



The Response of the British Library's Conservation Department to the COVID-19 Situation

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SHORT REPORT

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ABSTRACT

The British Library's conservation department faced a significant range of challenges arising from the COVID-19 situation and the limited time available to respond to them. By drawing on areas in which the department already had particular strengths, such as risk management, salvage planning and training, we were able to address these issues and support the operational requirements not only of our own area but also of the wider Library, in dealing with both immediate concerns and longer-term issues relating to the resumption of normal activities. This has encouraged us to look at underlying assumptions about our working practices, enabling us to revise our approaches in ways which not only respond to the current situation but also have far-reaching benefits.

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In common with other heritage institutions, the British Library (BL) faced many challenges arising from the COVID-19 situation, both immediate and longer term. The BL's collection care staff operate on two main sites (London and Yorkshire) to enable the custodianship and use of the collection, supporting internal and external activities including research, learning, exhibitions and loans. When the lockdown started in March 2020, staff access to the sites became extremely limited, and we had little time to prepare or to adapt procedures which assumed a minimum level of on-site staff presence. We also faced potential disruption to environmental control, and had to continue to manage both operational and short-term issues. Subsequently we had to plan for the resumption of Library activities, the prioritisation of particular workstreams (especially related to exhibitions, loans and digitisation), and the prospect of budget and recruitment restrictions.

This paper looks at some of our responses, the lessons we learned and the opportunities that emerged.

RESPONSES

The BL's conservation staff were not furloughed, so although we were unable to carry out the majority of our normal work, we were nonetheless able to engage in a range of other activities related both to the general operation of the department and the Library, and more specifically to respond to the unprecedented challenges of the situation.

The former allowed a range of personal and departmental development activities to be pursued, which would have been difficult to accommodate under normal operation, including treatment reviews (investigating the conservation of papyrus, palm leaves and modern paper, conservation for digitisation, board attachment methods and the housing of items in glass enclosures), a skills audit, continuing professional development (CPD) work and updating many existing policies and procedures. It has also allowed novel initiatives, such as a staff-led programme to introduce green working practices into the department.

The latter gave us the opportunity to draw on areas in which the department already has particular strengths, including risk management, salvage planning and training.

In response to the immediate circumstances, we carried out a comprehensive risk assessment of threats to the physical collection, across the two BL sites and for off-site material; this was compiled in parallel to a similar assessment for the digital collections. We identified over forty potential issues, but three in particular were assessed as of 'high' or 'very high' significance, relating specifically to outstanding urgent work, the limitations of the salvage plan in the current situation and concerns that any developing on-site problems might go unnoticed in the absence of staff. These were addressed with the following general mitigations:

- Prioritising critical outstanding work and the return of objects out of normal storage (on- or off-site).
- Ensuring the continuation of collection care operations, including monitoring, by reassessing and redistributing tasks, and using a combination of remote access, home working and limited on-site activity.
- Ensuring continued close liaison with other departments and external partners.
- Identifying areas where unauthorised or unsupervised access to collection items might occur.
- Limiting access to storage areas to stabilise environments.
- Arranging disposal of perishable materials.
- Planning for return of staff to the sites and recall of collection material.

This risk assessment was distributed to the higher-level planning teams within the Library, to inform institution-wide and strategic responses to the situation, and to other colleagues to provide a basis for further work and to allow more effective collaboration across departments by highlighting the importance and significance of collection care issues.

More specific risk assessments were also developed in relation to particular Library operations, especially as events evolved and a resumption of more normal activities (internal and public-

facing) became a possibility, to ensure these complied with both H&S advice and collection care requirements. For example, we worked closely with the Reading Room staff to facilitate the re-opening of these areas to the public, and have continued to liaise with them to develop and update this advice as the situation changes. We have provided similar support, or acted in an advisory capacity, to a range of other operational areas within the Library.

These approaches also informed our work with Estates, to ensure that items like disinfectant wipes and sanitiser gels were archivally sound, and that the physical protection of collection items was constantly factored in to any procedures or materials purchased for COVID-19 safe working purposes.

One of our most important tasks was the re-evaluation and revision of salvage plans in the light of the situation, to ensure the safety of both the Salvage Team and collection in the event of an incident. All aspects of a disaster response during this period, from travel to working on-site, were addressed by a health and safety assessment. Alongside the collection risk assessment, this enabled additional mitigations to be identified and procedures to be appropriately revised, which were then communicated to the Salvage Team and key stakeholders. It was possible to adjust workflows to enable salvage operations to incorporate social distancing, but this required an acceptance of knock-on impacts, such as less time-efficient methods. However, the increased use of remote working also created new possibilities for off-site support which we had not previously considered, particularly in the form of hybrid responses with some staff working on-site and others providing remote assistance, taking on roles which do not require in-person presence. It also emphasised the need to move away from shared salvage phones to collaborative IT tools that could be used by multiple users across a range of devices to provide secure communication and access to documentation (in particular *Microsoft 'Teams'* and *'SharePoint'*). Keeping the Salvage Team members in contact over this period presented a significant challenge; in part this was achieved through salvage exercises that could be completed at home, maintaining team cohesion whilst developing skills and knowledge. This highlighted the range of skills and knowledge in the team, and by sharing experiences of the exercise, it enabled an in-depth review of procedures. This led to novel solutions and working practices which we had not previously considered, and which will now be adopted and developed as part of our standard methods.

We also increased the range and variety of on-line training resources for staff across the Library, which we had already started to develop. It was necessary to share new collection care policies, adopted in response to the pandemic, and to provide a 'refresher' on standard collection care practices for staff who had been absent from the sites for prolonged periods. Although remote training required some changes in content, particularly relating to practical exercises, in most cases this could be achieved through visual resources and discussion. It also enabled access by large numbers of staff (in the first week, more than 100 attended), and by recording the material colleagues could view and revisit it at their convenience. Within the department, we also continued to provide training in areas like risk management and research skills.

EXPERIENCES, LESSONS LEARNED AND OPPORTUNITIES

The initial stages of this situation revealed a variety of problems for which it became apparent that we did not have appropriate mitigations - although we had plans to deal with immediate emergency situations, we did not have similar contingencies for circumstances requiring short-notice, prolonged absence from the sites. We now recognise this must be part of our ongoing planning to deal with any similar future events. Furthermore, some staff were able to transition to home working fairly readily, but for many there was not an immediate workflow with which they could engage, and this took several weeks to establish. Internet access and suitable home working spaces also varied significantly between staff.

More positively this period provided strong evidence for the stability of our storage environments and the robustness and adaptability of our collection care provisions. Staff rose to the challenge of independent working, and did so without requiring a strong management lead, exemplified by a willingness to find and share information, resources and CPD tools, to adapt their working practices and to develop novel activities like the green initiative. A greater cohesion between the two sites emerged, as did the evolution of both formal and informal networking methods.

Previously, collection care-based risk management had been focused on individual collections or areas within the wider Library, so the institution-wide assessment of risks to the physical collections we developed provides a strong foundation to continue with this much broader and more comprehensive approach. In conjunction with the parallel assessment for the digital collection, this will then give us an extensive and robust basis with which to inform decision-making at both strategic and practical levels.

An unexpected outcome was the realisation of the degree to which staff in the wider Library rely on the conservation department as a source of practical information, and it became clear we were increasingly being approached to provide a lead in areas not directly within our role, such as H&S advice or the development of operational risk management strategies. This understanding will help us work more closely with other departments in future to provide comprehensive advice, especially in complex and developing situations.

DISCUSSION

The need to change working practices has encouraged us to look at our underlying assumptions about conservation as a discipline, a profession and an activity, when dealing with the needs of both collection items and other stakeholders. This has led us to significantly revise some procedures, especially in terms of salvage planning, in ways which not only respond to the current situation but also have far-reaching benefits. Such lessons will enable us to continue to develop an active and forward-looking role in the Library and in the wider field.

COMPETING INTERESTS

CR is a member of the editorial board for JCMS, which is on a voluntary basis. All other authors have no competing interests.

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