

“Pre-Custodial Approaches in Planning for the Sustainability of Private Papers”

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Summary

This paper introduces the topic of employing strategies for early intervention in the archive acquisition process to ensure sustainability of collections. Brief background information about the Wellcome Library and Archives Department is followed with a case study detailing the processes by which the Wellcome Library recently acquired an extensive collection of historical private papers. The last section will examine the experience and the lessons learned from this acquisition, concluding with the main features of an “inter-disciplinary operational model” now used in pre-custodial approaches and planning by archivists in the Wellcome Library.

The objective of this presentation is to explore ways of managing the varied challenges that can occur when acquiring and preserving large collections of private papers. Emphasis will be placed on the efficacy of adept engagement with internal and external stakeholders, *prior* to taking legal and physical custody. One could call it pre-emptive trouble-shooting, or ‘sending in the advance party’.

The strategies that I will explore for early intervention to ensure sustainability often come to the forefront when dealing with large collections of private individuals who have had long drawn out careers or when dealing with the archives of a complex well established organisation. However, the strategies can of course apply to *any* collection of organisational or personal papers, small or large, digital or analogue.

The archivists here will have to forgive me if what follows seems like ‘selling snow to eskimos’. We have to admit that in hectic times we can all overlook things, or fail to follow best practice procedures in a *comprehensive* fashion. My case study will illustrate some obstacles that can arise in the early stages of an acquisition and if not tell us anything we ought to already know, then at least refresh our minds and provide food for thought.

First, some background information: The Wellcome Library is part of the Wellcome Trust, which is the world’s second largest medical research charity. The Trust has an investment portfolio of approximately £14 billion. Its mission statement, or “vision” as stated on its website is “to achieve extraordinary improvements in human and animal health”.

The Wellcome Trust's origins lie in an endowment made in 1936 by Henry S. Wellcome, pharmaceutical entrepreneur, philanthropist and avid collector of medical books, manuscripts and artefacts. Wellcome's collection aspired to deepen knowledge of the history and understanding of medicine and health. The current incarnation of the Wellcome Library incorporates a nine-member Archives and Manuscripts team of which I am a member of 14 years standing. The library also has a dedicated Conservation Department with four highly experienced conservators working in well provisioned studios.

Of course, our conservators are used to dealing with damaged or decomposing manuscripts which arrive in their labs and studios requiring treatment or repair. Normally at this stage the acquisition is a *fait accompli*. This case study, however, highlights the condition assessments which can and *should* occur *prior* to a parent institution taking in a large body of material. Negating a problem in advance not only makes sense, but improves your popularity with conservator colleagues.

CASE STUDY

I will now describe the convoluted journey of one particular acquisition, which began with the first survey in March 2008 and ended with the *final* transfer to the Wellcome Library in April 2009. After that I will focus on key issues which arose and resultant changes in certain work practices and awarenesses.

In November 1986 the archivists at the Wellcome Library received an offer from an important recently retired paediatrician. He wrote: "I have 24 four-drawer filing cabinets of my papers, some of which are of historical interest, medical and/or political". He went on to detail his career since 1943 which included senior posts in London and Sydney, and a good many years serving as Secretary-General of the International Paediatric Association. An archivist went to survey his material in April 1987, confirming that the papers would indeed be "of much interest to historians" and thanking him for his intention to bequeath them to the Wellcome Library. So not an immediate deposit but a 'promise'.

Twenty years passed by. Then in January 2008 a firm of solicitors, acting as the executors of the estate of the now deceased paediatrician, contacted us asking if we would still like to inherit the material. This triggered off a process of acquisition that would take fifteen months to complete.

I was assigned to carry out the initial survey at the property in High Wycombe, a town which lies about 55km west of central London. The archive material was stored in a cottage and

barn which retained many features of their late 18th century origins. This first visit took place in March 2008. I would get to know the area well, returning on at least four further occasions.

As many people at this conference will know from experience, when archivists visit people's homes or the offices of organisations to survey potential acquisitions we can be confronted with all kinds of scenarios, ranging from beautifully stored files in an air conditioned environment, to piles of filthy boxes in an old stable. This collection was situated towards the latter end of the range.

The filing cabinets were located in various rooms throughout the cottage and in the adjacent barn which was being used as a garage and junk store. Despite the pleasant spring sunshine and a surprisingly friendly solicitor who provided access to the property, the depressing logistical and preservation issues soon became clear, especially in the barn.

Apart from the dampness, poor state of repair, broken glass on the floor, the parked car, cobwebs, leaves, intruding vegetation, insects and avian access, there were a number of health and safety hazards. A number of filing cabinet drawers were rusted shut (not locked, rusted). I was reluctant to pull too hard on some drawers in case the whole cabinet came down including everything perched on top. This added a somewhat unwelcome element of the unknown to the survey!

Despite the large amount of material, the physical inconveniences, conservation issues and the lack of guidance about the arrangement of the records, my survey (which took all day) revealed the collection was still of significant historical value and met all the desirable criteria of the Wellcome Library's collecting policy.

During the following six months I was unable to re-visit the property and the archives. This delay was mainly in waiting for the solicitors to release funds from the estate to pay for the barn to be cleared of hazards and obstacles, and partly due to other pressing work commitments. During this six month period a sad deterioration in conditions took place. In addition the friendly solicitor left and was replaced by a rather brusque and indifferent one. The situation was probably exacerbated by the lack of any immediate members of the deceased's family to help drive the process forward.

The cottage had suffered numerous break-ins by the bored youth of the village. But, worst of all, the lead flashing on the roof was stolen, creating several damaging leaks into the upper floors of the cottage.

Based on my previous visit and these new developments, it was clear that a 'conservation survey' was required before any material could be moved to the Wellcome Library's storage facility. Whilst our Conservation Department would have been happy to provide this on-site assessment, our facilities for drying out documents are small scale and there were heavy demands on our conservators time due to staff shortages and preparations for internal and external exhibitions in which the Wellcome Library was becoming increasingly involved. Our conservators recommended we engage a well-established firm called Document SOS. This company could offer on-site survey and have large-scale recovery and treatment facilities to which they could take the material.

The assessment with Document SOS took place in October 2008. As expected, the material in the filing cabinets in the barn indicated undesirably high moisture levels. Protimeter readings varied between 14 and 16 % moisture content. In addition, there was evidence of a white mould formation on the exterior of some of the suspension pockets holding the files (luckily this had not transferred onto the files themselves, as far as we could see). To ensure that cross contamination was avoided and any potential unseen insect or larvae presence eradicated, this material was designated to be deep frozen for a month and then thoroughly dried at Document SOS facilities. This amounted to 119 boxes.

Whilst the barn was still open to the elements and local wildlife, the conditions inside had not deteriorated since March, probably because of the good ventilation! The cottage, however, presented a distinct smell of damp. The main reason was the horrendous mycological garden which was spreading through the top floor of the cottage.

We were very fortunate that mould fungus and high moisture readings were for the moment confined to one side of the cottage where the roof was leaking and that the archives were situated on the *other side*, a safe distance away. Investigations revealed that it was safe to bring back this material in the cottage to our environmentally controlled stacks at the Wellcome Library. It amounted to about 100 boxes.

The day to collect the 219 boxes was arranged for 8th Dec 2008. Unfortunately, between October and 'Collection Day' some additional complications arose. I was contacted by a neighbour of the late Professor. She informed me that she had found an additional ten boxes of archives in the Professor's ramshackle garden shed. This meant more unseen and unassessed material to contend with.

Compounding this news was the new state of the upstairs study. After visits from the removal men organised by the solicitor, more boxes of unsurveyed files had materialised and material already surveyed looked like it had been re-arranged.

On the bright side however, it emerged that the neighbour had for a long while been attempting to look after the property and the archive material. She had also been contacting the late Professor's distant relatives and former employers. For some reason the solicitors and estate agents who were trying to sell the cottage had for the past six months not thought it might be a good idea to put us in touch. The neighbour was a significant stakeholder, albeit a voluntary one. Not only did she offer important information about the Professor and help to expedite the process of tying up loose ends, she also provided access to his property, (in lieu of indifferent estate agents), hot tea and functioning clean "comfort" facilities.

'Collection Day' on 8th December was a logistical success. I arrived at the property at 8.30am to begin packing up the material in the house. Document SOS arrived mid-morning to crate up the material in the barn for transportation to their facility in Kent a couple of hours distant. Once they had loaded their lorry a second smaller lorry arrived to load up the material I was packing from the cottage for transportation to the Wellcome Library building. The two removal men and I arrived back in London around 6pm and we shelved every last box in the stacks before calling it a day.

Of course the saga of this acquisition didn't end in December 2008. With no time left to survey all the previously mentioned *newly found* material on 8th December, I had to make another visit to Foundry Cottage in Feb 2009 with a Document SOS representative. On this occasion there was much less material to assess, but myself and the operations manager from Document SOS realised that a few boxes of papers in the barn were beyond saving due to extensive rodent consumption. By this time mould had now found its way to some of the papers remaining in the house. Document SOS removed boxes for freezing and drying, and some cleaning, de-odorizing and mould deterrent application.

Over the next 12 months a few more boxes were to make their way to the Library via the previously mentioned good neighbour however, February 2009 was my last visit. Shortly after that date Foundry Cottage was offered for sale by the estate agents as a "dilapidated detached period home".

Issues raised and lessons learned

In this section I will analyse the previously described experience, highlight important issues it raised and detail some lessons learned. I agree that some of the 'lessons' may seem glaringly obvious. But I would also argue that hindsight is a wonderful thing and some pre-emptive actions, or pre-custodial approaches, are easier said than done. Nevertheless, if we don't learn from our experiences, then yes we really are asking for trouble!

Firstly:

There was a long elapse of time between the original approach in 1986 and the eventual bequest. It is clear that during this 'intermission' the Professor had accumulated more papers of historical interest and was running out of places to store them. Although officially retired he continued to be involved in child health matters, from advising in cases of abuse in the UK to high level visits to China.

The following lesson emerges: If it looks like there could be a significant or prolonged delay between first contact and eventual transfer, try to provide at an early stage, constructive advice on preferable environmental conditions. Although there is little you can do to *enforce* safe and sound storage on a depositor, especially where private papers are concerned, it is worth trying to avert potential major problems and thus prevent future conservation costs:

- Suggest the avoidance of damp or exposed locations and the importance of sturdy protective boxes or containers.
- Encourage the depositor to transfer a portion of the material early on as this may make them realise the benefits of freeing up domestic or office space.
- Offer to supply storage boxes with the name of your organisation printed on them which may act as a reminder that the material is 'promised' and so should be treated with care.
- Cultivate a long-term relationship and show continued interest, for example by emailing now and then to enquire about the condition of the promised material, asking if any advice or materials are required. Of course regular communication is easier said than done when you have 101 other things to deal with in your daily work routine. But I think that at least putting them on your organization's Christmas card list would be useful; both a painless and effective measure!

It would be comforting to say that organisations are more likely to take these advisories on board, but experience shows this is often not the case. With changes of personnel one often finds oneself repeating exactly the same information every few years to different people, each one initially as much in the dark as their predecessor. Therefore it is probably best to tailor your approach on a case by case basis. In fact some private individuals are far more

diligent over a long period of time than organisations which are subject to corporate impulses or administrative musical chairs.

Secondly:

After the death of the donor nobody was residing in the property, it was not being maintained and could not be monitored around the clock. Naturally, conditions deteriorated quite quickly. I suppose it does not take a genius to work out that unoccupied domestic properties are not good places for archives to remain in. Even though it might logistically be highly inconvenient, it really is best to have all the selected material removed as soon as possible - before any risks appear or existing ones increase. Where there are already environmental concerns get advice from a conservation professional and arrange for them to assess the material on site. Follow up recommendations swiftly, before the situation can deteriorate. These things will save time and money in the long run. For example, the cost of mould treatment for boxes removed from Foundry Cottage in February 2009 could have been avoided had they been removed in December 2008 when the mould was still confined to a specific part of the house. Security risks would be another reason to speed up removal. Theft of the lead flashing from the roof eventually led to mould growing on the archives and the consequence of burglary *could* have been disastrous. We were lucky that the local youths were bored enough to break in, but not bored enough to start rummaging through the Professor's papers. Such misadventures can also happen to office buildings but they are on the whole less vulnerable to leaks, thefts and unwelcome creatures. Ideally, of course, all of the Professor's archives *would have* been removed in spring or summer 2008. However, for Health and Safety reasons the material in the barn could not be extracted until the solicitors paid for a clearance company – which I had to be quite adamant in requesting. The customary issue of over-riding work commitments and staff shortages back at the library further delayed our follow-up action. I freely admit to the pangs of guilt I felt when returning in February to find material mould damaged. (I do consider however that we did remove the core material before any major disaster could occur.)

Thirdly:

Manpower. I dealt with this major acquisition on my own. The whole business was extremely time-consuming: carrying out survey visits, communicating with various involved parties, administrative work, arranging couriers, collections and deliveries, packing the material and shelving it. It all had to fit in with other tasks and duties.

Looking back, it would have been better to take a colleague with me on some of the visits. This way the work gets done faster, the load is lightened and you don't end up berating the Professor's spirit for him having retained so many papers! However, again, in the real world

we are often thwarted by staff shortages – someone has to man the ship while people are out of the office, people are committed elsewhere; colleagues have a tendency to go deaf at the weirdest times; and sometimes it is just plain easier to make arrangements for one person than for two!

Fourthly:

Perhaps most importantly, and influencing lessons 1-3: Budgets. Money. Arrangement of the conservation survey and collection by Document SOS in December was significantly delayed due to, let's say, 'budgetary confusion'. The December collection and freezing and drying work could not be confirmed until we knew which part of the Library or Wellcome Trust was going to fund it. Somehow, over the last 30 years the Library had muddled through without a *dedicated* conservation or 'salvage' budget *just* for prospective and new acquisitions. The money had always been extracted from somewhere, somehow, by someone. However, knowing that the cost of the work by Document SOS would run into thousands of pounds, we found ourselves in a dilemma. We were unwilling to use up a large portion of our Archive Department purchasing budget and unsure if we could automatically secure funds from the Library's Conservation Department or the Trust's Facilities Department. Money was eventually set aside from the Conservation Department budget. The consequence of this, however, was that other planned conservation projects had to be post-poned. This generated a certain amount of, shall we say, controversy between the Archives and the Conservation departments but in the end it was agreed we were committed to taking the collection and would have to adapt and learn from this event.

From experience we know that our new acquisitions don't all come to us in good physical condition. Therefore it is important to identify a specific budget from which funds can be apportioned for prospective acquisitions with conservation issues. The matter of *how much* to apportion cannot be an exact science but could be roughly estimated from previous such expenditures. With regard to this particular acquisition, it might have been prudent of me to have obtained a guarantee of some or all of our expenses from the estate of the Professor before agreeing to take custody of the material. However, the professional ethics of such an approach would need careful consideration! The executors of the estate, the solicitors, of course gave me short shrift when I belatedly suggested they contribute to our significant outlay on this acquisition.

When you add up the cost of an entire acquisition process it can be substantial. It is not just the cost of conservation work, but money spent on getting to and from the property, couriers and transport, boxes and survey equipment, and the intangible cost of time spent out of the office.

So, have we at the Wellcome Library learned from this experience? Have we graduated to an “inter-disciplinary operational model” in our pre-custodial approaches and planning? Are we better prepared than we were four years ago?

Well we’re getting there:

- We have established effective procedures which involve our Conservation department at a much earlier stage of an acquisition. This has already led to two large collections being condition assessed and cleaned on site, before being brought to the library’s store. We regularly get input from our conservators where there is even a hint of unhealthy physical condition. An added bonus is that this practice has enabled us to get money off manuscripts we’re been offered for sale by dealers. Knowing that we are going to have to spend money on conservation work is a great tool for haggling down the price of an 18th century manuscript.
- I can’t confirm that we now have a *specific* budget for prospective accessions accruing high conservation costs, however... all parties concerned are far more aware of these potential spending requirements and some precedents have been set. Funds are more readily available and undesirable delays to preservation and conservation work are avoided.
- We are more conscious of the need to negotiate agreements with depositors incorporating terms to justify or recover any major conservations costs for new acquisitions. This is normally easier to negotiate with organisations, i.e. we can accept deposits on condition that if the papers are withdrawn in the future we have the right to reclaim expenditure on any conservation and housing as well as cataloguing, or we can negotiate funding for clearly required treatment, stabilization or repair work. True, it is rare to get collection care funding from private individuals or organisations who are *donating* their papers, but it does sometimes happen, so it is always worth keeping your antenna primed for signs of potential cash contributions in the pre-custodial survey stages.
- We certainly do offer value added engagement to prospective donors and depositors. We provide storage advice to organisations that make archival transfers at regular intervals, send formal transfer guidelines and provide record management input. We also send out boxes well in advance of a planned transfer.
- On the digital front we are doing all sorts of things to ensure the sustainability of electronic records we currently receive and will receive in the future – but that is a whole other paper!

So, troublesome as the Professor sometimes was, I am grateful for the experience and for the lessons learned.

END.