

Catholic Archives Society Publications
Archive Advice Leaflet Number 6

Conservation and Preservation

This leaflet offers some basic guidance on the care and handling of archival material. To keep archive collections in good order, both preservation and conservation should be employed. Preservation is the provision of appropriate packaging and storage conditions while conservation covers care and repair.

Conservation

This term means the minimal physical intervention used on archive material to halt further degradation and to stabilise documents whether they are parchment, paper, maps or seals. It can fall into two categories: first aid, which can be as simple as tissue to stop a tear progressing, and the full complex operation. A parchment which needs conservation work would for example, mean relaxing the “old” parchment, finding a new piece, making starch paste, working over a light box to pare “new” parchment so that a good bond will form and strengthen the old.

Conservation should be carried out as recommended in BS 4971: Standards for repair and allied processes for the conservation of archival documents.

Active conservation work should only be done by a professional conservator and ethics for archive conservation should be strictly adhered to. These include:

1. Use compatible material
2. Leave the nature and extent of repairs unmistakably evident
3. Never obscure or falsify the written word
4. Never do anything which can't be undone
5. Do not weaken or damage the original item

Preservation

This is the process by which archives are protected from misuse or deterioration. The action is taken to stop damage happening or to halt existing damage.

The main advice is to store records as far as possible in the conditions recommended in BS 5454: Recommendations for the storage and exhibition of archival documents. These recommendations are for paper, parchment and some modern media and include requirements for temperature and relative humidity in storage areas. Even if a storage area is not environmentally controlled it is still possible to keep these readings stabilised, for example by using dehumidifiers.

Temperature and relative humidity can be measured in many different ways. There are whirling hygrometers, thermo-hygrographs, digital hand held temperature and relative humidity probes, plus probes connected to a computer system that can be read off in the form of graphs on a daily, monthly or yearly basis.

Packaging techniques and acid free archival packaging material play a major part in preservation. All materials for packing should be of archival quality and this preservation work can be done by non-qualified staff such as conservation technicians or suitably trained volunteers.

Maps and plans and other large items should be kept flat if possible but if not, can be wrapped round a calico covered tube and then covered with more calico or acid free paper.

Copies of photographs should be used when ever possible and the originals should be kept in a light and heat free environment. Photographs should be protected by sulphur and acid free material. Cotton lint free gloves should be used when handling photographs. Never let photographs come into contact with pins, paper clips, adhesive tapes, rubber bands etc.

Fragile paper and parchment items should be individually wrapped within a box, with a note of their condition.

Seals should be protected in a made to measure padded bag or box. Archival polyester sleeves are very good for putting individual documents in as the document can then be handled because it is fully protected. This method is called encapsulation.

Under no circumstances should documents be laminated because this is a non-archival process whereby a plastic sleeve is actually heat sealed onto a document and therefore is only used on posters etc which are to be on display outside and need to be water proofed.

The main criteria though for preservation is that there is no direct intervention in the physical structure of the archive material.

First aid

Basic

Before archive collections are ever used, when they are being listed, archivists will become aware of rusty pins, staples, plastic folders, dirt etc which must be removed carefully before the documents are made available for consultation. Preliminary first aid may appear straightforward but before embarking on any work which may alter or damage the physical format or appearance of a document, it is always wise to consider asking the advice of a professional conservator.

Next Step

More complicated materials to be removed are sticky tapes or mould. After this basic work more involved conservation work may be necessary for longevity of the document.

Minimal intervention

This might be something very simple such as repairing fine tears with tissue so they don't grow into large tears which may make the document fall to pieces. If minimal intervention is applied at this time it could save the document and could avoid extensive conservation work at a later work.

Finally

The document/collection should be boxed in an acid free box and may also be individually wrapped with acid free tissue or paper, or placed in a polyester folder or padded seal bag, then stored at the correct temperature and relative humidity according to the medium of most of the collection.

How to look after documents

1. Keep documents away from heat and erratic changes in temperature.
2. Protect documents from strong light sources if possible. The effect of destructive ultra violet light will weaken cellulose and make paper brittle. It will also make paper yellow and cause inks and colours to fade. The optimum level for light is 50 lux.

3. People can unintentionally deface documents and volumes by handling them with greasy hands, using pens, folding page corners over etc
4. Insects will be very attracted to food supplies in paper leather and parchment.
5. Incorrect storage will cause damage to documents especially if forced into tight spaces without any support and not using acid free packaging.
6. Fire or water disasters are two of the very worst things that can happen to archive collections so make sure the fire equipment is tested regularly and that any leaks are dealt with immediately.
7. Security if not checked upon on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis can also lead to a disastrous situation because documents are stolen but may not be missed until someone wants to use them.
8. A comprehensive Disaster Plan should be prepared and reviewed regularly.
9. Weighing bundles of papers before and after use is one way of preventing crime.
10. Use of original material in exhibitions should be avoided if possible unless proper display cases can be obtained. This is especially important if the exhibition is long term because the exposure of UV light and heat could lead to fading and brittleness of paper and unnecessary expanding and contracting of parchment.

Further reading and sources of advice

NB this reading list is not comprehensive and this advice leaflet does not cover preservation and conservation of modern media such as films, discs and electronic records.

British Standard 5454: Recommendations for the storage and exhibition of documents (2nd edition 2000)

British Standard PD 0024: A guide to the interpretation of BS5454:2000. (2001)

British Standard 4971: Repair and allied processes for the conservation of archival documents. (2002)

British Standard Institution publications are available from Technical Indexes Limited, Willoughby Road, Bracknell, Berkshire, RG12 8DW, Tel 01344 404429, www.tionestop.com Email: BSOLinfo@bsi-global.com,

The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU, Tel: 020 8876 3444, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

The National Preservation Office, The British Library, 96 Euston Road, London, NW1 2DB, Tel: 020 7412 7612, www.bl.uk/services/npo Email: npo@bl.uk

The Conservation Register, c/o Institute of Conservation, 3rd Floor, Downstream Building, 1 London Bridge, London SE1 9BG, 020 7785 3804 www.conservationregister.com Email: info@conservationregister.com

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