

Conservation of the college archives

A valuable link has been established between the college archives and the Hampshire County Record Office at Winchester, in a document conservation programme which has now been running for three years. It was particularly apt that the link started as a result of the conservation needs of our foundation charter and of other documents given to this college by William of Wykeham as Bishop of Winchester; but the benefits to our archives now extend far beyond the Founder himself.

Much of scholarly research, and quite a lot of the monitoring of the college's own legal rights and obligations as an educational institution and as an owner of landed estates, depends on access to the archives as primary sources, but if those documents are too fragile to consult in their original form or even to be photographed, transcribed or published, then research is of necessity curtailed. New College Archives contain very fine runs of medieval sealed deeds and manorial records, but the track record for their care over the past six hundred years has not always been of the best and some of the documents have long been in serious need of help to remedy damage caused by damp, insects, rodents, bad storage and handling.



NCA 3758 manorial court roll of Writtle, Essex: before conservation

The manorial court roll of Writtle (NCA 3758) for example, is a large parchment 'brick', its rolled membranes warped by damp before drying to such a rock-like consistency that even rodents gave up trying to eat it. The highly skilled conservation work carried out on it in 2011 has allowed the document to be unrolled and handled safely for the first time in over a century, and means that this document can take its rightful place again as part of the long series of court rolls dating back to the fourteenth century and William of Wykeham's gift to this college of the manor of Writtle Rectory, and thus it forms an important source for the history of one of our estates.

NCA 11985 is a royal confirmation of all the college's lands and privileges in Newton Longville, Buckinghamshire, dating from January 1484. As such it continues the sequence of royal confirmations (necessary to the college's status and security of title) of the previous hundred years, and like all royal confirmations it was authenticated by the monarch's Great Seal – in this instance a large beeswax and resin seal, affixed by plaited cords of coloured silk and bearing on one side an image of the monarch enthroned, with orb, sceptre and other trappings of power, and on the other side an image of the monarch on horseback, riding into battle to defend the realm.

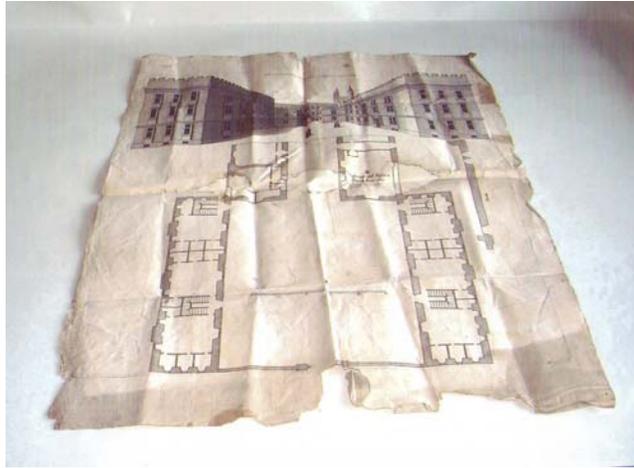
Each monarch has a slightly different design of Great Seal, and NCA 11985 is particularly interesting as it provides an example of the Great Seal of King Richard III – comparatively rare because he was only on the throne for three years. Unfortunately, at some point in its life this document and its seal seem to have been dropped, thrown or trampled on, for the surface of the charter was creased and grimy, and the seal had smashed into several pieces. Efforts to repair it in the early-twentieth century by inserting metal pins were of little lasting benefit, largely because the entire document plus seal was crammed inside a stiff manilla wallet and kept in a wooden drawer to jostle against many other sealed deeds; inevitably the seal disintegrated again, revealing some of the metal pins.



NCA 11985 Great Seal (reverse) of Richard III: before and after conservation 2012

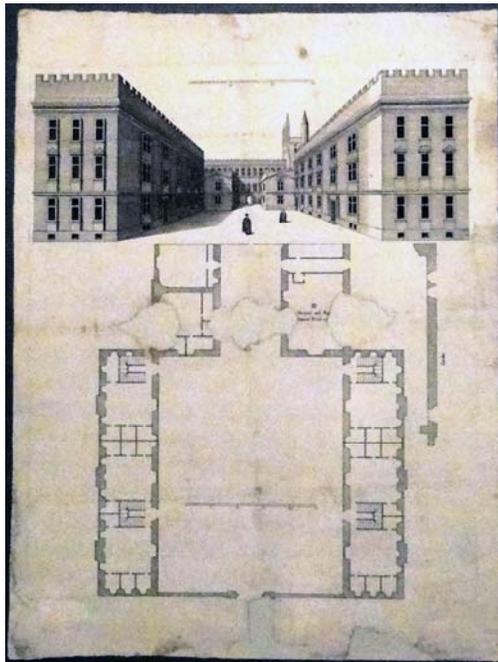
After eight hours of painstaking work earlier this year, to clean and relax the parchment and reassemble the seal securely, NCA 11985 is now stored flat on its own support board and seal protector, and is fully accessible for study.

For many years, little or no access could be granted to NCA 1134, a once-fine engraving of William Byrd's plan and elevation of the new 'Lower Court' in 1682 – better known today as part of the Garden Quad, staircases OB 7-10. Tim Edwards, Senior Conservator at Hampshire Record Office, wrote with remarkable restraint in his condition report for NCA 1134 that “the document is suffering mechanical damage. It has been stored folded and is heavily creased. Three holes at the centre caused by rodent damage have been rather crudely repaired fairly recently, with a paper support adhered over holes on verso and missing detail filled in on recto... two stains from sellotape repairs [are visible] at the upper right-hand edge.” In other words, unskilled bodge repairs were made at some date in the second half of the twentieth century, by which modern machine-made paper and unsuitable glues fought against seventeenth-century hand-made rag-pulp paper, and adhesive tape was also applied, with predictable results.



NCA 1134 Byrd's plan of the Garden Quad buildings in 1682: before conservation

It took over six hours work to eliminate the damage, clean and flatten the document and make it stable enough to handle again.



NCA 1134: after conservation, 2012

Sometimes of course it is too late and conservation skills cannot come up with a treatment which is economically viable. In such cases, as for example the manorial court book for 1776-1918 of the college's estate in Hardwick, Bucks, seriously charred round the edges in a (hopefully off-site) fire many decades ago, preservation photography is the only affordable answer at present, and high quality digital images now make the information, if not the book itself, accessible again.

The New College Archives conservation programme is modest in its expenditure and its funding to date has been supplied out of the college library's budget. In this way some twenty or so medieval charters and manorial records, together with some eighteenth-century maps and plans, have been treated at

Winchester. The results are invaluable, and we are grateful both for the willingness of the Hampshire County Archives service to help New College in this way, and to the skills of their conservation and photographic staff in carrying out this work.

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