

The National Archives holds the nation's memory. With many of millions of items, it is more than a record of government decisions. It is an archive about people, from the ordinary to the famous, who together tell the story of our nation.

It is my story.

It is your story.

It is our history.



Collaboration of Conservation and Digitisation Teams

National Archives of Australia, Melbourne.

Introduction

The National Archives of Australia manages valuable records created by Australian Government agencies to ensure that they are available now and for future generations. A major responsibility of the National Archives is to preserve and provide access to its collection – and there is a growing demand for digitised copies of records. The work of National Archives staff in the Melbourne Office demonstrates the importance of teamwork and communication in providing this form of access.

The National Archives provides a range of digitisation services, including a proactive program of digitisation for preservation purposes and digitisation on demand, as requested by clients.

Conservators work closely with the Preservation Digitisation team for preservation-related digitisation. Both conservators and the Preservation Digitisation team liaise with digitisation officers in the Access and Communication branch about digitisation on demand requests made by users of the collection. These different teams work collaboratively to ensure that collection items are handled appropriately during treatment and duplication, and that suitable supports and equipment are used during digitisation.



Image 1: Conservation and Digitisation teams (L to R: Tha Iem, Amy Bartlett, Liam Ryan, Debra Parry)

Ethical considerations

There are a number of ethical considerations when staff undertake digitisation of archival items. They assess the condition of the item and make a decision about whether conservation treatment is needed before duplication can take place. An assessment is also made of how the materials will respond to the digitisation process. Items that have been digitised are retained in the collection: the original item proves the authenticity of the digital item and, if there is a problem with the digital copy, the original can be rescanned. Items digitised by the Preservation Digitisation team are captured to reflect the integrity of the original object and the digital image is not manipulated for aesthetic reasons.

Preservation-related digitisation

Sometimes, specialised conservation treatment is required before digitisation can take place. Conservators work closely with the Preservation Digitisation team to ensure that items are in a suitable condition to be digitised. This poster highlights some scenarios we have encountered.

A framed photograph (dated 1883) was being digitised for preservation purposes. First, a pre-treatment shot was taken using a copy stand. The conservator then removed the photograph from the frame and carried out cleaning to remove insect frass and dirt.

The item was then recaptured using the copy stand and a digital SLR camera (see image 2). Using a colour chart, staff made a colour profile for the camera to ensure that the detail and colours present in the original image were duplicated. The camera was fitted with a macro lens, and a cross polarisation process was used to eliminate any reflections from possible silvering in the image.

The image was captured to National Archives preservation standards and the digital images were loaded on secure servers, located in Canberra.



Image 2: Carrying out digitisation of the 1883 photograph using a copy stand and digital SLR

NAA: B5808, Whole of series

Once the photograph had been digitised, the conservator put it back in the original frame. Previously it had no mount, so one was made so that the photograph no longer rested directly on the glass. New materials were then used as a backing board because the original board had caused extensive staining on the card upon which the photograph was mounted. The original board was then placed in a polyethylene sleeve and kept in a custom-made box with the framed photograph.

Files held at the National Archives often include oversized plans, maps or posters which have been folded to fit in a foolscap-sized file cover. These items are often damaged along the fold lines due to repeated unfolding and folding for viewing. Damaged plans are often removed from a file and flattened by humidification. Conservators make repairs or carry out lining as required. Plans are then sent to the Preservation Digitisation team for scanning.



Image 3: Returning the photograph to the original frame with a new mount

NAA: B5808, Whole of series

The oversized Warrnambool Post Office plan (dated 1875) was scanned with an Océ CS4050 scanner. It was critical that the plan was stable enough to withstand the moving components of the scanner. The operator uses white backing paper when required on severely damaged or thin items to provide support for fragile documents. The Preservation Digitisation team reproduced the plan as an A3 print, which was then inserted in the file as a copy. The original plan was stored separately in a plan drawer.

These actions, combined with the straight document path, and the ability to increase or decrease the speed of the scanner, contributed to the safe digitising of the plan. These scanning procedures have been successfully adopted as the National Archives converts hard-copy originals into a secure and accessible digital archive. This enables the National Archives to limit access to and handling of the original items.

The Preservation Digitisation team has other specialised scanners to deal with the different types of collection material in the National Archives' custody. The team use the Creo iQsmart 3 scanner to capture reflective photographs and transparent items such as glass plate negatives. A specialised film scanner is used to produce digital files from slide transparencies.

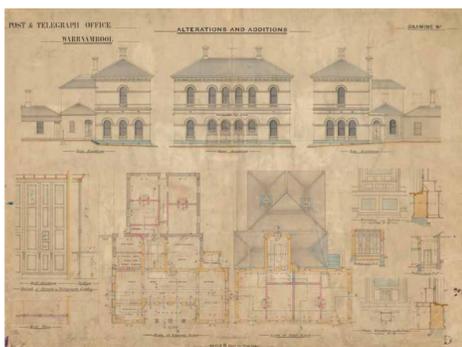


Image 4: Oversized plan

NAA: B3712, Drawer 44 Folder 6

Digitisation on demand

Researchers are able to request that items are digitised and uploaded to the National Archives' online database, RecordSearch. Digitisation officers from the Access and Communication branch who conduct this service often require assistance from conservators.

For example, conservators are approached to separate adhered folios when the information is obscured by the adhesive (see image 5). Therefore, treatment is required to prepare the item for digitisation. A range of methods is used to separate the folios, such as the use of a steamer (see image 6). Conservators liaise with digitisation officers during the treatment to ensure that timelines are met.

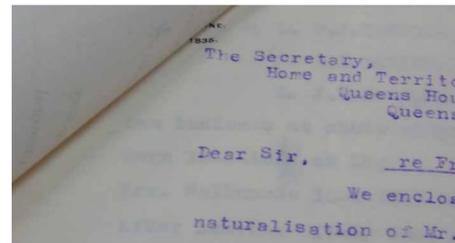


Image 5: Obscured information as a result of folio adhesion

NAA: B741, V/4727



Image 6: Conservator carrying out folio separation treatment

NAA: B741, V/4727

Digitisation by clients in reading rooms

Clients are allowed to create digital copies of National Archives records in our reading rooms using their own digital cameras. The clients are given instructions by National Archives staff about camera usage and handling items. In some cases, records are forwarded to conservators for treatment before clients view the items.



Image 7: Volume – before treatment

NAA: B4397, volume 30



Image 8: Volume – after treatment

NAA: B4397, volume 30

For example, a volume was sent to the Melbourne laboratory that had badly cockled and folded pages, as shown in image 7. Conservators flattened the folios so that the pages were as flat as possible. This contributes to the preservation of the item and helps the client obtain suitable images.

Conclusion: communication and collaboration

The examples in this poster demonstrate how communication and collaboration are necessary to ensure that items are preserved, digitised and made accessible to the public. Digitisation cannot be carried out in isolation from other sections of the National Archives; conservators are often needed to make sure items are in a suitable condition for digitisation to be carried out. The Digitisation team and the Conservation team communicate extensively with each other and contribute their expertise to achieve preservation outcomes for the National Archives and its clients.

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