

PRESERVING YOUR OWN DOCUMENTS

If you can prevent your documents from deterioration with good packaging and handling, you can save time and expense on possible costly repair later. A few basic factors can make a big difference.

STORAGE

Keep documents in a quality box, either acid free or lined with acid free paper or card, bought from a reputable supplier. The box will maintain a microclimate inside which will help buffer the documents from environmental changes in the room outside. Keep the box away from direct light or heat sources such as radiators or plants that might harbour insects. Package items within the box securely.

Separate modern notes and other papers from original/antique documents using acid-free archive quality folders or envelopes. Isolate delicate/fragile and damaged documents from stronger ones and give them extra protection.

Put photographs in plastic sleeves made from inert polyester such as Mylar™ or Melanex™ and interleave albums with “Silversafe” paper or “glassine” paper if you can’t get Silversafe. Negatives should be packed in paper or envelopes made with Silversafe. Sticky albums, such as can be bought in high street stores, should never be used and items should be removed from them for permanent storage. Colour photographic processes are particularly unstable and you should consider making a digital copy for preservation while keeping the original in as cold conditions as possible and always out of direct sunlight.

Maps, plans and other large items should ideally be kept flat but if there is not enough space to do this, they can be rolled around a tube and protected with a cover. Where possible use unbleached, un-dyed fabric such as calico as a cover because dyes can transfer over time.

Use brass paperclips to hold material together rather than staples. Never use “Sellotape” or any other pressure sensitive tapes to stick things back together. These tapes degrade badly; the gum dries, turns yellow and stains the documents. Usually the tape itself falls off after a time but the stain and sticky residue remain. Instead it’s better to gather pieces together in an envelope or a transparent polyester pocket.

Old or valuable books can also be stored in a box; it’s possible to buy custom-made boxes for particularly valuable books but if you must store them on a bookshelf, ensure that they are kept out of direct sunlight and are well supported on both sides.

ENVIRONMENT

Consider things such as room temperature, humidity and lighting and keep your collection in a room with as stable an atmosphere as you can achieve. Spare bedrooms, for example, are often preferable because they are rarely kept so warm as more regularly occupied rooms but don’t reach the more extreme temperature range that either cellars or attics and lofts can. Ideally the temperature should

range between 13oC and 20oC but a stable temperature is much better than one that fluctuates from high to low. Humidity levels should be around 50%. If you don't know what temperature and humidity levels are in your home, relatively inexpensive indicator cards can be purchased from all conservation suppliers and can be used to check the conditions in your home.

A humid atmosphere is a recipe for mould growth. If you cannot control the humidity in the room, consider using bags of silica gel granules in the same box or boxes as your documents to reduce the dampness. These can be dried out to refresh them periodically when they have fully absorbed the humidity.

If you do find any mould growth, don't try to clean it off while it is still damp. Dry the material out in a well-ventilated space. Separate out sheets and stand books on end to fan out the pages. Once dry, place the affected material on a plain sheet of paper and use a soft brush to clean the surface. Mould spores can be a health hazard so make sure you do this in a well-ventilated room or outside if the weather is good. Always make sure you wear a mask and gloves.

An overly dry atmosphere, such as in an overheated room, can dry paper out and cause it to become more brittle; this is particularly true of modern papers. If you experience this, it's possible to add humidity to the atmosphere by using a humidifier or low-tech room humidifiers such as a vase of water on a shelf above the radiator (but stand it well away from your documents, of course!). Try lowering the temperature of the room a little too.

Don't store books against outside walls and try also to keep them well away from water pipes, which could leak or rust.

Daylight transmits a lot of ultra violet radiation which can cause fading, yellowing and brittleness in paper. The best light level for displaying documents is 50 lux but that appears dim and electric light with curtains drawn is acceptable. It is best never to expose documents to direct sunlight and this should be remembered particularly when framing and hanging prints and drawings around the house.

HANDLING

It is always better to handle less and package well. If you consult your documents a lot, consider making copies and working from them, storing the originals safely.

When you do look at your originals, work on a clear, uncluttered flat surface. Don't allow items to overhang the edge of the table in case they get crushed and give documents plenty of room for the same reason. Always work in pencil and don't eat or drink when you're using your archive. Major damage can be caused by tiny, small degradations that happen over years because of careless handling.

Always think twice before attempting any kind of repair/treatment and before you take any direct action, ask for professional advice; the conservators at the Oxfordshire History Centre or The Museum Resource Centre are happy to give advice. Alternatively, to find a conservator, you can consult the Conservation Register online at <http://www.conservationregister.com>.