

What is conservation?

Conservation aims to stabilise the condition of, and limit any further damage and deterioration to, a given object whilst working ethically to provide the best treatment possible. It can be broadly divided into two interrelated categories. Interventive conservation involves treatment to address the chemical and physical effects of damage and deterioration; cleaning and tear repair, for example. Preventive conservation includes the provision of proper storage and monitoring and control of the environment; addressing light, temperature, relative humidity, atmospheric pollutants and pests. Conservation essentially seeks to ensure long-term preservation and, in the case of LHSA, to enable continued safe access to a historically, socially and medically important collection.

Core conservation activity

LHSA began to establish its conservation profile in 1999 by carrying out a National Preservation Office (NPO) Preservation Assessment Survey. This was designed to highlight areas of conservation priority within the collection and has subsequently served to provide supporting evidence for spending a significant part of the annual budget on core conservation activity. Initially, six months of a conservator's salary was made available in each financial year, with further sums for materials and for some work contracted-out to specialists. In April 2001, three years of the budget allocation was amalgamated and our first paper conservator was appointed full-time for 18 months. During this time the following were undertaken:

- A Scottish Museums Council Survey of the object collection.
- A NPO Survey of the photographic collection.
- A programme of preservation packaging of case notes.
- The conservation treatment of architectural plans, including David Bryce's drawings for the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh
- Grant applications to the Wellcome Trust and the National Archives of Scotland to fund further conservation work on a project basis.
- A range of internally-funded, but externally-executed, conservation projects. These have included the reformatting of microfilm case notes for digital preservation, the treatment of a selection of eighteenth-century documents, and the re-binding of books, such as volumes of Royal Edinburgh Hospital presscuttings.
- Environmental monitoring of the LHSA repository.
- The creation of a purpose-built conservation area for core and project work.
- Provision of stronger and safer shelving with funding from the Lothian Primary Care NHS Trust.

After a short interval when no conservator was in post, the second period of LHSA's conservation programme commenced when a further tranche of funding enabled a new full-time paper conservation position to be created in September 2003 – a two-year post that was made open-ended in June 2005. LHSA's conservation programme resumed and work to date has included the following.

- Preparation of bound volumes for commercial re-binding.
- Drafting a formal LHSA preservation and conservation policy and disaster response and recovery plan.
- Re-housing of index cards, the object collection, the glass plate negative collection and small series of case notes and correspondence.
- Preparation and monitoring of externally-executed conservation projects (the reformatting of microfilm and x-rays, for example).
- A comprehensive shelf survey to establish storage requirements and inform the implementation of a boxing policy for the Archive as a whole.
- Submission of applications for external funding (see below).
- Production of facsimiles, surrogates and photographic documentation.
- Exhibitions, presentations and publications.
- Repository management, including shelf cleaning.
- Development of the conservation work area.
- Continued environmental monitoring.
- Provision of handling guidance for staff and readers.

Conservation projects in LHSA

LHSA has also successfully bid for grants from the Wellcome Trust for five Research Resources in Medical History (RRMH) projects. The first RRMH project, *Preserving twentieth-century hospital case notes of University of Edinburgh clinical professors: Edwin Bramwell and Norman Dott*, ran from June 2002 for twelve months. The grant covered the salaries of a paper conservator and conservation assistant, plus materials. Approximately 10,000 case notes in the Bramwell collection and 24,000 case notes along with x-rays and glass plate negatives in the Dott collection were provided with proper storage. The project was completed on time and on budget and secured the long-term preservation of these important mid-twentieth century case notes, as well as improving safe access to them. A methodology for the preservation of folder-based clinical case notes has evolved from this project, which includes the treatment of photographic material (print and glass plate) and x-rays, as well as paper-based notes.

This methodology was then employed in subsequent RRMH projects as follows:

Preserving twentieth-century hospital case notes of University of Edinburgh clinical professors: James Learmonth and Derrick Dunlop (March 2004 – March 2005, c.38,000 case notes re-housed).

Preserving twentieth-century case notes of the Royal Edinburgh Hospital (July 2005 – January 2007, c.26,000 case notes re-housed).

Preserving Edinburgh's twentieth-century reproductive and sexual health case notes (February 2007 – April 2009, c.74,000 case notes re-housed).

Preserving Edinburgh's twentieth-century case notes: treating tuberculosis and World War II injuries (May – October 2009, c.23,000 case notes re-housed).

Future prospects

LHSA is committed to providing the best long-term care for the collection possible with continuing core and project conservation work.

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