

## **Conservation Research in Context**

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### **How we arrived here**

In 2002, the British Library created Collection Care to encompass Research, Preservation, Digital Preservation, Storage, Training & Development and Conservation. In 2003, the Library established the first Head of Conservation Research post in the UK library and archive sector, filled by Dr Barry Knight. This appointment enabled the development of the British Library Conservation Research Strategy whose main themes were validated at the House of Lords Science and Technology Inquiry, published in 2006. The inquiry also brought forth the Science and Heritage programme, funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council and Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (AHRC/EPSRC), which is making possible inter-disciplinary Research Clusters and substantial research projects. The Library rewrote its Stewardship Research Strategy 2008-2011 to reflect the widening responsibilities of Collection Care.

Creation of an overall strategy for the BL and wider library and archive sector in the UK has been supported by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation. The Mellon foundation went on to fund implementation of the strategy as "The Identical Books Project" from 2006-2009.

### **Scale and type of collections in libraries and archives**

There are 12,000 libraries and 2,362 archives in the UK. Historically, the collections of libraries and archives are largely organic comprising paper, parchment, papyrus and leather, which gradually degrade, requiring changing strategies of care. Increasingly, the library sector has been acquiring large quantities of digital items. These have the risk of total loss, as the carrier materials degrade preventing the copying onto new media. A recent physical manifestation of the Library's response to these different responsibilities is the Centre for Conservation (BLCC) building, which houses both book and sound archive conservation. The BLCC incorporates public programmes, training, and conservation research, all applied to the care of collections.

### **British Library Conservation Research Model**

The methods for conservation research in the Library are explicitly distributed and collaborative. For its research, the Library will draw upon, and help to develop, the expertise in other institutions such as universities and other libraries in the UK and abroad. It will continue to take part in collaborative projects such as the recent, highly productive, INFOSAVE, SurveNIR and PaperTreat projects that address its core concerns. The key purpose of the research to *apply* the new knowledge directly to the care of large swathes of

library and archive material. In addition, item-specific research will be carried out to benefit the Library's collection.

The 2004 Conservation Research Strategy collated previous work, for example on deacidification methods. Building on that, the Library hosted an international roundtable, funded by Andrew W Mellon Foundation, to implement the distributed and collaborative model. Invitees included European and North American scientists, educationalists, collections managers, all the legal deposit libraries in the UK, the UK national archives, etc. The group collectively identified gaps in conservation research by theme:

- Life cycle prediction, natural ageing
- Effects of storage environment
- Non-destructive damage assessment

The report of the roundtable was published as "Future Life of Collections", becoming known as the "Green Book". Building on this collaborative framework, the Library led a partnership of the UK legal deposit libraries and national archives which applied to the Andrew W Mellon Foundation for the projects being presented in this volume:

- The Condition of Identical Books in Different Nationally-Significant Libraries
- The Emission of Volatile Organic Compounds by Books and Paper

The core of the project was the partners' collections, while the bulk of the scientific investigations were carried out by the Centre for Sustainable Heritage (University College London), the Department of Chemistry (University of Strathclyde, Glasgow), and Morana (Ljubljana, Slovenia).

## **CONSERVATION RESEARCH IN CONTEXT**

The 2006/7 House of Lords Science and Technology Sub-Committee Inquiry into Science and Heritage is a key turning point in UK Conservation Research. This revealed some widely agreed ways of working, for example, not setting up a centre of research for the movable and immovable heritage in the UK. The report prompted the diversion of funds to the Science and Heritage programme by AHRC/EPSRC, which is funding research projects and interdisciplinary Research Clusters. Examples of such clusters include *Catch-22*, which looks at the access to collections and social benefit and *Booknet*, which explores the manuscript as a physical artefact. In parallel, the major heritage science players in the UK (quasi-government bodies - the BL, English Heritage Historic Scotland, a heritage charity – National Trust, museums and academics) came together to develop an overview of needs and potential strategies, in the form of National Heritage Science Strategy Steering Group.

### **Examples of BL Conservation Research**

The principles of conservation research as a benefit to all library and archive collections or item-specific research are exemplified by two projects.

The Library has created a new storage building in Boston Spa for 262km of stock incorporating a number of innovations: low oxygen environment; reduced temperature and humidity; high density; robotic retrieval. Real-time monitoring of books and the environment from the beginning of ingest is planned and this data will be made available in the future for study by library and archives.

By July 2009, the virtual reunification of the Codex Sinaiticus will be completed, bringing together the earliest New Testament from four different locations: London, St. Petersburg, St. Catherine's Monastery in Mount Sinai and Leipzig University. The Codex Sinaiticus Project has examined over-writings, erasures, text substitutions, different inks, scribal hand and animal sources for the parchment. The iconic prominence of this book is enabling item-specific research which will not only have relevance in its own field, but direct application to other items and collections in the Library and beyond.

### **2009 Conservation Research in Context**

In 2009, the Science and Heritage Programme issued another call out for inter-disciplinary research. By the end of 2009, The National Heritage Science Strategy Steering Group will produce a UK strategy for the entire movable and immovable heritage. The library and archive sector has collectively contributed to a research project that adds significantly to the quantity and quality of conservation science in the UK and abroad. This is demonstrated in the Advances in Paper Conservation Research Conference and the scientific papers flowing from the Identical Books Project.

### **Key documents**

Conservation Research Strategy

<http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/ccare/introduction/research/consresstratfinal.pdf>

2006/7 House of Lords Science and Technology Committee Inquiry into Science and Heritage

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldsctech/256/256.pdf>

*A Stewardship Research Strategy for the British Library 2008 – 2011*

<http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/ccare/projects/stewardshipresearchstrategyfinal.pdf>

The Green Book

<http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/ccare/introduction/research/futurelife.pdf>

### **Websites**

The Codex Sinaiticus Project

<http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/>

The Science and Heritage Programme

<http://www.heritagescience.ac.uk/index.php?section=1>

National Heritage Science Strategy

<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/nhss/server/show/nav.19891>

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