

A Code of Practice on Archives

for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom

Third Edition, 2002

1. Introduction

This *Code of Practice* was first drawn up in 1990 by the Standing Conference on Archives and Museums (SCAM) on behalf of its three parent organisations: the Association of Independent Museums, the Museums Association and the Society of Archivists. All three organisations approved the *Code*.

The *Code* was offered to museums to give them guidance in administering their archives in accordance with professional standards, and to suggest sources of advice and help. Later in the same year, a *Standard for Record Repositories*, also providing guidance on the administration of archives, was issued by the Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC). The *Code* was revised in 1996, and has been further revised in 2002, in response to comments from museums and other users, and taking into account both changing circumstances in the UK heritage sector and new professional literature and standards, including the *Standard for Record Repositories*.

The Standing Conference would be glad to receive any comments or suggestions from users of this new edition of the *Code*. These should be sent to the Standing Conference via the Historical Manuscripts Commission (address below).

The Standing Conference on Archives and Museums, September 2002

2. What are archives?

In general terms, archives may be defined as original documents in any medium created and/or accumulated by an individual, a family, a corporate body or institution in the course of its daily life and work, which have been selected for permanent preservation as evidence of purpose, function, organisation and operation. They may include legal documents such as deeds, wills, contracts, etc., minutes, financial records, files or loose papers, letters, diaries, maps, plans or technical drawings of all kinds, printed books, pamphlets or ephemera, illuminated manuscripts, photographs, newspaper cuttings, volumes/books of product samples, audio-visual material or computer discs or printout.

The relationship between the originator and the documents gives those documents archival significance and intellectual value. The integrity of an archive should therefore be respected where it survives. It should not be broken up, nor should separate items be abstracted. In museums, documentary material may often have been collected from diverse sources because of its interest, or because it bears some relation to a museum's object collections, and in these cases it will be an 'artificial' collection rather than a true archive produced by an individual or organisation.

Please note that this *Code of Practice* applies to all the material described above, even where it is largely divorced from its original archival context; and that the term 'museum' is used to include 'gallery'.

3. Archives in museums

Archives commonly found in museums can be divided into four categories:

- Records and documents acquired for the museum's collections by gift, purchase or loan, irrespective of their format or medium.
- Any records deposited in the museum by statutory authority.

For further explanation see 'Legal controls' in section 4 below.

- Documentary material associated with the museum's collections.

Please note that this *Code* does not apply to archaeological archives which are covered by *Guidelines for the Preparation of Excavation Archives for Long-term Storage* (UKIC, 1990), and *Selection, Retention and Dispersal of Archaeological Collections* (Society of Museum Archaeologists, 1993).

- The museum's own administrative records, files, etc., illustrating its history and activities as an institution.

Only those records which have been selected for permanent preservation are defined as archives; for the way in which a museum's current administrative records can be managed, and certain of them selected for preservation, see SCAM Information Sheet 5: *Managing a Museum's Administrative Records* (details in section 9 below).

4. Acquiring archives for museum collections

Museums should acquire archives (other than their own institutional records) only in accordance with their collecting policy; this should be formulated to take account of the provisions of the HMC's *Standard for Record Repositories*. Archives have special needs, set out in the *Standard*, which should be met by museums holding archives or intending to acquire them.

Further information on collecting and acquisitions is available in SCAM Information Sheet 1: *Collections Policy and Management* (details in section 9 below).

- **Consultation and co-operation:** to avoid conflict of interest there should be close liaison and consultation with the appropriate national or local record office before a museum makes any commitment to acquire significant holdings of archives. (See Section 9 below for information on how to contact record offices.) Where the interests of museums and record offices overlap, consultation is particularly important; in some cases a joint venture with a record office might be considered, although care must always be taken to preserve the integrity of the archive. There may also be an overlap with the interests of local studies libraries, for instance when museums plan to acquire collections of mainly printed or audio-visual material, or the kind of 'artificial' collections described in section 2 above; local studies libraries should therefore be included in consultations where this is appropriate.

There have been a number of successful joint ventures between archives and museums; for example, the administrative and financial archives of the Cunard Company were deposited with Liverpool University Archives while the technical archives were deposited, with some artefacts, with the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside. Full lists of each other's holdings must always be exchanged between the partners of joint ventures.

- **Legal controls:** certain categories of archives are controlled by law, including public, manorial, tithe and Church of England parochial records, and museums should be particularly careful not to acquire these without prior consultation with the Historical Manuscripts Commission, or, for public records in England and Wales, the Public Record Office; in Scotland, the National Archives of Scotland should be consulted about any proposed acquisition of public records; in Northern Ireland the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland is exclusively responsible for public records and should be consulted on any matter relating to them.

Information on statutory controls affecting the acquisition of archives is given in a Society of Archivists Information Leaflet, *Archive Legislation in the United Kingdom*, by A A H Knightbridge, (Society of Archivists, 1985). More recent Scottish legislation, the Local Government, etc. (Scotland) Act 1994, affects records in local authority custody, for which 'proper arrangements' must be made in consultation with the Keeper of the Records of Scotland.

5. Stewardship

Archives are fragile and need to be appropriately cared for and managed.

- **Management and conservation:** museums with significant holdings of archives should preferably employ professional staff with qualifications, as appropriate, in archive management or conservation.

Where no professional archive staff are available, advice on acquisition, storage, conservation and cataloguing should be sought from an appropriate national or local record office, or from one of the advisory bodies listed below.

- **Storage:** appropriate storage for archives should be provided.

Basic guidance on this subject is given in SCAM Information Sheet 3: *Archive Preservation and Conservation*. Detailed information on best practice may be found in the current edition of British Standard 5454, *Recommendations for the storage and exhibition of archival documents*. (Details of publications are in section 9 below.)

- **Display:** because of their sensitivity to light and other environmental factors, most archives are unsuitable for permanent display. Temporary display facilities should afford both physical and environmental protection, ideally in line with the British Standard 5454.

6. Public access

There should be arrangements for reasonable public access to the archives; such access must be carefully supervised.

Further details of appropriate policies, facilities and practical arrangements for public access are included in SCAM Information Sheet 4: *Access to Archives*. A draft *National Standard for Access to Archives* has been produced as the basis for a new British Standard, and is available from the Public Record Office (details below).

- **Catalogues:** catalogues and lists of all archive acquisitions should be sent to the Historical Manuscripts Commission for inclusion in the National Register of Archives (NRA), the comprehensive central collecting point for information about the archive and manuscript sources for British history, or, in Scotland, to the National Register of Archives for Scotland, at the National Archives of Scotland. Similar lists should be sent also to the appropriate national or local archive repository in order to ensure that archive holdings may be known as widely as possible. Where a museum has difficulty in cataloguing its archives, it should seek advice from a record office or advisory body.

Further information is included in SCAM Information Sheet 2: *Archival Listing and Arrangement*. The National Register of Archives is maintained by the Historical Manuscripts Commission. Internet users may find information and search the indexes of the NRA online at <http://www.hmc.gov.uk/nra/>. The National Register of Archives for Scotland is a department of the National Archives of Scotland and acts independently of the National Register of Archives, although it sends copies of all its surveys to the latter.

- **Personal information:** care must be taken in allowing access to personal information about living individuals, since this is now regulated by Data Protection legislation.

Advice on this subject is contained in the *Code of practice for archivists and records managers under Section 51(3) of the Data Protection Act 1998* (Society of Archivists and Records Management Society, expected publication 2002), and is also available from the office of the Information Commissioner (contact details below).

- **Public institutions and Freedom of Information:** access to archives in public institutions has long been subject to certain restrictions - for example, access to official public records in England and Wales has been restricted by statute, and in Scotland and Northern Ireland by administrative

arrangements, so that records less than thirty years old have not normally been available to the public. However, Freedom of Information legislation is fundamentally altering the traditional access regime for records created or owned by publicly funded bodies.

Authoritative advice on Freedom of Information is not currently (September 2002) available but should be sought from the Public Record Office or the Information Commissioner, or in Scotland from the National Archives of Scotland, and in Northern Ireland from the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (details below).

7. Disposal

If any archive material is considered for disposal, the procedures set out in the current *Registration Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom: Registration Guidelines* should be followed; the disposal should normally be announced through the *Society of Archivists' Newsletter*, as well as in the Museums Association's *Museums Journal*, and the interests of the appropriate national or local archive service should always be considered.

8. Professional co-operation

As a matter of professional principle, museum curators and archivists should endeavour to work with each other and with allied professionals:

- In areas where co-operation would be particularly useful, including the care of local commercial, industrial, technological and social history archives, and the collecting of photographs and topographical material.
- In the provision of professional services where collaboration might achieve better and more cost-effective results, especially in education services, joint exhibitions, joint publication, risk awareness and disaster management planning, and in conservation facilities and expertise.

9. Sources of help

- **Useful publications include:**

SCAM Information Sheet 1: *Collections Policy and Management* (2000)

SCAM Information Sheet 2: *Archival Listing and Arrangement* (2000)

SCAM Information Sheet 3: *Archive Preservation and Conservation* (2000)

SCAM Information Sheet 4: *Access to Archives* (2000)

SCAM Information Sheet 5: *Managing a Museum's Administrative Records* (publication due 2002)

The whole series of information sheets is available from the Historical Manuscripts Commission or Resource (addresses below), or online at <http://www.hmc.gov.uk/SCAM/>

Benchmarks in Collection Care for Museums, Archives and Libraries (Resource, 2002); together with a series of Resource conservation fact sheets, available from Resource or online at <http://www.resource.gov.uk/>

Code of practice for archivists and records managers under Section 51(3) of the Data Protection Act 1998 (Society of Archivists and Records Management Society, expected publication 2002)

Code of Practice on the Management of Records under Section 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (draft 2001), available from the Public Record Office or online at <http://www.pro.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/>

Local Studies Libraries: Library Association Guidelines for local studies provision in public libraries (Facet Publishing, 2nd edition 2002)

National Preservation Office preservation guidance leaflets, available from the National

Preservation Office or online at <http://www.bl.uk/services/preservation/national.html>

National Standard for Access to Archives (Public Services Quality Group, draft 2001), available from the Public Record Office or online at <http://www.pro.gov.uk/archives/psqg/>

Recommendations for the storage and exhibition of archival documents (BSI, 2000); BS 5454:2000 may be purchased from the British Standards Institute (BSI Group Headquarters, 389 Chiswick High Road, London W4 4AL; tel: 020 8996 9000; fax: 020 8996 7400; web site: <http://wwwbsi-global.com>); alternatively, it may be consulted in most local authority record offices.

Record Repositories in Great Britain (HMSO, 11th edition 1999); copies may be seen at all local authority record offices and many larger libraries

Society of Archivists information leaflets and best practice guidelines, including *Security* (SoA, 1994), *Archive Education Services* (SoA, 1998) and *Film and Sound Archives in Non-specialist Repositories* (SoA, 2001) may be consulted in many local authority record offices or purchased direct from the Society of Archivists.

Standard for Record Repositories (HMC, 3rd edition 2001); copies may be obtained at a cost of £3 from the Historical Manuscripts Commission, or online at <http://www.hmc.gov.uk/pubs/>

Standards in Action: managing archive collections in museums (mda, 2002); copies may be purchased at a cost of £18.50 direct from the mda (contact details below).

- **Advice on archive matters in any part of the UK is available from:**

Local record offices, which may be located from the current edition of *Record Repositories in Great Britain* or via the 'ARCHON' gateway at <http://www.hmc.gov.uk>

The Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC), Quality House, Quality Court, Chancery Lane, London WC2A 1HP; tel: 020 7242 1198; fax: 020 7831 3550; e-mail: nra@hmc.gov.uk; web site: <http://www.hmc.gov.uk>. Please note that at the time of printing (September 2002) the forthcoming merger of the Historical Manuscripts Commission and the Public Record Office has been announced.

- **or, in Northern Ireland, from:**

The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 66 Balmoral Avenue, Belfast BT9 6NT; tel: 020 90 255905; fax: 020 90 355999; e-mail: proni@dcalni.gov.uk; web site: <http://proni.nics.gov.uk>

- **or, in Scotland, from:**

The National Archives of Scotland, HM General Register House, Edinburgh EH1 33YY; tel. 0131 535 1314; fax: 0131 535 1360; e-mail: enquiries@nas.gov.uk; web site: <http://www.nas.gov.uk>

- **or, in Wales, from:**

the Convenor, Archives Council Wales. Details of the current contact may be obtained from any local record office or from the HMC

- **Other regulatory and advisory bodies include:**

Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 5AF; tel: 01625 545745; fax: 01625 524510; e-mail: mail@dataprotection.gov.uk; web site: <http://www.dataprotection.gov.uk>

mda (formerly Museums Documentation Association), Jupiter House, Station Road, Cambridge CB1 2JD; tel: 01223 315760; fax: 01223 362521; e-mail: mda@mda.org.uk; web site: <http://www.mda.org.uk>

National Preservation Office, The British Library, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB; tel: 020 7412 7612; fax: 020 7412 7796; e-mail: npo@bl.uk; web site: <http://www.bl.uk/services/preservation/national.html>

Public Record Office, Archive Inspection Services Department, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 4DU; tel: 020 8876 3444; fax: 020 8392 5283; web site: <http://www.pro.gov.uk>

Resource: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, 16 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AA; tel: 020 7273 1444; fax: 020 7273 1404; e-mail: info@resource.gov.uk; web site: <http://www.resource.gov.uk>

In England, the Regional Agencies for Museums, Archives and Libraries. These are in the process of being established in each English Region, and will absorb the Area Museum Councils and Regional Archive Councils. They are funded by Resource, and will be fully in place by 2004. In the meantime, Resource will provide information about appropriate contacts in each region.

The Standing Conference on Archives and Museums:

Association of Independent Museums, Secretary of the Association of Independent Museums, Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, Cambridge Heath Road, London E2 9PA; web site: <http://www.museums.org.uk>

Museums Association, 24 Calvin Street, London E1 6NW; tel: 020 7426 6970; fax: 020 7426 6961; e-mail: info@museumsassociation.org; web site: <http://www.museumsassociation.org>

Society of Archivists, 40 Northampton Road, London EC1R 0HB; tel: 020 7278 8630; fax: 020 7278 2107; e-mail: societyofarchivists@archives.org.uk; web site: <http://www.archives.org.uk>

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