 3: Training

(No power)

Session 4: Business Models

Tanja de Boer (KB) Value and risks: a paradigm shift

The KB has a preference to acquire digital copy rather than physical copies of published material. The digital collections are growing very quickly – 85000 pages per day are digitised. KB has a very small staff with a lot to do. A new strategy was developed in 2009 which is now in process of being deployed. A range of primary and secondary criteria are used to assess the value of a collection. These are scored on a scale of 1-10 (for primary) and 1-5 (for secondary criteria) which are then used to quantify the value of the collection. The result is a quantification of the value of the whole collection and relative values within the collection. This assessment is only interesting if it is then placed into a risk management framework. This works for digital as well as analogue collections. The results are arbitrary and are not a fixed point: it will need updated periodically. The value of the physical collection is higher than the digitised, and the born digital collection is valued least.

Megan de Silva (Monmouthshire Museum Service) and Jane Henderson (Cardiff University) The busy conservators guide to prioritisation

Funders are continually asking for more out of less resource, which creates a need for strategic approaches to conservation care. There are some well published approaches to make strategic decisions, such as by surveying then comparing with good practice, then producing a to-do-list of what is needed. But knowing how to do the 'to-do' list is the key. The theory and practice don't add up. The to-do list is going to encourage you to deal with one problem at a time and can become demoralising. A more strategic path is possible, enabling actions to be undertaken simultaneously. Typically large organisations have a strategic overview and strategic levels of management while small organisations don't have this luxury. Three thoughts can help – relate to standards, act across the whole collection, respond to circumstances. Sensible approaches like Pareto sorting (80/20) and PESTLE analysis. These tools were used to analyse the work load in a busy museum. The amazing thing is that many of the tasks that seemed most important at the start moved to the bottom, and less obvious tasks emerged as priorities. The point is that we are good at meeting our own slightly vain OCD motivations while we could be a lot better at doing the really high impact tasks which would allow us to be better resourced.

Cristina Durand (Amsterdam City Archives) Understanding the Use of Collections to Prioritise Tasks

Session 4: Business Models

Matthew Collins (University of York) Caroline Checkley-Scott (University of Manchester) and Stephen Milner (Manchester University) What do you call a conservator standing between a scientist and a scholar? A translator

We all have less money and we all have to demonstrate impact in new ways. We need to concentrate on the material nature of collections. Academic researchers are mostly small business men looking to raise funds for research. Lots of promise of new techniques and technologies but too little integration in practice: the promise is only ever realised in good times but the researchers also have a habit of moving on and then forgetting what has been achieved. AHRC recognises that there is a significant potential for collaboration between the science and the humanities. Multiple competing demands and hard to make a case for culture let alone conservation. Cost intensive work of conservation is not attractive and is not easily made subject to market forces. Waste from the conservation process is more interesting than you might think – so instead of the scientists simply coming along and doing science, the waste products of conservation make it possible for conservators to 'do more'. Much of the analysis is done electronically so can be distributed.

Christina Duffy (BL) From meteorites to Magna Carta a scientists journey into collection care

Physics and art history are an unusual combination but necessary for each other - but most entrants into the profession come from an arts background. Three types of imaging at the BL – multispectral imaging which helps identify the compounds which have been used in ink, while it also allows you to spot changes in documents where elements have been erased. Reflectance transformation imaging allows you to automatically re-light an image therefore allowing the 3d topography of apparently flat documents to be immediately visible. Digital microscopy allows really high quality measurements of

surfaces, the interaction of fibre and ink, the cracking of dried inks and also in predicting where wear and tear are likely. You can see individual tool marks in book binding which in turn helps interpret how a document was constructed. The images are very popular with the public and they are useful in themselves.

About this document

Version 1	Written at conference	14/10/2013	WK
Version 2	Distributed		DPC members