

## Unwrapping the past: conserving archives damaged in the fire that destroyed the Public Record Office of Ireland.

by

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*'The condition of the salvaged documents, scorched by the intense heat and weather exposed, rendered their identification and arrangement a matter of great difficulty.'*

— *The Fifty-fifth Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records in Ireland (1928),*  
Appendix I, p. 19.



Fragments of solicitor's apprentice affidavit of  
service of apprenticeship, 1826 Equity Exchequer

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In 2017, the National Archives began a project, funded by the Irish Manuscripts Commission (IMC), to survey a collection of 378 brown paper parcels containing archives previously stored in the basement of the Record Treasury at the Four Courts, that had not been opened since 1922.

The survey gathered key facts such as whether the paper or parchment document was in one piece or falling apart, or somewhere in between. Each document was photographed and carefully handled to see how easy it was to unfold or unroll it to read the contents. The parcels had been labelled by PRO (I) staff in 1922 but these gave only short or abbreviated titles and dates of the contents.

As was to be expected, the documents inside the parcels were covered in large amounts of soot and dirt. Many of the parchment documents were distorted as a result of the heat of the fire. Larger parchment documents, made up of multiple leaves of vellum secured along one top edge and then rolled for storage, had in many cases become a solid mass, with the pages fused together allowing little or no text to be read. Their visual appearance could be quite dramatic, these documents often looked more like an object that you might find in a natural history collection.



*Revenue Exchequer: account roll 1818*



*A brown paper parcel of  
Equity Exchequer: Exceptions 1801-1802*

Paper documents were charred and scorched to varying degrees, some only at the edges, others were black cinders and even careful handling could result in further irreversible damage to these records.

All the documents required some level of conservation treatment, ranging from surface cleaning to extremely complicated treatments involving the separation and reshaping of distorted vellum where possible. During the survey the documents had been graded depending on their condition.

Condition Grades 1 – 3 described the document's level flexibility and an amount of readable text. Grade 1 items were in the best condition with only minimal and less complicated conservation treatments required before they could be used by archivists and researchers. Grade 2 items would require some treatment to enable handling and making most of the text clear to read. Grade 3 documents being mainly inflexible but with 25% of the text still visible and treatments would be required to ensure access in the future.

Most of the documents in the collection were given a Grade 4 condition rating, and the majority of these were written on parchment. These 145 items were in quite a fragile condition with only 5% - 10% of the text clear enough to be read.

Grade 5 was reserved for the 45 items which had been so severely damaged by the fire that little or no historical information could be recovered. Paper material was charred and burnt beyond recognition and parchment fragments distorted and fused together often into solid blocks.

The condition of the material and the limited knowledge of the contents of the parcels meant that deciding where to start was a challenge. Organising the parcels into groups according to the condition of the documents was useful in terms of trying to plan the conservation treatments and define the resources that the project would require. Working with external experts gave another essential perspective.

The board members of the IMC provided guidance for the prioritization on the conservation of the surviving material based on historical relevance. It was decided to clean the documents that had been given a Grade 1 rating, this comprised the contents of 28 parcels. The IMC had highlighted ten parcels of interest, these included many multiple paper pages which are folded and grouped together, as well as large rolls, folded parchment documents and small parchment docketts and receipts.

All the material was cleaned using a Nilfisk® 4 HEPA filter vacuum cleaner with an adapted brush to remove the small granules of dirt and soot embedded and throughout the bundles. Documents were then cleaned using a combination of hand-held brushes, smoke sponge (vulcanized rubber) and plastic erasers. The use of smoke sponges after vacuuming was excellent at cleaning the surface and lightening the overall tone of both the paper and the parchment. Mars Staedtler® plastic

erasers in grated form were used on certain areas to remove dark areas of dirt and charring stains, again with very successful results.

In total 3, 945 sheets paper and parchment were cleaned. Documents from some parcels required additional conservation treatment, such as controlled humidification, flattening of parchment and minor repairs to weak and vulnerable areas. Due to the heat of the fire vellum receipts for wheat purchased at Dublin Port in 1818 had distorted and become hard along the right-hand side. [image]



*Receipts from the Revenue Exchequer, Collectors Account,  
Dublin Port, April 1818, before conservation.*

To allow the receipts to be accessible and the text readable, it was essential to reduce distortion and soften the hard edges. This was achieved by placing the receipts in a Perspex chamber and introducing moisture using an ultra-sonic humidifier. After six – ten minutes in the cold fog the receipts are soft and flexible to enough to open out. The vellum receipts are then placed on a fabric covered metal worktop and the distortions manipulate and straighten out. The receipt held in place with small neodymium magnets to air dry under tension. The result are excellent.



*Three receipts after conservation*

*housed in an archival paper folder and held in place with Mylar strips*

One example of paper documents that did survive the fire, in relatively good condition, are sixty-six Yeomanry monthly returns from Co. Carlow. These large forms give the names and ranks of the men who attended the barracks each month for training in 1798. As these forms had been stored folded most of the damage was along folded areas. When the printed forms were opened out, scorched parts and areas of loss were along these folds.



*Yeomanry Monthly Returns*

*from different barracks in Co. Carlow, 1798, showing scorch marks*

Carbon residues along the areas of burnt paper were removed from the edges of the forms. These areas were then repaired with a light tissue with an adhesive on one side. Two types of coated tissues were used, one coated with Tapioca paste and the other coated with Klucel G. The choice of which tissue to use depended in the location and the size of the area of damage. All the forms were humidified and flattened to introduce flexibility to the form and enable clear image capture for future digitisation.

Now cleaned, flattened and repaired: 2,980 pages of paper and 965 sheets of parchment are ready to be listed. All these items belong to the former collections of the PRO(I). Archivists will use *Beyond 2022*'s database version of Herbert Wood's *Guide to the Records Deposited in the Public Record Office of Ireland* (1919) to prepare finding aids to this rediscovered material. This is the very early stage of a long term project to conserve this material, there are still 350 parcels to work on.

The project supervisor was Zoë Reid, Senior Conservator, National Archives and the work was carried out by Rebecca de Bút (Project conservator Aug 2017- May 2018), Heather Courtney (Project assistant and photographer, Aug – Dec 2017) and Jenny Greiner (Project assistant, Jan – May 2018). This work would not have been possible without the generous funding of the Irish Manuscripts Commission (IMC).