

## Caring for Collections in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: preservation principles, priorities and practices

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### Introduction

The demands on the 21<sup>st</sup> century library are many and varied. Books and bytes; storage and provision; multi user profiles; changing trends in acquisition, access and demand – these are just some of the fundamental issues that need to be managed in today's modern, vibrant, living library. We must meet these challenges with courage, foresight and innovation, whilst safeguarding and promoting the core, traditional principles of collection care. This paper examines the role of the British Library's (BL) Collection Care department in this process. It demonstrates how the department is adapting and evolving its preservation principles and practices to meet the needs of its users and the challenges of its wider environment and, at the same time, retaining and strengthening its core values of collection stewardship.

*The library is not a shrine for the worship of books. It is not a temple where literary incense must be burned or where one's devotion to the bound book is expressed in ritual. A library, to modify the famous metaphor of Socrates, should be the delivery room for the birth of ideas - a place where history comes to life.*

This quotation of Norman Cousins (born in 1915) reflects the way in which perception of 'the library' has changed. The days are over when the library could afford to be the refuge of only scholars and intellectuals, demanding silence and reverential awe, familiar to the knowledgeable, inhospitable to the curious. Rather, the modern library is a place to be used, to be enjoyed; a place of inclusiveness in which to meet, learn, explore and wonder; to challenge and be challenged; a place where, as Cousins urges, ideas are born and history comes to life.

How do we develop our library into this modern, forward-thinking, accessible, holistic being? How may we

balance the user's desire for information with the needs of the collections? How can we provide access in a way the modern user demands while encouraging appreciation of the original and all the attendant issues?

It is, of course, a balancing act. On the public side, more people are visiting and using the British Library for a wider variety of reasons than ever before. For example, in March 2006, we opened our Business & Intellectual Property Centre (BIPC), encouraging entrepreneurial spirit and business development by providing free support, advice and access to relevant material and online databases in a specific business environment. Nearly 27,000 people used the centre in the first 9 months. We have opened up our reading rooms to a wider audience and have created the largest Wi-Fi hot spot in the UK (measured by number of users). We operate a thriving conference facility and run a programme of public exhibitions and talks each year. We hold music, drama and literary events in our public spaces during the day and in the evenings. Our last major exhibition 'Sacred' exceeded all previous attendance numbers with over 200,000 visitors. It attracted the highest ever average daily visitor figures of 1,325 per day; extensive TV, radio and press coverage, with over 270 stories in national, London and online newspapers; and book and merchandise sales of over £236,000, surpassing recorded sales from previous exhibitions. The British Library has demonstrably entered and embraced a new era.

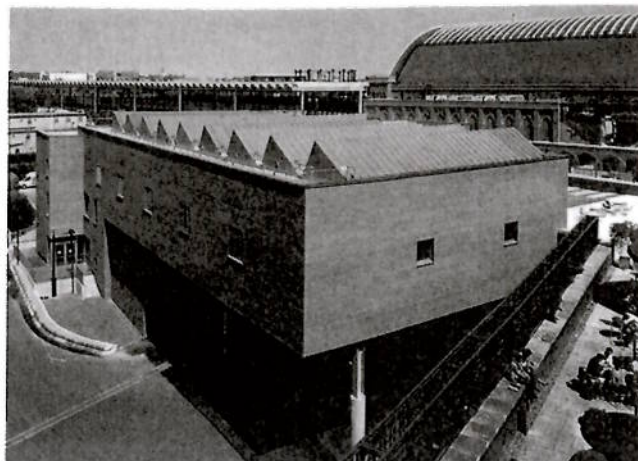
At the same time, we are strengthening core activities of conservation and preservation. These two sections work closely with one another at the heart of the BL's Collection Care department, complementing each other's roles (Collection Care also comprises Collection Storage, Collection Security, Digital Preservation, Training & Development, Conservation Research and

Preservation Planning). Fundamentally, Conservation manages the treatment and care of collection items which are unfit for purpose, while Preservation defines and employs strategies and procedures to ensure that as little of the collections as possible reach that state where they require conservation expertise. Both of these roles are supported by the work of Collection Storage, and the building of building the UK's first low oxygen store for heritage collections – a high density, automated facility at our site in North Yorkshire – to improve the long term storage of collections.

The new British Library Centre for Conservation (BLCC), opened in May 2007 (see ill 1), is an industry partner of London's Camberwell College of Arts, supporting the College's new Foundation Degree in Conservation. The centre also offers independent internships specialising in specific conservation treatments and research projects, to perfect existing techniques and foster the development of new ones.

Preservation, which this paper will now focus upon, finds itself at the heart of preventive changes and developments in Collection Care. The physical care of collections is our core role, but as the library continues to grow in the range and depth of services it offers to its users and stakeholders; as corporate and strategic responsibilities develop and change; and as technology and innovation are incorporated more and more into the library's nature, Preservation can no longer exercise this role in isolation, or in the traditional ways of old. For example, many of our preservation staff are trained conservators and qualified professionals, whose roles now involve educating and communicating, internally and externally at many levels. Their existing skills and expertise are crucial in this respect. Another example of changing practice is the creation of a dedicated digital preservation team to deal specifically with the challenges of preserving this new and demanding medium. Specific initiatives and strategies in a challenging environment are continually shaping and challenging our preservation principles and priorities. This is particularly true with regard to preservation priority settings for informing collection management decisions and maximising resource.

The Preservation Assessment Survey (PAS) is a tool for assessing the preservation needs of any library or archive collection with the overriding aim of producing an objective picture of the state of collections, both locally and nationally. The survey methodology was developed by the National Preservation Office (NPO)



**Illustration 1.** External view of British Library Centre for Conservation (BLCC).

and originally funded by the British Library Research and Innovation Centre (BLRIC) and validated statistically by Loughborough University. It is a practical, workable and useful way of determining the condition of a collection and establishing the highest preservation priorities. Its intrinsic value lies in the fact that data derived can not only be used as a basis for preservation to address specific areas of identified need, but can also aid and act as drivers for strategic bodies such as government, grant-making organisations and others involved in national planning and strategy.

The BL used the PAS methodology to survey its own collections over a three year period from 2001 to 2004, the result being, broadly, that the Map collection is the most stable and the Newspaper collection the most unstable (see ill 2). Additionally, we saw the potential for using a uniform, prioritising methodology like PAS as a more internal application in our need to prioritise the allocation of diminishing preservation resource.

Preservation funding decisions have, in fact, become more crucial over the past few years, with significant amounts of money being targeted to support other corporate and strategic initiatives. Because of this, we have streamlined the way in which collection areas bid for a share of the annual Collection Care resource, by designing a networked database through which they must bids for resource to preserve/conservate the collection items under their care. The database is a multi-tab form that asks the same questions of each bid. This ensures uniformity, transparency and fairness. The system assigns each bid a unique number which, if the bid is successful, is retained as its identifier throughout the year as work is carried out. Crucially, the system

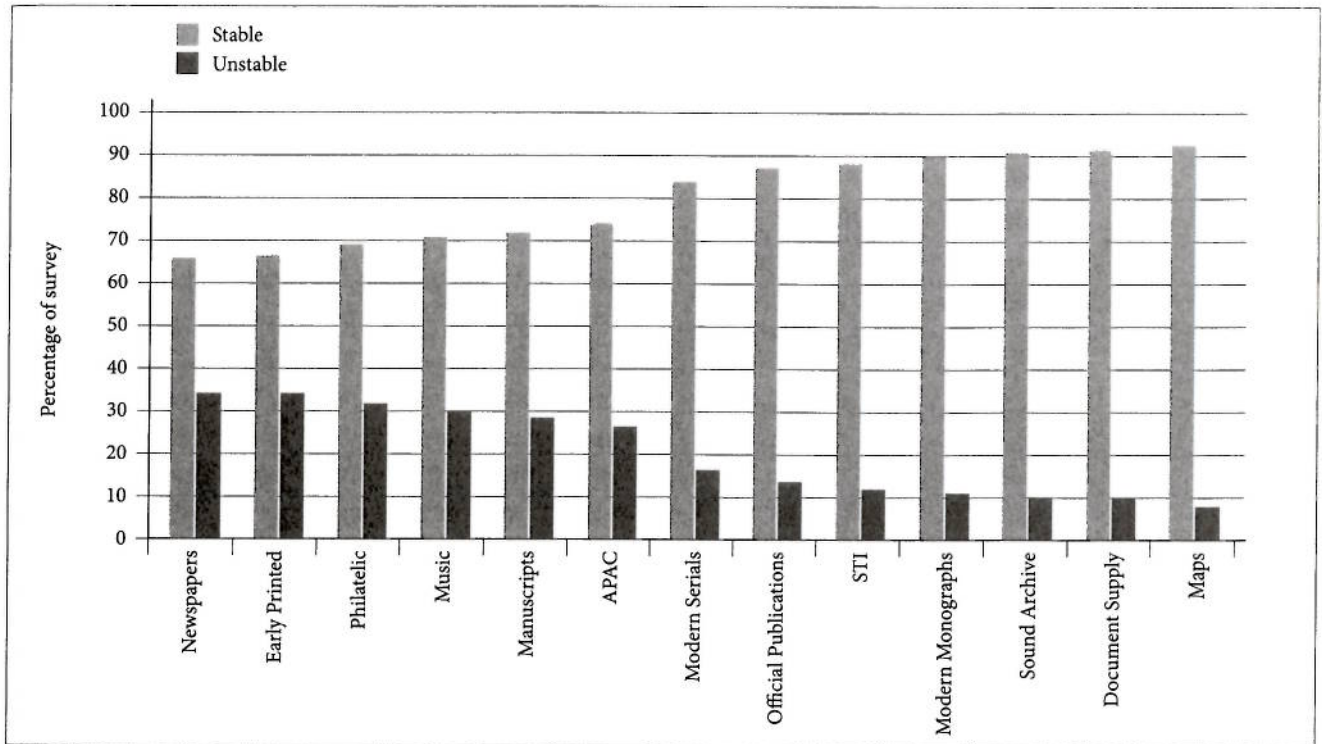


Illustration 2. PAS survey results of BL collections.

asks a series of questions based on the PAS tool, relating to access, use, housing, value and condition. A scoring structure lies beneath these questions, and the database automatically calculates the priority score for each bid. Where bids for resource outstrip the resource itself, these scores are used to determine which material is prioritised for treatment.

The BL's annual preservation budget is approximately £3M (€4.2M), but its use recently to support wider initiatives has made it necessary to look closely at some of the activities traditionally carried out. For the financial year 2008/9 for example, the budget will be reduced by a third in order to support the new storage facility at our site in Yorkshire mentioned above. Clearly, a strategy was required to ameliorate this. But what? Simply do a third less work? Or take the opportunity to review current practices and acknowledge changing trends?

One of our biggest expenditures is the outsourced binding of serials and periodicals (including some newspapers). Not only is this expensive, but we know from the increased production of born digital material, that many of the items in this category are available now in digital format.

After consultation with colleagues across the library, the decision was made to stop large scale binding of serials and periodicals and where necessary box them instead. A combination of three factors informed this

decision: financial necessity, in the shape of the much-reduced budget; external drivers - the changed trends in publishing and acquisition of this material type; and the desirability of optimising use of the three box making machines the BL now owns.

One of the biggest tensions that arise in collections management is how to ensure that widening use of and access to the collections does not put those collections at additional risk. Two initiatives, one quite recent, required extensive preservation involvement, which resulted not only in a review of procedures and practice, but also of how the principles behind them were communicated.

In 2005 the BL widened access to its reading rooms. Many new readers have never used a major research library like the BL before, where there are strict rules and guidelines on handling and copying and reading room procedures and etiquette. The challenge inherent in this was how best to educate these new users in appropriate use of collections and impress upon them that they share responsibility with the custodians of the collections; and, more importantly, how to do so firmly without dampening their spirit and curiosity, or making them so nervous of handling the collections that their enjoyment of doing so is eroded.

We focussed principally on iconography and graphics, relying on visual communication to get our message



Illustration 3. British Library placemat.

across (see ill 3) showing a placemat which is used on every desk in all of the reading rooms.

Preservation coordinators (conservation-trained preservation managers whose role includes promoting and facilitating best preservation practice across the library) work closely with reader services and reader registration to ensure that the collection care message is visible and freely available throughout the library. There is a specifically designed leaflet 'Taking Care of our Collections' available at the information desk, in the registration area and in all reading rooms. This leaflet encourages the 'shared responsibility' theme, detailing the risks to collections, what the BL is doing to mitigate these risks so that the collections can continue to be enjoyed and, crucially, what our users and visitors can do to help, including details of handling sessions that are freely available to the public. Coloured posters outside each reading room reinforce handling messages and indicate, with simple icons, the correct etiquette of reading room use.

Communication and education is becoming a more crucial element in preservation than ever before, particularly in the face of ever-changing trends in demand and access. New initiatives, particularly those that are user driven, are always challenging, and preservation involvement is critical in ensuring that the balance between access and the needs of the collections is not significantly upset.

In response to a review of the BL's imaging services, and repeated requests from readers, a pilot was introduced in 2007 to examine the impact of the use of digital cameras in reading rooms. Readers wanted to

take digital copies of content with their own cameras while they were consulting items in the reading room. Preservation again worked closely with Reader Services and Imaging Services, drawing up guidelines for all aspects of the pilot – copying restrictions, handling, type of camera, the use of camera. We also trained every reader who applied to use this scheme in the correct handling procedures and copying techniques, as well as staff who would be supervising.

While the pilot was run in response to a particular demand for digital capture in reading rooms, the results showed that using hand-held cameras was not the best way of achieving this. Preservation is now working with Imaging Services on a proposal to install self-service overhead scanners in reading rooms – a process with much less risk and much easier to control. Our principle remit is to ensure that the design and operation of the scanners poses no risk to collection items and to ensure that readers will also be able to use them safely. This demonstrates that while we strive to improve access to the collections, we will not put them at risk in order to do so.

In essence then, caring for collections in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, remains both a demanding and exciting challenge. As a national library of the United Kingdom, we strive to maintain our heritage collections for future generations by strengthening our traditional stewardship values and skills. At the same time, we are embracing the technologies and spirit of the age to draw people in, to show them that this is their library, their space, to be used and enjoyed in a multitude of ways.

## Reference

1. ALA Bulletin, October 1954, p.475.