

Establishing a Conservation Profile: The Experience of Lothian Health Services Archive

Background

During LHSA's early years, work concentrated on enquiries, cataloguing the vast collection to enable access and on promoting the Archive through exhibitions and publications. However, no funding was available to support activity that would secure the preservation of the collection for the long-term, be it proper storage, repair of the documents or basic measures to ensure that day-to day use of the collection did not threaten stability. Since 1999, when the new funding arrangements were secured, increasing sums have been spent on conservation.

Establishing a conservation profile: Establishing priorities

The first step towards establishing LHSA's conservation profile was to recognise that preservation of the collection is essential in order to provide access. It then remained to decide on the focus of conservation activity and it was, therefore, necessary to understand the general condition of LHSA's holdings and to identify priorities for treatment. This was made possible by a National Preservation Office (NPO) Preservation Assessment Survey (PAS), which was carried out in 1999. LHSA was the first archive in Britain to pilot this important tool developed by the British Library. The work was done by the LHS Archivist and Alison Hamilton, a former part time Edinburgh University Library project conservator, who was employed by LHSA on a casual hours basis.

The PAS is based on a sample of 400 items in a collection or part of a collection. Each sampled item is then subject to a two-part assessment using a tick-box form – the first part is to establish its historical, or curatorial, importance and the second to document its condition. The information is collated in a database and from the 400 items surveyed it is possible to extrapolate the findings out to the whole collection with a 95% +/- 5% accuracy. The conclusions of the survey are documented in a report returned to the surveyed institution. A copy of the report is also held by the NPO in order to gradually build-up an overview of the preservation needs of the UK as a whole.

The PAS is particularly useful in that it assigns a scored weighting programme to the collection reflecting the relative level of preservation need (i.e. 5 is very high priority, requiring urgent attention and 1 is very low priority). It can also indicate the types and prevalence of damage in the collection and this can, in turn, reflect the level of usability of the collection (i.e. whether it can be accessed without further damage).

The 1999 PAS of the LHSA collection as a whole indicated that we had a large proportion of items in bands 3 (medium priority) more items in band 5 (very high priority) than any of the other institutions who had participated in the survey to that date. The PAS showed that 41% of the items held had some form of damage and that the case note collections and bound volumes were in particularly poor condition. Bound volumes, in the context of the LHSA collection, could mean annual reports or patient records bound together for example or, indeed, books.

The PAS analysis software is also able to give what the NPO term 'what if' predictions, i.e. indicating how the numbered priority level would change if influential factors in the Archive altered, for example improved environmental conditions or storage facilities.

The findings of the PAS have proved to be the firm foundation of LHSA's subsequent conservation programme. The survey stressed the urgent preservation need of collection as whole, and in particular the case note collections and bound volumes, and it

recommended that this be addressed with the provision of proper storage and specific conservation treatment as necessary.

Establishing a conservation profile: Securing funding for core conservation

The pressing conservation requirements of the collection emphasised by the PAS served as supporting evidence to obtain funding for further conservation activity, be it in-house or commercial, project or core work. The first example of this was in securing core conservation money from the annual budget to pay 6 months of a conservator's salary in every financial year – Sophie Lacour, a qualified paper conservator was subsequently employed for 18 months from April 2001 by amalgamating 3 years' of the budget allocated to conservation.

The priorities highlighted in the survey began to be addressed during this 18-month period, concentrating on general approaches to improve the long-term preservation of the collection. Examples of this include monitoring the environment in the repository and beginning a programme of preservation re-packaging to provide the collection with appropriate storage, for example a series of ear nose and throat case notes (1930s – 60s).

Specific aspects of the collection that required treatment in order to enable easy access for readers and safe access for the items themselves also began to be addressed during this early stage of core conservation activity. Good handling is an important part of the safe access of a collection, however, in some cases the condition of an object is so poor that some conservation treatment is necessary simply in order to enable the object to be handled at all. The general approach of the 1999 survey indicated types of material that needed treatment, however, it was use of the collection that dictated the order in which items of a particular type are treated. A good example of this includes the re-binding of volumes in the collection. While highlighted as a whole in the survey, the heavily-used General Registers of Patients were treated first along with bound patient case notes. External commercial companies largely carried out this work, however, preparatory conservation was undertaken in-house before re-binding.

Establishing a conservation profile: further survey of the collection

A further aspect of core conservation work during the early stages of this developing conservation profile was to elaborate on the findings on the general 1999 survey, targeting specific areas of the collection. A Scottish Museums Council survey of the object collection was carried out that, like the first survey, emphasised the importance of proper storage to ensure long-term preservation. A further NPO survey was also undertaken, this time focusing on the photographic material in LHSA that served to stress the vast quantity of such material held by LHSA (about 30,000 images) and the specific storage requirements for this material, the provision of which was not, at the time of the survey, adequate. These additional surveys provide a more complete picture of the preservation requirements of the Archive to be met in the on-going conservation programme.

Establishing a conservation profile: securing funding for conservation projects

During this first 18 months of conservation activity in the Archive, grant applications were submitted to a number of bodies offering money to fund smaller conservation projects. Sophie's appointment had additional benefit in that a strong argument for the preservation of aspects of the collection could be put forward in the applications by a conservation professional.

A number of small grants were won during this period including c. £2000 from the National Archive of Scotland Conservation Grant programme to re-bind volumes of the

Royal Edinburgh Hospital Press Cuttings (dating from the late-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century).

The main project grant secured during this period was for a Research Resources in Medical History project funded with £45,480 from the Wellcome Trust. In June 2002, two full-time conservators commenced work on this one-year project, providing the medically and historically important Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh case notes of Professors Bramwell (1873-1952) and Dott (1922-1934) with proper conservation storage. This project aimed to improve access to these early-mid twentieth century case notes and to facilitate their long-term preservation.

Establishing a conservation profile: current and future conservation

The backbone of any conservation activity must be the funding to pay for salaries, materials and equipment. LHSA has secured part of the annual budget for core work, which can be followed up by applying for conservation project grants.

In fact, this approach to the funding of collection preservation perpetuates itself. The successful completion of grants, such as the re-housing of the Bramwell and Dott collections, provides effective supporting evidence when submitting applications for project funding in the future.

Conclusion

From a position of 30 years minimal preservation activity prior to 1998, LHSA now has a dedicated paper conservator, a strong conservation project presence and a long-term commitment to the preservation of its collections achieved through an active conservation programme.