

What Next? How can we organise the sector to respond to security matters?

My involvement with security matters is something which is very important in my role as Technical Services Manager at LMA (it's still in my new job description) but truth be told it is important for all people working in the world of archives.

It is not something which we can shy away from. Archive theft happens. In the recent book 'Stealing the Scream: The Hunt for a Missing Masterpiece', Edward Dolnick gives a deeply cynical view of museum security measures. 'Art Connoisseurs respond to art crime with the fluttery dismay of a Victorian hostess whose guests have unaccountably spoken of sex'. We don't like to talk about it, sometimes seem to deny it happens.

Well, what about archives?

In some ways our exposure to security risks is greater, more items are read at LMA in a year than are displayed at the Tate Modern. Not only that they are handled and examined in great detail. The risks have always been there but now with greater visitor figures and more interest from community and school groups and more promotion of access, the risks are probably higher. Archives are also different because of the high proportion of collections which are on loan rather than gifts. This makes for an additional dimension, if a theft occurs not only the institution but also the depositor is upset.

Get the basics right?

I'm not going to ask for hands to be raised but think through your response to a policeman investigating a theft in your archive:

- have you labelled all your bundles of documents?
- have you numbered all the items in the bundles of correspondence?
- do you undertake regular stocktakes?
- are your insurance schedules all up to date in their lists of contents
- do you review security on a regular basis?
- have you had an external security audit?

Taking control

At a meeting in May the investigating officer in a case known to some of us made it very clear where the priorities lay for the archivist.

Readers are visitors, but when they visit our premises we make the rules and if they don't follow the rules then access is denied.

If it's not safe to open because a member of staff has had to go home sick and no one can replace them, then don't stay open if it puts supervision at risk.

Similarly, if you don't know what's in your collections, then don't give access until you do (instance of a university based librarian – we believed we had some stolen items from her collection – but I'm not an archivist and I couldn't identify them; however, she had let a researcher have unsupervised access to the boxes of archive in her care)

Evaluation of risk: there is always a risk of theft, is that risk too high, what implications are there if it is stolen – not just monetary but reputation.

How can we develop our response ?

Define what is different about archive security – items are unique, irreplaceable, often on loan, very similar to other items, not necessarily look like valuable (a few scraps of paper, but have signature of famous historical figure).

Paul has talked about CARN

Compare what we do with other sectors: museums, libraries, historic houses (NT/EH/HHA), MLA security advisor.

We can try to use the best outside advice, sometimes from the parent organisation, or local police or professional body.

Don't be fooled into thinking hi-tech solutions are the only answer. Consider the design layout of your public rooms, staff training, staff awareness (e.g. of hostile reconnaissance).

Encourage readers and volunteers to be aware of security needs.

Manage the situation, use facsimiles, restrict the numbers of items, don't cram in an unsafe number of readers who cannot be supervised.

Share good practice and experience. Archive community very good on this but quite quiet on security matters (perhaps why we've had such a good turnout today).

How can we take this matter forward?

3 headings Visibility. Solidarity. Preparation.

Visibility: involvement with whole cultural sector on security issues, ensuring archives on the agenda. Some security groups fail to talk about archives (more interested in glossy art works being stolen from national museums) need to make sure we have made our presence felt.

To this end I've been getting involved with Metropolitan Police 'London Museums, Galleries and Archives Security Coordination Group' run by the Met's Art and Antiques Unit, part of SCD6 Specialist Crime Directorate based at Scotland Yard.

Lack of awareness of value and extent of archives.

(Useful information re crime trends: most likely time of theft 230-5 pm on Thursdays)

Solidarity: sharing our experience, knowledge, contacts re equipment, security advice
Coordinating response to media requests re thefts and incidents

Ensure positive messages about systems being in place are made clear to media:
thorough checking of readers, supervision, archives kept securely.

Preparation

Know it will happen again

Doesn't happen very often

Prompt and robust response

What can we do in practice?

NCA has a coordinating role, thank NCA for hosting this event on a subject we're sometimes reluctant to speak about in public.

PSQG hope will continue to meet regularly and security will remain on the agenda (keep up to date with latest technological advances; scams).

Update best practice guidelines; review current situation in archives and compare with other parts of the sector.

Dialogue with auction houses, dealers (one thing I was shocked was how little we knew of current dealers, online sales of autographs) need to know who is dealing in what.

Security and Access Group

Meet regularly but not too frequently; not just in London; represent variety of institutions large and small. Report to PSQG.

Survey current security situation

Encourage best practice

More consistent rules for search rooms

Raise profile of security, be natural first point of contact

Email contact trees

Coordination of media response information