

1 November 2012

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 REQUEST REF: 1015-12

Thank you for your email of 10 October 2012 asking specific questions regarding the library and stuffed snake at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). I am writing to confirm that we have now completed the search for the information that you requested. You asked:

- How much money has been spent on establishing a "history library", undertaken by the Foreign Office under this government?
- How much money was spent on re-stuffing "Albert", the 20-foot anaconda housed in a glass case in the Foreign Office?

I can confirm that the FCO does hold information relevant to your request. Our responses to each question are as follows:

- No expenditure has been made on establishing a history library under this government. The space occupied by the FCO Historians is not a library in the traditional sense. In fact, the space – which was originally occupied by the Home Office Library between 1874 and 1970 – has been used as FCO office space since 1971 and it has now been restored to its original Victorian splendour. The books within it mainly comprise the Historians' working collection, none of which are available for loan. The space is shared with the FCO's Knowledge Information Management Policy team who are the custodians of the FCO's residual book collection.
- 'Albert' the anaconda was allegedly presented by a Bishop, in what is now Guyana, to the Colonial Secretary in the 19th century - exact names and dates are unknown. However, he appears in a photo from circa 1892, which means he has been in the FCO for at least 120 years. As a gift to the FCO, Albert is therefore regarded as an FCO asset. As such, the FCO is obliged to maintain its assets, and the work on 'Albert' was essential maintenance. It is believed that 'Albert' was first re-stuffed in the 1960s or 1970s, but there are no records of how much it cost on that occasion. Certainly no significant maintenance has been carried out on him in the last 40-50 years. 'Albert' was never housed in a glass case, as is commonly believed. In moving him from his suspended position in the Ansell Library (a separate Library area to the old Home Office Library referenced above) to facilitate planned refurbishment to the area it was observed he was in poor condition. A decision was taken to use this opportunity to carry out a refurbishment to 'Albert' including a safety check on the suspension fittings.

The cost of the conservation and restoration work on 'Albert' was £10,000. The work was undertaken by the Conservation Team at the Natural History Museum, over a 5-week period, from 21 May to 26 June 2012. As nothing was known about previous work done on 'Albert', the conservation team at the NHM needed to use

x-ray CT scanning, which is a costly procedure that required extensive data processing and a specialist to do the analysis. Also, the level of detailed, delicate work in the restoration involved an intensive amount of care and attention from highly trained staff.