



# Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives

## Operational Policy for Collections Preservation

**AUTHORS:** Tamsin Bookey, Malcolm Barr-Hamilton, Natasha Luck,  
Shahera Begum, Robert Jones

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Mission Statement**

Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives is central to the borough it serves. We collect, preserve, manage and provide free public access to a wide variety of materials which record, describe or illustrate the borough's past and present. Through facilitating onsite research with these collections and delivering outreach, exhibitions and events, we engage and connect local residents and visitors from across the UK and overseas with the rich histories of London's East End.

### **1.1 Purpose**

**1.1.1** This policy is one of several operational policies documenting the approach to the management of heritage collections which are selected for permanent preservation by the service on behalf of Tower Hamlets Council. The aim of these policies is to ensure that the collections are properly managed, preserved and developed; and are made available to the public in the most appropriate manner to ensure their long-term survival and usability. It should be read in conjunction with these other policies.

**1.1.2** The Preservation Policy outlines the strategic approach at THLHLA in caring for and conserving its local history library and archive collections to ensure that they will be available for posterity. It provides a comprehensive statement on the preservation of the collections and communicates the principles that guide the conservation activities necessary for their long term protection and security.

**1.1.3** The Preservation Policy provides a framework to aid managerial decisions on future development, a source of information to staff who share a common responsibility in caring for the collections, a statement of commitment to archive users and depositors, a supporting document to facilitate funding applications, and a benchmark to improve standards and measure performance.

**1.1.4** The policy is underpinned by the British Standards Institution Code of practice for cultural collections management PAS198:2012 *Specification for managing environmental conditions for cultural collections*.

## **2. SCOPE**

**2.1** This preservation policy applies to all of the collections held at Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives including library, archive and other special collections (e.g. museum objects and

paintings), in any format (e.g. manuscript and printed books; photographs; plans; maps; analogue audio-visual material; digital records, both born-digital and digitised).

**2.2** Archive material in the collections has been selected for permanent preservation as evidence of the significant activities of Tower Hamlets Council and its predecessor bodies, as well as other individuals, groups or other entities independent of the local authority. Library material is collected to reflect all areas of life as it was and is lived within the borough. This includes social, economic, and political history as well as current issues. The service commits to retain this material permanently, for the benefit of current and future visitors interested in learning more about the history of Tower Hamlets; to aid council staff in their own research; and to aid the protection of the council's own corporate memory.

### **3. PRESERVATION PHILOSOPHY, STANDARDS AND ETHICS**

**3.1** THLHLA stores the material within its collections in secure accommodation. The service aims to provide appropriate environmental conditions which are monitored daily.

**3.2** THLHLA follows relevant national standards and best practice, and a professional code of ethics in all aspects of collections care and conservation.

**3.3** THLHLA adopts a proactive approach to collections care and conservation, with an ongoing programme of surveying, repackaging and appropriate remedial action where necessary within budgetary constraints.

**3.4** THLHLA does not carry out remedial conservation work itself but outsources work to qualified external contractors according to council procurement procedures.

**3.5** THLHLA provides free public access to catalogued collections, while ensuring their protection and minimising damage from handling.

### **4. SECURITY**

**4.1** Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives is based within secure premises in a detached building which is solely used for housing the service, collections and associated events. The building has an intruder alarm which is activated whenever the premises are empty. No collections are held offsite.

**4.2** Access for visitors is via an intercom system managed by 2.5FTE Facilities Management (FM) staff, one of which is always on

duty in the entrance hall. These FM officers control access to the building including the supervision of contractors carrying out work in the building. They also invigilate exhibitions on display in the entrance hall and provide support for any events on the premises and external room bookings.

**4.3** When the service is open to the public, the first floor reading room is invigilated by two members of staff. Most books and microfilms are on open access but much of the rest of the library collections are in staff-only areas and archive material is stored in a locked strongroom.

**4.4** Visitors using the collections are required to follow the reading room procedures which they formally consent to do when registering to use the service for the first time. In 2009 measures were introduced to help protect the collections from damage or theft (e.g. visitors must deposit coats, bags, food, drink and pens in lockers and carry other items in with them using a clear plastic bag).

**4.5** Users of the Reading Room are required to register and provide proof of ID including address at point of registration.

**4.6** Tower Hamlets Council's Facilities Management service is responsible for the management and maintenance of the building and carries out regular testing and servicing of the fire detection and intruder alarm systems. The 2.5FTE dedicated FM presence on site is responsible for opening and locking up; environmental checks in stores; and managing access (see 4.2).

## **5. STORAGE**

**5.1** Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives is housed in a Grade II listed building which was built in three phases between 1860 and 1935. Its initial purpose was as a vestry hall. It became Mile End Library in 1902 and, in 1965, the Central Library of the newly-formed Borough of Tower Hamlets. It was at this date that the Local History Library was established in the building.

**5.2** The majority of THLHLA's archival collections are stored in a temperature and humidity-controlled strongroom. This is a former lecture hall added to the building 1904 and converted to become a strongroom in the 1980s, with rolling stacks fitted. It broadly conforms to PD 5454:2012 *Guide for the storage and exhibition of archive materials*. Exceptions include: that water pipes pass through it; original windows remain, and there is an original door to the street which is not 4hr fire-rated. The strongroom is full to capacity, necessitating that some collections are stored in secure, managed 'overspill rooms' on-site. These are not designed to house such material but have had to suffice until an alternative can be found. Dehumidification equipment has been installed in these areas where needed. The temperature and

humidity is recorded daily in all archive storage areas, overspill rooms and the reading room (see 6.3).

**5.3** Library collections are housed across two storage areas. A large majority of the collections is stored within the reading room – books are on open access and shelved boxed items are retrieved by staff on request. The remaining library collections, including most periodicals, are stored in an overspill room within the building.

**5.4** Other collections held by the service (but which it has never been resourced to manage according to the appropriate professional specialism) include a collection of paintings and museum objects. These are stored on shelves in an overspill room.

**5.5** Following advice from NCS Director Chris Woods, plans are underway to move all of the collections currently stored across the 7 overspill rooms and consolidate all overspill storage in the very large former lending library, so that they will be easier for staff to access, manage and monitor. However it is likely that some collections will have to remain outwith this space due to insufficient space.

## **6. ENVIRONMENT**

**6.1** THLHLA is a member of the National Conservation Service which provides expert consultancy on preservation and conservation matters. Quarterly site visits by the NCS archive specialist conservator Jonathan Rhys-Lewis are held with the Heritage Manager and Borough Archivist, in which preservation matters and priorities are reviewed and recommendations made for next steps. NCS also provides practical assistance with the environmental monitoring of storage areas and reporting thereof.

**6.2** An air-conditioning system, last upgraded in 2003, operates in the archive strongroom. Tower Hamlets Council's Facilities Management department maintains the plant which receives annual servicing.

**6.3** Environmental conditions are monitored in all storage areas by means of automated data loggers (checked by NCS) and manual display units (manually recorded by FM staff. Data is entered into a spreadsheet for analysis by NCS every quarter).

**6.4** In order to reduce the risk of damage by UV light, storage areas either have no windows or the windows have been blacked out with curtains.

**6.5** THLHLA recognises the importance of a safe clean environment in the storage areas and the value of good housekeeping in collections care. Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives ensures that

regular cleaning (dusting, no chemicals used) takes place in its collections storage areas. Cleaning staff are supervised by FM staff to ensure the safety and security of the collections during the cleaning process.

**6.6** When a new accession arrives, it is surveyed for dirt and mould and any affected material cleaned/isolated as appropriate and repackaged.

## **7. DIGITAL PRESERVATION**

**7.1** THLHLA is committed to ensuring born-digital material earmarked for permanent preservation is available to future generations.

**7.2** THLHLA currently stores all born-digital material in its collections in a discrete location on the THLHLA folder on the Council's server which is backed up nightly.

**7.3** Born-digital material includes archival documents as well as publications which form part of the local history library.

**7.4** All born-digital material is accessioned on THLHLA's CALM database.

**7.5** The service plans to become an early adopter of a new London region consortium digital archive, led by AIM25/JISC, and is in discussions to progress this.

**7.6** The service recognises that it may only acquire certain desirable collections by means of digitisation (eg as the owner wishes it to be available at the archive but does not want to deposit the originals yet or ever). Therefore when appropriate, these digitised items are created in the most high quality preservable format (to date this is mainly TIFFs); and then managed and stored according to the same principles and procedures as born-digital archives.

## **8. CONSERVATION AND PACKAGING**

**8.1** LBTH does not have an in-house conservation unit, therefore when Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives requires conservation for any parts of its collections external professionals are engaged and the records sent off-site for this purpose.

**8.2** Individual items are prioritised for treatment depending on user demand, the context of the item within the collection, or its physical condition.

**8.3** Proper cleaning, packaging and storage reduce the risk of damage to the collections. THLHLA uses the best available conservation products: high quality acid-free paper, folders and boxes, polyester sleeves, unbleached tape and brass paperclips which meet the technical specifications recommended for archival use.

**8.4** THLHLA carries out an ongoing programme of re-boxing and repackaging archive and library materials which were not prepared to current standards.

**8.5** Collections are stored according to their physical nature and condition - on shelves, in cabinets, drawers and boxes as appropriate for their format.

## **9. DISASTER PLANNING AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE**

**9.1** Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives has produced a detailed and regularly updated Disaster Response Plan. This has been developed in consultation with Facilities Management and the council's Civil Contingencies unit.

**9.2** The service also subscribes to Harwell Drying Restoration Priority User Service which in the event of a disaster will provide recovery and emergency salvage services.

## **10. ACCESS AND HANDLING**

**10.1** THLHLA welcomes people from all sectors of the community and aims to provide access for everyone in accordance with its Collections Access Policy, both on-site and remotely.

**10.2** THLHLA makes catalogued material available to all users for consultation in appropriately controlled and supervised conditions, and in accordance with the current Reading Room Regulations.

**10.3** Uncatalogued material or material deemed to be at risk may be produced at staff discretion.

**10.4** THLHLA supports the use of surrogate copies and makes them available where the condition of the original material is unstable, or where current or anticipated use will pose a threat to its survival. Researchers are encouraged to use surrogate copies to minimise handling and reduce the risk of further damage to the original. Currently, this policy is chiefly used in the consultation of newspapers where microfilm copies are made available. Colour photocopies of a well-used cuttings collection have also been made.

**10.5** THLHLA provides guidelines on the proper handling of its collections by users, which are on display on each table in the reading room. Book rests and related items such as book snakes are available

for users in the reading room, staff invigilating encourage the use of these supports where appropriate and also advise and assist visitors on the best way to handle collections, in particular the more fragile items.

**10.6** Copying of a large proportion of THLHLA collections is permitted, dependent on age, condition and copyright.

**10.7** A self-service colour photocopier is available in the reading room. Users making copies from this machine pay at the end of their visit. Staff can advise and assist with the copying of material.

**10.8** No photocopying is allowed of certain fragile items, such as the London Trade Directories and some of the older maps/plans, and bound publications over 100 years old. No self-service photocopying is permitted of archive material. Users wishing to obtain photocopies of archive material must ask for assistance from staff invigilating in the reading room. In order to protect the items from likely damage and deterioration requests to photocopy may sometimes be denied. More precise guidance can be found in the Public Photocopying Procedure note.

**10.9** Self-service digital photography can be undertaken by those purchasing a daily digital camera permit and completing a copyright declaration.

**10.10** There is a digital scanning service for those wishing to obtain digitised of photographs from THLHLA's image collections and digital scans of other small items from our collections. Only items that are robust and fit comfortably within an A4 flatbed scanner can be scanned, otherwise THLHLA would risk damaging collections in the process of providing copies. The supply of images, and the costs associated with this are dependent on the intended usage and copyright. Guidance for this is available on our website.

## **11. EXHIBITIONS AND LOAN**

**11.1** Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives regularly uses material from its collections for in-house exhibitions. Selection of material is dependent on a range of factors, including the condition of the material to be displayed. In some instances copies (e.g. digital reproductions of images, press cuttings etc.) may be used as an alternative to displaying original material.

**11.2** Items from the collections are also available for loan for external exhibitions, dependent on: the physical condition of the items; any donor/depositor restrictions on the usage of the items for loan; the existing level of demand/interest in the items from users in the reading room; other conditions at the site where they would be displayed (most



notably, security). A loan agreement must be signed and the borrower must provide evidence of suitable insurance.

## **12. TRAINING**

**12.1** THLHLA provides advice and guidance on best practice and the importance of collections care to other Tower Hamlets Council services, external organisations and institutions, community groups, owners of private archives and the general public.

**12.2** THLHLA supports and develops staff to deliver high quality services. All staff and volunteers are trained in handling collections and in safe working practices.

**12.3** As stated in 6.1, above, THLHLA is a member of the National Conservation Service through which it receives expert guidance.

**12.3** THLHLA is a member of Archives for London and the British Records Association and maintains active professional relationships with the archival and preservation communities and organisations in the UK, including the UK & I Archives and Records Association.

## **13. POLICY APPROVAL, COMMUNICATION AND REVIEW**

**13.1** This Preservation policy was approved by Shazia Hussain, Divisional Director, Customer Services in December 2017. It will be published on our website early in 2018.

**13.2** The policy will be reviewed in December 2020, three years after the date of approval.