

Moving the British National Collections

by MIRJAM M. FOOT

There is no point in rehearsing the lengthy saga of building the new British Library in North London. The media made much of it – much of it inaccurate – and the Library, its staff and its users are now only too pleased to put all that behind and are eager to work in and with the new building, enjoying its amenities and much improved services.

However, between the actual building of the new library and its enjoyment lies an important interlude, which has been discussed far less – at least in public and by the press – and that is the gigantic effort of moving 250 kilometres of library and archive material from ten different locations into the new and vastly improved storage areas at St Pancras.

As an introduction to this panel discussion I will highlight four issues, the details of which will – I hope – be developed further when the introductions are over and the discussion starts.

They are:

1. Planning and budgets,
2. Diversity of collections and locations,
3. Preservation and security, and
4. Lessons learnt.

1. PLANNING AND BUDGETS

One advantage of the lengthy delays in building the new library was the extended planning period. The complexity of the move, which entailed a wide variety of materials coming from 10 different locations (all with different storage environments) into one building; the need for smaller subsidiary moves within London and between London and Yorkshire (the home of the

Document Supply Centre and a site for storing little-used collections); the varying dates at which the leases of the various buildings expired, thereby forcing a timetable that owed nothing to logic or convenience; coupled with the fact that library services were expected to continue virtually uninterrupted, could have provided a scenario for a nightmare. Intensive planning over a lengthy period of time turned this potential nightmare – I will not say into a dream, but – into a manageable and managed reality.

Three essential components of the planning process were: the development of a storage policy, computer systems that were designed for the move, and budgeting for funds to pay for it all.

But before either of the latter two could be developed in detail, years were spent in measuring the collections (shelf length, depth and height) and on configuring which parts of the collection should move into the new building and which should go North or into one of the two outhouses the British Library had to keep in London. These decisions largely depended on the amount and kind of use the collections received or were likely to receive, on their value and rarity, and on their portability and their physical state.

Once these storage decisions had been made, the smaller moves between existing buildings could begin and they were useful rehearsals for the big move, testing the computer system, the removal firms, and the staff. The mapping of the collections on to the shelves in the new library could also begin and the computer system was useful for working out the size of the shelves needed for the various parts of the collection. One of the aims was to restore a logical sequence, which, due to 4 or 5 decades of smaller moves and reshelving exercises, had gone badly awry.

Once the move had started, the computer system also helped to tell us where every set of books was at any one time (i.e. packed in which crate, in which van, or, at the far end, whether unpacked and, if so on which shelf).

The budgeting for the move was complex. Before this could be done in any detail, tenders had to be prepared with precise specifications for every separate part of the move, and bids solicited (from all over Europe). Prospective removal firms would reply to the specifications, give their own background and experience, their financial status, and suggest a moving schedule. If a prospective candidate, they would be invited to visit the library and its source buildings to inspect local difficulties, estimate the manpower, management effort, number of vehicles, crates, etc. needed, and to provide a broken down set of costs.

In the preparation of the tenders and contracts we were ably assisted by an excellent firm of project management consultants. The tender boards (made up of senior staff and a leader for each projected part of the move) would draw up their list of criteria and the firm that scored highest on all fronts (quality, experience, management, health and safety, costs, etc.) would be

selected. Different criteria would apply to different types of collections, as prints and drawings, manuscripts, rare books, sound recordings, printed books, loose archives, seals, paintings, globes and map cabinets (to mention but a few) would all need different ways of packing (specified by the BL) and transportation. In the end five different firms were employed to move different parts of the collections. Also the quantity of material to be moved and the speed of moving would vary according to the material itself, but also according to the idiosyncracies of the source buildings – all in central London, all with local access and traffic problems. The best-known and most troublesome building to move out of was the British Museum, where meanwhile local alterations and extensive re-building had to take place, occasionally obstructing and frequently disrupting the book moves. Negotiations with BM colleagues and their contractors started friendly enough, but became extremely fraught towards the end.

As well as budgeting for removal firms, budgets were needed for the enabling works (scaffolding, hoists, lifts, platforms, walkways), the protection of the collections (before and during the move: sheeting, wrapping, boxing, special chests and cases), and staff effort. All moves were supervised by the library's own staff and for some parts of (rare) collections the staff accompanied every item to its new home. The necessary extra security measures also needed to be budgeted for.

The move as a whole was a considerable drain on the Library's resources, and although there were special provisions, the Library did go through a very lean time.

2. VARIETY

I have already mentioned the wide variety of collection material: books, manuscripts, maps, sound recordings, postage stamps, seals, scrolls, prints and drawings, paintings, and even antique furniture, all of which needed a different kind of care, different ways of packing and protecting, and different handling techniques. Moreover, they came from ten different buildings.

There were in fact six separate moves that took place over three years (1996-99): General printed books; rare books (including music and philatelic material); maps (including globes and map cabinets); Oriental collections; Manuscripts; and Science collections.

General printed books were moved at an average rate of 340 metres per day and took 400 days (1 ½ years) to move; Rare books (music and stamps) were moved at a rate of 120 metres per day and took 211 days (ca. 9 months); Maps took 7 months; Oriental material (including prints and drawings, paintings, a large collection of photographs and archives) took 6 months. Although

numerically the smallest of the moves, that of the Manuscripts was the most complex, as the value and number of different formats of the material (seals, ostraca, papyri, archives and manuscripts) needed extra security and extra careful handling. Moreover the impact of the building works at the BM was felt most heavily during this part of the move, as most of the exit routes were blocked, and dust, noise and intermittent interruption of electric power were aggravating – to say the least. This material was moved at an average rate of 100 metres per day and took 114 days (just over 5 months). A special computerised move system was used for the Manuscripts, maps and Oriental moves. It varied from the Bookmove control system (for printed books) in that it recorded items and their locations in greater detail.

The Manuscripts department was the only one that completely closed during the move. Rare Books and Oriental Services were interrupted for a short period. General printed book services carried on, with parts of the collection being unavailable while they were being moved.

The Science collection moved last (again services were not suspended) and took ca. four-and-a-half months at the higher (i.e. 340 metres per day) rate. The main problem during this part of the move was caused by a tiresome hoist in one of the source buildings.

3. PRESERVATION AND SECURITY

One of the most important aims of the move was that the collections should arrive at their destination completely, safely and undamaged. A great deal of preparatory work in the form of cleaning, boxing, wrapping and enveloping had been carried out in the years leading up to the start date. Careful and detailed guidelines for the packing and handling of materials by removal firms had been drawn up by the BL's Preservation Department and were strictly enforced. Removal personnel were trained by Library staff before being allowed to touch any of the collections. A constant security presence (either the Library's own security guards or contract security staff) during the packing, loading, unloading and re-shelving; two drivers on each van, sometimes with extra supervisory presence, while some vans carrying rare material had tracking devices; specified locks on cases and vans; no unauthorised stops or interruptions; constant checking against the computer print-outs, all made sure that nothing went astray and – with two exceptions – nothing was damaged.

The two exceptions, an antique chair and a painting, both from the Oriental collections, were damaged notwithstanding the fact that a specialist firm of fine-art packers had been employed to move them. One small group of

sound recordings went missing – temporarily – but was found on the wrong van.

Some of the greatest potential security hazards were at the new building, where further delays in fitting out some of the storage areas meant that the necessary locks were not in place until literally hours before the material arrived.

4. LESSONS LEARNT

Experience is the best teacher and perhaps the most useful result of the move for those who organised it and carried it out is what we have learnt. If any of these lessons, both positive and negative, are of any use to those of you who are planning a library move: here are some of them.

Having a central point of responsibility in the form of a Project Board or a Move Board was essential. Nobody realised in advance how difficult it would be to integrate the various moves, removal firms, infrastructure and systems. Communication – always important – became a vital issue that could make or break a move programme. Local conflicts, conflicts between simultaneous move programmes, unforeseen crises that could not be resolved there and then, had to be referred to and solved by one central responsible body.

Although there were advantages in having a number of removal firms (different experiences and skills, healthy competition), it made – without doubt – the organisation and supervision of the move more complex. Rotation of supervisory staff and a maximum amount of variety in their tasks were also important issues. Nothing more boring and dispiriting than having to stand outside the same building in the rain, day after day, to watch men loading a van.

Detailed specifications of the amount and type of work are necessary before the tendering process starts. Accurate measurements of stock, realistic move rates, enough supervision, allowing time for traffic congestion, building in some slack for things to go wrong, can all prevent fluctuations in cost, which cannot be allowed in a fixed budget.

Over-sized material was separated out before the move started. This enabled us to lift, pack, order separate containers for, and move this material without interrupting the general workflow. This turned out to be advantageous, especially as this material had to be placed on different types of shelves at St Pancras.

Enabling works and structural problems at the buildings out of which we were moving caused problems and delays. The company employed to manage the

enabling works was unsatisfactory and a stricter contract with enforceable penalty clauses would have been useful. Instead we made the best of a bad set of workmen, did most of the work ourselves or with subcontractors, and muddled through.

The training programmes (in book handling) both for supervisory staff and for removal personnel were very successful. Throughout the moves it was clear that constant supervision by staff who could make decisions on the spot and who could handle (and earn the respect of) the removal men, was vital. Emphasis on the importance of health and safety issues throughout the tendering process and throughout the moves themselves also paid off. Apart from some very slight mishaps (such as a person using the wrong kind of knife and cutting himself; someone tripping over a piece of hardboard), the fact that no real accidents happened over such a long project is a credit to all.

If we made one mistake (in my view), it was to continue library services throughout. It was clear from the closure of the Manuscript department (and also from the experience at the Public Record Office and the Folger Library in Washington) that total closure frees the staff from all other duties, allowing everyone to concentrate on the move in hand. Yes, readers would have been inconvenienced, but they were also inconvenienced when they came to consult a particular book or document to find that it was in the process of being moved and unavailable. Lists of material that would be unavailable at any one time were posted everywhere, but nevertheless there were many unsatisfied and frustrated readers. If the BL had closed – and advertised that closure at least a year in advance and very widely – every one would have known and there would have been no surprises. Moreover, the moves themselves would have been faster and a great deal easier.

Finally, I cannot stress enough the importance of planning and of preparing the stock before starting to move. The unexpected will always happen, but it can be kept to a minimum if all eventualities are considered in advance.

Good luck with your moves!

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