Out of sight, out of mind

can transfer to remote storage create loss of collection knowledge?

These days lack of space and the high cost of building grounds close to libraries and archives gives way to remote storage. The further away, the less we as staff actually see the collections. Materials are available online, either as digitized copies or in digital library systems. We remove ourselves from the materiality of our collections. We no longer understand how individual items used to connect to each other when they were all on the same shelf as parts of a collection. Moving to remote storage more often than not break up the old order of placement, as the collections are re-placed according to size, material, needs for special climate or other convenient matters. How can we ensure that collection knowledge is preserved, as we seldom see the materials and digital catalogue posts might have less detail?

A short survey among colleagues here at the Royal Danish Library have told me something of how the knowledge and special connection with certain collections passes on to the next generations.

- Every newly employed person at the special collections gets a scheduled introduction to the buildings and storage spaces with visits, and the possibility to both work and engage with the physical objects on site.
- On site work in the stacks. Typically provenance projects and retro cataloguing projects.
- Revision of collections on site.
- Extra focus on cataloguing and adding metadata with notes on provenance, bindings and other item specific information.
- Publish digital copies of handwritten catalogues, book lists, and early printed catalogues.
- Ongoing discussions on classification and use of important cultural heritage objects in the reading room. The more knowledge the better security.
- Interviews with older colleagues before they retire. As an example, we filmed a very knowledgably book-historian when she was talking about the formation of a couple of special collections with historical bindings, fine bindings and interesting trade bindings from the 18th and 19th centuries. Here we gained lots of intangible knowledge and plenty of anecdotes something that gave completely new perspectives on books that can be considered rather plain and uninteresting.

I guess many of you present around the table today have done other things to preserve knowledge of your collections, both from written sources and those of an intangible sort. I hope you will join me in sharing your experiences and ideas on how to deal with this important question – how to keep the knowledge and how to share it.

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