

State Papers Online

Jess Ahmon, Preservation Officer, Catt Baum, Digitisation Support Conservator and Anna Brookes, Project Conservator, describe the work needed to support the digitisation of a major project at The National Archives

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three years The National Archives has been working with a commercial partner on 'State Papers Online', a project to digitise over 5,000 boxes of documents. The scale of this project combined with tight timescales and an unparalleled level of diversity in the documents has presented the Collection Care Department with significant challenges. This brief article discusses how, in response, we have altered our approach to treatment and overcome numerous logistical obstacles.

The State Papers Online project will bring together nearly three million images of original documents from The National Archives' State Papers collection and selected material from collections at the British Library. This includes official correspondence, administrative records and draft legislation from the reigns of Henry VIII to Queen Anne, covering state activities over six centuries of British and European history.

Digitisation work started in 2007 and will be completed by mid 2011. Once the project is completed a team of project conservators will have worked over 860 days between them and will have prepared over 2,000 boxes of manuscripts for digitisation.

PREPARING THE STATE PAPERS

The types of materials encountered in the collection include parchments, stationery bindings, loose papers, guarded and filed bindings, and documents stored in leather bags. The manuscript text is presumed to be written with iron gall ink due to the age of the objects and the appearance of the inks.



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Box of paper scrolls, some housed in a leather bag

Before and After Treatment



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Carrying out a splint repair

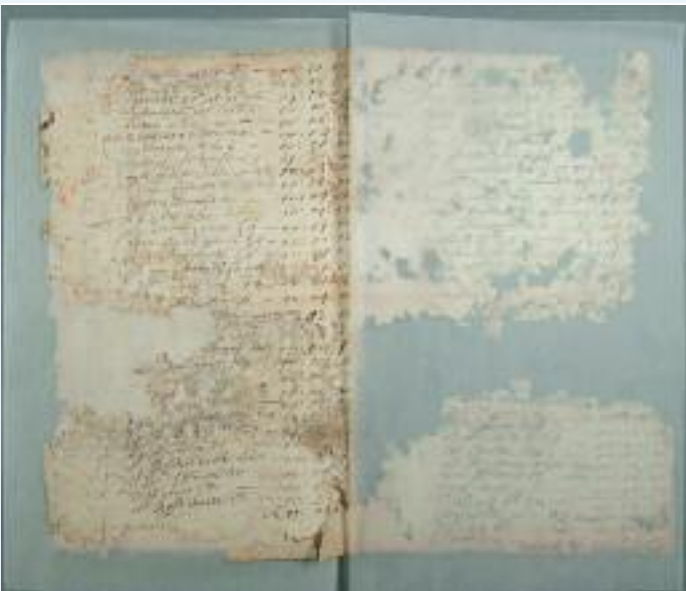
Characteristics include dark brown discolouration, cracks and loss of substance in inked areas.

The approach to treatment is determined by the context of digitisation. In this case significant factors are: document stability, performing minimal treatment, and treatment time. Our aim is to treat a document to make it safe to handle whilst conforming to a practice of minimal intervention within strict timescales. Hence, not all damage is repaired, only that which distorts text or makes an item difficult to handle, or where damage puts a document at more risk during handling. Surface cleaning is undertaken only if text is concealed.

A typical treatment would use dry flattening, surface cleaning and splint repairs (small rectangles of Japanese paper to create either a ladder or zigzag across a repair). Cold gelatine at 3% solution is used as an adhesive. Its properties are associated with an ability to enclose iron II ions found in iron gall ink, reducing their ability to migrate further into the paper and so slowing the ink's degradation process* .

Prior to undertaking any form of treatment a collection survey is carried out. The aim is to estimate, with the above context in mind, treatment times for individual items. For example, a pile of loose sheets requiring many repairs, flattening and rehousing would typically be estimated to require up to seven hours, a bound volume with two or three repairs and minimal flattening would be estimated to take up to thirty minutes. On completion of the survey provides an overall estimate of the total amount of conservation work needed and this enables Collection Care to plan resources. For the State Papers Online

Interleaved document



'Box of Doom'

project the commercial partner agreed to provide funding for all conservation work, based on the estimate obtained from the collection survey.

TREATMENT OF SEVERE DAMAGE

In a number of cases the typical treatment was insufficient and required modification, such as the boxes of severely mould-damaged documents nicknamed the 'Boxes of Doom'. These contained a mixture of bound and loose items ranging in condition from reasonable to confetti-like. They had preparation times assigned to them ranging from twenty to sixty hours, which in some cases could easily have been a conservative estimate. Eventually, in consultation with the commercial partner, five of the 'Boxes of Doom' were dropped from the project because of the level of damage.

For the remainder of these boxes, it was thought that their very frail condition would lead to handling problems for the imaging team. Initial trials with splint repairs showed the paper to be too fragile to support the repairs. After mould cleaning a gelatine solution of between 1% and 2% was applied with a spray. This strengthened the paper enabling splint repairs to be used to support any tears or missing areas. However, with the sheer volume of badly damaged items, solutions had to be found that would decrease the treatment

Camera station with integral book cradle and adjustable glass plate





Rehoused parchment

time without compromising the documents. The most successful option was interleaving. This solution provided an overall support to the sheet allowing safe handling while reducing the number of repairs required.

COLLECTION CARE SUPPORT

The Collection Care Department now has a full-time Digitisation Support Conservator to support all aspects of digitisation projects. This conservator provides regular document handling training for the in-house camera team and is also available to advise on any handling queries that may arise, providing useful tools and advice to assist in the process. Having spent two days working in the copying department as a camera operator, she also understands the problems they face, with their image capture target of 150-175 images per hour. This target requires a careful balance between working efficiently and ensuring the physical protection of the document.

MANAGING THE WORKFLOW

All conservation work was carried out by project conservators funded by the commercial partner. Fitting this work around the imaging operation was particularly demanding because the camera team were under pressure to deliver the digital images to strict deadlines.

Items in need of conservation were prepared for imaging in the conservation studio and then returned to storage. They could then be ordered by the camera team who were kept informed of treatment progress via a spreadsheet which was regularly updated by the project conservator.

The project was split into four parts, the first of which was digitised entirely from microfilm and did not require support from Collection Care. Part II contained 853 pieces of which 36% needed treatment. These were prepared within four months by a project conservator. Due to the relatively small number of documents there was little need for communication between the project conservator and the camera team.



Unfolded parchment

However, part III was significantly more complex containing over 2,000 pieces, 50% of which required treatment, including the 'Boxes of Doom'. A project conservator was required for fifteen months. As a result of this complexity, problems were encountered with the workflow and some items were imaged before they had been prepared by the conservator. It became clear that the spreadsheet alone was not enough and more direct communication was required. Regular meetings between the project conservator, the digitisation support conservator and the camera team's project manager were established, and this has ensured that the project has progressed efficiently and effectively.

The project conservator also had to work closely with the camera team when dealing with a collection of larger parchment items with multiple folds. These items needed to be unfolded and relaxed for imaging before being refolded for storage. This sequence required the project conservator to transport the unfolded and relaxed items directly to the imaging department. The project conservator would then help the camera operator during the imaging before returning the items to the conservation studio for refolding and housing.

The fourth part of the project will be completed shortly and is so far running smoothly as a result of lessons learned through parts II and III.

CREATING AN ONLINE RESOURCE

The first few parts of the State Papers Online project have already been released. The website is an invaluable research tool charting major events from the Reformation to the Civil War to the Great Fire of London, providing an insight not only into politics and religion during this period but also social and cultural change.

With completion in sight it is interesting to reflect on the project and how its scale and complexity have pushed those involved in our areas of expertise. It is a project that has emphasised, above all, the importance of effective communication between all parties.

Footnote: Part III of the State Papers Online project was launched by Gale Cengage in May 2010 and the fourth and final part is due for release in 2011. It is available on subscription to institutions and is currently not available to individuals.

*Kolbe, Gesa, *Gelatine in Historical Paper Production and as Inhibiting Agent for Iron-Gall Ink Corrosion on Paper*. (2004) In: *Restaurator*, Vol 25, p.26-39. Available from The Chantry Library