

## Werk

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## **Teaching Preservation Management in Large Research Libraries<sup>1</sup>**

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The profile for my library - The Royal Library in Copenhagen - does not differ from other large old European libraries: the collections have been built up over centuries and contain great treasures in the form of incunabula, early books, manuscripts and large collections of photographs and maps. In all, this comes to more than 140 km of library materials, comprising 4.5 million books.

Large old libraries with valuable collections and many early books have a number of problems in common as regards preservation. Demands are made that the policy of the libraries should be more user-oriented, and at the same time, the libraries have been subject to financial cutbacks.

### **The problem**

I would like to start by discussing the meaning of two words: 'conservation' and 'preservation'.

Ten years ago, the key word concerning this subject was 'conservation'. The responsibility for preservation within my

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at LIBER Annual General Conference 1997, Bern.

library lay with the Department of the Book-museum and our workshop was called the Bookbinding and Conservation Workshop.

Now the perspective has changed. The key word now is 'preservation'. The responsibility lies with the Preservation Department, managed by the Head of Preservation. Our workshop is now a part of the Preservation Department, where bookbinders have gradually been complemented by conservators, with an equal distribution between two occupational groups.

Is it just a question of words - or does it cover a real change in attitude? My answer is that it covers a real change in attitude.

### **Three case stories**

The Royal Library is both a national library and a university library. That is to say, we have collections that must be kept for posterity as well as collections to be used here and now. The three case stories illustrate problems in the past.

1. Many years ago, the management of the library, on the recommendation of those responsible for conservation, decided to remove from the public areas photocopying machines for self-service use, because the spines of the books could be ruined by copying them. This of course is correct, from a strictly bookbinding point of view, but it meant that in the middle of the 1980s, as a library, we were hopelessly out-dated in our service policy, where the users could not even make a copy from a periodical.

2. At about the same time, the management of the library also decided that shelf marks must not be written or printed on the outside of the books for aesthetic reasons. That meant that we had some very beautiful-looking collections of books in our closed stacks, but it was completely irrational from a service point of view, as every book had to be opened when it was processed.

3. My third case story dates from the same period and deals with lack of understanding at the political level. On account of the

colossal growth of the collections, the library suffered from serious space problems. The Ministry of Culture's solution to the problem was to force on the library a disused warehouse in what in Copenhagen corresponds to London's East End. Shortly before that, the Records Office had declared that the same building was unsuitable for the storage of documents, but because the Ministry of Culture was stuck with a long, non-terminable tenancy, the building was forced upon us. It is only now - more than 25 years later - that there are prospects that we can leave it.

I am not pointing out these things to put blame on former colleagues. I was a young employee in the library myself at the time and did not see any reason to question the decisions.

However, the situation was such that the conservation staff and the library staff proper lived in separate worlds. The conservation staff were terribly frustrated and felt that their words fell on deaf ears and that it was an uphill struggle to get their colleagues to understand the importance of the conservation aspect. They compared their conditions with those in small special libraries with rare collections. I have visited American special libraries where book trucks and book cases were lined with red velvet, where the books could only lie on pillows, where the users at the entrance, like school children, had to show that their hands were clean.

In contrast to this, there was then the everyday reality in our own library. There were cutbacks in library staff for a long period. We have many highly qualified employees who have great understanding of the correct treatment of books, but the daily handling of large numbers of books is done by temporary staff, staff who are assigned from social projects, unemployed people in job schemes, etc., who have never heard of The Royal Library before their caseworker notifies them that they have been assigned a job. We have to use these temporary staff in routine-type jobs, i.e. in the stacks, in the transport and driving service -

that is precisely in those functions where the books are subject to great mechanical stress.

The lack of a coherent policy meant - as can be seen in the above-mentioned cases - unbalanced decisions, which were to the detriment alternatively of the preservation aspect and of the user aspect.

Our situation was not unique. In 1989, a working group under the Commission on Preservation and Access prepared a situation report on the training in preservation in large libraries. The conclusion was not inspiring: the libraries had produced hundreds of reports in the past decades, which showed that valuable and rare collections were threatened by disintegration. The reports ended up in applications for money, threats about the ruination of collections, appeals to the public authorities etc., but the reports were not followed up by internal action. The reports were a cry for help to the grant-giving authorities, but only a few of them resulted in a long-term strategy for the solution of the problems that had been brought to light. Training in these circumstances was a very difficult matter.

We went through the same process. Our cry for help to the Ministry was not followed up by large amounts of money for conservation programmes either, but we were more fortunate than most, as we could be happy that we had so much political attention that the Ministry earmarked a special small amount for preservation projects. Equally important, we met political recognition of the fact that the long-term storage of library materials had to be improved. So money was granted for a new temperature- and humidity-controlled stack building, whose first phase was finished in May of this year. In that sense, we were among the fortunate, where the reports had not just been put into a drawer and completely forgotten.

**Strategic aims**

Nevertheless, the frustration among our conservation staff still continued. In 1993, we made an international evaluation of our preservation activity. The conclusion of the evaluation was that the institution-political aspect was lacking in our preservation policy, and that cooperation about priorities and solutions was not good enough between our conservation department and the professional and research staff.

Against this background, we decided to re-organise our preservation activities. We put traditional paper conservation, bookbinding activities, microfilming and photographic conservation together in one department. At the same time, the post of Head of Preservation was created to take care of the political aspect. The Head of Preservation now has the daily and administrative management of The Royal Library Preservation Department (i.e. the workshops) and is responsible for drawing up library policy as regards Preservation, including too the general, inter-departmental supervision of the library projects in this area.

By appointing a Head of Preservation, the perspective was moved from the purely workmanship perspective to an institutional perspective. The problem range has thereby been extended, so that preservation is no longer concerned solely with the book collections. Preservation problems for other types of material are now involved too: archive material, sound-carrying material, video, and electronic information, where a strategy for the individual types is necessary.

At the same time, it has also become clear that preservation activity cannot be a matter that is separated from other library routines, but has to be involved as an integrated part of library planning and everyday routines. Some of the questions now facing all libraries are mass-deacidification, policy on binding, retroconversion to other media (to microfilm or to electronic form), physical conservation, temperature- and humidity-

controlled book stacks, and counteracting the mechanical damage of the materials when they are transported and used.

In such a situation, training in preservation is not a static subject. Preservation problems develop in pace with changed circumstances, and the institutions have to organise their educational activity according to these. The individual staff member does not have to be an expert in conservation techniques and is not being trained to do small repairs on damaged materials. On the other hand, the individual staff member must be given an appreciation of the importance of the preservation question, so that library materials are treated carefully because of a basic knowledge of preservation. In a library, there will always be a small core of 'the chosen few', who are very interested in preservation, but the task is to extend a basic understanding to all the members of staff.

### **Preconditions for teaching**

What then about teaching? In the whole period that I have described, there has been agreement that staff should be instructed, and teaching programmes were drawn up. But it never came to anything. The preconditions have been lacking:

1. A coherent and balanced institutional policy
2. A clear division of tasks and responsibility
3. A satisfactory physical framework

#### *1. A coherent and balanced institutional policy*

As long as the preservation problems were regarded from a purely technical point of view, a balanced institutional policy could not be drawn up. The change in attitude within recent years has led to an understanding that the various purposes of the library and the different types of material have to be considered. It is no good having the same guidelines for rare books and for

university books for first-year students. In our present strategic programme, there are two key concepts: Quantity with quality.

User differentiation and differentiation of library materials.

This means that the work must be organised in such a way that the staff can treat very large amounts of material while doing it to a high standard. At the same time there must be different guidelines, matched to the type of user and material.

## *2. Clear division of tasks and responsibility*

It must be completely clear who is responsible for the collections and their preservation. The general policy in the preservation area is determined by the Head of Preservation. The responsibility for the practical administration and everyday conduct lies with those responsible for the individual collections. The Head of Preservation sees to it that those responsible for the collections follow the guidelines. The same principles apply to the responsibility for safeguarding against theft.

## *3. A satisfactory physical framework*

Without a proper physical framework for the storage of materials, it is meaningless for the staff to pay attention to preservation aspects in their daily work. For some time, we have had completely catastrophic storage conditions. Does it have any meaning that the staff have to look after the books well when, after use, they are put in stacks where there is danger of disintegration? It is demoralising and drags down the level of the whole preservation work. Satisfactory storage conditions for the materials is therefore crucial for a preservation policy that works well. It is well known that libraries have a tendency to continue to grow - this is particularly true for the large libraries that have to serve more than just the nearest educational establishment. It is extremely important that the management constantly directs the

attention of the relevant authorities to the long-term planning for stacks, so that one avoids being forced into crisis solutions where unacceptable buildings, constructed for other purposes, have to serve as stacks.

### **A policy for teaching**

Certain skills are suitable for class instruction. For example, this is true of new cataloguing rules or the introduction of a new search system for an on line catalogue, where some definite rules have to be learned, which then have to be used day in and day out by a certain group of staff. Instruction in preservation is much more concerned with dealing with attitudes and with determining a policy that applies not just to well defined groups, but to all who have anything to do with the library, permanent staff, temporary staff, users who come to the library and long-distance users. The instruction has to suit a number of target groups.

#### *1. Decision makers*

The most important thing is to start with the director, the management and other decision makers in the library. In the Royal Library, this work is done in the Preservation Council, where members of the senior management, the Head of Preservation and those responsible for the collections organise the general guidelines for preservation policy. A Nordic seminar is planned for the autumn of 1998 for the heads of the Nordic national libraries in order to put an extra focus on preservation. The working title is "New buildings - what about preservation". Special emphasis will here be placed on the general question of preservation versus use, in the light of the fact that the national libraries in all the Nordic countries are getting modernised buildings in these years. It is the management that has to ensure that the guidelines are kept up to date, that the general policy of

the library achieves a balance between preservation considerations and usage considerations.

## *2. Staff*

The members of staff are the group who are in charge of the practical implementation of a preservation policy. They are the people who daily see to it that the materials are handled correctly, and they are the people who are responsible for the physical handling of the material. Members of staff are the most important target group for work on attitude. There are great differences among staff groups. In the special departments, the Rare Book Department, Manuscript Department etc., the motivation for preservation aspects is very, very high. At the other end of the spectrum are the transport and internal transport services. In order to solve the problem with the latter staff group, a working group was set up, which is to organise a future transport system, where equal consideration is to be given to efficiency and preservation. The principle will be that the easiest solution for the individual member of staff should be the solution that is also the most appropriate from a preservation point of view.

Class instruction of staff is very resource demanding. Our present strategy is that members of staff are most receptive to problems when they are first employed. So we will prepare a small folder for new employees, which they will receive at home already before their first day at work. In a short form, it will go through some of the most important basic rules for treatment of books, i.e. storage of books and transport of books, and explain when a book is damaged.

## *3. Users*

Users are not as big a problem as members of staff. It is true that there is great mechanical wear and tear on books that are

borrowed, but the library can control what collections we want to lend. We are in the process of preparing some short sets of rules for users who work with rare material. They give very basic guidelines, such as that only pencils must be used when working with manuscripts, and that cotton gloves must be used when working with certain types of materials etc.

Our most recent experience is quite positive:

A few years ago, a Disaster Plan was drawn up, which has been significant for the awareness of the members of staff who are responsible for the operation and maintenance of the buildings. In addition, annual follow-up meetings are held, where we repeat in the minutes some of the most important precautions that counteract disasters. The aim is to keep members of staff aware of the need to be prepared for disasters.

When we started the rebuilding of our main building a year ago, we held a half-day seminar for all relevant members of staff to increase awareness about the danger of fire and theft during a building period. The main heading was "Books can burn". We had invited a fire expert to the seminar to underline the seriousness of the subject. These half-day seminars were a great success. The seminar was repeated several times and at the subsequent seminars we could see that we had raised issues that were discussed among members of staff. This was a success story in working on attitudes.

Since the start of this year, we have completely changed our binding policy. For generations, it has been good policy at the Royal Library that all books should be bound immediately on acquisition. This is now changed, so that new books are put in the stacks unbound. In future, the principle is that they are bound after the fifth issue, or if the books show signs of damage. This change in policy has been very well received by the members of staff who now actively go in and select books for binding.

The conclusion is that instruction in preservation demands an active political effort from the management of the library and

active work on attitudes from the staff. Not through a once-off course, but through a continuous process that never stops. It cannot be done by sending members of staff to school, but it has to be part of the active everyday activity of the institution.

Here, I return to the two words that I discussed in the introduction, "conservation" and "preservation". The change from the key word conservation to the key word preservation reflects the fact that the question of preservation is seen in connection with the other activities in the library. The Preservation Department and Collection Departments must each advance their own demands, which must be fulfilled in collaboration. Instruction must be based on a holistic policy where preservation is balanced in relation to the use of the collections.