PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH CONSERVATION AT THE BRITISH LIBRARY

Helen Shenton

ABSTRACT
The new Centre for Conservation at the British Library (BL) opened in London in 2007. It comprises state-of-the-art book conservation studios and sound preservation facilities, inextricably intertwined with an ambitious training and public outreach programme, all housed together in a beautiful, purpose-built, multi-million pound building next to the new Eurostar station at St Pancras in London.

It is the only such centre to focus on the conservation of books and the preservation of sound. The presentation of the conservation of the BL’s holdings of the world’s cultural heritage and the public programmes were integral to the fundamental ideas behind the building, designed in from the earliest stages of the project.

The paper describes the thinking behind this development and assesses the public engagement with conservation a year after the new building opened. The public programmes include a permanent, free exhibition on conservation and decision making at the entrance to the new conservation centre, linked to the rotation of iconic collection items within the BL’s Treasures Gallery. There are free, behind-the-scenes tours of the conservation studios for the public as well as demonstrations, workshops and talks to widen public access to the activities and concepts behind caring for the British Library’s vast collections.

These developments at the British Library are considered in the wider context of trends in presenting cultural heritage. The paper concludes with developments in how conservation is contributing to international engagement and cultural diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION
The British Library (BL) moved into its award-winning, flagship building at St Pancras in 1998 (Fig. 1) from a variety of sites around London. It was the largest public building constructed in the UK in the twentieth century, described variously as “the last hand-made building in England”, and a “Babylonian ziggurat”. In 2007, over one million people visited the exhibition galleries, reading rooms, bookshop and cafes. These facilities, together with storage and offices, cover 112000 square metres over 14 floors — nine above and five below ground, the latter comprising some of the deepest basements in London.

The collections range over the arts and humanities, the sciences, the social sciences, and are both physical (for example, 150000 monographs per year received under legal deposit alone) and digital (300 terabytes to date). Over 3.5 million items are issued in the 11 reading rooms each year and there have been 67 million ‘hits’ on the BL website in the past year.

The Library faces onto Euston Road, one of the busiest and most polluted roads in London and is next to the recently re-opened, spectacularly refurbished Eurostar station at St Pancras. The new British Library Centre for Conservation (BLCC) is the BL’s first major capital project since the library moved into the flagship building. The new centre is sited on the north side of the library. It is a discrete building with its own architectural identity, whilst complementing the style of the original building; a new public terrace links the two. First conceived in 1999, the BLCC project was completed on time and on budget in 2007.

MAIN ELEMENTS OF THE VISION FOR THE BL CENTRE FOR CONSERVATION
There were four main elements behind the vision for the British Library Centre for Conservation, namely: state of the art facilities for book conservation and sound preservation co-located with the collections; public programmes about the care of collections; conservation training (for future professionals and for BL staff); and applied conservation research.

Book conservation and sound preservation studios
When the library moved into its new headquarters in St Pancras, approximately 50 people remained a kilometre away on the British Museum site in nineteenth-century accommodation that was no longer appropriate for the conservation of the BL’s book collections. The paper conservation studios were already sited in St Pancras, while the sound archive’s technical archivists were housed in unsatisfactory studios three kilometres away. The vision for the new building was to create a world-class centre of excellence, bringing all book-related activities and sound preservation together in one building.

Fundamental requirements for the conservation studios were for north light; for the separation of wet and dry, clean and dirty, or quiet and noisy processes; and for a high-quality, ergonomic design with substantial input from those who would be using the building. A basic building block for the main conservation studios was the u-shaped bench. The large studio on the top floor accommodates 48 conservators, with groups of eight such benches around shared equipment, Fig. 2. This grouping was intended to delineate the different teams, to accommodate the circulation of visitors on tours and help with the acoustics in the large space. Separate areas were specified for leaf-casting, archival box-making, solvent treatment, material storage and gold tooling — the last of these has proved especially intriguing to visitors. Other facilities included anoxia for quarantine and salvage, an area for marshalling items going out on loan, and a room for microscopic and multi-spectral examination. The fundamental requirements for the sound preservation technical studios were for high acoustic performance [1].

Public access, publicity and profile-raising programme
The second element of the fundamental concept of the BLCC was a public programme of visits, displays and demonstrations to present and explain conservation, to make a quintessentially
A permanent, free exhibition and education suite at the entrance to the new centre. The exhibition, called Conservation Uncovered, not only explains the care of the BL's collections, but explores decision making behind conservation. Using interactive displays, visitors are invited to go through the options for preserving a nineteenth-century printed book as if they were a conservator (Fig. 3) or preserve the 110 year-old speech by Florence Nightingale and compare it to the BL Sound Archivists' restored version, Fig. 4.

The exhibition contains films illustrating generic techniques, together with the specific conservation of key world heritage items such as the Diamond Sutra (the world's earliest complete survival of a dated printed book, made in AD 868). A micro-site on the BL's website has been developed about the centre, which includes video clips of the conservation of important objects from the BL collections [2].

Furthermore, the exhibition is linked to the programme of rotation of 'treasures' in the Ritblat Gallery in the main body of the British Library. When, for example, the Lindisfarne Gospels are removed from display for six months in every two years for conservation reasons [3], the visitor is alerted to the permanent exhibition that explains about conservation. The Conservation Uncovered exhibition is also part of the daily public tours of the British Library building.

Behind-the-scenes tours of the studios for the public started in October 2007. These build on a known interest of the public to 'see people doing conservation', gained during Meet your Book fund-raising events that were part of the BL's Adopt-a-Book scheme, and reinforced by the experience of other organizations such as the National Museums Liverpool Conservation Centre. The circulation of visitors, the security of the collections and minimum disruption for conservators were designed into the layout of the conservation studios from the beginning.

A programme of demonstrations, workshops, advisory days and seminars for the public on topics such as Looking after historic family photographs as well as conservation advice clinics at weekends.

Professional events, for example Unlocking Audio: sharing experience of mass digitisation, which was held at the end of 2007. A series of professional master classes is planned on topics such as oral history, Ethiopic and Islamic bindings. A dedicated, flexible studio space isolated from the main studios is used for the conservation master classes.

An awareness-raising version of the exhibition held, for example, at House of Lords on the day of the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee's debate on science and heritage. This may also form part of a travelling version of the exhibition planned for display around the regions of the UK.

The publicity campaign was initially allied to the fund-raising, but went on to concentrate on publicity for the opening and the public programmes. The focus of the publicity campaign was the activity that would take place in the building and the people who would be working within, rather than on the building itself. So, for the campaign to launch the centre, a photographer took portraits of staff, who were invited to bring an object or tool that summed up their work — for example, a spoke shave for a book conservator who pares leather; HMV's iconic dog 'Nipper' chosen by a sound archive technical services manager. The resulting set of about 35 slightly idiosyncratic portraits has been used in different ways
for publicity, in leaflets, in listings and on the websites, Fig. 5.

Training and development
The third element of the project was the professional development of the BL’s staff and external provision of conservation training. Based on research carried out by a newly created Head of Conservation Training and Development [4, 5], a two-year foundation degree in book conservation with University of the Arts started in 2007. The research demonstrated that major libraries anticipated that books would still be required despite digital developments and that there is a need for book conservation training. The BL will take up to five placements in the second year of the foundation degree as one of the ‘industry partners’, who provide practical conservation experience. In addition, the BL sought sponsorship for one-year funded internships in book conservation and a series of shorter internships in audio preservation, which started in 2007.

In preparation for the foundation degree, a course leading to the UK’s NVQ (national vocational qualification) level three in training the trainers was developed to prepare staff, and customer service was developed for those who volunteered to give public tours. This was part of a wide programme of staff development (ranging from workshops to professional accreditation) formulated in the light of a ‘skills audit’ of all 80 conservation staff, which defined the needs for a changing, dynamic national library collection. Workshops on, for example, plastics, parchment and iron gall ink treatment are being given by both BL staff and external experts.

A 21st century Stewardship programme is now being developed for staff across the British Library. Current modules underway include training in handling and collection security awareness.

Applied conservation research
The fourth element behind the BLCC project was to establish the British Library in the field of applied conservation research, informing the conservation and curatorship of the BL’s collections [6, 7]. The BL led on an applied conservation research framework for UK libraries and archives, which identified three priority areas for research [8]. The BL’s research model is a distributed and collaborative one, working with national and international institutions; for example, the BL is a partner in the INFOSAVE, SurveNIR and PaperTreat projects, and leads the Identical Books and Volatile Organic Compound in Books projects that involve partners around the UK and Ireland.

The BL was one of the first Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) independent research organizations. As well as developing networks, the BL is concentrating on project-based developments, such as multi-spectral imaging for the identification of inks and examination of erasures in the Codex Sinaiticus.

THREE INTERTWINING STRANDS OF THE PROJECT
The BLCC was not ‘just’ a building project — rather it consisted of three interlocking, equally important elements: construction; a fund-raising and publicity campaign; and a change programme.

Construction
The building project was a ‘two-stage design and build’ (a risk mitigation approach recommended by the Office of Government Commerce who monitored the project under the ‘gateway review’ process throughout) whereby the primary contractor was Sir Robert McAlpine, and the architects were Long and Kentish. Covering 2600 m², the three-storey building is sited on freehold land at the north of main building above an underground railway line.

The architects have designed an ‘upside-down’ building, whereby the majority of the conservation studios are on the top floor with natural, north light from a saw tooth roof, Fig. 6. The new centre is reached from the original building across a new public terrace at first floor level. The terrace thereby affords the centre its own entrance, while also cleverly covering up the unsightly loading bay below (Fig. 7), and is designed at
a height to enable future links to the adjacent Eurostar station (the Mayor of London envisions a pedestrian walkway linking of Kings Cross, St Pancras and Euston stations avoiding the motorway-like Euston Road). This exemplifies the foresight of the project and the architects in designing a discrete building while taking into account future developments for the BL site and surrounding area.

The underground railway line potentially compromised the very high acoustic specification for audio preservation, especially since the sound transfer studios are on the lower floor. This led to the design of ‘floating studios’ for the 10 sound transfer and recording studios; built using blockwork, thermal and acoustic insulation, they sit on reinforced concrete slabs ‘floating’ on acoustically isolating rubber pads [9].

The British Library laid a great emphasis on design and quality of the building, from the tendering process for the primary contractors to the two-stage design and build contract. It attracted the attention of CABE (the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment), which actively promotes high design standards in public buildings.

Construction started on site in August 2005 and was completed on time and on budget, and was fully occupied by May 2008. The Princess Royal officially opened the centre in September 2007 just ahead of the first public tours in October 2007.

**Funding and publicity campaigns**

The second fundamental element intertwining throughout the life of the project was a fund-raising and publicity campaign. The £13.25 million cost of the construction project was raised from a combination of public and private sources. The initial core funding came from the retention of part of the sale of one of the buildings vacated when the BL rationalized into its new headquarters in St Pancras in 1998. The remainder came through a substantial, sophisticated, profile-raising and fund-raising campaign — the first capital fund-raising campaign for the British Library.

A variety of funding opportunities for potential donors was created, ranging from naming the different areas (e.g., the Foyle Visitor and Learning Centre) and the different studios (e.g., the Paccar Finishing Studio) to sponsoring individual studio benches, to funding book conservation and sound preservation internships.

The integration of conservation, professional training and public access into the fundamental concept for the new BLCC particularly appealed to donors and was key to the success in raising the funds.

The project started without all the finances in place, which further underlines why the fund-raising was such an integral part of the project. The publicity for the fund-raising was key and the engagement of potential donors in the work of the BL was critical. The generosity and support of the c.20 donors are recognized in a plaque within the exhibition and on the website.

**Change Programme**

The third fundamental building block of the project was a very far-reaching ‘change programme’. This was defined as 35 work streams of modernization, for example:

- a review of all conservation treatments, including international comparison
- updating equipment, maintenance, materials and recycling, etc.
- a skills audit of all current conservators and consequential skills development
- environmental practices, facilities management
- new documentation system, linked to the integrated library system
- improved estimating for, and programming of, highest priority conservation
- disability friendliness
- quarantine process
- dissemination, knowledge transfer, profile-raising
- organizational and structural change, cultural change, and increased professionalism

The change programme, and the involvement of a ‘senior user group’, which, at the time of writing, has met 120 times, is a major feature of this project, and is covered extensively in reference [10].

**REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITH THE BLCC**

At the time of writing, the public programmes have been operating for three months and are due for a formal review after six months in April 2008.

1 The BLCC and *Conservation Uncovered* are signposted from the main entrance through the main building — including a ‘light signpost’ — as directions from the busy, cathedral-like main entrance to the back of the building were always recognized as an issue. Early anecdotal and observational evaluation is that visitors make a special visit to the *Conservation Uncovered* exhibition and spend time with the interactive displays. It is noticeable that similar themes run through recent conservation-related exhibitions in the UK. One is of uncovering hidden things (e.g., *Reveal — the hidden stories of objects* and *X-ray your toys day* at the National Museums Liverpool or *Exposed*, the National Trust’s awareness campaign on climate change).

2 Weekly free behind-the-scenes tours of the studios in the new BLCC, led by BL conservators, give an insight into the techniques used to care for the items in the collection of the British Library and into the visitor’s care of their own collections. They are offered once a week with 20 bookable places. After the opening press campaign, when they featured in, for example, the *Times On-Line ‘top five events’* on 13 October 2007, they were quickly booked up for three months in advance, Fig. 8. The number of

![Fig. 8 Visitors to the conservation studios. Image: © British Library Board, all rights reserved.](image-url)
Centre. Pilot tours were run for other BL staff before the start of initiatives; for example, at the Natural History Museum Darwin included customer service. Advice was sought from comparable studios are also briefed. The conservation hosts volunteered and, Two tour hosts are allocated to the group and other staff in the

equipment. The resulting press coverage ranged from BBC News thirdly on the combination of traditional and high-tech skills and visual components such as tooling book covers with gold leaf and on-line reviews, radio pieces and listing magazines.

The BL’s press releases around the Royal Opening focused on how useful the advice was. The sound archive has run two sound case events on, for example, working with the Education Department on schools parts of the public audience can be addressed in the future by, marketing of the events was targeted at particular interest groups.

From the visitors’ perspective, the tours are rated consistently highly, for example 60% rated the content as excellent and 76% stated that they enjoyed the tour very much. When the six-month review is carried out, the tours may be extended to the sound archive. The early analysis of the behind-the-scenes tour conforms to the anticipated demographic; the majority of visitors have been white, older, females. The programmes for other visits, the tours may be extended to the sound archive. The early analysis of the behind-the-scenes tour conforms to the anticipated demographic; the majority of visitors have been white, older, females. The programmes for other parts of the public audience can be addressed in the future by, for example, working with the Education Department on schools groups, and a policy that has been agreed in principle that would see an element of conservation in all exhibitions.

The public advisory days on Caring for your family archive are held quarterly, are fully booked and participants have commented on how useful the advice was. The sound archive has run two sound case events on, for example, Accents and Dialects, held in the early evening and well attended; marketing of the events was targeted at particular interest groups.

REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROFILE-RAISING AND PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN

The key point of the fund-raising campaign was to raise the required amount of money, but a further, enduring, benefit is that the BL has a new group of donors with whom a longer-term relationship is being nurtured.

The BL’s press releases around the Royal Opening focused firstly on the people who work at the BL, secondly on the more visual components such as tooling book covers with gold leaf and thirdly on the combination of traditional and high-tech skills and equipment. The resulting press coverage ranged from BBC News and broadsheet newspaper opinion pieces to specialist journals, on-line reviews, radio pieces and listing magazines.

Many of these pieces picked up the dichotomy of centuries-old techniques and technical innovation — of sturgeon glue and beeswax alongside spectrometers and flatbed precision box-cutting machines. Similarly, many pieces picked up on the people angle. There were quirky stories about how magical conservation is, for example, “a visit to the elfin workshop”, which impishly plays with the subject but ends with:

. . . . I now finally acknowledge how important it is that the books in the British Library should be worried and fussed over like ancient invalids. I think that the fact of their existence is an important way of anchoring a bigger system to something real [11].

This element of the underlying long-term value of conservation for the public good comes over in much of the coverage, including the architectural press [12].

The awareness of the behind the scenes tours in London appears to be high. Ahead of the six month review, anecdotal evidence suggests that appearing in weekly listings magazines such as London Time Out is particularly beneficial in reaching all age groups.

There are also more subtle benefits, such as the incremental development of the BLCC micro-site, and the ‘softer’ issues of developing the presentational skills of staff. The next stage will be to embrace some of the advantages of web 2.0.

Innovative technology and cultural diplomacy

The next step for the British Library is to develop further ways of engaging different audiences, including using innovative technologies. These range from distance- and e-learning for preservation professionals, to looking at haptic technology, which may not only have the potential to pass on practical conservator skills, but also the potential to enable the public to feel what it is like to conserve an item.

In February 2007, the British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum and BL commissioned a report on cultural diplomacy from the think tank Demos, examining the role that cultural institutions play in international engagement [13]. Apart from capacity building, such as international conservation internships, a critical area is the virtual reunification of collections. For example, the Codex Sinaiticus digitization project brings together the parts of the world’s oldest bible manuscript that are located in UK, Egypt, Russia and Germany so they can be reunified — virtually — and made available to everyone on the web [14]. The inter-disciplinary approach, which included conservation, increases public access to heritage in a truly global way. Similarly, the International Dunhuang Project analyzes and virtually reunifies the ancient Buddhist material discovered by Sir Aurel Stein. These are prime examples of how conservation can contribute to increasing public access to heritage rather than to conservation per se [15–17].

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to all those who worked on the multiple facets of the BLCC project and in particular to those who contributed to this paper, especially Vicki Humphrey, Catherine Atkinson, Laura Jiggins, Alison Faraday, Marcie Hopkins and Kinsley Leonor.

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR**

Helen Shenton became the first Head of Collection Care at the BL in 2002, a role that encompasses conservation, preservation, training and research, storage, collection security and digital preservation. She currently chairs the BLCC project and has been deeply involved in the concept, design, development and execution of the centre since its inception in 2000. She read English literature at University College, London (UCL) and trained at the London College of Printing and with the arts and crafts book conservator, Roger Powell. She joined the BL in 1998 after 14 years in the conservation department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, where she was responsible for textiles, paper, paintings, photography and book conservation and finally assistant head of conservation. She is a founding member of the Digital Preservation Coalition and board member of the National Preservation Office for which she chairs the preservation administrator’s panel.

She sits on a number of national and international groups, such as IFLA preservation and conservation committee, the UCL Centre for Sustainable Heritage academic advisory committee, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s library advisory council, the National Heritage Science Steering Group and chairs the Preservation Division of LIBER, the Association of European Research Libraries.

She has taught and examined masters degree courses in conservation and preservation, edited journals, lectured and published widely in areas such as conservation, national preservation strategies, life cycle collection management and digital preservation. She is a fellow of the IIC, a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and an accredited conservator. Address: British Library, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB, UK. Email: helen.shenton@bl.uk