

Warwickshire County Record Office

Conservation and Reprographics policy

November 2006

1 Introduction

1.1 General overview

Warwickshire County Record Office was established in the 1930s. Since 1974, it has occupied purpose built premises in Priory Park, Warwick. Major refurbishment and extension work took place in 2003. It is the principal archival repository in the county of Warwickshire, with responsibility for the records of Warwickshire County Council and its superseded authorities, local businesses, organisations, courts, hospitals, schools and private individuals. It also acts as diocesan record office for parish records from the dioceses of Birmingham and Coventry. Its records date back to the 12th century, and include a variety of different media: paper, parchment, photographic paper, negatives (film and glass) and a small quantity of audio-visual material.

The service employs a team of professionally qualified archivists, a professionally qualified conservator, and a team of support staff.

The service is part of the Libraries, Learning and Culture division of the Adult, Health and Community Services Directorate of Warwickshire County Council.

1.2 Mission Statement

Warwickshire County Record Office's mission statement is:

Warwickshire County Record Office exists to ensure the preservation of historic and current records and information of significance for the study of Warwickshire and its people, and to hold them in trust for the use, enjoyment and education of present and future generations.

1.3 Role of preservation

Preservation in its broadest sense lies at the very core of the service's activities and aspirations. From appraising archives for permanent preservation through to appropriate storage and handling, preservation is an intrinsic part of every aspect of the work of the service; without preservation there can be no access.

2 Conservation and Reprographics Unit: overview

2.1 The scope of the unit

The Conservation and Reprographics Unit comprises a team of staff within the record office structure. The unit was relocated to Priory Bungalow, immediately adjacent to the main record office building, following the office extension and refurbishment in 2003. This relocation resulted in improvements in terms of allocation of space and security of documents undergoing treatment.

The unit takes responsibility for the physical long-term wellbeing of the Warwickshire County Record Office collections and assures their access either in original or surrogate form. This is accomplished through managing and monitoring the environmental conditions in the repository areas, conservation and interventive treatments, binding, production of surrogates, disaster response, advice and guidance on handling archival material, staff and user education. The unit also takes responsibility for commissioning active conservation treatments where appropriate.

2.2 Strategic aims

The strategic aims of the Conservation and Reprographics Unit are as follows:

- To achieve national standards with respect to storage and physical care of collections within Warwickshire County Record Office
- To maintain the security of the collections held by the service
- To promote good practice in handling documents, and to provide suitable equipment to protect them while in use
- To embed best possible preservation practices in all aspects of the work of the service
- To undertake interventive conservation work as appropriate
- To develop a prioritised plan for future preservation and conservation work
- To lead disaster recovery operations, and to ensure that all staff are trained to fulfil their responsibilities in the event of a disaster threatening the physical wellbeing of collections
- To develop and implement robust processes for managing the unit's resources, and managing the flow of work through the unit
- To develop and implement performance measures for conservation and preservation work

2.3 Working principles

The Conservation and Reprographics Unit adopts a range of principles which underpin the conservation treatments that it carries out:

- All treatments used must be reversible, or as nearly reversible as is possible
- All materials used should be of the highest archival standard
- No process should ever remove or conceal the written or visual evidence of the document
- All conservation treatments should use compatible materials
- No attempt should be made to complete missing text or images, or to restore to a perceived original state
- All reasonable tests (e.g., testing for fugitive inks before undertaking wet treatments) should be carried out in advance of undertaking a conservation treatment to ensure that the method will not harm the document
- All binding methods should reflect the original binding style, with full respect for the bibliography of the item
- No binding method should restrict access to the text
- All conservation work carried out must relate specifically to the needs of the document, recognising that conservation staff will need to consult with an archivist in order to define these needs
- Appropriate documentation must be kept

2.4 Processes undertaken

The unit is currently skilled and equipped to undertake the following processes and treatments:

- Dry cleaning
- Traditional paper repair
- Traditional parchment repair
- Map repair (size limited)

- Leather repair
- Binding
- Leaf casting
- Customised packaging and storage media
- Digitisation (size limited)
- Digital photography
- Microfilming
- Traditional photography

2.5 Staffing establishment

WCRO's staffing establishment must include a professionally qualified conservator to oversee its preservation and conservation activities. Other staff and volunteers working in the section must be appropriately supervised, trained and monitored. Active conservation work should be carried out only by a professionally qualified conservator, or under his/her direct supervision. WCRO may on occasion commission professional conservation work from an external supplier, but will only do so once its own conservator is satisfied that the work will be carried out to a standard no lower than that of the work carried out in house.

2.6 Management arrangements

WCRO's senior conservator is a member of the office management team, thereby ensuring that conservation and preservation issues are represented at the heart of decision making processes within the record office. A member of the archivists' team is designated as having special responsibility for strongroom management and liaison with the Conservation and Reprographics Unit, to ensure a holistic approach to collections care.

2.7 Workload context

The number of documents in the care of the service which require preservation and conservation far exceeds the capacity and resources of WCRO. The addition of new strongroom areas in 2003, together with the removal of the Conservation and Reprographics Unit to a separate building have increased the number of areas for which the unit is responsible, but with no corresponding increase in the staffing levels. Public demand for reprographics services has also increased in recent years.

3 Professional standards

3.1 Archival storage areas (strongrooms) are designed to comply with British Standard (BS) 5454. At WCRO, the original 1970s strongrooms are broadly compliant with earlier versions of the standard. The 2003 strongroom extensions are fully compliant with BS 5454:2000.

3.2 All processes for archival conservation should be undertaken in accordance with the recommendations in British Standard (BS) 4971.

WCRO recognises, supports and depends upon the standards, principles and ethical requirements implicit in the scheme for *Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers (PACR)* run under the auspices of the National Council for Conservation-Restoration (NCCR) and the professional registration scheme of the Society of Archivists.

The sharing of best practice is encouraged through the contact with the relevant professional groups and attendance at formal training events...

4 Date of statement

- 4.1 This policy statement was prepared by the County Record Office Management Team in December 2006.
- 4.2 It is due for review in December 2011, or sooner if substantial legislative or administrative changes so dictate.

Current issues (2007/8)

1 Lack of capacity to conduct survey / audit

With just 1.5 staff, the Conservation and Reprographics Unit is currently unable to allocate time to surveying and auditing the overall conservation and preservation needs for the service. Nevertheless, the unit has carried out inspections to quantify the extent of specific issues, an approach which has proved successful. Targetted work programmes are based on and led by observations by record office staff in general, and observation and sampling by conservation staff.

2 Large and growing preservation and conservation backlogs

WCRO has followed national trends in recent years which have seen a decline in the amount of interventive conservation treatments carried out, in favour of investment in preventative preservation work. However, public service staff continue to identify documents in need of repair or treatment as they produce items for public consultation. The numbers of items flagged up exceeds the number of items treated in any given period.

The rate of incoming accessions remains high. All incoming documents are routinely inspected and treated if signs of mould or pest infestation are present. Any item which needs professional conservation is flagged up.

Many incoming collections have specialist storage or packaging requirements. This, coupled with the need to refresh and improve dated packaging for existing collections, is a significant workload in itself. WCRO has successfully used and continues to use teams of volunteers to assist with packaging programmes.

3 Management of strongrooms

In 2003, WCRO increased its strongroom storage capacity by 90%. In so doing, it was able to release unsuitable outstore accommodation, and greatly improve the storage conditions for its collections. The ongoing strongroom management and monitoring is now more complex than before. Conservation and Reprographics Unit staff are now regularly involved in ensuring that the vital services such as the Hanwell environmental monitoring system, the air-conditioning system and the Inergen inert gas extinguishing system are operating correctly.

Conservation and Reprographics Unit staff, with support from public service staff, have introduced a range of cleaning programmes in the repository areas including a biennial shelf and box 'spring cleaning' using supervised third party contractors.

4 Documentation

WCRO acquired CALM for Archives software in 2000. The package includes a conservation module. The long term aim is to automate the preservation and conservation documentation processes, linking the data with the relevant catalogue data. In the meantime, manual processes are maintained.

5 Public demand

Public demand for reprographics work has undergone a rapid period of growth in recent years. WCRO is equipped to offer a comprehensive public reprographics service, but staffing levels are currently too low to permit proper development in this area. The service aims in the medium term to explore opportunities to build capacity for core preservation and conservation work by operating a commercially profitable reprographics service. WCRO is increasingly offered opportunities to copy photographs and other documents for its own collections. This is a welcome development, but places further pressure on the unit.

6 Separation of Conservation and Reprographics Unit from main building

Before the large scale building project in 2002/3, the conservation section was part of the main building, sharing its work area with staff and volunteers engaged on other tasks and indeed doubling up as a staff tea room. The conflicting activities undermined the Conservation and Reprographics Unit's ability to control and manage its work flow. The new arrangements have been beneficial in providing the unit with an area which they can control and manage to suit the tasks in hand at any given time, but the physical separation has increased the time some tasks take. Staff in the unit are keen to explore opportunities to address these problems, either through the building of a physical walkway between the two buildings, or through a review of work flow arrangements.

7 Volunteer work programmes

WCRO has an active and flourishing volunteer programme which includes the Conservation and Reprographics Unit. Volunteers have successfully completed digitisation and packaging work programmes, and the unit continues to look at new opportunities for working with volunteers.

Strategies for future planning

1 Criteria for prioritisation

The unit will always have to allocate a sizeable proportion of available time for routine environmental monitoring activities, reactive requests for assistance prompted by public requests for documents in the searchroom, and digitisation work associated with new accessions. However, we feel that it is essential to allocate a workable proportion of time to tackling identified backlogs, both for preservation improvements, interventive treatments and production of preservation surrogates.

We will pilot the following approach with effect from the 2007/8 service planning process.

To identify year on year specific themes for preservation packaging and storage work, active conservation work, and reprographics. In identifying the themes, the team will consult with archivists planning collection or access related programmes so that potential synergies can be fully exploited in order to:

- explore external funding opportunities relevant to the theme
- “protect” time slots for relevant staff members for this work
- set targets for the programmes to help maintain a focus
- explore opportunities to increase capacity and sharpen the focus by recruiting specialist staff for specific tasks

2 Performance management

By setting preservation/conservation targets we provide a framework for measuring improvement, for reviewing the success of resource allocation, and for lobbying for additional resources.

3 Resource allocation

3.1 Clearly there is plenty of potential for additional resources to be put to good use. However, we have to be realistic, and recognise that while we will of course continue to lobby within the county council for additional funds, the chances of success are limited and we must therefore explore the opportunities offered by other sources.

3.2 A number of external funding bodies are willing to invest in conservation, preservation and reprographics related projects. In recent years, criteria have tended towards preservation, conservation and reprographics as prerequisites to access and outreach. We will therefore look at all of our outreach and access related funding applications with a view to including a conservation / preservation / reprographics component wherever possible.

- 3.4 Public demand for reprographics services continues to increase. Public orders are undertaken by the Conservation assistant as a core element of his role; while this is useful in that it generates a modest income, it reduces the amount of time available for WCRO conservation and preservation priorities.
- 3.5 Requests for WCRO to provide project-related digitisation work have also become more commonplace, tending to arise from small externally funded projects organised by colleagues within Libraries, Learning and Culture. This is not currently identified within the job description for existing WCRO staff, and is loosely managed on an ad hoc basis under the terms and conditions of the now dormant Windows on Warwickshire project¹ as additional hours for the Conservation assistant. This situation is unsatisfactory, both from a service perspective and from the perspective of the postholder concerned.
- 3.6 We will draw up and grade job descriptions for specific reprographics tasks, such as digitisation, microfilming and traditional photography. We will attempt to recruit suitable candidates and maintain a pool of staff who are willing to carry out this type of work on an as and when basis.

We will evaluate opportunities to develop our commercial reprographics functions with a view to generating income which can be re-invested in core service provision.

4 Disaster planning and business continuity

The Conservation and Reprographics Unit has drawn up a disaster response plan for WCRO, and trained all relevant staff on its implementation in the event of a disaster occurring. The Conservation and Reprographics Unit will continue to maintain and update the Disaster Plan, and to ensure that staff are well briefed on their role in the event of a disaster. The unit will also keep abreast of developments in this field, and recommend improvements as appropriate.

5 Competencies and skills

Our current conservation postholders offer a wide range of experience and skills, and we recognise that this is an important asset to the service. We will continue to support and encourage requests for essential role-related training, and to make it possible for staff to benefit from participating in professional networks and continuing professional development opportunities.

6 Advice and guidance to users

We recognise that the expertise of our Conservation and Reprographics Unit is valued by service users, as well as colleagues from other disciplines within the local authority. We consider that providing basic guidance to those with an interest in or a need to care for historic documents is part of the role of WCRO, and will support this as resources allow. We will do so by maintaining and

¹ Windows on Warwickshire was a New Opportunities Fund (NOF) project which successfully digitised and web enabled heritage resources from WCRO collections and those of partner organisations. WCRO's conservation assistant was seconded to the project as digitisation technician, but upon completion of the project returned to his normal duties at WCRO. He has since undertaken occasional additional hours to add content to the Windows on Warwickshire website.

developing leaflets and on-line help sheets, through talks, demonstrations and workshops, and on a one-to-one basis if appropriate. We will include preservation and conservation as a theme within the remit of the Learning and Outreach Officer to increase capacity in this area.

7 Advice, training and guidance for staff and volunteers

We place good preservation practice at the heart of record office activity, and expect all staff and volunteers, irrespective of their role, to be competent and confident in handling unique archive material. The Conservation and Reprographics Unit will continue to cover basic principles and techniques as a core element in the induction programme for all new starters, and will provide occasional practical sessions where new processes or policies so dictate.

8 Preventative measures

We believe that investment of time and materials into preventative measures is a sound and cost-efficient approach to resource allocation. The Conservation and Reprographics Unit will ensure that appropriate handling equipment and accessories are available, such as map weights, melanex protective sheets and gloves for handling photographic negatives.

9 Exhibitions and displays

We believe that exhibition and display have a role to play in promoting archives, provided that the long term preservation of any archival material is not compromised. The Conservation and Reprographics Unit will continue to advise on and manage the physical and environmental parameters for display of unique archival material, both at WCRO sites and in the community.

10 Consultancy work for or commissions from external agencies or private individuals

While WCRO is pleased to note that the services of its staff are valued and sought after by external agencies, we do not have the capacity to undertake regular consultancy work. Where we do undertake pieces of work for agencies or individuals outside WCRO, we will charge a professional fee.