

Cleaning and repairs

Paper and parchment can be damaged irreversibly by inappropriate treatment. For example, the damage caused by self-adhesive tapes is all too apparent in the yellow staining and sticky residue they leave as they deteriorate. These tapes are extremely difficult to remove and their use should be avoided.

Documents should only be cleaned or repaired by trained conservators. Prevention is better than cure: your contribution towards careful storage and use will help to avoid the need for conservation treatment.

CONSULTING A CONSERVATOR

Conservators are trained to understand the composition of materials and the ways in which they deteriorate. They use this knowledge to stabilise vulnerable materials and devise methods for slowing down rates of deterioration. The input of a conservator can be invaluable and may help you in a number of different ways. Conservators can:

- **Assess the condition of an archive and provide recommendations for the prioritisation of treatment.**
- **Provide advice on storage materials and methods of storage, including bulky or oversized items.**
- **Provide recommendations for the monitoring and control of the environment, including temperature, relative humidity and light.**
- **Provide advice on the monitoring of insects and other pests.**
- **Carry out treatments on a range of archival material, including cleaning, repair and deacidification.**
- **Provide guidelines for the use and handling of documents and other archival material.**
- **Provide guidance on re-formatting or the preparation of original documents for re-formatting.**

Find a conservator by using the Conservation Register.

The Register is free to use. It provides detailed information on conservation-restoration businesses based in the UK and Ireland, including contact details, referenced examples of previous work and the qualifications of members of staff. It is searchable by specialist skill and geographical location, and each business listed has been required to meet rigorous criteria which include professional accreditation. The information is regularly updated.

www.conservationregister.com

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This article offers general guidance and is not intended to be a substitute for the professional advice of an accredited conservator. The views expressed are those of the author or authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Institute of Conservation. The Institute of Conservation would like to acknowledge use of the MGC publication 'Ours for Keeps' in the preparation of this text. The Institute of Conservation and its partners accept no liability for any loss or damage which may arise if this guidance is followed.

Front page image© Devon Record Office

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The Institute of Conservation is grateful for the support of The Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851 in the production of this guidance information. Further information on The Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851 and its work is available at www.royalcommission1851.org.uk.



Care and conservation of documents and archives



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The life of every person is documented in some measure. Families accumulate many documents, commonly including accounts and financial records; wills, contracts and other legal agreements; passports and licences; certificates for births, marriages and deaths, educational awards and other achievements; property deeds, maps and plans; diaries and correspondence; genealogies, scrap-books and journals; photograph albums; cuttings, notices and other ephemera.

Some documents have a legal origin (such as property deeds) and should be kept safely, while others are historically significant (such as plans, accounts, journals and some diaries and correspondence), but all documents can become archives. Some are protected by statute (such as parish and court records) and should be lodged in a Public Record Office. Few documents are of significant monetary value. Those that are usually have an association with an historically important individual or event. Nevertheless, even the most recent family papers are the historical archives of the future and should be cared for in the same way as old documents. The use of digital information is increasing, but legally binding documents, usually requiring a signature, are still produced in paper (or 'hard copy') format.

WHAT CAN GO WRONG?

Most family documents are made of paper, although some (principally old property deeds) are made of parchment, which is a material made from the limed skins of sheep, goats or similar animals. These materials are at risk from damp, mould, insects, pollution, unsuitable packaging and frequent or careless handling. All documents are damaged by light, particularly ultraviolet light which is present in daylight.

- Paper may become yellow and brittle over time, particularly if exposed to heat and light.
- Documents which are handled frequently are at risk of becoming creased, torn and dog-eared. They may also be stained by the grease and oils from fingers which, (in addition to leaving unsightly marks), will attract further dust and dirt.
- Papers may become stained from rusting metalware such as staples and paperclips.
- Some inks corrode paper: sometimes this will make pages with text weak and vulnerable to further damage, but in extreme cases the ink will 'burn' right through the paper leaving holes where there was once text.

- Acidic papers, such as newspaper, not only become yellow and brittle themselves but also discolour any papers with which they are kept in contact.
- Photographs can be glass, plastic, paper or metal and need special care. Photographic surfaces are particularly vulnerable and are easily scratched and marked by greasy fingerprints.
- Paper, inks and photographic surfaces are all attractive food sources for insects and pests. Some pests cause significant damage and loss of the paper, others just graze the surface.
- Seals are easily damaged because they tend to be bulky and more rigid than the materials they are attached to. They may crack and chip, but they can also cause damage to the document they are attached to, for example by tearing paper, as they are relatively heavy.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Having original documents at home or visiting a local archive or history centre gives you the opportunity to handle old materials and historical evidence, but there is a price to pay. Frequent handling results in the steady physical wear and tear of the original, possibly resulting in eventual loss of the document. In addition, the documents are vulnerable to damage caused by fluctuating environments and light.

Handling

- Old documents should be handled with care, preferably using clean, dry hands. Surgical (or cotton) gloves may be used to protect documents from dirt and grease, though care should be taken with thin and damaged papers as gloves, (particularly cotton gloves), can reduce the user's sensitivity.
- Folded items suffer from repeated folding and so should be kept flat if possible.

A conservator can provide training and advice on the handling of documents and archival material, or help to draw up guidelines for users.

Storage

- Documents should be stored in acid-free folders and boxes – ordinary brown envelopes and polythene bags are not suitable.
- Single sheets can be stored and handled in clear, archival polyester sleeves although there are risks associated with condensation, static and build up of offset gases from actively decaying paper.

- Make sure that documents are clean and dry before packing them away, and carefully remove metal fastenings such as staples and paperclips if they are corroding and staining the document.
- Do not be tempted to overfill boxes and try, where possible, to match the size of the box to that of the documents as this will avoid damage due to excessive movement within the box.
- Label boxes clearly with their content to minimise the need to search through boxes for specific documents.
- Storage conditions should be clean, dry (preferably 45–60% relative humidity), cool, dark and stable. It is best to avoid storing boxes of documents next to heat sources such as radiators and sources of moisture such as damp external walls. In practice, this often means avoiding storage in attics, garages or basements where temperature and humidity fluctuate, where pests may be a problem and where leaks and floods are relatively common.
- Old documents should be displayed for limited periods only, mounted in acid-free boards, away from sunlight and fluorescent or halogen bulbs, and in low lighting (preferably 50 lux maximum).
- Check the contents of stored boxes regularly (for example annually) for signs of damage such as mould or pest activity.

Conservators can provide advice on environmental monitoring and control. They will be able to show you how to monitor the environment and how to interpret the results of environmental monitoring.

Some materials have special storage and display requirements: for example parchment can be damaged if mounted in an inappropriate manner; it should not be treated like paper.

Consider making photographic copies for display, particularly if you want something to be displayed for a long time as this will allow access to information without putting the original document at risk.

Conservators can prepare documents and other archival material for storage and display, and give guidance on storage materials and suppliers. They will also be able to advise on the re-formatting of documents and other items.