

# Starting a Conservation Programme

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*Based on a talk given at a seminar organised by the Sydney Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists Inc. on 1 September 1984. The Westpac Archives Conservation Survey, 1983, is given as a case study.*

For the purposes of this talk, I have assumed that your management appreciates the need to retain, and the value of, archival records in your care, and is committed to an on-going archival programme. If this is not the case, then your first priority must be to convince your management to commit itself to an on-going archival programme. A management that is not so committed, or not convinced of the value of such a programme, is not going to consider sympathetically any proposals for a conservation programme, except possibly for the restoration of a few exhibits.

Let me also say at the outset that I do not propose to address the management of a conservation programme in library or museum situations. In my view, the conservation requirements in those situations are different from those in archival situations. The average library is interested only in restoring those tattered books that are still in demand but no longer readily available from booksellers. The average museum, although concerned to preserve its holdings, is generally more concerned about original appearance and functioning of items and may well be prepared to 'cannibalise' duplicates. In both cases, items in the holdings are generally not unique and can be borrowed, in the event of need, from other institutions. In both cases also, items are on display (to a large extent) and any deterioration is usually evident. In the case of archives, items are generally unique. They can be copied, but if the originals are lost, they are lost forever. Archival records are usually stored away from view and a great proportion might be consulted extremely rarely, some perhaps never in living memory. Consequently, deterioration is not always readily apparent and may well proceed unnoticed.

I think it is undisputed that there is no such thing as an archival collection that does not need conservation action. By conservation action, I mean treatment of the physical nature of items in the collection to ensure the preservation of those items and their intellectual content. Treatment may take a variety of forms, including copying.

In my mind, there is equally no doubt that, except in very rare cases, conservation work should be undertaken only by (or under the active supervision of) a specialist — a trained and qualified conservator. I find it difficult to envisage an archivist having sufficient time on her or his hands to undertake active conservation work — and even then she or he will need to consult and seek advice from an expert. The archivist must always be aware that inappropriate treatment can cause irreparable damage (that might not even be apparent initially) and that to allow this would constitute an even more gross dereliction of duty than mere poor listing or inadequate description.

It must be recognised from the outset that conservation does not come cheaply. There are materials to be bought and used, the right tools must be available, and you may need to pay a specialist to undertake the work. Even if you do some of the work yourself, you must recognise that this is time you have taken from other activities — and time, of course, is money. At the same time, you cannot afford to sacrifice quality in order to reduce the budget. When investigating cheaper alternatives, make sure that you are not compromising your standards. If you do, you (or, more likely, your successor) will regret it. You are going to have to convince your management that it must be prepared (perhaps even want) to spend money on conservation.

How do you do this? You need to prepare a well-documented case for a conservation programme, a detailed programme, and a draft budget, preferably covering a period of some years. You will also need to point out the consequences if your recommendations are not adopted.

The first step in preparing a case for a conservation programme is to determine what conservation action needs to be done. For this, you will need to survey your collection. If your collection is too large to conveniently survey the whole, you might prefer to survey a representative sample and extrapolate the results across the whole, but you will still need some documentary evidence, such as a stocktake, to support your findings. Remember at all times when dealing with your management, you must be able to justify your demands and provide facts rather than expressions of opinion.

The survey will need to include:

- accession numbers, so you can easily retrieve items to substantiate your case;
- a brief description, so that it is evident from the survey what type of record it is;
- a classification of the record format, e.g. volume, file, photographs, plan, etc.;
- an indication of the quantity — whether it be in numbers of items, numbers of boxes, shelf metres, etc. (use whatever is the most meaningful expression of quantity for each record format);

- a brief description of the present condition of the record;
- an assessment of the type of conservation work needed (de-acidification, placing in folder, boxing, supporting, flattening, encapsulating, cleaning, rebinding, repairing, copying, etc.); and
- an assessment of the archival value, the usage, and the urgency of treatment of the records.

Let me explain these last assessments in a bit more detail, as these are important. You need to give each entry in the survey (whether the entry be an item, series or accession level) a rating on a predetermined scale so that you can determine priorities. In a survey at Westpac, we used three-step scales for value, usage and urgency. The ratings for these were explained as follows:

#### **Value**

- A The records contain authoritative information of a nature that is vital or essential to the Bank. The information also has great potential for research use.
- B The records contain significant information, usually of a unique nature, that is of value to the Bank and has potential for research use.
- C The records contain information that usefully supplements or complements information elsewhere and has potential for use by the Bank or for research.

#### **Usage**

- A The records are consulted almost continually.
- B The records are consulted frequently.
- C The records are consulted occasionally.

#### **Urgency**

- A Immediate attention is needed to arrest deterioration and preserve the information. Major repairs are often needed. In some cases the only recourse will be to copy the records. Some records have been withdrawn from use. Handling of other records should be at an absolute minimum.
- B Repair work is needed to prevent further deterioration. This should be undertaken as soon as possible (given the above). In the meantime, the records should be handled with great care.
- C At this stage, de-acidification and appropriate storage only are required. Some minor repairs could also be undertaken, although major repairs can be safely deferred.

The survey will have uses beyond simply ascertaining what needs to be done. Information can be extracted to estimate the time-scale involved and to provide a basis for costing. The survey will also be used to set up a

programme for the conservation work. Consequently it is essential that the survey be done properly. You cannot afford to waste time with a 'hit or miss' effort, just as you cannot afford to take an ad hoc approach to conservation.

Clearly you will need the assistance of a conservator in assessing the conservation work needed and the urgency of treatment. If you don't have a conservator available to you, you will need to obtain the services of one for the survey. This may well cost you money, but it will be money well spent as the results of the survey will have some authority. To get the necessary money, you might find you'll need to do a preliminary survey yourself in order to produce a report calling for a full investigation of the conservation needs of the collection in your care. Such a report will need to cover such aspects as the value and usage of the collection and its present apparent condition. The report will need to point out that expert advice is required — expert advice that you are not qualified to give.

Once the survey has been completed, you will need to analyse it and produce reasonably reliable estimates of the workload involved in effecting the necessary treatment. Here again you will have to rely upon the advice of a conservator. Workload statistics should be produced for each rated category of records. By way of example, Appendix A contains extracts from a report prepared for Westpac.

Once you have a comprehensive and reliable assessment of your conservation needs, you can then determine how you want to meet your obligations. As I see it, you have three basic options:

1. Establish an in-house facility.
2. Send all material out for treatment.
3. Establish a limited in-house facility to handle simple jobs but send out the more complex.

Sending material out for treatment has obvious hazards. In addition to the risks involved in transporting material, it is also out of your custody and control while being treated.

Establishing an in-house facility can be expensive. Certain equipment is essential, and you are short-changing yourself if you compromise on quality. On the other hand, much of the equipment you will need will depend, of course, upon the types of treatment your holdings require. Again you will need expert advice.

At this point it is probably fair to say that there may well be a fourth alternative, and that is to establish a joint conservation facility with other small archival institutions. You might choose to establish a single joint facility, or to each establish individual facilities, each specialising in different treatments and equipment. In both cases, of course, the cost of employing a conservator could be shared.

Having completed the survey and having decided how you wish to carry out the necessary conservation work, you then need to draw up a programme. This should be comprehensive and should cover a span of several years. It must be realistic. You can determine the programme from the results of the survey — obviously the first items on the programme are those with highest ratings for value, usage and urgency.

At the same time, the programme should take into account human nature and health and safety factors. Simple de-acidification can be quite routine, and therefore quite boring even though essential, and so it should be leavened with some more interesting work. Some work, involving exposure to chemicals, could have health hazards in conditions that are less than ideal (and, let's face it, the ideal conditions may be prohibitively expensive, and might not be mandatory), but might be acceptable in small amounts. The same goes for work which might be safe, but uncomfortable.

The programme should also have an element of flexibility. You might have to drop programmed work in favour of preparing some material for exhibition. You might also find that your perception of the value of some records is changing for some reason, or that usage rates have varied. I don't think it matters how much (to a certain extent) you adjust your programme, as long as you are administering a rational programme in accordance with rational criteria.

Having completed a survey, having decided how you wish to tackle the conservation problem, and having drawn up a conservation programme, you can now prepare a detailed report encompassing all three. The report should make a firm and unequivocal recommendation as to the course you think should be followed, and should be accompanied by, or include, a draft budget for the next few years.

How you frame your report and recommendations will obviously depend upon your organisation's style of management and your knowledge of the organisation's politics. I can, however, suggest two things. Firstly, supplement the report with photographs illustrating both the problems and the solutions. Secondly, while painting as gloomy a picture as necessary, don't make it sound hopeless — otherwise no-one will want to spend anything.

The above process worked for us at Westpac. Our conservation report resulted in approval to establish a conservation unit with three professional conservators. I must admit we had two advantages:

- a management that appreciated the value of its archives, and
- an organisation that was used to thinking in \$m terms (not that the budget for the conservation programme was anything like that — just a very minor percentage of the Bank's annual expenditure).

We have taken some time to develop our conservation facility. The necessary renovations to the accommodation were spread over two years,

and included only one item of fittings (a combined fume cabinet and sink). Rather than build benches and work tables, we have adapted existing desks and other furniture, with a view to seeing how the laboratory work patterns develop. We have spread the acquisition of equipment over a number of years. All of this has avoided the need for a major capital outlay in one hit.

## APPENDIX A

### Extracts from Conservation Report, Westpac Archives, 1983

#### *ANALYSIS OF SURVEY*

For the purposes of this analysis, it has been estimated that the average volume has 250 folios, the average bundle has 250 folios, and the average box of written records has 625 folios. For ease in calculating the volume of conservation work, a standard 'work unit' of 250 folios has been adopted. Thus the archival records included in the survey (5441 volumes, 472 bundles, and 530 boxes) represent 7211 work units.

The following table sets out the workload involved in the treatments identified as necessary:

<i>Treatment</i>	<i>Work Units</i>	<i>Rate</i>	<i>Years</i>
De-acidification	7211	2 hrs	9.16
Support	70	4 hrs	0.18
Encapsulation	51	4 hrs	0.13
Flattening	225	4 hrs	0.57
Repair	4961	4 hrs	12.60
Rebinding	807	12 hrs	6.15
Cleaning	3328	1 hr	2.11
Leather dressing	1622	0.5 hr	0.51
Total years of work			31.41

The archival records included in the survey will require, it is estimated, a minimum of 31.41 years of conservation treatment if they are to be restored to a satisfactory condition and if their preservation is to be ensured.

In the absence of a complete stocktake of the archival holdings, it is estimated that the survey covered approximately 60% of the archival records. If it is assumed that the remainder of archival records will require the same level of treatment, then the total workload comes to 52.35 years.

If the annual rate of accessions was assumed to represent 1000 work units, then accessions each year would represent an addition of 1.27 years to the conservation workload, just for de-acidification treatment alone. This figure could be rounded up to 2 years annually to allow for other conservation treatments likely to be required (if the same proportion of

treatment was required the figure would actually be 4.36 years annually, but this is considered too high for records of recent origin).

Those archival records in the survey that were rated A/A/A (i.e. highest archival value, usage rate and urgency of treatment) represent 1418 work units. These will require 1.8 years for de-acidification and a further 4.38 years for other treatments. To treat all records assessed in the survey as being of highest archival value (regardless of usage and urgency of treatment) would take 29.48 years.