

Worcestershire Archives: The Diocesan Wills Conservation Project

Edited item from The Friends' Newsletter, No.97, Autumn 2017

There can be very few archive researchers who have not had occasion to use wills, administrations and inventories. The many who have referred to those sources will have realised how very useful, revealing and problem-solving is the information they contain. Such 'papers' form the backbone of many a researcher's project reports.

In the previous Newsletter I drew readers' attention to the parlous state of a considerable number of wills and associated documents in the Diocesan collection stored at WAAS. I hasten to add that the deterioration is the result of poor conditions of storage many years prior to deposit at the state-of-the-art strongrooms of Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service (WAAS). Many had originally been rolled or folded and damage includes powdery/flaky paper rendering the document unusable, water staining, surface dirt, insect and rodent damage.



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We are indebted to WAAS Conservator, Rhonda Niven, who at our request reviewed the state of the documents in a random selection of 110 boxes and extrapolated the findings averages across the whole collection (15th Century onwards) - the enormity of the problems is clear to see from her survey:

- Flattened and repaired – 308 boxes containing 33,880 documents
- Flattened but not yet repaired – 184 boxes containing 22,368 docs.

- Neither flattened nor repaired – 424 boxes containing 106,547 docs.
- Additional related material – 82 boxes containing 12,504 documents some of which currently are unusable and need urgent treatment.

The four categories include handmade paper/parchment/machine-made paper. Additionally, repair materials will have to be purchased and modern acid-free storage folders and boxes need to be available.

It is estimated that conservation of the presently unusable documents would take three and a half years work at a cost of £129,600 plus additional costs for material required, at an estimated average rate of 20 documents per day worked. To complete the project would take 31 years (part-time 62 years).

Perhaps some readers may think, 'This expensive project isn't necessary – I use the microfilms of the wills!' But those of you who have used those films to any extent will acknowledge that the images are of very variable quality and some films are scratched due to wear. Furthermore, like the will originals the microfilms will not last forever and how could they be replaced if the original documents have not been conserved? For that reason it has been decided that during the conservation cycle digital images will be made of the 'wills', these will then be available as the main source for researchers.

A pilot scheme to develop the methodology for the project has already begun.

That these documents are a veritable treasury of information and that they should be conserved not only for our own use but for the generations to come is undeniable. But the situation is such that if our present generation allows these already seriously endangered documents to flake away into meaningless deposits of powder we must take action immediately.

How might the necessary funding be secured?

The project is so large that:

- after the completion of the pilot scheme, and when an adequate level of funding is secured, WAAS will need to use volunteers for some of the tasks for the project proper (training will be provided where necessary).
- WAAS is applying to secure monetary grants from national organisations
- the FWA Committee has already approved a system of regular grants from our funds. Another local charity has done the same.

The need is so great, however, that more money will be essential to the eventual completion of the project:

- so FWA have sent an appeal to the numerous local/county/family history societies across Worcestershire asking each of them to seriously consider making a monetary contribution. Individuals are also targeted.

I thank archivist, Charlene Taylor, for spearheading so capably the organisation of this project which The Friends feel is so vitally important.

If the funding is not forthcoming then we will all be the losers as a resource of inestimable value and possibly essential to your own research would disintegrate and be lost for ever. Let us prove true the proverb, "Where there's a will, there's a way!"

Roger Leake, FWA Chairman