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## Introducing archive preservation

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### **Introduction**

Preservation of archives is the means by which the survival of selected material is ensured for enduring access. Perceptions that archivists preserved materials just for the sake of it are out of date and incorrect, if indeed they were ever correct; preservation and access are two parts of the same mission. Without sustained preservation activity it would not be possible to satisfy the myriad of users worldwide who beat a path to the door of archives and record offices, or who search for information on the web. Using archives has become a popular pastime for young and old, whether they are researching family history, requesting information under Freedom of Information Acts or pursuing historical facts. This increasing trend is unlikely to reverse and more than ever organizations must ensure that the material will be available, not only to the current generation but also to those of the future. Organizations must, as a matter of policy, look beyond their immediate requirements and utilize strategies and techniques to ensure that the originals, or if that is impossible the information contained in them, will be available for as long as needed. This book is designed to give readers the tools to manage preservation issues; it is not a manual on how to cope with every eventuality as these differ widely and advice for one archive might be quite inappropriate for another. Alongside this is the key intention; to act as a lead and guide for the varying needs, questions and research of fellow professionals charged with the responsibility of preservation.

### **How has the relationship between conservation and preservation developed?**

Once, looking after documents was within the remit of all curatorial members of staff, many of whom no doubt undertook basic repairs to the best of their rather limited ability. In the 1950s and 1960s archive conservation began to

develop as a distinct skill – one which, given their increasing responsibilities in other directions, curators were happy to cede to conservators. At that time *conservation*<sup>1</sup> was a wide-reaching term embracing many aspects of what is now included under the umbrella of *preservation*. Since then, those employed as archive conservators have become specialists in the intervention techniques required to stabilize badly damaged material. Their work has become grounded in science, they have adopted techniques to achieve economies of scale in some applications and they have become fully qualified professionals with rigorous programmes of accreditation<sup>2</sup> and continuous professional development. Their status has changed from that of pure craftsmen, although a strong element of dexterity remains in their training. They often remain the best qualified staff to carry out training in document handling or measuring and monitoring environmental conditions, but others can be trained to take these tasks on; actual conservation work remains their specialist preserve.

## Definitions

In subsequent years the management of preservation became a concern as resources and targets got tighter; lack of understanding between archivists and conservators also caused difficulties in some places, not least because it was rare for conservators to be involved with management issues. Nevertheless, the relationship between and responsibilities of the two activities gradually clarified. *Preservation*, led by one or more specialists who may or may not be conservators, became a holistic activity in concerns such as environmental conditions or pest management. *Conservation* became defined very clearly as an intervention activity to stabilize the condition of a document, requiring the skills of a trained conservator while remaining part of the spectrum of preservation activity; it was, and is, definitely at the more expensive and individual end.

Slowly, the perception that preservation is the responsibility of all those who work in or use an archive has become more widespread and at much the same time moves have been made to identify common ground in preservation activities between archives, libraries and museums. Care of the materials entrusted to cultural heritage organizations is one of the easiest and best possible partnerships. This led to a search for more common vocabulary – hence the use of terms such as *stewardship* and *collections care*, each with a slightly different emphasis but essentially covering the requirement to ensure enduring access.

*Preservation* is used in the following text as the overall term; it has the advantage of being widely understood, although *collections care* may be a more current term for the holistic activity.

Any text which refers to *archives* has a difficulty with the fact that in English the term is used to describe both documents and the organization which looks

after them and makes them accessible. In the following chapters the term *record office* is used to describe the building or organization if the meaning is ambiguous; otherwise the context should make the distinction clear.

## Summary

This chapter has introduced the reader to what constitutes archive preservation, or whatever term is used to indicate the need for care and protection of archival material to ensure continuous access. It has emphasized the importance of archival material for establishing the right to information and the consequent role of preservation activities within access programmes. Understanding the terminology used, and the way in which it has developed, is important in leading to understanding about how to care for archival materials and archive buildings. The following chapter continues the explanatory theme, indicating the importance of background understanding about archival materials before undertaking any kind of remedial activity.

## Notes

- 1 Immediately after World War 2 some junior staff were employed at the then Public Record Office (now The National Archives) in a triple capacity. Their duties included carrying the coal for the fire in the reading rooms, acting as messengers and ‘mending documents’ – which they had to do upside down in case they were tempted to read them.
- 2 These accreditation programmes are now managed by the Institute of Conservation (ICON). The Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers (PACR) scheme implements standards for the care of the cultural heritage across a range of disciplines. Conservator-restorers accredited by PACR have demonstrated to assessors that they have the appropriate knowledge, practical skills and sound professional judgement.