

Report of the Preservation Management Summer School Held at The Public Record Office and The British Library, 19th-23rd July 1999

by MIRJAM M. FOOT

In July 1999 (19th-23rd) one of the first comprehensive summer schools to be organised in the UK on preservation management was held at The Public Record Office, Kew and The British Library, St Pancras, London. Organised by The Public Record Office (PRO) and The Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche (LIBER) in conjunction with The British Library (BL), The European Commission on Preservation & Access (ECPA), University College London (UCL) and the International Council on Archive (ICA), the goal of the Summer School was to introduce key elements of preservation management to archivists and librarians in middle managerial positions, and to give participants practical insights to the problems that arise and the possible solutions, thereby helping delegates to develop and plan preservation policy and practice for their own organisations. In a wider context the aim was to initiate and establish training specific to the requirements of institutions in the increasingly specialist field of preservation management.

The Summer School was led by prominent European figures within the world of libraries, archives and museums who deal with preservation issues and who have first hand knowledge of the challenges facing preservation managers. The Summer School brought together participants from all over the world. Issues outlined initially by lectures each morning, were carried through to practical hands-on workshops in the afternoon where four groups looked at case studies and scenarios based on real experiences. This practical approach through active group participation was to assist delegates to work through 'real' situations, developing the ability to understand the problems involved on the way to finding the solutions. The main topics of discussion were preservation policies and strategies; environmental issues; risk assessment and disaster preparedness; book/archive moves; preservation management in the context of Europe; and preservation management training. The final

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evaluation indicated that the approach was invaluable in raising awareness and in training preservation managers.

The first day was opened by the Chair, John McIlwain, Lecturer at the School of Library, Archive and Information Studies (SLAIS), UCL, who introduced the speakers and delegates and outlined the week ahead. The first speaker, Dr Mirjam Foot (British Library) clearly outlined the idea of a preservation policy and how it linked to the function of the institution together with the main points to consider when developing a preservation policy. She outlined the broad aspects of a preservation policy to include rationale, scope, aims and function of the institution and the relationship and links to acquisition, retention, access, security, storage, environmental control, handling guidance, assessment of the formats and the preservation needs of a collection. She reminded us all of the fact that a preservation policy was a living document which is regularly updated and constantly monitored.

The second speaker, Dr Helen Forde (PRO) focused on strategy following the preservation policy. The strategy is the practical aspect of the policy, explaining how it achieves the policy objectives, what to do and when to do it. Dr Forde stressed the importance of being aware of the resources available and ways of working within this, using alternative methods if necessary. Also mentioned was the relationship to aspects of the building housing the collection; the maintenance of the collections; the disaster preparedness of the organisation; and training for the handling of the collections for all levels of the working staff. Dr Forde also stated the importance of choosing the right moment, both politically and financially to develop and present the strategy, as well as the planning of your approach for everyday tasks and special projects alike. The importance of less costly alternatives as possible solutions to the problems of preservation and the value of collaboration with other people in developing solutions was also emphasised.

The afternoon workshops looked more closely at the policies from the institutions represented by the participants; the information required to write a policy and a strategy; and the structure and elements of a policy, such as a mission statement, strategic objectives of the institution, needs assessment, retention statement, security statement, storage policy, access policy, surrogating policy and statement of preservation philosophy. The salient points from the workshop were summarised as: the more people involved in gathering and writing the information, the better; every preservation policy should be owned by everyone and be flexible; a preservation policy involves basic principles; and from these the question arose, how a national preservation policy would affect the individual organisations' policy.

The second day focused on the environment and its control. Ian Milford (WS Atkins Consultants) gave a well thought out and extremely informative lecture on the engineering aspects of environmental control. He outlined clearly the standards currently in use, and explained the way the environment acts on the buildings, objects and people involved in an institution, as well as the principles behind the control of the environment and the daily 'life-cycle' and maintenance of the institution. He concluded that by considering the 'whole-life' issues of a building, a more secure and financially viable environment can be created with less impact on the total external environment. The design of a building is central to this, considering the special requirements of this type of building.

Sarah Staniforth (National Trust) gave a good, practical and clearly stated second lecture of the day concentrating on practical issues in environmental control focusing her discussion on actual situations, for example, the use of historically valuable buildings which cannot be fully adapted to the preservation of the collections they hold. She explained the difficulties of installing modern equipment and instead focused on the implementation of room based systems of control stressing the importance of appropriateness and compromise between the building, resources and the collections to be housed and maintained. She concluded that sometimes, after careful monitoring doing nothing is the chosen option when collections are not deteriorating, but that this is only possible when done knowingly and confidently.

The workshop of day two was led by May Cassar (Museums and Galleries Commission). A highly organised and motivating workshop, again in four groups, focused on a case study, exploring the technical and management issues that contribute towards an archive's environmental control strategy, illustrating in particular, that decisions surrounding the environmental housing of a collection are not possible without establishing and maintaining management support. In order to do this, the relevant management needs to be kept informed of the expert advice, including reasons behind this; it was stressed that the aims of management need to be considered when viewing the options available so that everyone works together, and that clear communication is an imperative for a successful and mutually beneficial result. Other important factors to consider are the politics of a particular situation and the requirement for negotiating skills.

Dr Jonathan Ashley Smith (Victoria & Albert Museum) opened the third day with a lecture on risk assessment. A great deal of research has recently been done on this aspect of disaster preparedness, showing it to be of more

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significance than was previously understood. While risk cannot be eliminated, protective measures have been shown to reduce the potential of risk. Dr Ashley Smith explained how to calculate risk considering all the relevant external factors, for example, locality or other agents of risk damage (light, pests, humidity, people etc.) and bringing them together as a mathematical equation. Further factors of importance in risk assessment to note are the psychological aspects involved and time, since these can have a major impact in the calculations. Dr Ashley Smith's presentation was clear and well paced, opening an aspect not considered in such depth before, but shown to be of great importance to understanding disasters.

John McIntyre (National Library of Scotland) led the remainder of the day, dividing it into three sessions: concept of disaster control; prevention and reaction, this last section as a workshop. Since risk cannot be eliminated, but can be reduced, the rest of the day was devoted to managing the remaining risk. The workshop was extremely informative and practical which gave an insight into the extent of the detail required when developing a disaster plan and the impact of a 'real' disaster through the case study. Information given out was of great assistance and included two booklets on the salvage of water damaged library materials and a current bibliography.

The fourth day was based at The British Library and concentrated entirely on the preservation and management issues relating to book moves. This was based on the actual moves which took place to the new British Library building at St Pancras, and that from Chancery Lane to the expanded PRO site at Kew. It was led by a number of key managers from the BL and the PRO: Dawn Olney (BL), Bryan Betterton (PRO), Ron Millen (BL) and David Mitchell (BL). The talks made evident the highly complicated nature of such a project, highlighting through the workshop the financial and managerial aspects, as well as the importance of timing, the scale of the project, and the preservation problems that arise from these. There was a tour of the BL basements showing the automated book handling system, the storage and environmental aspects. In particular the day highlighted the potential for problems and risks involved as well as the fact that, whether the project is small or large, the problems are the same. A main aspect to be sure of at the end of the day, is that all material is accounted for.

The final day concentrated on preservation management in the context of Europe and preservation management training. The day was opened by Yola de Lusenet (ECPA), who explained the purpose of the ECPA and the background to its establishment to promote preservation issues on a European scale. An important aspect of their work is to establish successful

collaborative projects and assist with finding funds to help preservation in a wider context across Europe. This talk put the other topics under discussion into a wider picture by raising awareness and the availability of support from the European sector.

Finally, Elizabeth Danbury (UCL) discussed an overview of the available training in preservation management, primarily within the UK but internationally as well. It was concluded that while training has been slow to establish it is now increasing. The participants then discussed what aspects of preservation management they had experienced and what is now needed for the future.

In conclusion, this was an extremely useful Summer School, with a balance of theory and practical workshops through which to develop awareness and training to the participants for use in their own organisations. The groups worked well together, welcoming the opportunity to discuss the various issues in greater depth. There were two evening receptions during the week which brought the delegates together in a less formal way. The Summer School was well organised with a lot of useful general and specific information given on institutional back ground, updates on current developments, and workshop subjects and bibliographies.

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