

Archives Sub-Group Report

Many thanks to Jane at the Royal Institution who hosted a very well attended archives sub-group meeting on 21 November 2017. Meagen Smith, Conservator at the Parliamentary Archives, came to talk to us about working with a conservator. These are some of the important things to consider when commissioning conservation work:

- Use an accredited conservator <https://icon.org.uk/>
- Establish the purpose of the treatment (exhibition/popular item/damaged but rarely used) this will determine the level of intervention required
- Following an initial consultation, the conservator's proposal should suggest various treatment options, an estimate of the time involved and a quote for the cost
- Establish who will be doing the work and where
- Ask questions and negotiate – conservators are friendly and love to discuss their work
- Consider the economies of scale – the project maybe large but work could be done on one or two items at a time; or, an item may require a lot of work but perhaps you could afford one or two essential treatments. Discuss both the overall aims as well as specific tasks with the conservator
- The conservator's report should include a breakdown of the treatments recommended and the types of materials that will be used (if PVA is proposed, walk away!)
- The cost of a very experienced conservator is around £80 an hour (and they may have a long waiting list)
- Once the work has been agreed, regard any items to be treated off site as a loan: have a loan agreement prepared with the name, address and insurance details of the conservator, and the date of the item's departure and return
- Keep records of the work so it is clear where the item is and what treatment has been done - the conservator should provide images of the item before, during and after treatment and these should also include a measure for scale as well as a colour chart
- Payment – let the conservator know if your finance department tends to be a late payer. Some conservators may only release the item upon payment, others may charge 'rent' if a finished item has not been paid for
- Confirm with the conservator any publicity issues – not all institutions want to reveal the conservation work carried out on their items but for others it can make a good outreach story
- When having an item treated and digitised, establish with the conservator the order in which the work will be done

Following her talk, Meagen took a wide range of questions from members. These included:

- techniques for DIY conservation work (invest in good quality materials; consider asking a conservator to conduct an initial workshop)
- a document brought to the meeting was considered (Meagen recommended that a fugitive test be carried out to establish the stability of the media)
- environmental problems (Meagen noted the current issue of 'sticky dust' resulting from diesel and petroleum)

- climatisation periods for items brought in and out of controlled storage conditions (rapid change does more damage than gradual change)
- acid tests for old boxes (testing kits can be easily purchased; they provide evidence)
- LMA provides a bespoke box making service (recommended)
- regular monitoring of conditions (not forgetting to check inside boxes from time to time)

Members then spent the remaining time exchanging news on their various archive projects.

The next meeting will be held in March/April, to be advised.