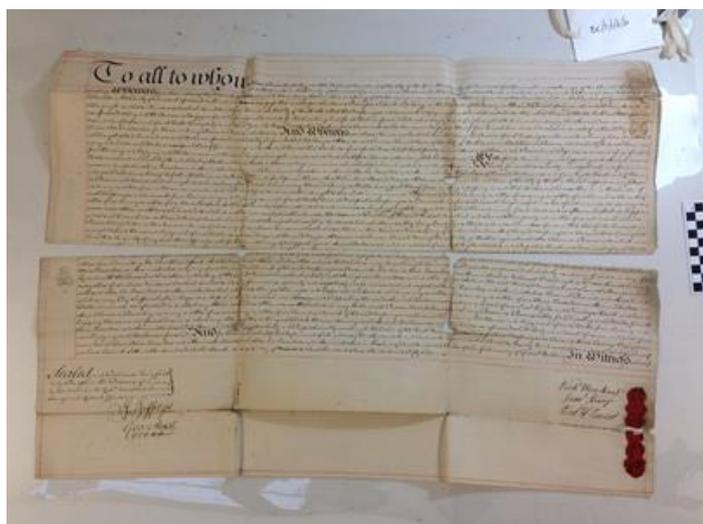


Reflections on Creating a New Archive Project Team:

Sharing our experiences of developing conservation workflows, improving communication processes & the importance of packaging.

In June 2018 Bath Record Office started a Wellcome Trust funded project: Building a Healthier City, scheduled to finish at the end of July 2020. This two-year project has been slowed down like a lot of the world due to the impact of Coronavirus. The team have moved to working from home where they can on project-based tasks, like condition report mapping, cataloguing, updating and cleaning up excel documents and process workflows. We also decided that this would be a good time to reflect and learn from the project thus far. The project has had a significant and positive impact on the Record Office, affecting the wider goals of the service and shining a spotlight on the importance of a strategic collections management and conservation approach. The team consists of the project applicants – Lucy Powell and Rosemary Boyns, the project archivists – Drew Westerman and Hannah Whittingham and project conservator – Pamela Murray. All team members work on the project part-time, three of them forming part of the core Record Office staff at other times, contributing to the running of a busy public authority record office, with around 3000 visitors a year.

We all sat down and had a Zoom meeting where we discussed the benefits of an in-house conservator, the gratifying task of untangling the collections' complex administrative histories, the importance of communication and the difficulty of estimating the packaging and conservation needs of a large collection. Below are some of challenges we experienced, our lessons learnt, and insights we can offer other projects.



Q. The collection runs from late 1700s – 1950s! What was your decision-making process for selecting the collection for Wellcome Trust funding? And what important steps did you take in the application process that you didn't expect?

Rosemary:

We decided on the material to include based on our list of cataloguing priorities and the types of collections that the Wellcome Trust is interested in making available to potential researchers. Their mission is 'to improve health by helping great ideas to thrive'; research resources grants (which our grant is) must 'help develop library and archive material for humanities and social science researchers'. I don't think we expected the emphasis which the Trust lays on conservation and preservation: one of the reasons our first application failed was that we didn't have a clear understanding of the conservation needs of the material, and how we were going to carry out this side of the project. It was incredibly helpful when the Trust gave us a small grant to call in a professional conservator; Helen Lindsay, and her advice played a large part in putting together the second, successful, application. Another aspect of the application process which was new to us (although we knew to expect it) was the emphasis on academic researchers and getting academic support, this was very different from applications we had made to other bodies, for example Heritage Lottery Fund (now National Lottery Heritage Fund).

Q: Before the project started the Bath Record Office had never worked with a project conservator or in-house conservator, what are the benefits of a conservator being embedded in a project?

Hannah:

Before this project, conservation of our collection would be approached on an item by item basis and outsourced. The cost involved would be considerable and so conservation is only considered for items, not for a collection overall.

Drew:

Having Pam on board means we are able to get immediate advice and guidance instead of putting the problem to one side for what could be a considerable amount of time with no intervention. Having a conservator on site, allows us to gain an understanding of what can be done immediately and what needs to be planned for, when time allows.

Lucy:

The project collections will be the best packaged and conserved collections we hold, thanks to the role of the project conservator. The post has been absolutely crucial, as high-quality packaging and excellent remedial and stabilisation work are vital to ensure the sustainability of the Wellcome Trust's investment in the cataloguing of the material, ensuring the records will be available to researchers in the long-term. Having a professional conservator in-house has transformed the level of preservation work we are able to undertake.

Q: The Wellcome Trust project required a huge amount of packaging. The entire collection (roughly 70 linear meters) was still in its original format – whether that was in a tin trunk or loose in overstuffed boxes or old acidic files. How did you find having a packaging process specific to the project, materials and formats?

Hannah:

Having a conservator working as part of the project has taken a lot of pressure off us as Project Archivists because we know that part of Pam's role is to carefully consider all the packaging needs of the project and to order the relevant materials. I know this is a lengthy process and one which takes up a considerable amount of Pam's time, but I find it very reassuring that she is there to make those decisions, ensuring the collection has the necessary protection, in some cases organising bespoke packaging. Normally, we would have to buy standard boxes and make it work, which can cause problems in the future in terms of damage and being able to retrieve items.



Drew:

In the Bath Record Office, we have various types of packaging in standard sizes available and when it came to packaging a collection we would use whatever we had available at the time that worked best. But when you are working on a big project like this (with a budget), you can look at the specific amounts and types of packaging needed for the project and really tailor it to the specific requirements of the collection.

Pam:

As the first project after my studies, it has been an amazing opportunity to really sink my teeth into the products, manufacturers, and suppliers out there and working it into a manageable workflow. I underestimated the scale of planning and sourcing required for



packaging of this project. Every aspect needed to be addressed from pricing to whether it will fit on our shelves which aren't uniform and ensuring that delivery and sourcing would all fit in with other steps of the project. We also quickly realised the important role that a volunteer-based packaging program would have. This was achieved by creating programs suitable for a small team of volunteers to carry out basic packaging of selected collections. I've really enjoyed working with the volunteers and having their input!

Q: This project has some staff on a part time basis – how do you find that?

Pam:

I have 2 jobs which have very different goals, teams, communication skills and even settings. I've gained a diversity of skills from the 2 jobs in the field and my organisational skills have had to keep up! I've had to readjust my expectations because what normally might take you 5 days in a part time role, you will only really see the same result in 2 weeks. That was probably my biggest challenge.

Hannah:

Work continues on the project in your absence so it can take time to catch up with any progress made and you can feel detached from the project overall as you aren't working on the whole collection, just aspects of it on the days you are in. Working part time also means extra effort has to be put into communication, because all of the project staff aren't in and working together all week. I think a positive aspect though is that I come in mid-week with an enthusiasm and energy to get started and that can be a boost for Drew (I hope). Also having to reiterate what work has been done in my absence and where we are with the project overall, allows for reflection on progress which is helpful and may not happen regularly if we worked together all week.

Rosemary:

It works well from my point of view, but what really helps is having worked with people on the team for a long time and knowing them well. Regular and relatively frequent team meetings are vital but deciding on frequency is a question of getting the balance between meetings that are frequent enough to keep everyone in touch and informed, but not taking up too much time which needs to be spent on individual work.

Lucy:

Having a project where some team members work part-time presents both challenges - and distinct advantages. The challenges can be met with good communication and planning. On the plus side, it has meant that the project has a larger skill set to draw on, which is very important in a multi-faceted project like this one, requiring cataloguing, conservation, academic liaison and budget management.

Q: This project successfully set up a conservation room on a separate floor and a lot of the collection is spread across strong rooms – How have the space limitations influenced the project process?

Pam:

The Record Office is located in Bath's Guildhall, a Grade 1 listed building, and the collection was spread between seven strong rooms. The archivists catalogue and process the collection at their desks in an open plan office and for this project, a conservation room was set up from scratch three floors up from the collection and the rest of the project team so I've become staircase fit and can time how long the elevator takes to the second.

Bulk packaging with a volunteer program required spatial planning. Packaging can't happen in the same space that a desktop takes up and working in an office and building where space is limited required significant planning. Fortunately, we are able to access very large rooms in the Guildhall, which has enabled us to carry out an efficient packaging program.



Assessing the condition, cataloguing and packaging of a collection of oversized maps also demonstrated another aspect of spatial planning. We didn't know what the maps were of, how big they were, or in what condition. None of the Bath Record Office spaces were suitable for this task, so we booked the biggest room in the Guildhall we could. This needed to be booked well in advance, because it is often used for more high-profile public events. Transporting the maps required planning out a route and making sure we were all on the same page – getting them out of the strong rooms and up a series of stairs and making sure there weren't any social events happening that day that would block us en route. It was necessary to ensure the route was manageable for us without causing damage to the map or to us!

Drew:

Space constraints have been an issue for us for quite a while especially with a really big set of material like this where different sections have come into the archives at different points



and been shelved wherever we had space at the time. From a cataloguing perspective that has actually made things a bit easier sometimes as we can focus on specific areas of the collection and know that the record series (with a couple of exceptions) were not mixed up with each other. The big space issue is when the collections have been repackaged as it was obvious from the start that they were going to take up a lot more space than they had initially. So

we have always been having to think about things like; is this series going to fit back where it came from, do we need to move it somewhere else once it has been or while it is being repackaged, do we need to relocate other things at the same time to make space for these ones, etc. Packaging work has had to be scheduled to take account of the need to make the space required for the repackaged collections available. . The space limitations have made spatial planning a big ongoing thought process throughout the project.



Q: How has your communication process evolved through the project?

Hannah:

I think my initial thoughts were that there would be a need for some communication between us but that the roles of cataloguing and conservation would run alongside one another quite separately. This is true overall but it soon became apparent that good communication was going to be key as so many changes were happening, for example to the collection structure or physical locations of the material. Team meetings every three months make us sit down and review progress, but informal conversations happen frequently as and when needed. If we shared a physical space, discussions would happen naturally, with Pam aware of changes as they happen. Instead we have had to work at being mindful of letting her know what has been happening in case that affects the work she has planned. Our communication has developed as we have worked through this project, setting us up well for the next one.

Lucy:

This project represented a change in scale for the Record Office. The different workstreams of cataloguing, conservation, preservation, academic and funder liaison required a more formal structure than our previous projects, including regular team meetings.

Pam:

I think our communication must take account of the physical distance between our workspaces, and different working days, and we addressed this by the excel tracking document, which shares our progress and makes us aware of each other's phases. This is a simple document that has collection reference numbers which we use to mark our progress with the collection. We update it on a colour basis – green is complete, orange is in progress and white is to do. This document also has important information like where the collection currently is and where its being moved to – so it marries spatial planning and process tracking.

I also see the ability to adapt, important for communication: different phases of the project would require different levels and styles of communication. This project has inspired me to look at project management tools and processes to implement in future projects.

Q: Historically collections can have gone through multiple filing and numbering systems - how do you figure that out?

Drew:

It takes hours and hours! There is a lot of information that has to be put together in the right order, so that it can make sense. It's a bit like a conceptual puzzle, one with plenty of sources of information to work from thankfully. The records themselves are full of clues about the original context of their creation and being part of a local authority, we can refer to the history of the organisation and how it and the people involved have changed over the years. Knowing that context allows you to work out why some records have been filed and sorted in one way while others have used a different system. The same way a conservator might piece together a broken object or torn document, we piece together conceptual information to build up the picture of what has happened and use that to inform what we are doing now.



Q: What take away tips would you offer another organisation about to commence on a project like this?

Rosemary:

Make sure everyone works well together, that they are clear about the overall outputs of the project and their role within that. And allow enough time for each activity! Everything always takes longer than you think.

Pam:

Take time to scope and survey, as a team. In a way, a physical survey of a collection is like standing on top of a hill overlooking a city, whereas without that survey, you are just walking around the city without the basic perspective. It's important to set your limitations and requirements for a survey so you prevent going down a rabbit hole of assessing. Answering the question – “what information do I need from this survey?” is a quick and handy reminder to keep you on track.

Drew:

I agree that initial prep work is essential. Preliminary survey work can identify issues with the intended catalogue structure which will save time later on. Records are not always what they appear to be when you first look at them.

Hannah:

I also think that good communication between project staff is key and making the time for regular weekly catch ups, however brief, is really important. Also make time for more formal meetings where you can really reflect on the progress made and come up with some action points. Keeping a log of work completed throughout the week is also helpful as it allows you to reflect on the progress you have made and allows you to keep other staff updated on work completed in their absence.

Lucy: Even with good preparation, there are always unexpected challenges in project work. When problems do arise, having a professional team with a positive attitude makes all the difference to the success of a project.

