

Editorial

by HELEN SHENTON

The papers in this edition of *LIBER Quarterly* are from a conference on the topic of cellulose acetate microfilm held at the British Library, 23 and 24 May 2005. The conference, the papers and the establishment of a website on the subject, represent the next steps in disseminating and making public the work and findings of the International Roundtable on Preservation Microfilm, established in 2002.

The key issues being addressed are that institutions such as the [British Library](#) and the [Library of Congress](#) have realised they have more cellulose acetate microfilm than anticipated; that if they do, then other institutions may have; and that there is a finite “window” in which the deterioration problems can be addressed.

CAMF

The Cellulose Acetate Microfilm Forum (CAMF) was organised jointly through the British Library and through LIBER's [Preservation Division](#) in connection with the International Roundtable on Preservation Microfilm. The purpose of CAMF 2005 was three-fold. Firstly, it was to share some of the thinking and some of the activity, which has taken place around three meetings of the Roundtable, the latest of which was on 23rd May 2005. Secondly, to maximise the dissemination of professional awareness and disseminate knowledge of best practice in this area and to draw upon the best practice resident in all of the individual expertises in all the institutions. Thirdly, that whilst in some senses this is a particular preservation issue, its importance is not confined simply to preservation professionals. The problems, which are thrown up by the issue of cellulose acetate, go far beyond the narrow preservation boundaries. This is one of the fundamental challenges in the broader life cycle of collection management with which all the institutions have to wrestle with on a day-to-day basis. The intention is to ensure that it becomes mainstreamed with all of those who have ultimate responsibility for the management of our organisations, whether at an executive or a governing level.

Tuesday 24th was divided into two parts. The first part comprised presentations about what is currently known either at a general level or from the experience of particular institutions. Some of the speakers were members of the Roundtable; others not. But the papers collectively provided a kind of instant briefing in terms of not quite everything that is known about the cellulose acetate microfilm problem and how it could be addressed, but it certainly gave an excellent tutorial. The second half of the day was a more practical session facilitated by British Library colleagues, on essentially how to conduct a survey to see whether an institution has a problem or not. At the end of the day, Dr Clive Field, the Chair of the International Roundtable pulled some threads together, re-stated some of the important messages heard during the day and also explained what the Roundtable is proposing to do.

THE INTERNATIONAL ROUNDTABLE ON PRESERVATION OF MICROFORM

The International Roundtable on Preservation of Microform held its first meeting in December 2002 at the British Library. It was organised by the British Library during the later half of 2002, after quite a long period of reflection and investigation. This is covered in more detail in my paper, but essentially, many of the issues which were thrown up by Nicholson Baker for the British Library, Library of Congress and other major research libraries, about the disposal of printed overseas newspapers and the reliance upon microform surrogates, made us think quite seriously about the permanence of the surrogacy programmes which many of us had been engaged in. It particularly affected those institutions like the British Library and the Library of Congress, which had been undertaking preservation microfilming programmes on a very large scale for a long period, because when it was analysed many of those microfilms were found to be on cellulose acetate film. There was potentially a ticking time bomb. In many cases, the originals (namely the paper originals from which the microfilms had been produced) were no longer in the collections.

The British Library convened a group, by invitation only, because it was still sensitive in terms of the post-Nicholson Baker furor and debate. A number of institutions were invited who would have a shared agenda. Those were largely institutions, or commercial organisations, which had produced lots of acetate microform master material themselves. So the emphasis was very much on the producers, those who had created unique microform masters and acetate film, rather than for example those who had bought service copies from commercial vendors. Eleven organisations in the UK and the US were approached by the British Library in the first instance (Cambridge University Library, Harvard

University Library, Library of Congress, The National Archives, National Library of Scotland, National Library of Wales, New York Public Library, Oxford University Library Services, Princeton University Library, Yale University Library) plus two of the major commercial publishers: ProQuest, which incorporates all of the material which University Microfilms, Chadwyck-Healey and so on produced over the years, and Thomson Gale, which reflects both US production and also quite a lot of the UK production through companies such as Primary Source Media. The British Library was conscious that this was not a comprehensive list, but it was an appropriate start.

There have been two further meetings of the Roundtable since then, one in Washington in April 2004 and then the third at the British Library on 23rd May 2005, at which the list was lengthened slightly, because as we thought about it all of the major players may not have been captured (and may still not all have been included). So over the last three years the National Archives and Records Administration of the US and the National Library of Australia have come on board. The purpose of the Roundtable was really to begin thinking about the issues, potential solutions and to document them. Out of that first meeting were developed the 'St Pancras Principles'. This was an attempt to ensure that it was not simply a gathering to discuss the issues but also to think and agree some ways forward.

ST PANCRAS PRINCIPLES

On 10 December 2002 representatives of major research libraries both with experience of publishing microfilm collections and holding significant quantities of microfilm met, at the invitation of the British Library, to discuss the quantity and condition of microform in library and archive collections. We particularly welcomed the presence of two major microform publishers. We reviewed the current state of our microform collections based on acetate microform stock, which have the potential to deteriorate resulting in the 'vinegar syndrome'. We believe this review to be important to ensure both the preservation of archival masters and the continuance of service from existing microform collections that, in some instances, represent significant portions of the stock of many libraries.

We concentrated our discussions on the preservation of archival master negatives (1N), and resolved the following:

- to conduct a survey of master negatives (both commercial and produced by libraries) to identify their current whereabouts;
- to synthesise known research and produce good practice guidelines for surveying and storing this material;
- to conduct desk research on migration technology, the triggers and the options for moving from acetate to polyester film stock, with or without associated digitisation.

All present agreed that:

- all have a part to play in this migration and preservation but believe it is better achieved through progress under a common banner;
- they would share research and survey data to support each other;
- they would meet again in one year to update each other on progress and share future collection condition survey data;
- the group will prepare a statement setting out the parameters (climatic conditions and observed degradation of stock) within which libraries should be operating to safeguard existing archival microform;
- they should prevent the mass re-filming of rare and precious library materials and
 - in the short-term will seek to achieve optimal micro-environments for storage (e.g. by replacing acidic boxes and removing elastic bands);
 - will make clear statements of the priority they place in this activity and seek to resource it;
 - in the medium-term will improve macro-environmental storage conditions.

Out of these St Pancras Principles came an embryonic action plan, which has been worked with and refined since. All of those present committed themselves to conduct a survey of their own master negatives, to essentially establish what the baseline size of the problem was. At that time, surveys were relatively in their infancy, so over the course of the last couple of years a lot of work has been done to perfect the methodology of surveys. The Roundtable also however wanted to try and take a more strategic overview, rather than simply hear a lot of individual surveys, and to synthesise the outcomes of all of the research which had been undertaken, and to produce some good practice guidelines both for surveying, and particularly for storage. Research was conducted into how the Roundtable would progress, both around

the migration technology (whether migration essentially from acetate film to polyester film or to digital surrogates) and what was the connectivity between solving this problem and what was going on in the broader world of digitisation.

At this early stage, the thinking was very definitely continuing that preservation microfilming was producing the preservation surrogate and digitisation was producing the access surrogate. However it was appreciated that there was obviously some synergy between the two, not least in funding terms, because it was felt that funders would probably be more interested in looking at the digital future rather than addressing the legacy problem of acetate microfilm. Over and above those broad actions, all agree that - whilst ultimately all would have to deal with their own problem - it would be more effective if it could be done under a common banner and a common cause. All committed, and have since done so, to share the research and survey data that has been generated - some of which of course was potentially sensitive. It was agreed that the Roundtable would meet a year later, to report on progress, and to share essentially what had been learnt about the conditions of each institution's microform collections. It was agreed that we would work towards the production of a broader public statement, which would set out some of the parameters within which libraries and archives and other institutions with this issue would need to work. The options for addressing the problem were thought about carefully.

We did have some hopes in 2002 that there might be a possibility through collective action of essentially encouraging funders, and a list of prospective funders was drawn up. It was thought that there might be an opportunity to get some investment to help share the solution of the problem, running both across the public sector side, i.e. the libraries and archives with the problems, but also the producers' side. Quite a lot of emphasis was already being placed on the storage environment as a means of solving the problem. Both at the microenvironment level of good housekeeping, through to the other end of the spectrum, of the macro environmental conditions, which largely equates with cold or cool storage. It was thought very important that a lot of emphasis was put on this activity both within individual institutions and also our collective stewardship for these collections. And that comes back to the initial point that this is not just a preservation issue out there on the side; this is central to the responsible stewardship of library and archival collections and information resources.

So, out of those principles was developed an action plan. Over the last two to three years there have been some adjustments in terms of the thinking of individual roundtables. Some of those early expectations about large-scale financial support coming in were disabused early on. Less emphasis has been put on large-scale reformatting of acetate film to polyester film. A lot more has been learnt about environments, and also, the Roundtable is thinking even harder, about this relationship between preservation filming and digitisation for preservation: is there actually a growing congruence between those two?

The following papers of CAMF pick up and develop the themes and thinking of the three International Roundtables on Preservation Microfilm.

The last two articles were sent in individually and have nothing to do with CAMF, but are very interesting for the LIBER members.

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

British Library. <http://www.bl.uk/>

Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov/>

Preservation Division. <http://www.kb.dk/liber/division/preserv/>