

The Magdalen College Medieval Deeds Project: Conservation in the Round and Up a Spiral Staircase

Jane Eagan, Oxford Conservation Consortium

Magdalen College, of the University of Oxford, was founded in 1458, and is unique in Oxford in retaining in a largely unchanged state its fifteenth-century Muniment Room, where the college's 13,000 medieval property deeds have been kept for over five hundred years. Magdalen's Muniment Room has its original oak wall cupboards and deed boxes, in which the documents are still stored, arranged by property, as they have been since the 1480s. It is one of the few college spaces which has remained unchanged since the fifteenth century and would be instantly recognisable to any of the original fellows of the college.

My paper will outline the conservation and rehousing of this large collection of manuscript archival documents over a ten-year period by the Oxford Conservation Consortium (OCC), describing the project management by OCC, and team work of 8 library/archive trainees and 14 conservation students, working in pairs for two-week sessions during their summer vacations. The benefits to the trainees and students of examining, handling, and rehousing a large amount of material will be highlighted, as will the challenge of communicating the appropriate level of conservation repair, maintaining consistency between work teams, and the need for accuracy in tracking a large number of small items. As background, I will explain how problems of elevated relative humidity led to the prioritisation of this project over other conservation needs.

My second focus will be on the work that has followed the project's completion in 2013 to ensure the preservation of the room itself as an important historic artefact and survivor. OCC has worked with the College archivist, librarian, surveyor, and maintenance team to return the Muniment Tower to a more original state, removing decommissioned dehumidifiers, spare furniture, and bookcases deposited there over the past 50 years, seemingly with a lack of appreciation for the unique character and importance of the room. Conservators of ceramics, wood, and decorative surfaces have been consulted, as part of the aim to document the condition of the room and fittings, which include a medieval floor of glazed red earthenware tiles, possibly reclaimed from a previous setting, wooden library chests and travelling trunks dating to at least 100 years before the college's foundation. This most recent work has taken place amidst ongoing maintenance and modernisation in adjacent spaces which have impacted on the Muniment Room.

This talk has relevance to the Care and Conservation of Manuscripts Seminar 2018, as it highlights the importance of applying conservation principles and activities as broadly as possible and in such a way that encompasses both a large and important collection of archival manuscripts and its original storeroom.