

Our conservation working group are beginning a series of conversations concerning ethics and working practices.

Co-ordinator Helen Bower begins by asking the group the same question:

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

Working group chairman Steve Clare begins the dialogue:

I guess that with the benefit of hindsight, looking back over our archive, which is now extensive, spanning nearly 40 years, my view of my old reports and conservation records is critical. Earlier reports now appear to be verbose, opinionated and lacking in clarity. They are also rather amateurishly presented.

I have over the years refined the systems that we use in Wells, and in that process, my long-term role as National Adviser on stained glass to the National Trust has been pivotal. In my time in post, I have seen, and been part of a move towards a system based on short concise reports which serve to identify specific key areas of condition, and to give prioritised advice on necessary conservation work. Importantly advice to do nothing is equally valuable, supported by recommendations for *structured* monitoring where necessary. In National Trust conservation proposals and records, enough information is given, it is thorough, but avoids over complication. It informs house custodians, conservators and curators to allow them to deal with immediate conservation needs, and to integrate stained glass in the wider conservation plan for the building. It is well designed and presented; a thoroughly good model.

So that basic premise of pared down concise content and good presentation has influenced my own policy.

Not all conservation studios function in the same way, or under the same circumstances, so my views on the complex undertaking of designing and producing a good conservation record need to be set in context. As a conservator in private practice, I am fortunate to work habitually on very high quality stained glass, ranging from small private commissions to very major schemes in cathedrals and great churches. However in stark contrast to studios attached to cathedrals, with whom I regularly compete in a tendering process. I carry out this function as it were ‘without the aid of a safety net’. We have no guaranteed income from great ongoing cycles of conservation enjoyed by some of our competitors working as part of a cathedral works department; we have no support from professional fund raisers, or well-equipped IT departments, and no easy access to academic support. We have to look to our own resources.

This is all directly relevant to the approach to, and design of, our in-house recording system. It has to be efficient, concise and cost effective, or we lose money, but to complicate matters, we of course have our professional pride, and want to give our clients the best possible service- we want it to be presented beautifully too!

In recent years I have been fortunate to have a group of talented younger colleagues with high level computer skills, which has helped massively in realizing our aims.

We began by asking some fundamental questions: what is the true purpose of recording, what are our obligations, and following from that, what should be our level of involvement? We did this in team discussion, leading to consensus, which is how we operate.

Our position can be summarised as follows in no particular order:

- I see our function as providing a true record of our interventions- nothing more, nothing less.
- We insist that the conservation record is concise and useful. It must importantly be accessible to future conservators, custodians, art historians etc. We want layman and specialist alike to look at the record and readily understand the process. To that end we have continuously pared down the methods of recording. Our standardized format pre and post conservation document templates now provide information in a largely diagrammatic format.
- We have to prioritise. We always provide good quality records, however some projects have adequate funding for a far more involved level of recording, others are costed with the provision of basic recording. For example at Wells, Worcester and Winchester cathedrals, exhaustive documentation charted the restoration history of the glass. The consultation process was unerringly documented, and the presentation was of the highest calibre. Other projects, where a small parish struggles to raise a few thousand pounds for the entire project will simply be provided with a brief written summary, well presented conservation diagrams, and the pre and post conservation photographic record.
- It is sometimes important to provide access to supporting material from art historians and conservation scientists, and indeed experts in building performance. We cost the involvement of these colleagues as separate items. If their involvement is agreed, we invite them to become involved, and pay them for their time in a straightforward business transaction. I feel that this properly respects them as fellow professionals. We of course have a network of colleagues in these disciplines, and can always find necessary external specialist advice. Their input is always included in our reports as separate appendices with a distinct personality, which we prefer.
- We know from experience that carefully prepared paper records are often stored in poor conditions. From my point of view, digital technology has been a great step forward. We send digital records to as many stakeholders as possible, and store our digital records in several locations and on the Cloud. We hope that in that way there's a good chance of survival of the records.

Importantly, in earlier years, we routinely lodged records with National Monuments Record at Swindon, and they do still take bound records for larger scale projects. However it would be of great value if a central repository could be established where records could be lodged. In my view, and that of BSMGP Council, this is something that the BSMGP should be instrumental in taking forward. Icon (Institute for Conservation) is also doing very valuable work in the field of conservation records, and liaison with Icon in this aim would be mutually beneficial.

- There are projects where paper records are appropriate, this can be larger religious foundations, universities, or anywhere with good archival systems. We decided to engage with and encourage custodians in these cases by producing beautiful finely bound volumes using entirely acid free materials. We are very confident that these records will survive for the long term.
- Where photography is concerned, we have the best digital camera we can afford. We provide good quality large file size images, which are taken under controlled conditions in a dedicated room provided with a large vertical LED lightbox.

All this being said, once we made key decisions about what we wanted to provide, and of course what we did not think we should provide, there was some way to go. A concerted design period commenced about 8 years ago, and is of course ongoing. However in 2017, we arrived at a system with which we are broadly happy.

A hard truth had emerged through experience, and had recurred in our earlier deliberations and discussions- some people are much better than others in preparing and presenting conservation records. Our solution to that problem has been to make this key aspect of our work the responsibility of one person, who has refined our processes and acts as a conduit for information from colleagues concerning conservation records. This has worked extremely well.

I feel that we are at a point where we meet our obligations as we have defined them in this area, working in line with best practice, and our presentation is good.

For information, our system primarily employs Adobe Illustrator, and of course we are more than happy to share our methods and thought processes with colleagues.

It seems to me that this is an excellent area for further discussion at our next BSMGP symposium which is now at the planning stage.

Steve Clare

Wells 2019