

UK-Kew, London

An Internship at The National Archives

This report is about my experience as an intern in the Conservation Studio of The National Archives' Collection Care Department (CCD). As a student in paper conservation at the Institut National du Patrimoine (Paris, France), it is part of my training to spend a six-months internship in a conservation studio abroad during the fourth year. Interested in the conservation of archival materials, I found on the internet that The National Archives (TNA) offered an internship programme and I downloaded the form from the website and submitted an application <www.national-archives.gov.uk/jobs/internships-info.htm>. The internship programme is geared towards mid-course conservation students or recent graduates (less than three years), and is for a minimum period of three months up to a maximum of twelve months. There are two application deadlines per year, one in March and one in September, depending on the starting date of the potential internship. I was selected in the March 2010 round and started my internship in February 2011.

Overview of Collection Care within TNA

The CCD is in charge of preserving a large quantity of documents stored on approximately 180 linear shelving kilometers. They have been kept over the centuries as records of central government of the United Kingdom. The variety of these records in terms of type and date range is amazing and in a way unexpected: you can find manuscripts, printed books, maps, seals, photographs, and watercolours, spanning over 1000 years up to today. All materials and media are represented here, such as parchment, paper, fabrics, ceramics, metals, as well as printing inks, iron gall inks and many artist media and modern inks. All records are considered public

property and as such have to be available to any reader coming to TNA to see them. It is therefore the duty of CCD to balance access with preservation so that the documents are kept for future generations but they can still be available to the public today.

CCD is divided in three parts that, whilst having their own specific functions, work very much together as a unit. The conservation studio mainly designs and executes all conservation treatments, from dealing with daily customer enquiries to carrying out wide-ranging projects; the preservation section deals with questions on a larger scale and with a holistic view to collections, like pest monitoring and risk assessment as well as being in charge of important digitisation projects; the conservation research team has recently taken on the main responsibility of closely monitoring the environment of TNA's repositories with the aim to gather clear and useful data in order to point out potential problems to the relevant department that is in charge of building maintenance. Conservation research also welcomes post-doctorate researchers on specific and diverse subjects such as for example degradation of parchment or colour photographs.

My Experience in CCD

My first two weeks were meant as a general introduction to all the activities undertaken by CCD. During this time I had the opportunity to meet every team member and get an overview of CCD's projects. From there on I had more time to improve my conservation skills in many disciplines. For example, I took part in the 'pressure sensitive tape project' involving the removal of pressure sensitive tape using a controlled hot air pen, coupled with paper repairs and re-housing of a large series of records. I also spent some of my time on the 'NS&I project' which consists of the conservation of original works of art originating from the Post Office which included consolidation of pigments as well as making new conservation

mounts. A 0.5% methylcellulose solution was used as consolidant and applied with a brush. Methylcellulose gave the best results for these types of media and paper supports, according to a research project led in CCD that compared physical, chemical and optical properties of a range of consolidants.

It is a particularity of CCD that all conservators work on all type of objects, even if they all have their own specialism. I was lucky to do the same and therefore I also learned a lot from areas of conservation that I didn't know as well (book conservation) or not at all (photograph conservation).

Book Conservation

In book conservation, I conserved six 17th century archival bindings from the HCA 13 class (High Court of Admiralty [Fig 1]). I learned about the structure of those books by making my own models as aide-memoire. The parchment covers of some of those bindings were distorted and torn, and some sections were detached from their textblock. In this case I sewed back the sections in their original place and repaired the parchment covers using Japanese papers and cold gelatine. Sometimes the cover was lost or in such poor condition that it was not advisable to reattach it around the textblock.

In those cases, the conservation treatment of choice was protecting the textblock with a conservation binding which wouldn't interfere with the original structure nor dam-



1 HCA 13/115: Reinforcing the sewing structure. Photo: Lindsey Gibson.

age it further. The project team had found an opportunity to try and develop useful conservation binding structures during this project, minimising the use of adhesive. I had the chance to learn one such structure and conserve a book using it. A link stitch was used to attach the new protective cover to the textblock and the handmade paper used for the cover was strengthened at the spine area by lining it with aero-cotton.

Photograph Conservation

I also discovered the conservation of photographs by working on the ‘COPY 1 project’ (Fig 2). COPY 1 is a large class containing copyright forms and a copy of the original photograph or print adhered to it on one edge. This class is very popular and therefore suffers from mechanical damages due to poor and frequent handling. A significant part of the photographs are large and have been folded to fit around the form and in the box. It was decided to separate the oversized photographs from the form to allow them to be conserved and re-housed flat in larger boxes. Working on this project was really interesting because it confronted me with materials I didn’t know, and I realized that conserving photographs poses new challenges due to their complex make-up of paper support and binders, for example, gelatine or albumen. During this time I also took the opportunity to learn more about the photographic processes I had in front of me.



2 Copy 1/440: Example of an oversized image folded and attached to the original form. Photo: N. Duqueyroix.

Treatment Proposals

Each year new conservation projects are chosen according to the business plan drawn by CCD management in collaboration with all members of staff and other departments. The criteria that lead to make a case for new projects are the inherent instability of documents, and high usage due to their popularity. At the beginning of the last business year, I got involved in the planning of a new project. Twenty objects, mainly parchments, with illuminations, were assessed because they urgently needed to be rehoused. With two other conservators, we examined each piece, wrote a condition report and a treatment proposal. This exercise was really informative in learning how to weigh out possible treatments and estimate the time needed.

The initial assessment highlighted that many pieces had gold-leaf illuminations in need of consolidation (Fig 3), and it was decided that a separate research project could be carried out to identify the best consolidation method for gold leaf on parchment. Following an initial review of the literature available on this topic, isinglass was chosen as the consolidant. At the time of writing, samples are being prepared to decide on the best application method.



3 E 156/8/1: Detail of illumination showing damage to gold leaf. Photo: N. Duqueyroix.

Managing the Collection

Another important part of my stay in CCD consisted of my involvement in all the various activities of other sections of CCD. For instance, I joined the team coordinated by a conservation scientist in charge of monitoring the museum environment. I learned how to calibrate the Hanwell digital sensors inside the exhibition cases, and I participated in the rotation of objects inside the cases.

During my time, the disaster plan had been re-assessed by the preservation team and a new one put in place. I was able, together with all other conservators, to follow a disaster exercise as well as the internal workshops that preceded it (Fig 4). As I had learned in school the theory about risk assessment and disaster planning, it was exciting to see its practical implementation.



4 Disaster exercise. Photo: Lindsey Gibson.



5 Surveying in preparation for the next digitization project. Photo: Lindsey Gibson.

I also took part in one of the many digitisation projects that are run at TNA by the preservation team. Digitisation projects have become more and more important over the last years at TNA and the preservation section has taken the lead in how to manage them. A typical digitisation project would start with a survey of a chosen class (Fig 5). For example, I helped surveying a class of 5497 pieces where a fraction of the boxes were selected randomly using Excel. Inside the boxes, type of materials and condition were assessed and treatment times estimated, following a time code established by the team. When the time comes to prepare the documents for digitisation, these will be conserved accordingly. So whilst taking part in the 'Royal Air Force digitisation project', I learned to conserve in a different way, carrying out the minimum treatment needed to allow the scanning operators to handle the documents safely and reducing the risk of further damage.

In Conclusion

I have learned a huge amount during this internship, improving my practical skills as well as understanding the 'behind the scenes' of a busy department working for a very important and varied collection such as TNA. As an intern, it was really instructive to be introduced to, and involved in all the aspects of the work carried out in CCD.

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Suggested Reading

Bülow, Anna, and Ahmon, Jess: *Preparing collections for digitization*. London: Facet Publishing, 2010.

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