



Meeting the need for long-term digital preservation

The Public Record Office has a long history of preserving paper, parchment, film and other media. But, in the 21st century, we are faced with a new and urgent challenge – the need to preserve digital materials.

Digital records – such as email, web pages, and databases – are produced by government departments in growing quantities. If properly preserved, and made available to the public electronically, these records will provide a wealth of historical evidence for future generations.

But the task of preserving digital records poses a number of difficult challenges. Records on magnetic tape or disc may become wholly or partially unreadable in less than ten years, and so need to be copied on to fresh media every few years.

As new computer systems are developed, current hardware and software soon becomes obsolete, making it impossible to read records in formats that were once widely used. Two possible solutions to this problem are to migrate old data formats to new, and to replicate old systems on new hardware. Whilst these methods are being thoroughly tested, we will store records in their original formats.

The Digital Archive

In March 2003, a newly developed digital archive system, to

Future generations

In helping government departments and others select the archives of the future, and by cataloguing, storing, preserving and conserving our holdings, we can pass on the nation's recorded heritage to future generations.

Even producing records for today's readers can affect the future, as daily wear and tear corrodes the condition of the records themselves. Paper can degrade and computer systems can become obsolete.

This section brings together all our work in safeguarding the physical condition of our records, so that users in the future will be able to access the records they want. It describes how we are:

- Meeting the need for long-term digital preservation
- Maintaining our excellence in traditional conservation
- Preservation copying by microfilming

support the preservation of records that were originally created and stored electronically, was installed at Kew.

Access to records stored within the Digital Archive is currently available to members of the public visiting the reading rooms at Kew. At a future stage of this project, researchers will be able to access digital records over the internet.

Preserving BBC Domesday



BBC Domesday was a national project carried out in 1986 to celebrate the 900th anniversary of Domesday Book. Schoolchildren and researchers from all over the United Kingdom collected huge amounts of information about the communities in which they lived. This information, in the form of text and photographs, was recorded onto two special videodiscs that could be played using a BBC Master computer and an LV-ROM player.

A user of the BBC Domesday system was able to zoom in on a map of the British Isles and gain

detailed information about any part of the UK. BBC Domesday was very innovative for the time and it was organised on a scale that has not been seen since 1086.

In 1986 a full BBC Domesday system was presented to the then Keeper of the Public Records. By 2003, however, this system was one of the few working examples of BBC Domesday in existence. After 16 years of use, most of the LV-ROM players produced have reached the end of their working lives. As a storage technology, LV-ROM has been superseded by CD-ROM and DVD, leaving the BBC Domesday disks perilously close to being unreadable.

Working with the BBC and others we have managed to preserve the content of the BBC Domesday project in a digital storage medium, using the original analogue videotapes. We are now working to make this resource available to generations of future users.

Maintaining our excellence in traditional conservation

We have continued to raise staff's and readers' awareness of preservation.

We have run training sessions for readers and departmental record officers on preservation, and bought photographic book cradles and scanners to prevent possible damage while documents are being microfilmed or digitised.

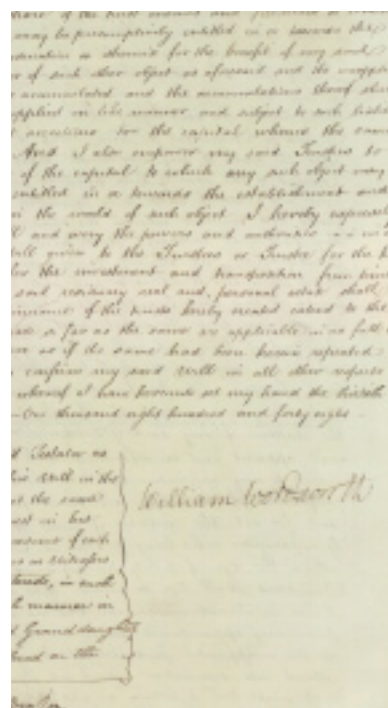
We have also improved access by



conserving those popular records most in demand and those withdrawn from use because of their condition.

Pieces which have received conservation treatment include:

- An indenture between Henry VII and John Islip, abbot, and the convent of St Peter's Westminster 1504 (E 33/2)
- The Will of William Wordsworth (PROB 1/90)



- A piece from the Edward Muybridge collection. In the foreground is "Female descending stairs with basin in hands" Plate 134 - 25 April 1887. In the background is "Female descending stairs and turning". Plate 135 -25 April 1887 (COPY 1/384)

- Doodles found in E 179/341.

As a result of an independent review of our current preservation activities we have appointed a preservation manager to be responsible for coordinating preservation across The National Archives. We are also looking at developing a series of research projects with other leading institutions.

Help from volunteers

For the past 12 years, we have enjoyed the valuable services of our volunteers from the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS).

Their work has included removing rusty paperclips, pins and staples, encapsulating photographs and plans in polyester enclosures and placing the files onto plastic ended treasury tags. Four boxes of exceptionally dirty wills have also been cleaned prior to being scanned for DocumentsOnline.

We are deeply indebted to them for their continuing valuable contribution and unending commitment in helping to preserve the records.

Other conservation activities

Senior members of National Archives staff continue to serve

on several external bodies concerned with conservation, including the National Preservation Office.

The first phase review of our current Risk Management Framework was undertaken during the year. The Framework provides plans and controls to guard against significant risks, and the primary aim is prevention. However, if confronted with a disaster situation we also have recovery plans for prompt organised action to minimise any damage.

Preservation copying by microfilming

In our programme for preservation copying we have continued filming documents that are popular with users (such as First World War soldiers' records – see *page 19*), for their preservation

and to make them more accessible. As usual with popular series, copies are made available on open access in the microfilm reading room, widening user choice and extending the range of information on open access.

We are also broadening our approach to preservation copying to include digitisation, which will increasingly play a larger role in making records available online.

Among the series included in our programme this year are the Royal Navy seamen's registers of service in ADM 188, the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve service records for the First World War in ADM 337, and Royal Naval Reserve ratings' service in BT 377.

The nominal index to passport registers in FO 611 and length of service pensions' admission books of the Royal Hospital Chelsea in WO 117 have also recently been filmed and are now on open access.

