

‘What is your view on the purpose of, and best practice for Conservation Records, and how have your systems for recording developed?’

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The subject of conservation documentation is vast, with much having been debated and written about it. What are we recording and why? What is the purpose or aim? Who is it for? And how do we balance the time and cost of producing documentation with the often limited resources of a conservation project?

I believe that accurately recording our projects and creating conservation records is a mandatory and important part a conservator’s job. This conviction is corroborated in section 2 of the CVMA Guidelines (Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi), which is an internationally agreed code of best practice for conserving stained glass (<http://www.cvma.ac.uk/conserv/guidelines.html>). It is also a stipulated requirement by many funding bodies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

Documentation is created with many different audiences in mind, and should be kept as jargon-free as possible. Nobody wants to read reams of unnecessary information, so it is important to have a clear understanding of what we are recording and for whom. In my experience, documentation can often be under-valued by an owner or custodian, as money is often seen as being better spent when it directly corresponds to the conservation of an object. Funding can be tight in both private practice and large public institutions. However, it is important that stained glass conservators help to change this point of view. Documentation forms an important link between our work now and future heritage specialists and historians. It is also a valuable resource for the owner/custodian, as it provides them with a detailed and justified record of work undertaken; a photographic record of their stained glass (that can be referred to in case of future damage); and clear guidelines for ongoing care and maintenance.

The opportunity to hand down information about the condition and treatment of the glass to future heritage professionals is perhaps one of the main purposes for creating a detailed record of our work. It is important to record as much information as possible about the location, history, significance, current condition, cause of condition, treatment methodology and reasoning, and the conservation treatments applied. Typically, I also include a list of materials used and where they can be sourced. This is particularly important for organic polymers, such as adhesives, as there can be variations in production that can cause differences between batches. There are consequences for the stained glass when we do not treat certain damage phenomena, and there are potential ramifications when we do. Every conservation material added to a window must be carefully considered for how it will age and how it may negatively affect the glass in the future. A clear report detailing what was done and what products were used, and why, immediately supports the next generation in looking after this heritage.

The amount of information that can be captured on each project is inevitably controlled by the available budget (both time and money), which is in turn affected by the value, age and significance of the stained glass. For example, notes about the history of a window may only extend to the maker, year it was created and evidence of previous repairs. However, on other projects there may be a whole archival section covering the history throughout the centuries. As resources are always

stretched, we need to find ways to work smarter and more efficiently, such as tabulating basic information and partnering with other heritage professionals and organisations to create a document which encompasses all aspects of the project. On large projects, I have found it insightful to work with historians and conservation scientists, to help uncover the story behind the current

condition of a window. This work can then be referenced and incorporated into the project documentation.

Over the years, my project documentation has developed and become more comprehensive. In part, this is due to me recording information more quickly, but it is also due to my increased awareness of what might be lacking from the project's historic documentation. Having freelanced with many studios in the UK, Germany and Belgium, I inherited different ways of producing documentation and learned different programmes and systems for capturing data. Some I found to be more effective than others. However, the information we captured was essentially the same across all of the studios and across the different countries. Best practice in conservation is something that has been dictated internationally through charters and guidelines since the Athens Charter in 1931, and everyone does their best to adhere to this.

I divide my documentation into two parts – a main text report for information related to the whole window (including an art historical report, statement of significance, location, installation, overall analysis and conservation methodology) and appendices for information that relates directly to individual panels (such as mappings of damage and treatments applied, photographs of each panel before and after conservation, and any detailed photographs).

In order to maintain a level of consistency in my work, I refer back to past projects and, where possible, use the same symbols and terminology. I produce digital documentation and then print copies for the custodian and the archive, using acid-free archival paper and ink. For in-situ mapping, I create a digital layout in advance and then illustrate it by hand on the scaffolding. For all other graphic mappings of the condition and where treatments were applied, I use Adobe Illustrator. It is a very flexible programme in which you can create your own symbols for different phenomena and different layers of information for complicated panels. For text reports, I have used InDesign, Ragtime or Word. Clearly, it is important to ensure digital photos are of a high quality. These are taken before and after conservation (interior side of the panel in transmitted and reflected light; exterior side in reflected light only) and clearly demonstrate the conservation work undertaken.

It is frustrating to work on a project that you know has been documented before but the information has either been destroyed or mislaid. How best to archive and update our documentation, so that it is easily accessible in the future must be a major consideration. Today, most studios produce a mixture of hard-copy and digital documentation. Full sized documents, such as cartoons or rubbings are rarely digitised full-scale, whilst reports are ordinarily backed up in the virtual world and printed, as required. Ideally, paper documentation is made using acid-free materials, but it still requires a climatically controlled environment to ensure its longevity. Climatically controlled archives are rarely available in either glass studios or a church building, so it is best practice to also submit a copy to the local town or county archive, referenced to the building containing the stained glass.

Black and white documents have been shown to remain legible for longer, as black ink is the most resistant to fading. However, I believe that by ensuring digital files remain accessible, it is logical to use colour in our documentation, as we can capture far more detail. PDF, TIFF and JPEG files are commonly used and are saved on a memory stick or CD, alongside the paper copy. However, technology moves very quickly and it is not so long ago that such information was placed on a floppy disk, that would now be difficult to access. Software also develops at a pace, and the file types we use now may well become obsolete over time. Ultimately, preserving documentation is an ongoing and continuous process.

Establishing an online archive for conservation documentation, that can be backed up, virus checked and updated, must be a primary goal for our industry. Although it is a goal that comes with some hurdles, such as who should have access to the database, client and commercial confidentiality, and consistency of documentation etc. Large collection management systems such as EMu and Spectrum are increasingly being adopted by larger institutions and museums, both to manage their collections and to store conservation data. However, most glass studios do not have the resources for such a database. As an industry, we should also remain mindful of the potential ramifications of renting space in private company-controlled databases, with monthly or annual charges. Organisations like the Digital Curation Centre (<http://www.dcc.ac.uk/>) and the Digital Preservation Coalition (<https://www.dpconline.org/>) can provide advice on keeping digital files safe and up to date.

There is a willingness within the stained glass conservation community to develop some basic guidelines for documentation (e.g. minimum requirements), in order to develop a level of consistency within the documentation we produce. This subject is being discussed within the Institute of Conservation (Icon) and is also an ongoing project of the CVMA's Technical Committee. As well as producing a set of guidelines, the CVMA are currently creating a glossary of terms, which is being translated into several European languages. Outside stained glass, but still relevant, the British Standards Institute are also producing guidelines on Conservation Documentation. All of this will sit alongside resources already available, such as those by the Church Building Council ([https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/CCB\\_Conservation-reports.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/CCB_Conservation-reports.pdf)).

I hope this conversation peaks people's interest in an important, if often unseen, part of our work.