Heritage Conservation and Social Engagement

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Learning from archives: integrating preservation and access
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Introduction

This chapter introduces the interdisciplinary approach to conservation (understood as investigation, preservation and presentation) that has been adopted at The National Archives (UK) and links this work to the institution's democratic mandate (The National Archives 2017i). The chapter highlights the underpinning conceptual and practical approaches that are used to make conservation sustainable by integrating strategies for preservation, access and development. It also demonstrates the engagement of community groups in the development of archival records.

In doing so, we first introduce The National Archives, then consider its formal mandate and a case study that shows how an integrated approach can optimise sustainability. We also draw attention to the wide range of resources available on The National Archives website. The discussion focuses on the democratic ethos of The National Archives and explores how this is manifested in practice. The chapter’s main conclusion is that the archive sector provides excellent models for managing cultural heritage sustainably in environmental, social and economic terms.

The National Archives is responsible for collecting and preserving UK government records and for making them publicly accessible, traditionally as learning resources. Archives are distinctly different from museums, which offer interpretative experiences. For many years The National Archives was an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice, but
since 2015 it has been located within the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The Department was recently renamed to include Digital in its title, reflecting its acquisition of significant new responsibilities covering the digital sectors – telecommunications, data protection, internet safety, cyber skills and parts of the media and creative industries.

As the government’s national archive, it holds a huge range of records. These span 1,000 years, from the Domesday Book (assembled after 1085) to websites, for everyone to discover and use.

The National Archives preserves only a small percentage of the government record. The selection of records for permanent retention is made jointly by staff of all government departments and bodies whose records are deemed public records under the Public Records Act. Guidance on selection and transfer are also provided, together with the operational selection policies for each government department which are available online. Each department is also responsible for determining which records should be designated as open (to the public) on transfer to The National Archives and which should be transferred as closed for a period of time (The National Archives 2017h).

Records selection is an important step in archival practice. Tensions can arise between demands for scrutiny and secrecy. One recent example concerns ‘migrated’ colonial records related to the suppression of the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s and 1960s (Petersen 2012). These records, from Britain’s former colonial governments, were sent to the UK (hence migrated) on the eve of decolonisation. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) of the British government claimed erroneously that all information it had on the Mau Mau rebellion had been transferred to The National Archives (Cary 2011). This was not in fact the case: the records had not been transferred to The National Archives, which was neither suppressing access nor claiming the records did not exist. It transpired that the records had remained in ‘archival stasis’ in Hanslope Park, the government’s Communications Centre. By appearing to deny the existence of the records, it was claimed that the FCO sought ‘to shape the future colonial archive and the realities it would produce’ (Elkins 2012).

Such claims underline the importance of government records in understanding both the past and the present, and the way in which histories are generated and sustained. A useful distinction can also be drawn between archives and libraries. The former are characterised as unconscious, reflecting the raw data of policy or procedures, and the latter as conscious, reflecting different interpretations.
For the record. For good

The records held by The National Archives play a mediating role not only between the past and the present, but also between the government of the day and the public. The National Archives has responsibilities both to the British government, which generates the original material, and to the public, who have rights to scrutinise the archived records of government departments. The National Archives must confront the past, the time in which the records were created, and the future, the time for which the records are preserved, while also seeking to meet the needs of its current users. Exposed as it is to these blurring temporalities, The National Archives has adopted an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to achieve these challenging, apparently competing objectives (The National Archives 2017d).

The mandate of The National Archives can be characterised as For the record. For good, the title of its Business Plan for 2011–15. The first part of this title, ‘For the record’, emphasises the importance of preserving ‘the record’, i.e. the selected, archived records of the UK government. The second part, ‘For good’, exploits the expression’s dual meaning: it can refer both to time and to morality. In the context of The National Archives, ‘For good’ encompasses both. The Archives’ responsibility is to preserve designated material ‘for ever’ (i.e. a duty of care extending over generations) and also for the ‘public good’ (i.e. for public benefit).

The ethos of The National Archives is rooted in democratic principles: public access to the records of government is considered paramount to sustain an effective democracy. Openness to scrutiny (‘transparency’) is demonstrated by The National Archives itself, through the vast amount of information about its policies and practices available (at no charge) from its website. Among this is the business plan noted above (The National Archives 2013b) and reports on conservation research plans and outcomes, as noted below.

Sustaining and adding social value

Conservation has been characterised by its focus on scientific understanding of materials and construction – and more recently by the environment in which collections and sites are maintained. The important role of social sciences in this area is now more widely recognised, as it is important to understand the significance attributed by people to different forms of heritage and in different settings (Jones and Holden 2008). The cultural and social dimension of conservation is widely reported, with
examples including Clavir (2002) and Johnson et al. (2005); see also essays in Richmond and Bracker (2009). A notable example of applying social science approaches to the understanding of conservation issues is provided by Mind the Gap – a report on an investigation to understand the working culture of collaborative research, and in particular perceived hindrances to such collaboration (Bell et al. 2014). An attitude survey formed the basis for the evaluation. This was informed by a questionnaire, designed to elicit both quantitative and qualitative information and drawing on social science methodologies.

The National Archives has been active in developing relationships between users and potential users of the archival records locally, regionally, nationally and internationally; many projects involve archive users in the development of the records. (A case study described below provides an example of such user engagement.) Known as ‘User Participation Projects’, these projects highlight the integrated role of users in adding value to the records. Partnerships arise in many ways, ranging from a single enquiry from a member of the public to a wider, proactive outreach strategy. The latter may be linked to anniversaries, for example the expulsion of Ugandan Asians in 1972 (see below).

For over 20 years The National Archives has worked with volunteers. It has enlisted their help upon a wide range of cataloguing; some projects will last for a few months, others continue for several years. The National Archives has recently expanded its volunteer projects online, engaging ‘virtual volunteers’ to help improve catalogue descriptions by contributing their record knowledge and expertise.

As well as working with local and regional history groups, and with university students, The National Archives uses community partners to attract audiences who are often new to archives. Its outreach staff actively seek new ways of engaging communities with archives, working both on-site and in community settings. Past projects include Caribbean through a lens, in which community partners from Leeds to London worked with the team for over 18 months to create powerful exhibitions, reminiscence workshops and events inspired by colonial photographs of the Caribbean (The National Archives 2017a). Another project explored the archival records of the expulsion of Asians from Uganda by President Idi Amin in 1972, enabling exploration of first-hand accounts. Podcasts by those caught up in these events provide moving descriptions of what took place and its consequences; some include a note of optimism in the stories of new lives created in Britain (The National Archives 2012; Orne 2012).

Outreach services include group visits to view the archival records and support for developing ideas for community engagement using
archive collections. They may involve hosting workshops or public talks with speakers on diverse histories and free loan of travelling exhibitions on Caribbean, Ugandan Asian and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender histories (The National Archives 2017e).

The international reach and impact of the records, as well as the colonial origins of some – and their post-colonial legacy – is illustrated by the following example of links between the UK and Canada. In October 2013 a delegation from the Canada-based Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN) visited The National Archives to view documents connected to a royal proclamation. The four-day visit was organised to mark the 250th anniversary of the Royal Proclamation by George III, issued on 7 October 1763. This Proclamation is viewed as an important moment in the relationship between First Nations and the Crown – a declaration that established government for Quebec, East Florida, West Florida and Grenada.

The FSIN represents 74 First Nations in Saskatchewan, Canada. Its delegation consisted of 25 Indigenous people including chiefs, veterans, elders and leaders. They met with records specialists at The National Archives and viewed a selection of documents and maps connected to the Proclamation. The delegation’s leader, Chief Perry Bellegarde, commented that:

As Indigenous peoples, it is very important for us to be here because the Royal Proclamation of 1763 represents the first time that the Crown recognised Indigenous peoples’ title to lands and territories. The Royal Proclamation is fundamental to the legal framework for First Nations in Canada and is referenced in Canada’s constitution. (The National Archives 2013a)

Sustainable in environmental terms

The National Archives has identified and implemented sustainable approaches to conserving the archives in its care and to maintaining its premises. These approaches range from ongoing careful monitoring and control of how space is used to sustaining local bee populations by having beehives in the grounds. Ways have been sought to enhance the environmental conditions of the storage areas (repositories) while also reducing financial and environmental costs. Research was undertaken to develop a building model, known as a Building Environment Simulation (BES), that would simulate the repositories’ environmental conditions (primarily their relative humidity and temperature) in order to provide the
information needed to optimise building performance, and so to achieve a stable preservation environment with reduced energy use (Ntanos and Bell 2007; Hong et al. 2012; Hong et al. 2011).

This research was initiated by The National Archives’ Collection Care Department. The project proved highly effective because it required research collaborations that were intra-institutional, inter-institutional and interdisciplinary. In the first instance, discussions took place within the institution to identify who ‘looked after’ (i.e. monitored and controlled) the environment of the repositories (for example, the roles of conservators and the building maintenance team). This preliminary investigation established that the two teams used different terminologies, reflecting different professional norms and traditions. Once such differences have been recognised, collaboration becomes much easier and research and development more effective (Eastop and Similä 2007; Similä and Eastop 2016; Bell et al. 2014).

Following this crucial initial stage, The National Archives formed an inter-institutional research partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Heritage at University College London, which had specialist expertise in modelling. Environmental records provided by The National Archives (arising from years of monitoring relative humidity and temperature within the repositories) were used as a basis for developing the BES. The model was constructed for three of the repositories, based on their physical dimensions, material characteristics and the mechanical air-conditioning temperature and relative humidity (RH) settings. When proposals are made to change the building – for example by altering the roof insulation – the BES is used to predict the likely effects, enabling informed cost-benefit analysis and effective use of resources. The National Archives provides information on energy, environment and sustainability on its website; it also offers free online access to research reports. Examples of such reports include ‘Environmental Assessment Without Limits at The National Archives’ (Ntanos and VanSnick 2010) and Conservation Research and Development for the National Archives: Strategy and implementation plan 2009–2011 (Ntanos 2009).

The National Archives is committed to improving its environmental performance by reducing energy use and carbon emissions, preventing pollution and reducing waste streams (National Archives 2017c). In 2010/2011, for example, it achieved a higher than average reduction in carbon emissions of 17.7 per cent, exceeding the target figure of 11 per cent set by the Ministry of Justice. Such improvements are not only environmentally friendly, but also cost-effective in both the shorter and longer term. The National Archives works within strict financial controls and has developed commercial services to support its core objectives. Such
commercial developments are part of an integrated strategy to optimise the use of public resources.

**Integrating preservation and access: a case study**

The integrated conservation approach adopted by The National Archives is illustrated in this chapter by one case study. The work involved enhancing the preservation of, and improving access to, a large set of diverse records known as the Board of Trade (BT) Design Register 1839–1991. The Register includes nearly 3 million designs registered for copyright protection by proprietors from all over the world. The geographical spread and diversity of design Representations is remarkable; one example is illustrated here (Fig. 8.1). It is the Representation of a design for a kerchief.

![Image of a kerchief design](image)

Fig. 8.1 Design for a kerchief commemorating Field Marshal Garnet Joseph Wolseley, 1st Viscount Wolseley and the razing of Coomassie in the Gold Coast (now Kumasi, Ghana) in 1887 (Design 282367). © The National Archives.
commemorating Sir Garnet Wolseley and the razing of Coomassie in the Gold Coast (now Kumasi, Ghana) in 1887; the quarter repeat, of a design intended to be printed on cloth, is shown as a print on paper.

The BT Design Register is acknowledged to be an important primary source for understanding trade, commerce and technology (Sykas 2005; Tuckett and Nenadic 2012, 2013), the history of design (Greysmith 1983; Halls 2013; Kramer 2007; Lyons 2005), dress (Levitt 1986) and material culture (Eastop 2015; Riello 2009). It is also recognised to be a source of inspiration for present-day artists and designers (Eastop et al. 2012). Being both a very vulnerable set of records and a highly significant resource for a wide range of potential users, the BT Design Register was identified as a key conservation challenge. External support was therefore secured from The Clothworkers’ Foundation to undertake an Options Appraisal in 2010/2011. Some of the recommendations were subsequently implemented as pilot studies in 2012 and 2013. This work was made possible thanks to further external funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

The Design Register is made up of two main types of record: Registers, which contain the text record of each design (the registration), and volumes or folders which contain the Representations of the registered designs. Registers record the ‘unique’ number assigned to each design, the date of registration, the name of the design’s proprietor and the proprietor’s address. In the earlier series the Representations of the designs are adhered to the pages of large, bound volumes; in the later series they are loose and stored in folders. The Representations take many forms such as drawings, tracings, photographs, samples of cloth or other materials, for example fur, felt, embossed leathers and papers. Complete articles were also submitted as Representations, with notable examples including printed kerchiefs (Riello 2009), gloves (Eastop 2015), straw bonnets and Stevengraphs (Brooks and Eastop 2014). Further information on the Design Register is available from the online catalogue Discovery (National Archives 2017g).

As part of the Options Appraisal, the opinions of existing and potential users of the records were sought in order to inform the strategy for preservation and access. Users and potential users confirmed that online delivery of the written records provided in the Registers was a priority. This was duly included as an integral part of the conservation strategy, as online delivery would reduce handling of the volumes. Each registration for the period 1842–1883/4 was transcribed and catalogued. In this context, cataloguing refers to standardising place names and also the addition of the supplementary category ‘female proprietor’. The decision was made to highlight female proprietors while transcribing the registers; it is now possible to search under the category ‘female proprietor’ in addition...
to the transcribed text of registration. One can thus establish, for example, how many female proprietors registered designs under the ‘Lace’ category.

The outcome of this transcription project is that more than 700,000 design registrations are now accessible online, in a readily searchable form and available to users free of charge. This huge task was achieved by integrated teamwork. It involved the work of specialist National Archives staff and transcribers employed by a commercial agency (but working on-site at The National Archives and paid via the AHRC grant mentioned above), assisted by volunteer transcribers.

User participation and user-generated content were recognised as important factors in sustaining and informing this work. The Registers contain the majority of the written information, but additional information is provided in text on or alongside some Representations. Examples of this include the details of agents who sought registration on behalf of proprietors, the names of persons or places depicted in some designs (for instance monarchs, buildings and battle scenes) and the numbers allocated to the designs prior to submission to the Design Register (for example studio design numbers). A User Participation Project was initiated to record this additional information, which has been added as metadata to the online records (Fig. 8.2). One example

Fig. 8.2  A volunteer inspecting designs and transcribing information written on or alongside the Representations. © The National Archives.
is the full transcription of the achievements of Queen Victoria’s record reign as listed on a printed cotton handkerchief with a design registered in 1897 – the year of her Diamond Jubilee (Design 292206) (The National Archives 2017f).

Another pilot project was undertaken in 2013/14 to explore and exploit the interconnections between museum and archive collections. The aim was to link records in the BT Design Register with collections at York Castle Museum (YCM). Fifteen links were established in this study (supported by the Textile Society [of the UK]). They ranged from printed cotton handkerchiefs, boys’ sailor suits and mantlepiece ornaments to holders for balls of wool and Stevengraphs. These links provide precise dating and provenance (for example, the name of the proprietor who registered the design), as well as evidence of the original colour and finish of some products (some of the material in the BT Design Register has been preserved in an unfaded condition). For example, links were established between Called to the Rescue: Heroism at sea – a framed Stevengraph preserved at York Castle Museum – and a Representation in the Design Register. The latter retains its vivid colours, having been enclosed in the volume and therefore protected from light exposure, while the version at York Castle Museum provides complementary information in the form of an original label (Brooks and Eastop 2015).

The links made between York Castle Museum and the BT Design Register will be made public via a ‘tagging’ facility which encourages ‘user participation’ through the recording of metadata. This facility allows members of the public to add their comments to the online records provided by The National Archives. This facility will be used to link collections at York Castle Museum with those at The National Archives. For example, the draft text of the 100-character tag for the handkerchief mentioned above is: ‘Printed handkerchief with same design of Victoria’s record reign 1897 at York Castle Museum (THK69)’. This means that people will be able to see designs registered nationally by visiting a regional museum.

Options for the online delivery of the designs themselves (the Representations) were also investigated for both commercial and research purposes; further options were considered. Intuitive Image Browsing (Ward et al. 2008; Eastop 2012) and visual search techniques that imitate the characteristics of human vision were investigated. Measures to encourage use of this design resource (both on-site and online) have been introduced, including ‘not-for-profit’ reuse of the designs (for example via Creative Commons licensing) and via income-generating services. An online exhibition of 300 ceramic and miscellaneous designs from the Victorian era that were featured in the BT Design Register has already been provided (The National Archives 2017b).
Filming has provided another way of widening public engagement as part of an integrated collection management strategy. Films can draw attention to different aspects of archival practice, as revealed in the work of artist and film-maker Anna Brass. She made three films in 2013 to convey the experience of working with the BT Design Register. In her film *The Volunteer Experience* Brass evokes the rhythm and repetition of page-turning, of unfolding and refolding the Representations of designs in one volume of the BT Design Register (ahrcpress 2013). Another example is the presentation *Material Culture in a Digital World* by Dinah Eastop. This was filmed and included in the outcomes of the Gerald Aylmer Seminar 2013.

Interactive modes of online engagement have been encouraged, such as the posting of selected designs in a form that allows the user to control the lighting. This is achieved via Polynomial Texture Mapping, one application of Reflectance Transformation Imaging (PTM/RTI) (Padfield et al. 2005; Earl et al. 2010; Eastop 2013a; 2013b; 2016; National Archives 2013a; Duffy et al. 2013). Simpler and cheaper alternatives have been investigated at The National Archives, for example ‘shape from shading’ technology (Gallen et al. 2015).

The application of PTM/RTI at The National Archives complements established measures, such as providing access to the records held there in person and online. It is also just one example of exploiting information and communications technology (ICT) for widening access and user engagement. User consultation, user participation and user-generated content are recognised as important factors in sustaining and informing the work of enhancing access to archival records, and in developing archival resources.

**Conclusion**

Cross-disciplinary working is fundamental to the operation of The National Archives. The cultural heritage sector and the work of social development have much to learn from one another, as well as from the archive sector. Maintaining long-term public access to government records is the fundamental objective of The National Archives. ‘Transparency’ in both policies and practices is central to its activities as it strives to be an open and transparent organisation … in addition to responding to Government’s requests for particular information to be published, it is our aim to proactively share as much information as possible and make it available on our website. (The National Archives 2017j)
A democratic ethos is fundamental to The National Archives. The practice of government can be held up to scrutiny if primary records are retained and access to them is facilitated, for example by search capacities of ICT and commitments to retaining the ontology of the originating government department and to cataloguing. Specialist archivists and conservators provide advice on the collections and their care. Research undertaken within the conservation team – and more widely – informs historical narratives (for example by understanding developments in the technology of wax seals), handling guidelines (for example by identifying the presence of harmful substances such as arsenic within the records) and, as noted above, the effective use of resources. Conservation work is incremental; it makes step-by-step changes, on a project basis, to enhance both preservation and access. Managers are encouraged not only to deliver more for less, but also to engage more actively with citizens and civil society.

We have argued that The National Archives’ ethos of transparency, accessibility and preservation facilitates innovation; this also often crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries. Negotiating every change is undertaken with care, bearing current sensitivities, economics and practicalities in mind. Integration of preservation and access, and an understanding of the social and other benefits of supporting democratic processes through transparency and accessibility to government records, is important for social development, whether at a regional, national or international level. The overarching theme that emerges from this multifaceted and multidisciplinary narrative is that preservation activities add social, economic and environmental value. Demonstration of these social, economic and environmental values can be used as an important tool for advocacy.

References


