

A hidden history: The University of Edinburgh's Cultural Collections Audit

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Abstract

The Cultural Collections Audit project began at the University of Edinburgh in 2004, searching for hidden treasures in its 'distributed heritage collections' across the university. The objects and collections recorded in the Audit ranged widely from fine art and furniture to historical scientific and teaching equipment and personalia relating to key figures in the university's long tradition of academic excellence. This information was gathered in order to create a central database of information, to identify objects in vulnerable or dangerous situations, to identify items that require conservation, and for insurance purposes.

The response of colleagues in all areas of the university has been overwhelmingly positive. The Audit has proved successful in raising awareness of collections and collections issues both within the university and with the national media, instilling a sense of pride among non-museums university staff who have tirelessly safeguarded these heritage collections despite ongoing pressure to downsize.

The Audit highlighted a number of issues in the university's non-formal collections including environmental conditions, departmental relocations, object conditions, security, insurance, storage and long-term preservation. With the positive support and specialist knowledge of established contacts in every department of the university, the Audit worked to bring these collections and issues to light by acting as a resource for information, identifying vulnerable items and challenge areas, and by celebrating the university's rich object history through an online website dedicated to the Audit. This paper details the challenges identified by the Cultural Audit, and gives examples of positive solutions that enable preservation while promoting pride in academic excellence and innovation.

Introduction and project aims

The University of Edinburgh is blessed with a number of formally curated collections, including the Fine Art Collection, the Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments, the Anatomy Museum, the Chemistry Museum and the Natural History Museum. Numerous other objects and collections exist across the university in meeting rooms, labs, and offices, but without an in-depth survey of these holdings, details of their scope, location, and condition were not known to the university. The need to assess the University of Edinburgh's cultural assets was identified by the University Museums and Galleries, and a Cultural Collections Audit project was recommended to the University Collections Advisory Committee. The Cultural Audit project began at the University of Edinburgh in 2004, with a remit of identifying hidden treasures in its



Fig. 1 - A group portrait of Professor Tait and his physics laboratory class. 1875. UCA0973

non-formal *distributed heritage collections* across the university.



Fig. 2 - An elaborate carved figure at the base of the main staircase in St Leonard's Hall. UCA1009

The Audit was intended as an initial survey of locations, conditions, and basic connections to university history. The objects and collections recorded in the Audit range widely from fine art and furniture, to historical scientific and teaching equipment, photographs, architecture and commemorative items. Single objects were catalogued separately, while groups of objects over 10 items were done on a collection basis. This information was gathered in order to: create a central database of information, identify objects in vulnerable or dangerous situations, identify concerns held by stewards of these collections, identify items that require conservation, and for insurance purposes. It was not the intent to catalogue every last object in a collection, but rather to provide detailed information on the types and sizes of collections within the university.

The Audit remit included only objects and collections belonging to the University of Edinburgh. A small number of items were included in the Audit where the ownership

was either known to be outside the university, unknown, or questionable. These items were included solely on the basis that their care was the responsibility of the university, and ownership or suspected ownership outside the University of Edinburgh was expressly documented in the database.

It was not the aim of the Audit to remove objects from the departments in which they reside, except in very exceptional circumstances. At present the University Museums and Galleries does not have the resources to store cultural heritage items outwith formal university collections. In addition, the majority of the objects and collections surveyed by the Audit have a historical connection to the university, and are best understood within their academic context. This connection might be lessened if objects or collections were removed from the surroundings of their discipline, and thus department retention has been supported during every phase of the Cultural Audit project.

Methodology

From the outset, concerns focused on the difficulty in arranging visits with 200 busy members of staff within a relatively short period of 12 months. Initial contacts were made through the head of each college, school, and department. Visits were normally arranged several weeks in advance, keeping the schedule of visits as flexible as possible. In several instances retired Professor Emeriti were the most knowledgeable on department collections, and were very willing to take time to discuss historic items.

Information was entered into a database on a daily basis, which was in turn replicated to a university server. Images were taken as records for works of art, furniture, photographs, and visually intriguing

objects. Information deemed sensitive has not been included on the webpage, such as location, contacts, or serious environmental or condition issues.

Response of university colleagues

The response of colleagues in all areas of the university has been overwhelmingly positive. Colleagues have gone out of their way to assist in the Audit, understanding that their knowledge contributes to the creation of a multifaceted and continually expanding record of innovation and



Fig. 3 - Headdress from the Social Anthropology Teaching Collection. UCAC0084

achievement at the University of Edinburgh. The Audit has proved successful in raising awareness of collections and collections issues both within the university and with the national media, instilling a sense of pride among non-museums university staff who have tirelessly safeguarded these heritage collections despite ongoing pressure to downsize.

Colleagues across the University of Edinburgh have been conscientious in preserving objects and collections pertaining to the history of their discipline, and welcomed a project intent on safeguarding these items for future

generations. It is a common theme that staff are concerned with preservation of cultural and historic items in their departments. Many factors, often out of their control, weigh upon the continued care and preservation of these items.

Audit findings

A phase I report was written detailing the results of the first year of the Cultural Collections Audit project (PEPPERS 2006).

- **1,100+ Objects**
 - o Over 50%: Furniture and fine art (paintings, sculpture, and prints)
 - o 10%: Photographs
 - o 5%: Scientific instruments, commemorative objects
- **170+ Collections** ranging in size from 10 to 200,000 objects
 - o Collections of 500-2,000 objects most common
 - o 20-25%: Photography and archives
 - o 10-15%: Scientific instruments, teaching equipment, medicine and anatomy, university history, slide collections

Most objects and collections are considered to be in 'fair' or 'good' condition, with less than 3% considered to be in 'poor' condition (PEPPERS 2006: 12–15).

Issues raised during the Audit process

The Cultural Audit highlighted a number of challenges faced by the university's non-formal collections including:

- Environmental conditions
- Departmental relocations
- Object conditions
- Security
- Insurance
- Storage
- Long-term preservation

With the positive support and specialist knowledge of established contacts in every department of the university, the Audit worked to bring these collections issues to light within the university by identifying vulnerable items and challenge areas, acting as a resource for information, and by celebrating the



Fig. 4 - Historic spherical surgical theatres designed in part by Professor Norman Dott. UCA0668

university's rich object history through an online website dedicated to the Audit. The following points affect many university non-formal collections.

Environment

The quality of storage environments is difficult to control, especially in shared buildings. Available storage areas are often damp or dirty basement areas, or are exposed to extreme heat due to nearby heating pipes. Most staff are aware of these undesirable conditions, but do not have other options.

There are, however, many situations where objects or collections could easily be moved to improve the immediate environmental conditions. Examples of reversible detrimental situations include:

- Paintings hung directly above tea kettles or coffee machines
- Prints and early 20th century photographs hung in areas with strong direct sunlight
- Objects placed too near high-traffic areas
- Objects stacked or stored haphazardly, with heavy items placed on top
- Micro-climates created by air-tight frames, over-zealous use of wrapping materials

Condition

Most objects and collections viewed are in good/fair condition. The main concern of university staff regarding condition is the continued preservation of objects and collections without resources to do so. The challenges include:

- Furniture is in varying states, often with surface damage to varnish or has structural damage
- Oxidation to metal objects
- Paintings in poor environmental conditions

- Audio / visual recordings (including wax cylinders) deteriorating, material acidic or moulding
- Poor storage conditions
- Archives, prints, and photographs are yellowing due to adhesives, mounts, matting, frames and other acidic materials

Security

Security is an issue for a small number of departments, who have items of cultural or historic importance in common / accessible areas. Security concerns split objects into two categories: items



Fig. 5 - Japanese Shinto Noh mask. UCA0310

that are currently on display or in areas of common access, and items which are not on display, due to a perceived or real security risk.

Insurance

The information gathered by the Cultural Collections Audit has been used to inform general and specific insurance valuations. In addition, colleagues wanted to know what university insurance covers in relation to their collections.

Storage

Lack of storage or poor storage is a major concern across the university. Space is limited for the storage of cultural and historic items, but most departments have managed to dedicate a secure separate storage space for their items. Storage

areas consist of cardboard boxes, filing cabinet drawers, and top shelves, to storage cupboards, 'archive' rooms, and safes, as well as the rarer museum-quality environmentally-controlled storage rooms.

Major concerns regarding storage relate to other issues:

- Environmental instability – temperature, humidity fluctuations and burst pipes are the main culprits of deterioration and destruction
- Security issues
- Inappropriate storage methods – heavy items stacked haphazardly, or rapidly deteriorating materials used

Departmental moves

Approximately 80% of schools, departments, and divisions visited during the course of the Audit were either in the process of moving, or had plans to move in the coming months and years. Many colleagues expressed concern over the uncertain future of their departmental collections.

Audit webpage and publicity

A Cultural Audit webpage was considered an excellent opportunity to make the findings of the Audit accessible to the public, at every stage of the project.¹ A central Audit page was created to welcome



Fig. 6 - Mural of a skeletal man and horse. Royal Dick School of Veterinary Studies. UCA0729

viewers and to invite them to view the growing Cultural Audit collection, in the form of object and collection record catalogues. The webpage has also served as a platform to inform university staff and the public about the Cultural Audit project itself – its purpose, methods, and future objectives. The webpage has served as a positive ambassador for the Cultural Audit project. Since its creation, the Audit website has received approximately 50,000 hits by new and repeat visitors.

The Cultural Audit webpage was also intended as a showcase, highlighting and making accessible collections and objects within the university, which would otherwise be unknown to the greater university and public. It was hoped that the focus of the webpage, on physical items that attest to the university's

traditions of academic excellence and innovation, would create a sense of pride and achievement in the university, which could foster and improve upon communication and cooperation between the University Museums and Galleries and the greater University of Edinburgh.

An 'Object of the Month' feature has been incredibly popular, showcasing objects and collections within the university which might otherwise be unknown to the greater university and public. Recent plans have expanded the Object of the Month to a virtual online exhibition, bringing objects and collections together in an accessible web format. The 2007 virtual exhibition was *From the Vaults*, featuring treasures and objects of curiosity from the University of Edinburgh's vault in Old College.²

Phase II

The main objectives behind project work plans for phase II were advocacy, positive action, and promotion (PEPPERS 2007: 3). Phase II focused on turning the information gathered in phase I into a resource to benefit University of Edinburgh schools, departments and divisions, University Museums and Galleries, as well as increasing cultural resources for the public at large.

The decision to continue funding the Audit project for a second, third and now fourth year was evidence of the significance of the project to the university and enthusiasm with which it was received within the university community.

¹ <http://tweed.lib.ed.ac.uk/audit/Web/UCA.html> (accessed August, 27, 2008).

² <http://tweed.lib.ed.ac.uk/audit/Web/OE01.html> (accessed August 27, 2008).

Highlights from the Cultural Collections Audit

A temporary exhibition, *Highlights from the Cultural Collections Audit*, opened on 24 February 2006 running for six weeks in the Main Library. The exhibition was held to introduce the Audit and communicate its aims, objectives and successes to a wider university and semi-public audience. Ten objects and collections were featured, including items from the School of Literatures, Languages, and Cultures, the Institute of Atmospheric and Environmental Sciences, the Moray House School of Education, and the University Old College Vault. Placed in an area of the library dedicated to IT training, seminars, and meetings, visitors to the temporary exhibition included staff, students, and outside visitors to the library.



Fig. 7 - One of a set of vodka bottles owned by Catherine the Great. UCA1086

Handy preservation tips

During phase I colleagues identified a number of preservation concerns and questions. As a thank you for the warm welcomes and vital assistance on the Audit project, a friendly informal information guide was created to make basic preservation information accessible to colleagues across the university. The guide:

- Outlines basic preservation standards for items of different materials
- Gives Collections Support Team contacts for further information / support
- Advises on university protocol regarding object / collection disposal

The *Handy preservation tips* guide is currently a feature on the main Cultural Audit webpage, and has been included in the first phase of the Audit records sharing plan (see below).

Collections Guardians Recognition Scheme

The Collections Guardians Recognition Scheme is a collections-initiated programme focused on identifying, gratefully acknowledging and supporting university colleagues across the three Colleges and University Support Services who have gone out of their way to protect and preserve the university's unique heritage collections. The Scheme was launched at a Museums and Galleries Month event on 4 May, 2007, at which over 15 Collections Guardians were present. It was an excellent networking opportunity for academic and support staff to meet museums and collections-based colleagues, discuss their collections, and make professional connections.

The Scheme is currently being developed in consultation with the Guardians. As part of the scheme, the Guardians will be provided with in-depth advice from the Collections Support Team, a networking platform on which to voice concerns about the preservation of collections they represent, and tailored opportunities to receive special training on preservation and object handling, should they wish.

Audit records sharing

An important part of phase II has been to make relevant Audit information available to university colleagues and departments, as well as outside organisations, where appropriate. Goals of Audit records sharing include:

- To provide university departments, schools and support services with records and images of items found under their responsibility
- To answer enquiries from university and outside sources
- To assist in Sotheby's insurance valuations
- To assist in the updating of university Fine Art Collection records

The most recent records sharing exercise has involved providing twelve different departments, schools, and support services in the university with detailed records and images from phase I of the Audit, in order to provide them with the means for more organised management of their cultural items. The twelve were chosen for their relatively large holdings of cultural items, some numbering over one-hundred catalogued individual items. The information was distributed via CD in the form of an excel file and jpeg files, and the *Handy preservation tips* guide was also included as a further resource.

Current and future challenges

There are a number of challenges and considerations that face the year-to-year maintenance of the Cultural Audit project. Some of these issues are included below, as are recommendations for future improvement.



Fig. 8 - Sunshine recorder. UCA0871

Year-to-year maintenance of Audit project

- New items – New objects are coming to light each year as colleagues come across them in the far recesses of their offices or departmental storage areas. Gifts to the university occasionally need to be accessioned, and the existence of / information about these gifts need to be communicated to the Audit Officer
- Location information – Staying informed of departmental location changes, which affects location records in the Audit database
- Updating / developing Audit website – Online features to change on a regular basis, and reflect larger university or collections agendas
- Maintaining correct contact information – Contacts in over 200 departments have, and will continue to change as jobs are changed, roles altered, staff retire, and departmental locations change

Disaster planning issues

While the university collections have focused a large amount of energy in recent years on disaster planning, it has been noted that no Audit objects or collections are included the current Collections Disaster Response & Recovery Plan. Many items identified in the Audit are of significant cultural, historic, or financial value, and should be included in building salvage plans, and on salvage maps. A list of iconic items should be created, to cover all university campuses.

Creation of a heritage policy

The heritage policy will compliment collections policies of formal museums in the University of Edinburgh, but the dissemination and practical use of such a document in the wider university will require ongoing advocacy on the part of the Cultural Audit Officer.

The advocacy of a heritage policy should:

- Attempt to create widespread awareness throughout all areas of the university, made through Collections Guardians and contacts created during phase I of the Cultural Audit
- Focus on the support such a policy offers stewards of cultural and historic collections across the university. When the safeguarding and/or retention of informal collections is challenged, stewards of collections will be able to cite a university-supported policy backing their efforts to preserve and protect these collections

Development of information and support resources

- Further development of the Collections Guardians Scheme, including information and support resources based on direct consultation with Collections Guardians
- Creation and implementation of in-house training, based on perceived and reported areas for skills improvement (PEPPERS 2008: 20-1).

Sustainability and relevance



In 2008 the Cultural Collections Audit Officer post was transferred from a renewable one-year contract to an open-ended contract. It is anticipated that the future role of the Cultural Collections Audit Officer will change according to the needs of collections stewards across the university, the University Museums and Galleries and the wider university, but it will keep the key Cultural Audit objectives of advocacy and grass-roots practical support at its core.

Fig. 9 - The Table of Many Woods. UCA0865

Literature cited

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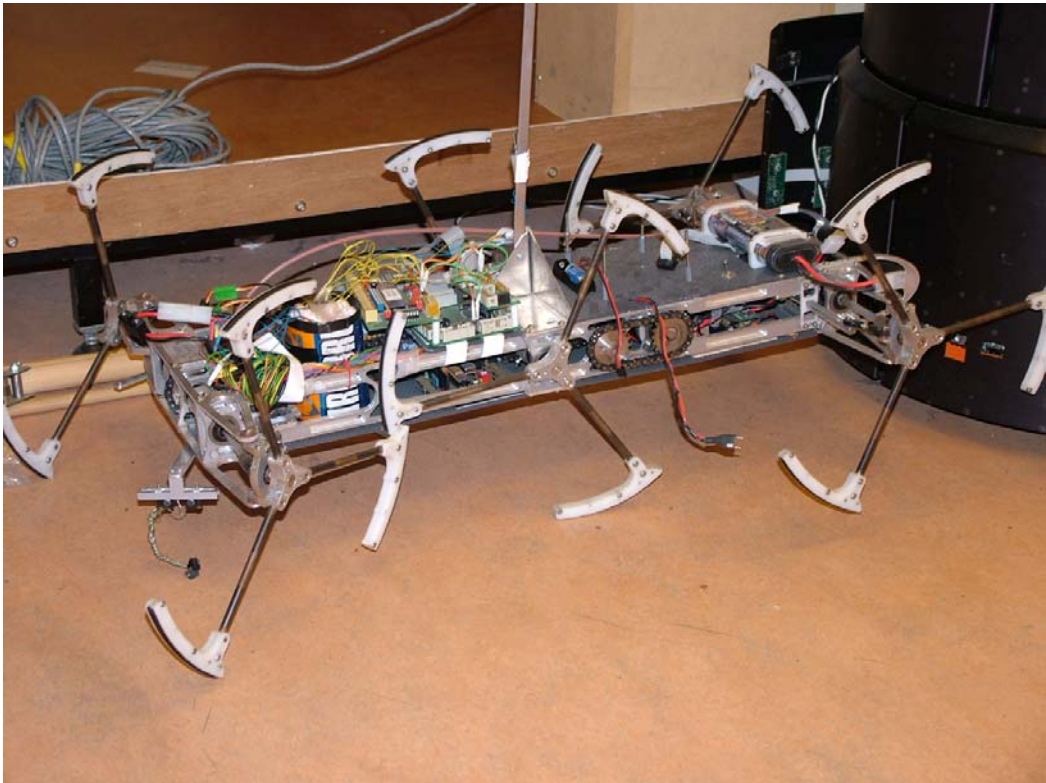


Fig. 10 - Walking robot. Institute of Perception Action and Behaviour. Informatics. UCA1068