

The display of single-sheet material: two recent exhibitions at the Bodleian Library, Oxford

Andrew Honey

Abstract Although the Bodleian Library, Oxford, has a long tradition of displaying bound books, this paper concentrates on two recent exhibitions that have been drawn almost entirely from single-sheet material. Within the library, single-sheet material is stored in a number of housing formats and these dictate how it can be displayed. This paper will describe a panel mounting system using polyester slings that has been developed to enable single-sheet items to be safely and attractively displayed without removing them from their original backing sheets.

Exhibitions at the Bodleian

The Bodleian Library, the main library of the University of Oxford, has continually mounted exhibitions since 1832 when it first purchased ‘a large Wainscote oak table with glass-case top’ for the permanent display of some of its manuscripts (Craster 1952: 6).¹ This single case situated in Arts End was joined by others until a permanent exhibition displaying ‘the untold bibliographical treasures of the library’ was contained in some 30 cases by the early years of the 20th century (Clark 1906: 39).² The late 1930s saw the building of the New Bodleian Library, which added to the existing library accommodation and included two new exhibition rooms when it opened for library use in 1946. These housed a permanent exhibition as well as allowing a series of temporary exhibitions to be mounted.³ Changes to library accommodation in the 1960s, however, resulted in the Library assigning the 1940s exhibition rooms to other purposes, and exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, were then moved to the Divinity School and the old School of Natural Philosophy. The Divinity School later ceased to be used as an exhibition venue and the old School of Natural Philosophy, following a fundraising campaign, was completely renovated. In 1994 it reopened as the current exhibition room hosting a changing programme of exhibitions drawn from the Library’s collections.⁴

Display of single-sheet material

The majority of the Bodleian’s exhibitions, both of library treasures and changing temporary exhibitions, have reflected the predominant format of material held by the Library – the codex. The current exhibition room is very much designed to show these to their best advantage, and the majority of work in the field of exhibitions by current

and past Bodleian Library conservators has reflected their concerns for the safe and attractive display of this type of material (for example see Clarkson 1997; Josephson 1999a–c). Most of our exhibitions have usually contained small numbers of single-sheet items drawn from the Library’s collections, and two routine methods have been identified for their safe display (Josephson 1999c: 10). A standard window mount is used for anything ‘which can be viewed as a formal image’, and ‘less formal or irregularly shaped’ material is held by polypropylene straps to a sheet of Museum board slightly larger than the object. Single-sheet material housed in guard books is treated for display purposes within the bound format as items are not routinely removed from bound volumes for exhibition.

The following two exhibitions will be used as case studies illustrating a very different approach to the display of single-sheet material: *A Nation of Shopkeepers: Trade Ephemera from 1654 to the 1860s in the John Johnson Collection* 1 October–21 December 2001 (hereafter *Trade Ephemera*) and *Scenes from an Extraordinary Life: An Exhibition Marking the Bicentenary of Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881)* 4 December 2003–1 May 2004 (hereafter *Disraeli*).⁵ Both of these exhibitions were unusual for the Library as they both relied almost entirely on single-sheet material which had been mounted for long-term storage. The *Trade Ephemera* material was mostly mounted on backing sheets and the *Disraeli* material had been conserved and fasciculed between 1991 and 1999.⁶ The restrictions imposed by these long-term storage methods will be discussed in greater detail under each exhibition.

The current exhibition room is equipped with 15 display cases: there are five wall cases and six upright island cases, all with cloth-covered bases and adjustable glass shelves. In addition there are four desk cases with cloth-covered bases which can be adjusted in height. The depth of the cases and their heights are well suited to our normal displays, which

are usually a range of books supported on either card or acrylic cradles with some objects and conventionally mounted single-sheet items supported by lecterns or plinths. A tensioned-cable mounting system running from floor to ceiling allows additional space to be used for the hanging of framed items. Our exhibitions usually allow some 70–100 items to be displayed.

Trade Ephemera exhibition

The 2001 *Trade Ephemera* exhibition displayed 338 items of trade ephemera drawn mainly from the John Johnson collection of printed ephemera.⁷ Of these 338 items, all except seven books and eight artifacts were single-sheet material. The exhibits were mainly small trade cards and other commercial ephemera, a typical trade card measuring 75mm × 100mm. The sheer number of items selected, the majority of which were small, presented problems for their display. The early stages of the exhibition planning identified a number of problems that would need to be overcome. The exhibition curator wished to show as many relevant items as possible, and the exhibition was to work both as a sequence of individual exhibits and as a unified whole telling the larger story of the development of this kind of trade ephemera (Fig. 1).

The last major exhibition based purely on the John Johnson Collection was mounted in 1971, following the transfer of the collection to the Bodleian Library in 1968 (Bodleian Library 1971). For this exhibition, 259 individual items of ephemera were permanently removed from their Johnson backing sheets and hinged with gummed paper to sheets of black card slightly larger than the item. These black secondary supports were then laid out or pinned up in the display cases. Many of the exhibited items remain on the 1971 exhibition supports to this day, and although they are now a useful way of identifying the exact contents of that exhibition, they do not fit well into the general storage of the collection.⁸ Early thoughts about the



Figure 1 Sixty-seven exhibits, including one book, showing the Development of Trade Cards & Bill Headings displayed in a wall case. The panels project from the back wall.

2001 exhibition also assumed that it might be necessary to remove the items from the Johnson mounts. The first trial layout, which did not overlap the backing sheets, did not manage to fit the desired number of exhibits into the display cases.

As Printer to the University, Johnson was fortunate to have access to materials from the Press which he used to mount and house the collection. With the exception of some specialised categories of material, Johnson based his storage system on a hierarchy of five sizes: four different sizes of backing sheets housed in boxes and portfolios and finally plan chests for outsize items and posters.⁹ The items were either hinged with gummed paper to their backing sheets, or more usually adhered with a spot of paste at each corner. Sometimes more than one item was placed on the backing sheet. The storage boxes and portfolios were colour coded by subject and had attractive printed or tooled labels. The ranks of boxes lined the walls of ‘The Sanctuary of Printing’ at the Press and this arrangement was broadly recreated when the collection was moved to the Bodleian. The quality of materials used for the original support sheets was excellent and they have aged well; the backing sheets used in the large portfolios were often whole or half-sheets of handmade paper.

To use our existing mounting methods (window mount or ‘board and strap’) for an exhibition of this kind would have required the safe removal of the items from their backing sheets. After temporary mounting for the exhibition, the items would have needed remounting on their original supports. The conservation priorities of the Library are not driven by exhibitions and, even if it were desirable, the time necessary to detach 330 items could not be justified when their long-term storage would eventually require them to be remounted in a similar way. It became clear that the main conservation concern for this exhibition would be to find a safe method of display for the items while keeping them on their original Johnson mounts.

Although there is a growing body of literature devoted to conservation and exhibition mounting, most of it reflects the familiar museum and gallery print room storage systems of a series of window mounts housed in a Solander box (see Kosek 2004 for the latest overview and a detailed bibliography). Within a library context this storage system is not usually found, and although some items within the Bodleian are housed in window mounts, this is far from usual. Single-sheet archival material has often been bound or housed in guard books or albums. Prints and drawings have also usually been housed in albums, kept loose or mounted on backing sheets and housed in boxes.¹⁰

Developing the polyester sling system

In addition to the constraints imposed by the existing storage methods, the material itself presented problems for exhibition. The items were mainly intricately printed trade cards, often very small, and any display would need to make each item legible within rather deep display cases. It would also need to present the very full exhibition in an attractive manner that enabled each item to be presented as an individual print, while keeping the overall look as unified and unfussy as possible. During the planning stage it was

also decided that the whole of each item should be floated in the window aperture – they were not to be clipped by the mount. The mounting method of the collection (one or more small trade cards mounted on a backing sheet) led to some difficulties during the initial trial layout of the exhibitions. To fit the required number of items into the exhibition cases their backing sheets needed to be overlapped in a collage manner. As no way could be found to hold the overlapping backing sheets in place without using adhesive, however, a new method was worked out. After some trials, a system using polyester slings to enclose or partially encapsulate the items and their backing sheets was developed, which allowed the backing sheets to be safely overlapped and a larger number of items to be displayed.

This led to an irregular and asymmetrical layout which might have been seen as a disadvantage, but in fact created a balanced and pleasing arrangement. The items, on their overlapped backing sheets, were supported on rigid sheets of Kapa-Line board, a sandwich board with a polyurethane hard foam core, lined on both sides with white pigmented coated chromo board which is available in large sheets 1040mm × 1530mm. These panels were then overlaid with single overthrow multi-aperture window mounts. Polyester slings were used to hold items safely in a temporary collage, allowing them to be overlapped and taped to their panel. Although some loose items had not previously been mounted, they also required polyester slings as they often needed to be laid over the margins of the backing sheets of other items.

Three variants of polyester sling were used for this exhibition.¹¹ In all cases the final overthrow mount covered the slings completely, except where loose or hinged items were clipped by the sling in order to restrain them.

- For items securely adhered to a backing sheet, a window larger than the item was cut in one side of a polyester sleeve and the backing sheet was secured in the sleeve by ultrasonic spot welds (Fig. 2a).
- For items hinged along one edge to a backing sheet, a window shaped to clip the free corners of the item was cut in a polyester sleeve and the backing sheet secured in the sleeve by ultrasonic spot welds (Fig. 2b).
- For loose items, a window shaped to clip all corners of the item was cut in a polyester sleeve and the item secured in the sleeve by ultrasonic spot welds (Fig. 2c). For one large loose item that was to be displayed vertically, the window clipped the item by 4mm on all edges.

Mounting method

The sequence of mounting started with all items being encapsulated in polyester slings. A back panel was then cut from Kapa-Line 10mm board and the visible edges of the board were covered with strips of mount board adhered with double-sided tape. Items were then arranged on the panel to roughly determine the layout. For those panels that were larger than full sheets of mount board, a joint in the overthrow mount would be necessary. These joints were positioned vertically, avoiding window apertures, the layout of the items allowing for the joint. A slight gap was left

between the overthrow mounts and a strip of handmade paper was placed under the joint. This aimed to make the joint look deliberate rather than just an untidy necessity. The position of the panel caption was also decided at this point. Each item in its sling was then squared up to the panel with a T-square, the slings being overlapped where necessary. The slings were then taped to the panel with masking tape (Fig. 3). If an item was not mounted on a backing sheet, its sling was laid over a piece of handmade paper to give the appearance of a backing sheet. This also hid any parts of the panels or other backing sheets that might have shown in the apertures.¹² The use of masking tape was not ideal and made removal of the items after the exhibition a little hazardous, though no damage was caused. Low-tack tape will be investigated for future use.

To transfer the required positions of the items and their window apertures onto their overthrow mount, a sheet of polyester the same size as the panel was used as a layout mask. This was laid over the panel and the collage of items, and was lightly taped in place. The window apertures were marked, with a spirit marker, a standard 5mm beyond the edge of the objects on the mask. In an attempt to unify the display, all the windows were marked perpendicular to the edges of the panel, even when the edges of the objects were not square themselves.

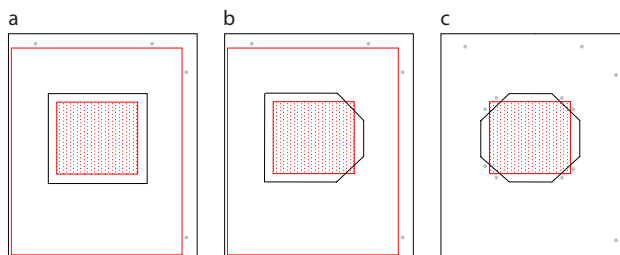


Figure 2 The three types of polyester sling.



Figure 3 Taping the overlapped polyester slings to a panel.

An overthrow mount of 'olde ecru' coloured mount board was then cut to the size of the panel, allowing for the extra thickness of the mount board edging on the visible edges. The polyester layout mask was removed from the panel, inverted and laid face down on the inner face of the overthrow mount board. The positions of the corners of the window openings were transferred to the board with a pin. The window openings were then marked in pencil and the openings were cut with a mount-cutter. For these large multiple-window mounts a vertical cut was used for the windows, rather than the usual bevelled edge. The arris of the window was then lightly sanded and the edge was burnished with a Teflon folder. The vertical window cut was decided upon because of the large number of windows that were needed in each mount; it was decided that this method would limit the possibility of mistakes, and also that a series of softened windows, often in an asymmetrical arrangement and with uneven margins, would look less fussy than a panel with many small bevelled windows. The display aimed to produce a neutral but unified backdrop that allowed each item to be clearly seen. It was hoped that the warm colour of the mount board and softened windows would help to differentiate it from conventional print exhibitions.

The outer edges of the overthrow mount, or series of overthrow mounts for the larger panels, were then lightly

sanded. Finally they were adhered with double-sided tape to areas of the panels free of the polyester slings. The catalogue number for each item was placed below its window aperture. The exhibition captions were kept to a minimum and there was often only one general caption per panel. The individual item numbers identified longer captions in the accompanying catalogue and on the exhibition web page.

The lightweight but rigid Kapa-Line board used as the base for the panels allowed the separate panels to be used in a structural way within the exhibition cases. With the wall and desk cases they could project from the back walls and bases, bringing the items closer to the viewer, and with the island cases they were built into free-standing two-, three- or four-sided towers (Fig. 4).¹³

Disraeli exhibition

The polyester sling method of temporary mounting had been viewed as a one-off solution when it was devised to answer the particular problems of the *Trade Ephemera* exhibition, but it has proved to be a useful method and has been employed on occasions since. Recently, it has been used once again on a large scale for the 2003 *Disraeli* exhibition. This exhibition displayed 140 mainly archival items drawn from the private papers of Benjamin Disraeli. These have been held at the Bodleian Library since 1978, on deposit from the National Trust (Hughenden Manor), and, as noted before, the archive was conserved and fasciculed between 1991 and 1999. Fasciculing as a housing method was designed very much with display in mind; the sewing thread can easily be removed from each fascicule and individual items and their support sheets can be removed for exhibition (Lindsay and Clarkson 1994). This works well when only a few items are required for display or when larger numbers of items are scattered throughout an exhibition. The size of the fascicule support sheet or the placing of the items on it can lead to large margins being required for symmetrical window mounts. For this exhibition, however, large numbers of fasciculed letters were required for display, grouped together in cases, within the exhibition. This presented a similar problem to the *Trade Ephemera* exhibition. Although all the items would have easily fitted into the display cases if they had been individually strapped to boards, on their fascicule backing sheets this was not possible. For this exhibition, the polyester slings were once again used, allowing the backing sheets to be overlapped and again presenting the groups of letters as a unified whole in larger group mounts.

Conclusions

The exhibition aesthetic required by both curators and the public for the display of single-sheet material is driven by best museum and print room practice. Library storage, however, has historically followed a different path from print rooms and this can make the display of their single-sheet materials problematic.¹⁴ The polyester sling method



Figure 4 Oxford Trade – a panel and a three-sided tower displayed in an upright island case. The tower rests on an adjustable glass shelf.

outlined above has proved to be a useful non-adhesive temporary hinging method that enables items to be attractively displayed without removing them from their permanent library backing or fascicule support sheets. For some exhibitions involving the display of large numbers of items, this has required the items to be overlaid as a collage on large panels, and the slings have worked as a protective barrier allowing the items to be safely temporarily taped in place. This system may prove to be a useful temporary non-adhesive hinging method in other contexts with the additional advantage that the window opening in the sling can, where necessary, be shaped to restrain hinged items.

Acknowledgements

The mounting of these two exhibitions and the development of the polyester sling was carried out in conjunction with Dana Josephson, exhibition conservator at the Bodleian Library. Julie Anne Lambert, Librarian of the John Johnson Collection and Jane Eagan read and commented on drafts of this paper.

Notes

1. Although this is the first mention of a permanent exhibition, a proposal by Humphrey Wanley to the Curators of the Library in 1697 suggested that ‘the Strength and Flower of all the manuscripts in the Library, might be brought from their respective Stations, and laid up ... to be shown to Strangers and Travellers’ (Gillam and Hunt 1954: 92). For an account of an early exhibition at the British Museum Library held to coincide with the Great Exhibition of 1851 see Knight 1851: 706–8.
2. For lists of items displayed in the exhibition cases during the late 19th and early 20th century see Macray 1890: 458–82, Clark 1906: 39–45 and the 1931 ‘Handlist to the MSS. and Printed Books in the Archives F & G and in the Exhibition Cases’ (Bodleian Library, Library Records L. S. fol. 49).
3. Temporary exhibitions seem to have been mounted as early as 1912 and a complete run of exhibit labels dated 1912–54 is preserved as Library Records ca. 1508–23, Library Records d. 1574–1671 and Library Records f. 70.
4. An 1843 watercolour by R.W. Buss of Arts End shows what may be the 1832 display case and is illustrated in Craster 1952: facing page 4, the New Bodleian Upper Exhibition Room in Bodleian Library 1952: plate 29, the Divinity School as an exhibition venue in Bodleian Library 1976: plate 10 and the current exhibition room in Josephson 1999a: 8.
5. For details of the *Trade Ephemera* exhibition see Bodleian Library 2001 and 2004b; for *Disraeli* see Langley 2003 and Bodleian Library 2004c.
6. For a description of the fascicule system see Lindsay and Clarkson 1994.
7. The John Johnson Collection is one of the most important collections of printed ephemera in the world. It was assembled by John de Monins Johnson between ca. 1923 and 1956 and was housed at the Oxford University Press (where it was called The Constance Meade Collection of Ephemeral Printing) until its transfer to the Bodleian Library in 1968. Johnson collected retrospectively, establishing 1939 as his *terminus ante quem* (although there are exceptions) and while the majority of material dates from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, there is ephemera dating back to 1508. There are over one million items in the original collection. For further details of the collection see Bodleian Library 2004a.
8. Four items were displayed in both the 1971 and 2001 exhibitions (1971 catalogue numbers 42, 130, 213 and 218; 2001 catalogue numbers 78, 36, 76 and 158). The John Johnson Collection was sorted and indexed in a rudimentary fashion when it arrived in the Bodleian. This form of indexing is still in use today and remains the only finding aid to the uncatalogued sections of the collection. In Johnson’s time, the state of the art in terms of cataloguing was the file card. Clearly, even had the time been available, a card index of single-sheet items (with cross-referencing) would have been as large as the collection itself. The computer age is now enabling the Library to catalogue the collection in detail at an item level, providing multiple access points. The aim is to attach images to the catalogue records wherever possible to enhance both access and preservation. See Bodleian Library 2004a under Catalogue for the online catalogue.
9. The sizes of backing sheet are: (1) 250mm × 180mm (2) 295mm × 267mm (3) 350mm × 267mm and (4) 520mm × 385mm. These are still mainly housed in the standard-sized boxes or portfolios provided by Johnson. The boxes for 1 and 3 are 4to (quarto) and F’cap (foolscap) storage cases manufactured by East-Light which were commercially available and 2 is either housed in ‘Boa’ filing boxes or tooled leather drop spine boxes probably made at the University Press. The largest size of mount, 4, is housed in portfolios, again made at the University Press.
10. An early large collection of single-sheet material that came to the Library which was not housed in a bound format was Francis Douce’s collection of 10,000 prints and drawings bequeathed to the Library in 1834 with his collections of manuscripts and printed books. For a discussion of their housing, either as loose sheets or mounted on backing sheets and housed in wooden boxes covered with block-printed paper see Bodleian Library 1984: 28. The floor case used to house the print boxes is illustrated as catalogue item 26.
11. Two types of polyester slings have previously been described as methods of either securing a loose item without adhesive in a mount, or as a method of securing a hinged item in a float mount (AIC Book and Paper Group 1994: 46–8; Angelo 2001: 12–13). In both these cases, the sling is a single polyester sheet with a window aperture clipping the object and being taped to the back board of a conventional window mount.
12. The use of Kapa-Line board for long-term storage or display is not suggested here. For the *Trade Ephemera* exhibition all items were separated from the board by at least one thickness of polyester and either their backing sheets or a separate sheet of paper.
13. See Bodleian Library 2004b under ‘Display cases’ for further illustrations of the exhibition.
14. Long-term storage methods in museum print rooms can also differ from exhibition mounting systems; see Rayner 2003: 39.

Materials, equipment and suppliers

Kapa-Line board: Wiggins Teape Ltd, Gateway House, 198 Golden Hillock Road, Sparkbrook, Birmingham B11 2LB, UK. Tel: +44 (0) 121 252 3399, www.antalix.com.
50 micron Mylar-D sleeves welded on two sides; 75 micron Mylar-D sheets: Secol Ltd, Howlett Way, Thetford, Norfolk

IP24 1HZ, UK. Tel: +44 (0) 1842 752341, www.secol.co.uk.

Crescent Classic Rag Mat 100 mount board: Conservation by Design Ltd, Timecare Works, 5 Singer Way, Woburn Road Industrial Estate, Kempston, Bedford MK42 7AW, UK. Tel: +44 (0)1234 853555, www.conservation-by-design.co.uk.

References and further reading

AIC Book and Paper Group (1994) 'Matting and framing' in *Paper Conservation Catalog*, Section 40. Washington DC: AIC.

Angelo, C. (2001) 'Investigating the temporary hinging of float-mounted western prints for display', *Paper Conservation News* 99: 12–13.

Bodleian Library (1952) *The Bodleian Library in Photographs*. Oxford: Bodleian Library.

Bodleian Library (1971) *The John Johnson Collection: Catalogue of an Exhibition*. Oxford: Bodleian Library.

Bodleian Library (1976) *Bodleian Library Oxford*. Oxford: Bodleian Library.

Bodleian Library (1984) *The Douce Legacy: An Exhibition to Commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Bequest of Francis Douce (1757–1834)*. Oxford: Bodleian Library.

Bodleian Library (2001) *A Nation of Shopkeepers: Trade Ephemera from 1654 to the 1860s in the John Johnson Collection*. Oxford: Bodleian Library.

Bodleian Library (2004a) <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/johnson/> last accessed 15 Nov 2004.

Bodleian Library (2004b) <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/johnson/exhibition/> last accessed 15 Nov 2004.

Bodleian Library (2004c) <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/modpol/disraeliexhibition/> last accessed 15 Nov 2004.

Clark, A. (1906) *A Bodleian Guide for Visitors*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Clarkson, C. (1997) 'The safe handling and display of medieval manuscripts and early printed books', in *Book and Paper Conservation Proceedings, Ljubljana 1997*, J. Vodopivec and N. Golob (eds), 141–88. Ljubljana: Archives of the Republic of Slovenia.

Craster, E. (1952) *History of the Bodleian Library 1845–1945*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gillam, S.G. and Hunt, R.W. (1954) 'The curators of the Library and Humphrey Wanley', *The Bodleian Library Record* 5(2): 85–98.

Josephson, D. (1999a) 'Mounting exhibitions at the Bodleian Library, part I', *Paper Conservation News* 89: 8–9.

Josephson, D. (1999b) 'Mounting exhibitions at the Bodleian Library, part II', *Paper Conservation News* 90: 10–11.

Josephson, D. (1999c) 'Mounting exhibitions at the Bodleian Library, part III', *Paper Conservation News* 91: 10–11.

Knight, C. (1851) *Knight's Cyclopaedia of London*. London: Charles Knight.

Kosek, J.M. (2004) *Conservation Mounting for Prints and Drawings: A Manual Based on Current Practice at the British Museum*. London: Archetype Publications.

Langley, H. (ed.) (2003) *Benjamin Disraeli: Scenes from an Extraordinary Life*. Oxford: Bodleian Library.

Lindsay, H. and Clarkson, C. (1994) 'Housing single-sheet material: the development of the fascicule system at the Bodleian Library', *The Paper Conservator* 18: 40–48.

Macray, W.D. (1890) *Annals of the Bodleian Library Oxford*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Rayner, J. (2003) 'Rehousing of print collections at the British Museum: the William Blake post binder project and other recent approaches', *The Paper Conservator* 27: 35–45.

Author's address

Bodleian Library, Broad Street, Oxford OX1 3BG, UK (ahoney@bodley.ox.ac.uk).