

In the first of an ongoing series of encounters with staff from State Records, we introduce

Emily O'Reilly conservator

Q&A

Why Conservation?

I knew I wanted to be a conservator when I was about 16 years old. My father is a keen book collector and also has a collection of prints and watercolours. Growing up in a house surrounded by these cherished things, it was only natural that I should follow a career caring for them. I was always quite 'artistic' at school so imagined myself studying fine art at university, followed by postgraduate studies in easel painting conservation. But then I discovered that there was an undergraduate course in paper conservation at Camberwell College of Arts in London and switched to that.

After completing the three-year course I went to the National Museum & Galleries of Wales in Cardiff as a paper intern, then to a private studio near Cambridge. For my last year in the UK, I returned to Cardiff as a paper conservator.

What led you to State Records?

I moved to Australia in August 2000 (after marrying an Australian) and began working at State Records in December. Although my specialty is in works of art on paper, such as prints, watercolours and drawings, my skills and experience as a paper conservator were highly desirable to the organisation. When I first started work at State Records there was no conservation lab, as the original one in the city office had been closed down the previous year. A new suite was developed at Kingswood, including a large, well-lit lab, which I moved into in February 2001. It was my job to unpack, organise and set-up. Equipment and materials had been saved

from the old lab, but with more space, new and more advanced pieces of equipment were ordered.

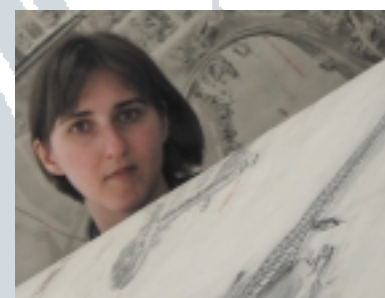
In December 2001, conservator Jennifer Hodgeman joined me in the new lab and we are busy washing, cleaning, repairing and rehousing State archives for copying, storing and viewing.

What are the aims of Conservation?

Conservation is really preservation. We are here to ensure that the archives are around for many years to come. We preserve them in many different ways, depending on their needs and the need for them. The most basic treatment is to keep the archives in the correct environment. This slows down the rate of deterioration and keeps away pests and mould. The next important factor is housing them correctly. Maps are best kept flat in polyester sleeves. Papers and letters etc are kept in boxes and files made from inert materials that will not cause any further damage. This means that they should be acid-free, last for a long time and not produce any harmful gases. Finally we may clean, wash and repair items to make them last longer, but this should not be confused with restoration. We are not trying to bring items back to a near-perfect state, which can be very damaging, but to ensure that further unnecessary deterioration is halted.

Of all the items that you have worked on at State Records, which is your favourite?

My favourite item from State Records' collection is a map drawn by Edmund Kennedy of explorations through Queensland. Kennedy was a surveyor who explored



alongside Surveyor-General Sir Thomas Mitchell. The map is dated 1848, which was the year of his death. It required fairly standard treatments, such as washing, using a bath of ordinary tap water, and lining onto a new piece of paper. But it was what I discovered whilst carrying out the treatments that was interesting. The map consisted of 24 pieces of paper (about A4 size) that had been lined onto cloth to make up one large sheet. A small gap was left between each sheet, to allow the map to be folded to A4, without causing creases and obscuring the delicate lines of the map. Once the 24 sheets had been removed from the cloth backing it was easy to hold them up to a light, whereupon sections of watermark became visible. It was possible to re-order the 24 pieces of map to see the original watermark. From this discovery I understood that, originally, one large watermarked piece of paper had been cut down to A4 size and affixed randomly to a cloth backing. The map was then drawn upon this new surface.

What do you like about being a Conservator?

You never know what you will discover until you get up close and properly examine an object. As with the Kennedy map, secrets lie hidden that are just waiting for somebody to uncover and interpret. Sometimes I am carefully taking something apart and viewing it from an angle that has not been seen since its manufacture, which might be 200 years ago. Using my skills and knowledge I can understand how and where something was made, where the materials came from and the techniques used.