

# Interim Preservation

Simon Barcham Green, Icon life member and former Chair of the Institute of Paper Conservation, shares thoughts about the fate of many collections and his own in particular

We hear plenty about interim management nowadays but it occurred to me recently that much of our cultural heritage is in 'Interim Preservation' – using both words in the widest possible sense. In this case by *interim* I mean that a collection is being held temporarily between its former use and some long term, stable situation. For example the original owners may just have it in store until they can get round to doing something or maybe it has been rescued to avoid destruction but a permanent solution has yet to be found. *Preservation* could mean anything from being kept rusting on a heritage railway siding to a fairly well organised and protected situation.

The Hayle Mill Archives which I own may be typical of many collections. Hayle Mill, Maidstone was built in 1808 as what was then a state of the art, small handmade paper mill. It was leased to John Green in 1812 and purchased by him in 1817. John Green and his son developed the business fairly successfully and for a while rented and operated another small mill nearby. In the hard times of 1838 they went bankrupt but John's brother, Samuel Green, took on the business and employed his brother to run it. The business flourished and at one stage Samuel's son John Barcham Green owned four paper mills and four other mills. Many more changes occurred over the years and paper was made

Hayle Mill from the north east, c.1870





As bad as it gets, but the alternative could have been a trip in a skip to landfill.

by hand at Hayle Mill until 1987. The archives are managed by my wife Maureen and me and form the subject of her current PhD studies and her recent book *Papermaking at Hayle Mill 1808–1987*.<sup>1</sup>

The early papermaking Greens appear to have been well organised and kept detailed records indefinitely. Having tens of thousands of square feet of paper storage did not encourage a disposals policy so we have a large collection dating back to 1838 with some items from even earlier. The Hayle Mill archives comprise one of the largest collections of business archives in the UK.<sup>2</sup> Archives is rather a narrow word for the collection and its breadth is as much of a challenge as its scale. It includes:

- All the usual business ledgers in various formats and including wage records back to 1837, production, sales and financial records from about 1850 and huge quantities of correspondence.<sup>3</sup> The latter comprise several dozen letter books of outgoing mail whereas incoming letters are mainly folded in their original envelopes. The correspondence and a variety of reports also cover a wide variety of papermaking and other business activity only partly related to Hayle Mill, trade union negotiations, child labour and family matters that have been kept with the business collection. As a whole they give an amazing insight into the way a family ran its business in the 19th and 20th centuries and the many other things that interested them.

Some of the huge vellum covered wages ledgers from the late 19th century



The 1930s to 1950s correspondence in open crates. The 3 bladed wooden stirrers were used to agitate pulp in the papermaking vats

- A variety of papermaking tools including about 200 pairs of moulds, many of considerable interest and beauty.
- Large quantities of paper, including the first making of RWS watercolour paper and the first filter paper made in the UK.
- Photographs dating back to the 1870s including glass plate negatives, some wet collodion.
- Books about papermaking and related subjects.

By the middle of the 20th century we became aware that our business records were of some wider significance and progressively started to catalogue them and take more positive steps to look after them. In the 1970s we had valuable advice from an archivist and conservators at Kent County Archives. The better parts of the collection were gradually brought together in some spare rooms of the former mill owners' house which had been restored in 1978; shelving and archival boxes were procured and an outline retention and disposal policy agreed and gradually implemented. Nevertheless the collection continued to grow. As not everything could be stored in the dry and generally warm house, some of the collection remained in draughty outbuildings.

After production ended, those officials charged with the protection of historic buildings proved most obstructive to finding a viable future use for Hayle Mill which is Grade II\*

The rented barn: our sophisticated, watertight, naturally ventilated artefact collection facility





In this mixed collection, the five wooden crates hide behind the Albion press and a fibreglass water tank with papermaking moulds along the right hand wall

listed. As a result, restoration did not start until 2005, eighteen years after closure. Despite our considerable efforts and expense, the buildings gradually deteriorated and became insecure, causing us to be concerned not only about theft and vandalism but also the risk of fire. In 1999, we rented some farm buildings near Maidstone and moved the archives and many artefacts to what is still intended to be interim storage. The accommodation is in two buildings. The first had previously been converted to offices with storage and is air and weather tight. We have installed storage heaters to minimise damp and in the room containing the most interesting parts of the collection we also have a domestic dehumidifier. This does a good job as about five litres of water are discarded every week or two throughout the year. A cheap digital thermohygrometer shows that humidity is below 40%, the minimum temperature is about 5–10°C and the maximum is similar to that outdoors.

The smaller room has good shelving, a small office area and an excellent plan chest. Two larger rooms in this building also have good shelving although part of the collection is stored in cardboard boxes stacked on pallets. This area also contains the extensive paper collection, both for its historical value (including many fine watermarks) and stock for sale.

We also rent a brick barn with eaves at about five metres and a corrugated asbestos roof. It is watertight and remarkably dry

The collection includes wages records from 1838 to 1987, the oldest being these narrow paperbound volumes



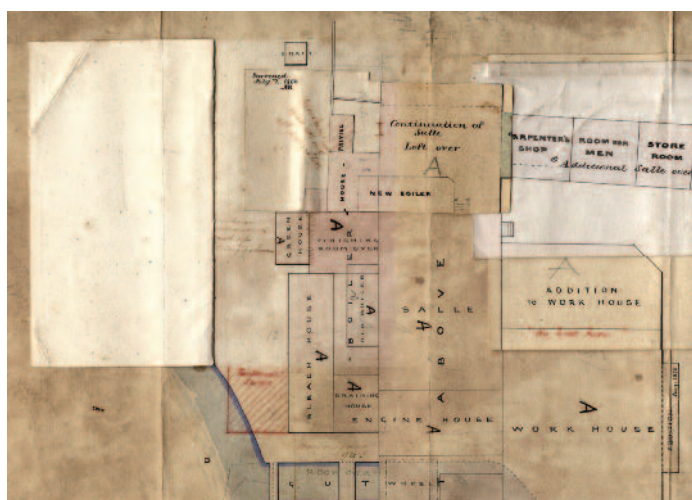
New storage box with typical samples of machine made papers from the 1950s. Stained but not nibbled – in this case at least

considering that it is certainly not airtight; arguably, though, it is well ventilated! The main purpose of this store is to keep the papermaking moulds in as well as some iron hand printing presses and pulp preparation equipment. However spare space attracted other items including quite a lot of furniture and timber from the Mill and a variety of metal and wooden tools.

During 2010 I started working though the barn to sell or dispose of items that had no particular significance to the collection and reorganise those items retained. My approach to de-acquisitioning artefacts is simple. Dust them down, photograph them, sell them (sometimes via eBay) or take them to the dump for recycling or conversion to energy. Sale proceeds help mitigate the huge cost of keeping the collection – particularly rent, insurance, business rates and electricity. One of my aims has also been to make space to move stock around and to provide access to five large wooden packing cases and their contents. These are mainly thought to be correspondence files from the 1930s to the 1950s. This vague description reflects the fact that the collection has never been closely examined although some interesting items were spotted at one time. For example a very spirited letter from my Grandfather Jack Barcham Green to our Australian agents on 8 December 1941; he was

Sundries including: papermaking felts, a 25lb 'Valley Beater' for preparing pulp, a small, very early (1820s) Albion printing press and on the floor parts of an 1835 Columbian printing press (recently sold to a collector in Nuremberg)





Part of a plan of Hayle Mill showing how fold out flaps were added to show changes in the buildings. The base plan was surveyed 20 May 1867.



Wider view of same plan (all flaps flat)

delighted that the Americans were now in the war and did not seem too concerned about the devastation of Pearl Harbour. Now I am sure that letter is in there somewhere, but where? Before these letters were put in the crates, they had been stored in a loft under a slate roof in full sunshine. Considering they are mainly on cheap manifold paper, their condition was remarkably good. Conventional views on paper deterioration would have forecast that they would have crumbled away after half a century of this treatment – the loft temperature was found to be about 40°C when the documents were removed and that was in April.

To get at these crates a large water tank full of bags of papermaking fibre had to be sold first. Through eBay I sold the fibre for £1 to an artist in East Kent. But underneath the fibre I found boxes and bundles of papermaking samples. This was when I conceived the expression *Interim Preservation*. Clearly this situation could not continue and preservation simply meant not taking them to the tip. Some of the plastic bags of soft fibre had split or been chewed open and had provided excellent bedding for generations of rodents, arthropods and even a few snails. My unwanted chore was to excavate the samples, reduce the risk of further major attack and remove the very unpleasant fibre and excreta mixture.

Whilst I did this I reflected that, however much we in Icon may concentrate on great national collections, a huge part of our heritage is actually stored in less than ideal conditions. Does



Part of the collection of two hundred papermaking moulds, many dating back to the 19th century

this mean it has no inherent value or is neglected or perhaps should be dumped? The reality is that people retain material for decades or centuries without having the resources to do so. Nationally and globally we could never afford the resources to look after all this material 'properly' so often the only option is to retain it in less than ideal conditions. On the other hand, a lot of material survives very well in these circumstances, as this is after all what its creators were used to.

At the present time I am gradually selling old paper stocks and papermaking moulds, including some of the most historic ones which I had previously hoped to pass on with the archives to some suitable institution. It has proved very hard to find such a new owner just for the archives<sup>4</sup> and I have reluctantly concluded that the prospects of finding an organisation that has the facilities and interest to take on the archives and the very different moulds are very low. One of our long mahogany packing benches will be put into use to sort through the 20th century correspondence. Most will go to be recycled and I am investing in non-archival plastic boxes bought cheaply on the internet to keep the interesting parts. In the real world of limited resources these will at least provide some protection against dirt and those rodents and arthropods.

#### Notes

1 See <https://sites.google.com/site/simonbarchamgreen/Home/papermaking-at-hayle-mill>

2 In 1995 the Victoria and Albert Museum considered that the document collection and the samples (main collection and security) would need about 346 feet (105m) of shelving and ten 10-drawer (50 mm drawers) plan chests after weeding. This was about ten times the size of the Heal & Son Ltd archive, which at the time was the largest in the V&A's Archive of Art and Design. However this estimate did not include much of the material now stored in the barn which is referred to later in the article. The total volume is probably at least twice the V&A estimate.

3 For more information on the main archive collection see <https://sites.google.com/site/simonbarchamgreen/Home/archives>

4 Anyone with a serious interest can contact me at [simongreen@aol.com](mailto:simongreen@aol.com)

There is more from Simon about his collection of papermaking moulds on page 3