

Charles Dickens Museum

DOCUMENTATION POLICY

The Charles Dickens Museum Limited acting as the sole trustee of The Dickens House and the Dickens House Fund.

This Policy was approved by the Board on 28 May 2015 and reviewed on 15 March 2018, 14 March 2019, 3 December 2020 and 10 March 2022.

1. Museum's statement of purpose

The Charles Dickens Museum's collections of object, archive and library material are considered to be the world's most comprehensive repository of material related to the life and works of Charles Dickens. Documentation of the collections is shaped by the Museum's mission: 'to establish the Charles Dickens Museum as the world's leading centre for the study, appreciation and enjoyment of Charles Dickens's life and works.'

The purpose of this Documentation Policy is to serve as a guide for staff, Board and other stakeholders, and the public, concerning the professional standards the Museum will apply to the objects in its care – both its permanent collection and loans.

The Policy aims to ensure the Museum fulfils its responsibilities in relation to security, management and access to its collections and information about them. It seeks to reassure the public that the Museum is operating within an ethical framework and is publicly accountable.

This document should be read in association with the Museum's *Collection Development Policy, Forward Plan, Care and Conservation Policy, Plan and Procedural Manual, Access Policy Statement and Emergency Plan*.

The Museum's *Documentation Plan* explains what we plan to do in order to deliver the statements made in this Policy. The *Documentation Procedural Manual* details how we plan to do it.

2. An overview of documentation at the Charles Dickens Museum

The Charles Dickens Museum opened to the public in 1925 and its earliest documentation records date from this period. Due to the varied nature of the collections (objects, archives, library and picture library), periods of sporadic registration activity and a multitude of historic, collection management systems implemented over the years, the Museum's documentation procedures are not always consistent.

The first accession register was started in 1925 and contains information about objects, books, film and archival material and disposals. Two new accession registers started in 1993 are still in use: one for objects and the other for library material. A duplicate copy is held by the Foundling Museum, 40 Brunswick Square, Bloomsbury, London WC1N 1AZ in a fire proof safe.

Formal Entry and Exit forms were first used in 1998; before then, information about donations and loans were documented in correspondence files and published in *The Dickensian* (the quarterly publication of the Dickens Fellowship). Loans in and out have been formally documented since the 1990s.

Basic inventories and cataloguing of the object collection began in the 1970s, and cataloguing of the Archive & Manuscript collection and Picture Library started in the 1980s. The Library was fully inventoried with basic catalogue information for the first time in 2003.

The Museum has often used different systems to catalogue its collections. Whilst progress has been made in centralising data, there are currently 24 different active catalogues, ranging from card files to electronic documents running to over 200 pages, recording information about active loans and the permanent collection.

The Museum first gained Accreditation status in 2009; this landmark raised the Museum's documentation standards to a professional level and set in place a Documentation Plan to identify and address the Museum's backlog.

A Heritage Lottery Fund grant in 2011/2012 allowed the Museum to upgrade its building, thus improving conditions for the collection. New collection management system software (MuseumIndex+) was also purchased, allowing for the centralisation of collection catalogue and procedural information (Entry, Exit, Loans In and Out, Accessions, De-accessions, Movement, Conservation, Exhibition use etc). These conditions mean that in 2015 the Museum is better placed to implement a documentation plan and focus on providing the public with better access to information about the collection.

3. Current documentation aims

The Museum's documentation aims are as follows:

- Improve accountability for the collections;
- Maintain at least minimum professional standards in documentation procedures and collection information and attain the very highest standards wherever possible;
- Extend access to collection information;
- Strengthen the security of the collections.

3.1. Improve accountability for the collection

The Museum will follow the accountability principles defined by the Museums and Galleries Commission:

"to enable museums to fulfill their fundamental responsibilities for collections and the information associated with them. The principles are that a museum should know at any time exactly for what it is legally responsible (this includes loans as well as permanent collections), and where each item is located." (MGC 1993)

3.2. Maintain at least minimum professional standards in documentation procedures and collection information and attain the very highest standards wherever possible

The Museum recognises that maintaining professional standards in documentation policies, plans and procedures will ensure there is continuity during times of change; this places us in the best position to care for our permanent collection and loans.

We will do this by:

- Implementing a documentation plan which identifies and addresses the Museum's backlog and prioritises recording (at minimum) inventory information about all objects for which the Museum is legally responsible so they can be located and identified;
- Ensuring documentation procedures meet SPECTRUM and ISAD (G) standards;

- Ensuring we have documentary proof of legal title to the collection that meets ethical standards;
- Accurately recording new acquisitions in an accession register;
- Allocating and labelling collection items with unique accession numbers;
- Prioritising the centralisation of information about our collection and moving away from multiple systems of collection management;
- Ensuring curatorial policies, plans and procedures are up to date and reviewed every three years;
- Completing an annual inventory of items on display;
- Completing an annual review of all outstanding loans, in and out.

3.3. Extend access to collection information

The Museum is committed to making accurate information about our collection available to the public through displays and online records, and by providing access to our catalogue and collection in the Suzannet Research Library.

All requests for information will be considered in terms of compliance with the Freedom of Information Act (2000), General Data Protection Regulation and the Environmental Information Regulation (2004). We will review requests for confidential data such as donor information, environmental information, valuations or site details on a case by case basis, and in accordance with the applicable legislation and any legal agreements or conditions of gift.

3.4. Strengthen the security of the collections

The Museum is committed to ensuring the physical security of our collections and the information held about them.

We will do this by:

- Backing up regularly all electronic systems we use and ensuring they do not become obsolete, by implementing relevant technological advancements;
- Maintaining up-to-date and well serviced intruder alarm systems within the Museum, professional-level secure cases, CCTV, and (within opening hours) having volunteers and staff who regularly monitor the public spaces of the Museum;
- Maintaining contact with our local fire service and completing regular fire alarm checks;
- Ensuring building facilities are serviced regularly;
- Maintaining housekeeping and environmental monitoring to ensure a clean and suitable climate for the collection – both in the Museum and in our offsite store;

- Keeping duplicate paper copies of our accession register offsite;
- Maintaining up-to-date emergency plans and linking with local museums for support in the event of an emergency.

4. Policy review procedure

The Documentation Policy will be published and reviewed from time to time, at least once every five years. The date when the Policy is next due for review is noted above. Arts Council England will be notified of any changes to the Documentation Policy, and the implications of any such changes for the future of existing collections.