

Informed decisions – the Copac Collection Management Tools Project

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One of the key themes to emerge from the RLUK/BL Preservation Learning Project has been the interconnection between preservation and broader collection management concerns. This morning, Katie Sambrook gave a very powerful example of the benefits which have accrued from an integrated approach to planning at King's, and Chris Fowler just now challenged us to examine what we are doing when we throw things away. These are two areas where the Copac Tools Project is working to provide a framework which will allow libraries to make better-informed decisions in the future, as I hope now to explain.

The current phase of the project is funded by the JISC and runs from October 2011 until July 2012. It brings together as partners Mimas (who manage the Copac database), RLUK, and the three libraries of the White Rose consortium, namely the universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York. The Project's aim is to develop tools, based on the Copac database, which will improve collection management decisions. The focus is particularly on identifying ways in which the Copac database can be used to provide hard evidence on the pattern of national holdings in order to inform decisions and streamline procedures around the retention, disposal and, potentially, the redistribution of materials in individual libraries. Three key issues have been identified:

- Firstly, the status of the individual item – is it widely held or rare?
- Secondly, the desire of libraries to understand how strong their individual collections are within the wider national context ;
- Thirdly, and of particular pertinence today, questions around retention and preservation: how to safeguard access to materials in the long term.

Although it is already possible to use Copac to establish whether a title is widely held or rare, we are all aware how cumbersome and time-consuming this can prove when using the standard web interface to Copac. Aside from the issues around large retrieval sets and duplicate records for the same bibliographic item, the process is inherently slow and inefficient. In situations such as that outlined at Southampton, where 845 metres of stock needed to be assessed for potential disposal, real commitment is required to ensure that the "last copy" of a title within the UK is not sent for pulping. The Copac tools will allow libraries to quickly assess how many copies of a title are reported within Copac and will offer support for automated procedures and batch processing, with the ability to import data either into the Library Management System via MARC format or into a free-standing spreadsheet or database. Control still rests with the holding library as to whether to retain or discard the individual item – or indeed to offer it to another library. But having ready access to Copac holdings data does provide a potential safeguard against inadvertent disposal of a "last copy". And access to the full picture regarding national holdings can also support decisions to actively conserve or to digitise an item, allowing scarce resources to be channelled where they will have most impact.

Although the assessment of individual items is well-understood and operationally common-place, the assessment of whole collections is currently far more problematic and subjective. What the Copac Tools now offer is the possibility of identifying a group of titles (a “collection”) and obtaining a report on how many are held by each library within Copac. The system also reports how many are unique to your library, held by you and one other library, etc. From this data, a picture emerges of how that collection fits into the national context, based on two main parameters:

- Whether the constituent titles are themselves unique or rare, and
- Whether this grouping of titles in one library is unusual or commonplace.

This approach allows a library to assess the strength of its holdings in a given subject area or for a specialised collection, and to understand with some confidence how its collections fit into the national picture of research provision. This can then guide decisions in many areas of collection management including retention, conservation and digitisation. The power inherent in this process can be illustrated by comparing the graphical output generated by the Copac Tools for two subject collections at the University of Leeds, those relating to Chemistry and Colour Chemistry. Graphs 1 & 2 show the “rarity” of individual items within each of these collections. Whereas the graph for Chemistry shows a standard bell curve, with most titles held by 7-14 libraries, the graph for Colour Chemistry is strongly skewed to the left, immediately highlighting the comparative rarity of many of the items. Indeed 25% of all the titles are held by 3 libraries or less, whereas for Chemistry the equivalent figure is only 8%. Graphs 3 & 4 complement this data by showing in which other libraries the titles are held. Again it is immediately striking how few libraries have any significant overlap with the Leeds collection in Colour Chemistry and only the British Library is able to offer a reasonable selection of the titles in this specialist area. In comparison, a large number of libraries have collections in Chemistry which overlap with Leeds, several very substantially.

Moving on to the questions around retention and preservation – which is of particular interest in the present context – here the work of the Copac Tools Project is less advanced and far more exploratory. We want to understand how the Tools can help libraries to signal their intentions with respect to individual items, and, where applicable, to whole collections. What sort of information would be helpful? Possibilities might include the intention to retain a title in the long term, its actual physical condition, any conservation undertaken or planned, the existence of surrogates, the intention to digitise. How can this information be shared and exploited via the Copac database? And how can this help libraries to coordinate their actions in a way which is beneficial both to themselves and to the wider community? The project plans to engage with the community in order to identify the issues involved and begin to find solutions, particularly for materials sitting outside of “Special Collections”. There are clear links here to the RLUK Unique and Distinctive Collections initiative. There is also the possibility of building mechanisms to facilitate transfer of material between Copac libraries, if this emerges as a need. The hope is that we can move beyond the immediate and reactive handling of last copies, and towards a more informed and coordinated approach to retention and preservation, taking account of the broader national context. This will ensure the best use of scarce resources and will safeguard access for scholars.

This last statement gives us a fresh perspective on the issue of “last copies” and leads us back to today’s main theme of preservation – what we are really talking about is preserving the National

Research Collection and ensuring its availability for future generations. The Copac Tools will permit a collective response to this challenge by:

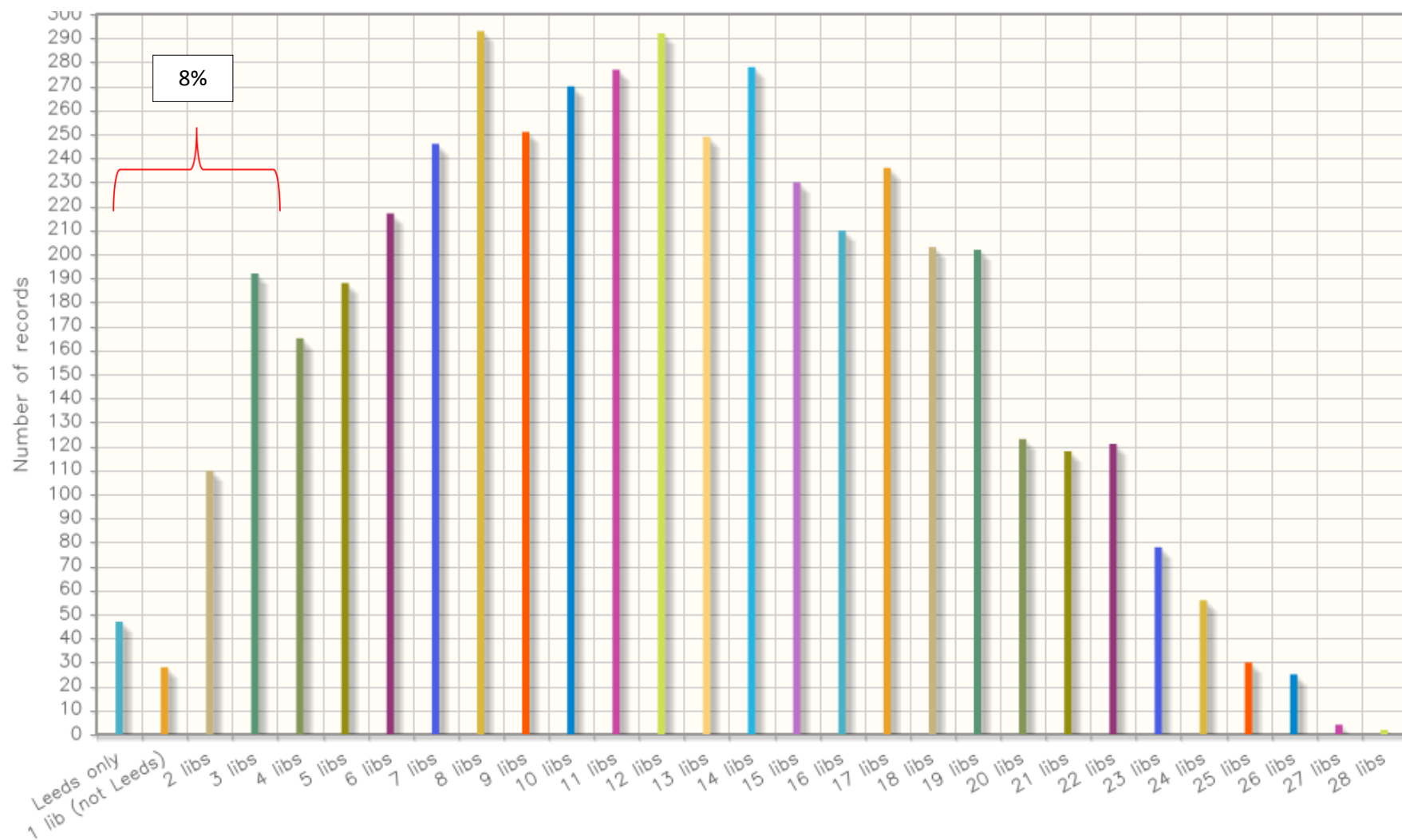
- Safeguarding against unwitting loss of last copies;
- Helping each library to understand better how its collections contribute to the National Research Collection;
- Offering mechanisms for us to share information about the preservation status and future availability of the items we currently hold;
- Providing the basis for informed decisions.

At the beginning of the day, Andrew Green articulated preservation as “sustained use”, a novel and illuminating rephrasing of its key purpose, namely to enable access to materials in the long term. The Copac Tools offer support for this mission across a broad range of preservation concerns, adding value through improved decision-making and providing us with the opportunity to deliver a better service to the scholarly community, not only through the strengths of the collections in our separate institutions but also as part of the National Research Collection.

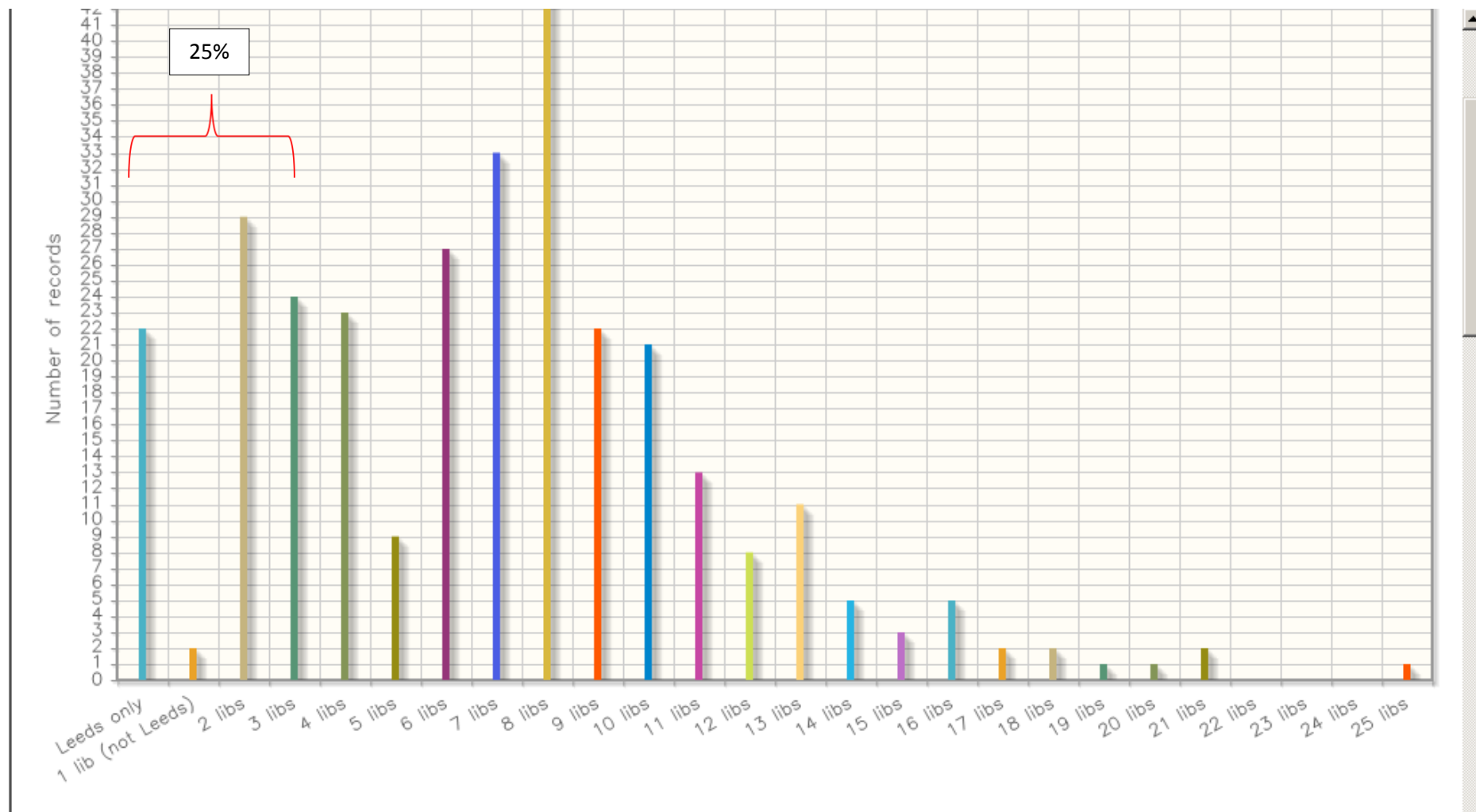
Further information is available on the Project website at:

<http://copac.ac.uk/innovations/collections-management>

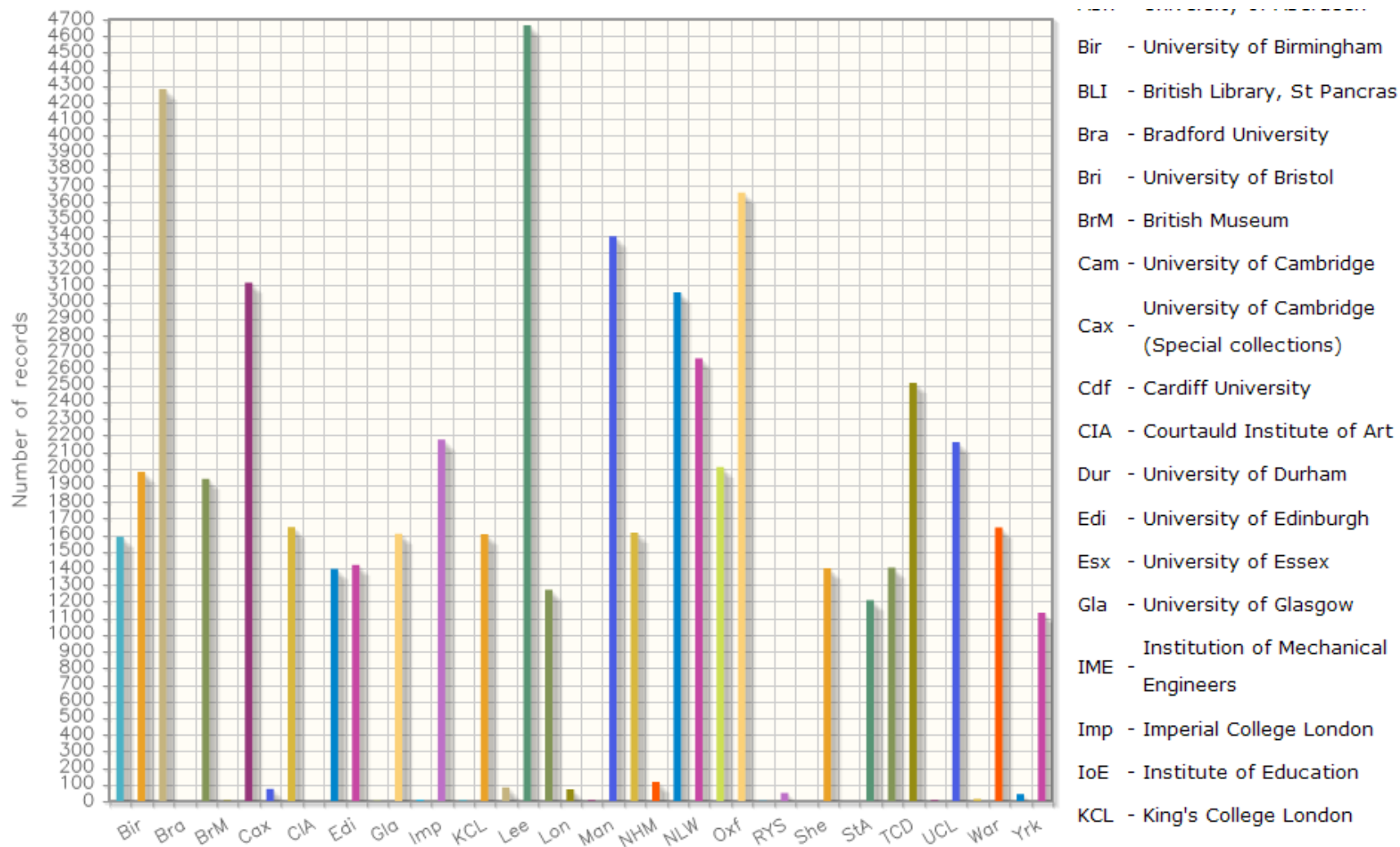
Graph 1 – Leeds holdings in Chemistry: rarity of individual items



Graph 2 – Leeds holdings in Colour Chemistry: rarity of individual items



Graph 3 – Leeds holdings in Chemistry: other libraries' holdings



Graph 4 – Leeds holdings in Colour Chemistry: other libraries' holdings

