

KEPT IN THE DARK

Jennifer Moran discusses keeping the collection in good condition

The preservation of materials in the National Library of Australia is a constant mediation between the optimal conditions for their longevity—keeping them unused in the cool, dry dark—and the necessity of making them accessible to readers and scholars.

'There are things you can do that have an impact across a lot of the collection, and help provide stability to the collection, and then there are things you can do to the collection on a day-to-day basis that maintain it,' says Jennifer Lloyd, Manager, Collections Preservation. 'If you're going to start from the outside in, you'd start talking about the building and how it is conditioned to promote long-term preservation of the items.'

Tony Cuzzillo, the former Manager of Building Services, pointed out that in the nearly 40 years of the National Library's existence, environmental measures and technology have changed considerably. Also, as collections grow and develop, they might be moved to different storage areas within the building, requiring changes in temperature and humidity conditions.

'In the cold store, for instance,' says Lloyd, 'we put materials that require cool storage to prolong their life, which is normally photographic material and microfilm material. The cold storage is maintained at 7 degrees C so it's not a working environment by any means; staff can only go in there for half an hour at a time. We also have two tape stores maintained at 16 degrees, which is still quite cool, and then the other storage areas we have are maintained around 18 to 24 degrees. From a preservation point of view 18 is better but 20 or 21 is better for people.'

Automatic data loggers monitor temperature and humidity and take a reading every half hour. This is downloaded onto a computer which draws a graph. In addition, thermohydrographs have been retained in areas where it is important for staff to be able to read temperatures instantly. Each month, this data is analysed



in relation to what would be considered optimum conditions.

'Part of Building Services' role is to monitor these spaces 24/7. We have a building management system so that the air conditioning systems, especially for the critical areas, all feed back into that,' Cuzzillo said. 'Based on the requirements from Preservation Services as to the upper and lower temperatures, we run the plant to those criteria. We have a building management system in our office but we also have one in the security control area, so any alarms that come up will come up on that system. We always have one person on call after hours.'

Preserving materials also requires the control of light. Lloyd says storage in boxes and filing cabinets helps protect objects, manuscripts and paper materials from light damage. All shelves have tops on them so no books are subjected to direct light. The compactus units have lights that turn on only as the units open up. Cuzzillo said that in the new stack areas, sensors pick up movement to switch on lights. When people

Paul Livingston (b.1947)
Sue Dale retrieves a transcript box
from the Oral History stacks,
27 March 2006



Eve Conroy
Ian Smith retrieving material
from the Pictures Stacks,
March 2006

exit the area, the lights go off, leaving only sufficient light for emergencies. Storage areas in the central parts of the building have no windows and those with windows have blinds blocking light.

Appropriate storage also protects materials. 'For instance,' says Lloyd, 'maps are stored flat in cabinet drawers, manuscripts are stored in boxes on shelves, paintings are stored hanging on a screen, objects we try to store in boxes so that they are securely packaged. Powder-coated metal shelves are the preference because wood has all sorts of problems with the fumes it gives off and also metal is more robust.'

'Display cases are made out of wood coated with sealant so that the wood doesn't give off fumes. Of course, in an exhibition situation, the item is only there for a short time.'

'Then you start thinking about how you box an item—we call that the housing—we use acid free boxes; polypropylene boxes; and non-acid-free boxes for less fragile material, and we use Mylar pockets which are made from an inert polyester material. We custom-make boxes for things that don't fit into a normal manuscript box and we have wallets and folders and envelopes. The idea is that you need to store things in such a way that you can handle a quantity, for instance, a box of manuscript material, without having to handle the items themselves.'

Staff are trained in simple procedures to reduce the likelihood of damage—not to use rubber bands to bind material, to wear gloves, not to eat or drink near collections, to make sure they have enough space for the task they are doing—and in handling valuable materials. 'A lot of our material

gets photocopied or digitised, so we provide training in how to handle individual pages—a music manuscript, for instance, can be quite fragile, so we make sure to pick it up with two hands to the piece of paper. If we're dealing with a large map, we ask somebody else to help. And we have rules for when a book is being photocopied, we have overhead photocopiers and digitisation cameras so that things are not squashed flat.'

And then there are pests. The Library takes an environmentally friendly approach—staff act preventatively with new acquisitions, and only when they see evidence in the existing collection. When new collections arrive they are opened in the loading dock and checked for any evidence of mice or other pests. If a problem is detected—silverfish, for example—staff might freeze the boxes for a week to kill them.

Lloyd says the Library has very little problem with moulds in the collection but, if mould is detected on an item, it is sealed in a container and then treated.

Preservation of the collection is a never-ending task, and the queue for repairs must be managed. The Library has developed a register of significant materials, and collection managers have been asked to make a relative ranking of their collections which enables managers and the Preservation team to know where the priorities lie.

'Our preservation program has two different streams of work,' says Lloyd, 'one of those streams is the targeted work on high priority collections where we might start at the beginning of a collection and work all the way to the end and treat every item in that collection.'

'The other program is called the Identified in Use or "yellow form program". Anything

below left:
Greg Power (b.1974)
Preservation procedures and
handling, 1 August 2002

below right:
Greg Power (b.1974)
Looking through bound
historical newspapers
Preservation procedures and
handling, 1 August 2002





found in the building by staff that needs repair gets sent up to Preservation with a yellow form and gets entered in the database. We have a team of four conservators and a bookbinder and they work on the repairs.'

When materials are sent for repair decisions must be made about whether to preserve, conserve or restore them. 'You might hear people talking about restoration, conservation, preservation,' says Lloyd. 'Restoration normally refers to restoring something to look the same way it used to, and it doesn't necessarily mean it's reversible. Using lacquer, for example, is not reversible. So you restore a lacquer box rather than conserve it. The basics of preservation are that whatever you do needs to be reversible. If you are talking about conservation, you are normally talking about doing something that is reversible, and also not trying to hide the history of the object. So if something had a tear in it you might repair the tear but you might still be able to see that it had been torn. It gets back to the questions of how important the item is in the collection, what the item is going to be used for, whether it is going on exhibition.'

Reformatting is a growing preservation strategy and is used to produce a copy of something fragile, an item that gets a lot of use, or material that the Library would prefer was not handled in its original form. Microfilming is an example of the process and, these days, digitisation is a major area of reformatting. 'We provide access to our collection through digitisation and the Library has made the decision that digitisation has to meet preservation standards as well. So we actively look after the digital information. We have

standards of what type of file formats we digitise into.

'We look at the physical format that things come into the collection in—floppy disks and CDs—and we migrate those into different formats, take them off the floppy onto the computer because the floppy disk itself is not stable,' says Lloyd.

'We are educating ... ourselves and collection managers about what is acceptable to take into the collection. In some cases, it's more acceptable to print material out on a piece of paper and put that into the collection rather than accept file formats that we don't have the software for and can't open.'

Jennifer concludes that the Library continues to refine and develop its processes with regard to preservation: 'Digital preservation, like traditional preservation, is about making sure that the thing you have created is stable in itself. We don't necessarily have all the answers to that yet, we just consider and research so that we know what's going on'.

JENNIFER MORAN is a writer and editor for several newspapers and journals

above left:
Greg Power (b.1974)
Susanne Wullen from Collection Preservation Section undertaking conservation work on an original artwork in the Library's collection

above right:
Greg Power (b.1974)
Kerry McInnes from Collection Preservation Section undertaking conservation work on items from the Library's collection

below from left:
Covers of Preservation Microfilming: Does It Have a Future?: Proceedings of the First National Conference of the National Preservation Office, at the State Library of South Australia, 4-6 May 1994 (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1995); *Multimedia Preservation: Capturing the Rainbow. Proceedings of the Second National Conference of the National Preservation Office, Brisbane, 28-30 November 1995* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1996); *Guidelines for Preservation Microfilming in Australia & New Zealand, Prepared by Information Preservation Section, National Library of Australia* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1998)

