

## DOCUMENTATION AND THE DECORATIVE ARTS AT THE HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT

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Emma Traherne

Houses of Parliament, Palace of Westminster, London SW1A 0AA, United Kingdom

[trahernee@parliament.uk](mailto:trahernee@parliament.uk)

**Abstract.** The Historic Furniture and Decorative Arts team are now in their third year of professionally caring for 11,000 items of historic furniture, silver, clocks and ceramics. The collection had been treated as a basic asset with only skeleton information being recorded, especially in the last 20 years. In recent decades, conservation of this working collection had been carried out on an ad-hoc basis driven by the need to return items to use quickly.

This paper will discuss one of the team's main aims; to build up reliable object documentation and information. Legacy data from two old databases was integrated into a new Spectrum compliant Collection Management System. This pointed the way to other supporting documentation including archival records. The Parliamentary Archives, The National Archives and local archives have provided material showing collection items as they were originally designed. This has informed accurate, standardised, materials and techniques being used in conservation. Archival records illustrating where items were originally placed around the Palace of Westminster are leading to more harmonious, accurate interiors. This information will dovetail into the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace beginning in approximately 2025. The challenge of integrating this information into the Collection Management System is ongoing, with a number of different processes being trialled.

Work has begun using this newly revealed information to assist in interpretation, access and outreach in Westminster and further afield. The documentation relating to the origins of items including sketches, technical drawings and photographs, are often used in talks to deepen understanding and increase engagement.

Keywords: Documentation, Houses of Parliament, Conservation, Research, Archives, Standardisation,

### 1 Setting the Scene

A team of three people was formed in 2015 to care for and make accessible the 11,000 items of Historic Furniture and Decorative Arts in the Houses of Parliament. The majority of the collection consists of gothic revival objects designed by A.W.N. Pugin in the 1840s (Wedgewood 2000, 113-135) and items designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott in the 1940s after the bombing of the House of Commons (Stamp 2000, 149-161). The collection covers everyday objects such as coatracks and bins, as well as iconic items including the despatch boxes in the House of Commons and the sovereign's throne in the House of Lords. The collection is intrinsically linked to the interiors of the Palace of Westminster, a Grade 1 listed building (Historic England, n.d.) and part of a UNESCO World Heritage site (UNESCO, n.d.).

A vital element of managing the collection is exploring and documenting object information; linking to the theme of this conference, the provenance of knowledge. Ensuring there is reliable object documentation and information means that the collection is safeguarded, legal accountability can be demonstrated and research and interpretation is encouraged (Ambrose and Paine, 2006, 159). The challenges of managing this unique collection are many and varied but there are two main points:

1. **Lack of Professional Collection Management in the Past** - Although the collection was catalogued to a good standard in the mid-1990s the collection has not been cared for by museum professionals for most of its existence. It has been viewed as an asset of the Houses rather than a cultural, historical resource.
2. **Heavy Use of Objects** - The majority of the objects are in use every day which presents difficulties with location and movement control, recording condition, damage and loss. The items are part of a living collection, very different from what might be described as a 'traditional' museum collection.

In 2015 documentation relating to individual objects was fragmented and incomplete with the management of the collection not following current museum best practice. It was time consuming or virtually impossible to answer enquiries, both internal and external, regarding the origins of items, their meaning and use. From a conservation perspective, up until 2015, work to care for objects had been driven by a need to return items to use quickly and to select contractors based on cost rather than skill. This led too many items losing their original design intent meaning they had unsympathetic modern additions, were overstuffed in inappropriate upholstery and often had been polished with unsuitable materials to an incorrect colour.

## 2 First Steps – Policy, Procedures and Plans – Getting our House in Order

The first steps were to create policies for the collection based on the Arts Council England (ACE) Museum Accreditation Scheme (Arts Council England, n.d.). The collection is not accredited but writing policies required for the scheme demonstrates a desire to abide by nationally agreed standards and define good practice; to inspire confidence from the public, internal stakeholders and decision makers (Arts Council England, n.d.). The policies assist in assessing current performance and in future development (Arts Council England, n.d.). The next step was to write a Documentation Procedure Manual which covers most of the Spectrum 5.0 procedures (Collections Trust 2017). Spectrum 5.0 is the UK collection management standard and is also a requirement for ACE Accreditation (Collections Trust 2017).

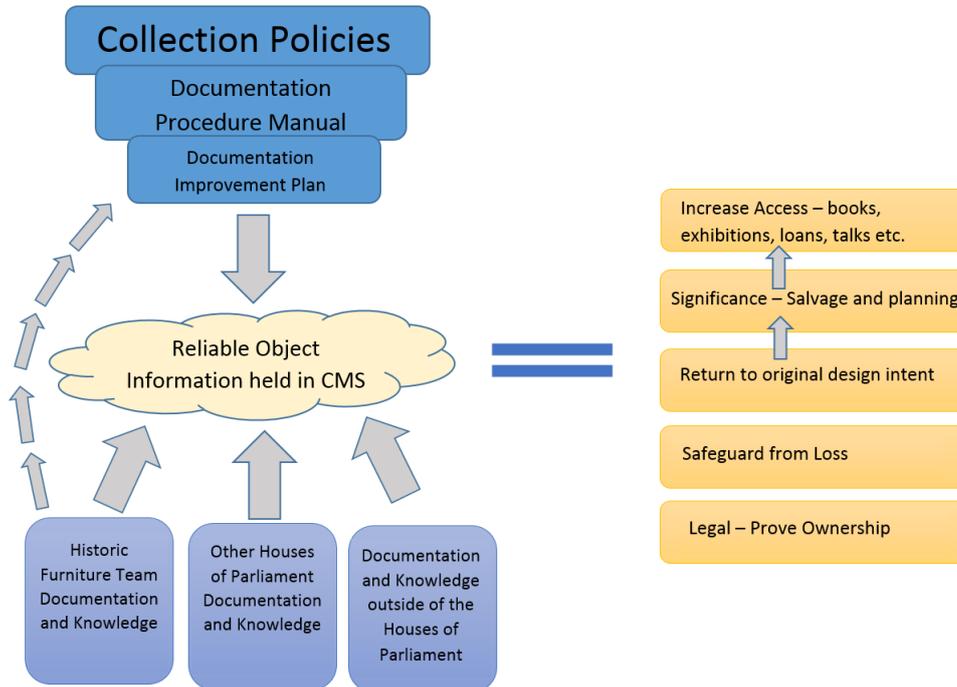
A Documentation Improvement Plan was devised to identify how documentation known to exist could be brought together to help map the history and use of objects. Object information was fragmented into many different physical locations in a variety of formats as shown in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1.** Object information fragmented into a number of locations.

The Documentation Improvement Plan highlighted integrating data remaining in the two legacy Collection Management Systems (CMS), Cardbox and Hardcat, as a priority due to the financial costs involved in keeping these systems functioning and their age meaning their ability to continue working was not certain. EMu, provided by Axiell, (Axiell, n.d.) had been selected in 2014, through a competitive procurement exercise, as the CMS. EMu was chosen because it is Spectrum 5.0 compliant as well as offering barcode scanning and a comprehensive Service Level Agreement. A group of internal volunteers assisted in extracting images and conservation reports from Hardcat and importing these into EMu. For Cardbox the data from each field was extracted and held in individual spreadsheets. Some of this data was simple to import into EMu as there were easily identifiable similar fields. However other fields were more difficult, often containing a combination of complex information which needed to be separated out before it could be imported into various or multiple fields within EMu.

Benefits of this work have already been noticed as indicated in Figure 2. Perhaps most surprising was that location history data for many objects had not been migrated into EMu. By rectifying this issue it is now easier to investigate the use of objects in the last 20 years and highlight possible loss cases. Other important information now correctly recorded within the CMS relates to conservation, acquisition and loans. This knowledge greatly increases understanding of how items have come into the collection and their use and interpretation over recent decades.



**Fig. 2.** Factors which feed into building up reliable object information and the benefits of this information being gathered and correctly managed

Work is now ongoing to digitise and integrate the other items listed in Figure 1 under the heading “Documentation held by the Historic Furniture and Decorative Arts Team” with the help of contractors and in-House volunteers. Advice has been sought from the Parliamentary Archives Record Managers on transferring material to their care which is not related to the collection or has been digitised and is not necessary for the team to keep. Once all of the legacy data from Cardbox and Hardcat had been imported, references to published materials and archival documentation became clear. Information in published material is being scanned, where appropriate, and added to EMu under the Bibliography Module. Archives are also being visited to assess what information they hold on the objects and how this can best be integrated into EMu.

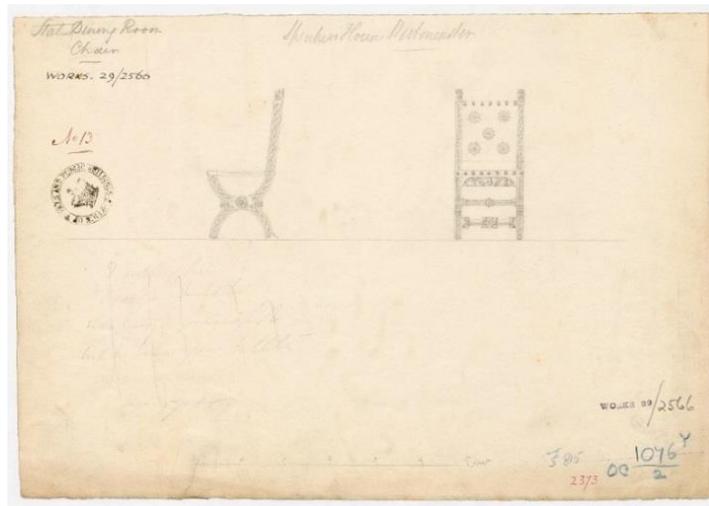
### 3 Gathering Data from External Sources

An example of this work is a current project examining the furniture commissioned for the Speaker of the House of Commons in 1858, and specifically sets of x-frame chairs (Riding, Church and Garibaldi 2000, 195-211). Although references existed in the old Cardbox system to further information being held in archives, without copies of the archive documents, or further details, the references added little to the team’s current knowledge about the objects (Figure 3).

On visiting The National Archives, drawings for the x-frame chairs and the tender document describing them were viewed and high-resolution copies of the drawings and document were ordered (Figure 4). These were then integrated into EMu in the Multimedia and Bibliographic modules.

Classification: <b>A118 X_Frame Chair</b>		Photograph relates to object number <b>POW7995</b> Record Update: <b>15/10/1998</b>	
	Description: <b>X_frame chair oak</b> , rectangular back panel comprising two moulded cross rails covered with leather and nailed across the front, carried round and nailed at the top and bottom, above and below the exposed rails on the back. Framed by supports surmounted by lions head finials with open mouths, bulging eyes, long beard and large ears. The front of the supports carved with narrow overlapping imbrication with moulded edges, the sides with wider, leafy imbrication on ribbed ground and moulded edges. The supports extended to form x-frame base with interlacing uprights supporting front seat rail. Leather panel stretched across to form seat, turned and nailed on front and back seat rail, both carved with intertwined fruiting foliage. The juncture of x-frame legs, carved with large Tudor rose on the outside, the structure shown by horizontal and vertical lines through the centre of the Tudor rose		MATERIALS: Wood <b>Oak</b> Textile <b>Leather</b> Ceramic Metal <b>Brass</b> Surface Treatment Plate Glass Dimensions: <b>39 x 17.75 x 17.25</b> H x W x D or Diameter Metal Mounts:
	Maker: Supplier & Date: <b>Holland and Sons 1859</b>	Marks: "A.R.", "N.W."	Original NPOW: <b>HOC: Speaker's</b> Location: <b>House: State Dining Room</b>
Designer & Date <b>att. John Braund c 1858, after A.W.N.Pugin c 1846</b>	FURTHER INFORMATION: Photographs: <b>Object File: POW7995</b> <input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No <b>1994: 8 colour negatives, "Chair 1,</b>		Documentation: <b>1) PRO Works 6/259: Specification &amp; Tender for the Furniture required for</b>
Tudor Rose	Notes: The junctures of the x-frames outlined to represent folding chairs of this type, as with earlier chairs for Princes Chamber by Webb. Construction different at this point to <b>A117</b> chairs by Webb, which were not made with castors and other differences highlighted in		

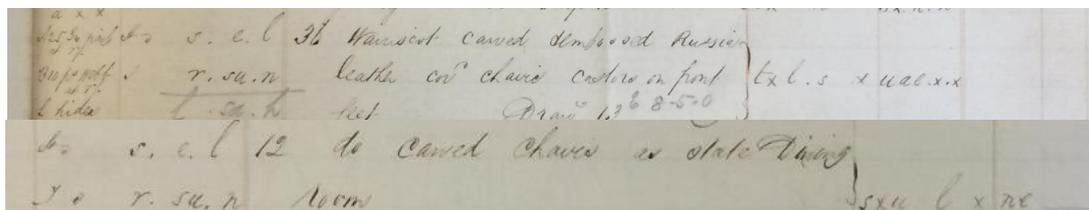
**Fig. 3.** The x-frame chairs as seen on retired CMS Cardbox. The green box illustrates the reference to further archival material about this item in The National Archives.



**Fig. 4.** The x-frame chair drawing held in The National Archives, (State Dining Room Chair).

Further investigation of these chairs answered a known problem about their number. The published material stated 16 were made by John Webb for the Princes Chamber in 1847 and a further 36 were made by Holland and Sons for the Speakers Dining Room in 1858 (Riding, Church and Garibaldi 2000, 195-211). However the collection contains 65 chairs, 13 more than in these orders. Inspection of the chairs confirmed the identity of the 16 John Webb chairs, as these were of a different construction, plus a shorter possible prototype chair. If 36 of the remaining chairs were the Holland and Son 1858 order there were still 12 extra chairs. This raised the possibility of a third set of chairs. The answer to this mystery lay in further inspection of the 1858 tender document for furniture for the Speaker's private dining room, where it states "12 wainscot carved chairs as in State Dining Room" (Speaker House Furniture Tender).

A visit to the Holland and Sons Archives at the Victoria and Albert Museum produced documentation that these items had indeed been made and delivered (Holland and Sons) (Figure 5).



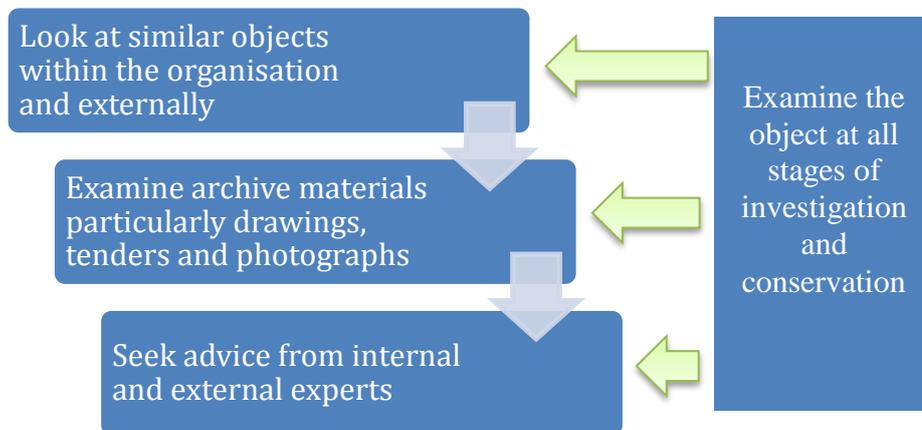
**Fig. 5.** The x-frame chairs described in the Holland and Sons Archives.

Only through thorough investigation of the objects and the archives did this information come to light and explain why there were more chairs in the collection than expected. It confirmed that 48 chairs had been made for the Speakers House by Holland and Son, not the 36 originally quoted in publications. This means we now have solid provenance information on these items and we can be certain when stating who created them and which part of the building they were originally used in. This has a number of practical applications including assigning significance. Significance work is important for improving the salvage plan and also planning for major decanting of the Parliamentary Estate over the coming years. It is only through this work that we can validate what we think we know about these objects and facilitate understanding now and in the future.

Examining archives often yields additional rich information. Both The National Archives and the Holland and Sons archives contain information showing that the furniture manufacturers Holland and Sons were unimpressed when delivering their items to find workmen still finishing the interiors. Sharp but polite letters were exchanged between Holland and Son, the architect and the staff of the House of Commons to resolve the issue. It is this additional information about the stories and personalities behind the objects that many people can connect to, and in the case of over running building works many can relate to (Falk and Dierking 1992, 74). This provides engaging material for outreach and interpretation projects in the future.

#### 4 Documentation Influencing Conservation

The conservation of two chairs in 2016 illustrates the intersection of archives, collection management and conservation as outlined in Figure 6. The chairs are often referred to as Door Keepers Chairs as the doorkeepers for the House of Lords use the chairs when the House of Lords is in session.



**Fig. 6.** The process of gathering information about conservation of Historic Furniture in the Houses of Parliament

Both chairs had ripped leather upholstery and the Keeper of the Collection prioritised the conservation of these two items. As a living collection it is important that items are in a safe, visually appealing state appropriate to the role and importance of the work of the Houses of Parliament. Most of the historic furniture has been extensively conserved over the years meaning that, apart from a few ceremonial items, there is no original upholstery. The team agreed that previous conservation work had, most likely, left the items looking inaccurate in appearance. Therefore research into the chairs was carried out in a number of ways.

Firstly, chairs of a similar type were examined. There are 12 chairs in the collection of this type and inspection of these items showed a number of different approaches to upholstery had been taken over the years (Figure 7). It was therefore difficult to establish what the correct style of upholstery should be from the objects.



**Fig. 7.** The different approaches to upholstery which had occurred over the years to the same type of armchair.

The Parliamentary Archives hold a photograph from 1905 (Figure 8) which is believed to be the earliest known illustration of this type of chair (Farmer). The image clearly shows that 40 years after the creation of this type of chair it has show-wood on the back rest and buttoning on the seat and back. The image also shows the profile of the upholstery and that the chair is flush across the front of the seat.



**Fig. 8.** Right, earliest known image of this type of armchair. Left close up of chair (©Parliamentary Archives)

Many of these findings were confirmed when the chairs were stripped. Without the upholstery it is clear that an additional piece of modern wood was placed on the front of the seat (Figure 9). The pattern of polishing and nail holes on the back rest also illustrates the show-wood that should not have been upholstered over. Additional research into the original colour of the leather and types of nails was also applied to these chairs increasing the accuracy of the conservation work.



**Fig. 9.** Left, one of the chairs before conservation, centre the other chair without upholstery showing the modern additional piece of wood and right after conservation

The conservators have now returned the chairs to their original design intent based on the chairs themselves, research into materials and the archival photograph. Documentation regarding this research and conservation has been added to EMu.

There is now a written standard of how conservation of this type of chair should be carried out which will be applied to the other 10 chairs as and when they require work. This example of conservation work has been used extensively with internal stakeholders in talks, tours and internal publications to illustrate the work of the team, the importance of the collection and the skill and knowledge needed to carry out research and conservation.

#### 4.1 Too much documentation?

The main challenge that this work is producing is the volume of documentation to be integrated into EMu. Not only from archives and published materials but the large volume of multimedia created by each piece of research and each conservation case.

The example here of the Door Keepers Chairs involved adding 78 items to the multimedia section of the conservation record, a time-consuming process (Figure 10). Currently approximately 70 items of furniture are conserved a year and it is not possible at the moment to keep up with the volume of material being produced. It could be argued that not all of the images associated with the conservation need to be placed on the database but then what is the point in taking them and keeping them if they are not stored in EMu, which should be the repository for such information and knowledge to assist current and future researchers.

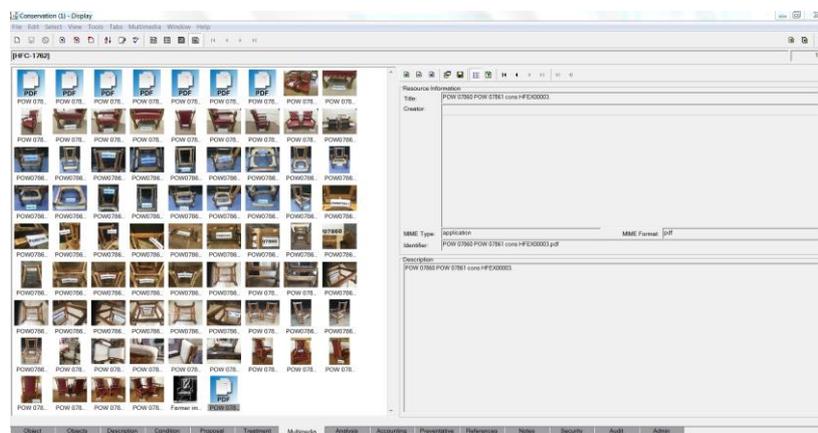


Fig. 10. A screen shot of EMu, the CMS, showing the volume of material associated with just one conservation record.

## 5 The Future

This paper has hopefully shown how the first challenge listed in the introduction is being overcome. The creation of a skilled team to professionalise the care and management of the collection has already led to improvements in many areas including beginning to integrate knowledge held in documentation about items into the CMS.

The second challenge outlined in the introduction, the heavy use of items, will not be overcome any time soon. However, by increasing engagement with internal stakeholders it is hoped that issues around location and movement control, condition, damage and loss can be reduced. Conservation is being improved constantly by research into the original designs of items and what materials and colours should be used.

Increasing engagement with the collection is greatly amplified when we have knowledge about the objects and interesting stories to tell about their role over the years and the people involved in their creation and use. Additional knowledge about items has been used to create webpages, Instagram posts, videos, talks and tours to internal stakeholders, the public and external experts. This has resulted in the number of enquires doubling.

In January and February 2018 both Houses of Parliament voted to move out of the Palace of Westminster for a number of years so that essential works could be carried out as part of the Restoration and Renewal Programme (Houses of Parliament n.d.). This complex project clearly presents opportunities to increase engagement with all of the historical objects through increased loans and touring exhibitions during the shutdown. In addition it is hoped that many items can return to their original locations within the building. This however will only be possible if further research is carried out into the objects to understand their provenance, use and uncover their stories.

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