

Catholic Archives Society Publications

Archive Advice Leaflet No. 9

Mounting an Exhibition Using Archives

Exhibitions, whether of original documents or of facsimiles, can be a very valuable tool for any archive service in demonstrating the value and inherent interest of the material which they hold and preserve. It is also a useful way of interesting individuals in the archives, who would not necessarily wish to carry out detailed archival research, and hence a means of stimulating and involving a wider audience. It provides a challenge to the archivist in engaging with new ways of interpreting the records, of safely making material available for public viewing, and in engaging with constituencies of users, sponsors and funders. Moreover, modern technology in terms of digital imaging and copying has greatly increased the means available for producing attractive and informative displays, and also demonstrated wider possibilities by which archival material might be made available, for example through interactive displays and the internet.

This leaflet aims to examine the two most traditional and long established means of using archives in exhibitions: through the use of facsimile documents mounted on display boards, and through the use of original archival documents, though of course the two methods are not always mutually exclusive. The latter method, using original documents, presents particular challenges of preservation and interpretation, which will be explored in section *b* of this leaflet. A display using display boards might be set up for a relatively short period, in relation to a particular theme or event, or have a more long term focus, perhaps being part of an entrance or vestibule area to an archive, or part of a wider display related to the history or culture of a particular organization. Such temporary displays are often utilised by archive services as ‘travelling’ exhibits.

They may not have quite the same immediate impact as displays which include original records and images, but they do not present the same challenges in terms of the preservation and transportation of often fragile and unique original documents.

a. An exhibition using display boards

Preparation

Preparation is the key to mounting a successful exhibition. If several boards or areas are being used it may be useful to theme each area, for example this can be thematically or chronologically, so that the exhibition tells a story. It is important to remember to keep it simple.

Have an idea of the space available and the amount of material needed to fill the area. Having too much information is not always best as it can look too busy and put people off looking at it.

It is very easy to over estimate how much can be achieved in a small space. Although being creative is good, initially keeping exhibitions simple can ensure that the message or story being told has been successful.

Choosing a subject

This often depends on why an exhibition is being mounted. It is important to consider what is the purpose of the exhibition.

Subjects may include a specific time, place or event.

It is also necessary to think about the intended audience, as this can influence the nature of an exhibition. For example an exhibition prepared for primary school children is likely to differ from that aimed at adults.

If it is intended for the exhibition to be changed on a regular basis it is best to ensure that a variety of topics are used to show the extent and scope of the collections. It is often useful to have a specific area in an archive or display area where temporary displays may be mounted at intervals.

Choosing images/text

If the audience is likely to be mixed then it is important that the exhibition contains a variety of material both text and images, as not everyone learns in the same manner. If an image of text is used and it is difficult to read it may be worth including a transcription of the document in the exhibition. The existence of colour photocopying means that it is very easy to obtain good reproductions of documents, though care should be taken in making copies not to damage the original if it is fragile or sensitive to light.

If images are used ensure that they are relevant and that they are referred to, so that they become part of the story.

Layout

Given the nature of display boards they can only really be used for two-dimensional displays, either images which of course can be of pictures of artefacts, and text based sources.

It can be useful to layer the exhibition, for example label all images and then add further details so that those who have only a short amount of time can quickly pick up information as well as giving more detail for those who have a particular interest in a subject.

With layout it is best to be consistent, to have labels in the same place in relation to images so that the audience knows where to look for information and not be confused as to what information relates to each image (if they are being used).

Ensuring that there is sufficient space around items such as images and text panels can make them stand out and catch peoples' attention. Breaking up large chunks of text by having short sentences can make it easier for people to quickly read and understand.

When thinking about the presentation of the exhibition the RNIB has put together a set of Clear Print Guidelines for making printed information accessible to people with sight problems, but they are also extremely useful when considering the production of any printed material: http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/public_website/public_printdesign.hcsp includes useful guidelines and advice as to the best fonts to use and type size as well as making text accessible by ensuring there is a strong contrast between text and background. For printed material the RNIB advises against using glossy papers for prints as they can reflect light becoming difficult to view. This can also be an issue where images are laminated.

There is also a need to be aware of data protection and copyright legislation when considering what material to include in an exhibition. Further guidance about data protection legislation can be found on the Information Commissioner's website. With regard to copyright a useful book is Tim Padfield's *Copyright for Archivists and Record Managers*.

If the first language of your audience is not English then it may be worth considering having alternative text panels or a printed leaflet available in other languages.

Where possible exhibitions should be changed, updated or refreshed on a regular basis, so repeat visitors have new information to spark their interest. If particular sources are used for the exhibition they should be attributed, so that if someone wishes to investigate the subject further they have a starting point.

Preparing a 'hand-out' or catalogue to go with an exhibition can be useful both in giving the visitor a permanent memento of their visit and a source of further reading, and also in providing a permanent record of the content of the exhibition for future reference. Exhibition texts might on occasion be adapted for use as document packs and even as a basis for publications.

b. An exhibition using original documents

General

Many of the above comments relating to layout and selection of subjects are also applicable to a display using original documents. An attractive display will often use a number of different formats such as photographs, volumes, letters, illustrations etc to draw attention to the variety of material available on a particular subject, and to provide interest for the visitor. It is important that interpretative material be provided, in the form of labels and hand-outs, as even the most striking of documents are unlikely to stimulate interest and understanding unless context is provided. There is no reason, of course, why copy and original material should not be combined in the same display, so long as they are interpreted and displayed imaginatively.

Preservation

The particular challenge of displaying original archives is to ensure that provisions are in place to ensure the proper security and preservation of the documents, taking account of the different preservation requirements of different formats e.g. photographs, parchment and paper. Original archival documents in whatever format should *never be placed on display indefinitely* as damage such as fading and discolouration is both cumulative and irreversible. If archives are on open display, they should be invigilated continuously,

and such a display should last for no longer than a few hours, and be away from direct sunlight.

If materials are placed on display for a longer period, then it is necessary to acquire a display case, which is not only secure (i.e. lockable, and made of robust materials) but configured according to the correct standards so as to ensure that the material is not subjected to environmental deterioration due to variations and extremes of temperature, light and humidity. If material is loaned to another institution for display, it is vitally important that an agreement is in place ensuring that the material will be secured, displayed, insured and transported in conditions which are comparable to the home institution, and if this cannot be guaranteed then a request for loan should be refused.

In a British context, reference should be had to the relevant British Standard (BS 5454: 2000), full details of which are given below. This document includes detailed recommendations as to the form, configuration and locating of display cases for archival documents. It is recommended that if documents are displayed in areas not specifically designed for that purpose, then the period of exhibition should not exceed three months. Documents on display for a longer period should be displayed only in areas which are comparable in terms of environmental conditions and security to the archive repository itself. In practice, it is unlikely that many archives would be able to achieve this, and three months may therefore be considered a reasonable period beyond which duration of time original documents should not be displayed. The repeated use of individual documents in different displays on separate occasions should also be avoided, as exposure to repeated handling and variations in environmental conditions is in itself undesirable.

In preparing displays of original documents, the following factors should be particularly borne in mind. Material chosen for display should be robust, and with inherently fragile media such as photographs it is probably best only to use facsimiles

for all but the briefest of displays. All items on display should be supported so that they are not placed under pressure, and book-rests or cradles should always be used. Material which is fragile or damaged should never be displayed, unless it has first been repaired by a trained professional conservator. Exhibition illumination should not be stronger than 50 lux (which is the SI unit measuring the light falling on an object), and be free of ultra-violet rays; heat and direct sunlight in particular need to be avoided.

Conclusion

It is hoped that it has been made clear from the above that in setting up an archival display, it is important to take account of a range of factors, including the purpose and focus of the planned display; its intended longevity; the nature and variety of material available in the archive; and also issues such as copyright and ownership of original items, particularly if copies are intended to be utilised.

There is a large literature on the benefits and planning of archival exhibition programmes, and reference should be had to the items in the bibliography which only constitute the 'tip of the iceberg' of what is available.

Further Reading:

British Standards Institution: BSI 5454/2000:
Recommendations for Storage and Exhibition of Archival Documents (2000)

G F Casterline *Archives and Manuscripts: Exhibits* (Chicago 1980)

Judith Ellis (ed) *Keeping Archives* (Melbourne 1993)

Mal L. Eutick 'On the display of archives' in *Archives and Manuscripts* 12/3, May 1984

T. Padfield, *Copyright for Archivists and Users of Archives*. (London 3rd ed. 2007)

Kathleen Roe 'Public Programs' in J G Bradsher (ed) *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions* (London 1988)

M H B Sanderson 'Exhibitions and education services: the Scottish Record Office experience' *Journal of the Society of Archivists* vol 11 nos 1 and 2 1990

N. Stolow *Conservation and Exhibitions* (London 1987)

G. Thompson *The Museum Environment* (London 1986)

Giles Velarde *Designing Exhibitions* (London 1988)

Websites

British Standards Institution <http://www.bsi.org.uk>

Information Commissioners Office: <http://ico.gov.uk>

Copyright Alison Bignell, Paul Shaw and the Catholic Archives Society, August 2009

This Advice Leaflet may be photocopied or otherwise reproduced without charge. Please acknowledge the author and the Catholic Archives Society if a large number of copies are made.

Details of the Catholic Archives Society can be found at www.catholicarchivesociety.org