



Gateway to
the history
of Shropshire
and Telford

Preserving your family or local archives



Introduction

Many people own books, certificates, deeds, correspondence, photographs and other documents which have been passed down to them, and wish to ensure that they are looking after them correctly so that they, in turn, can pass them on to their children and grandchildren. Records may also be acquired or collected from a variety of sources, but all have specialist needs to ensure their long term survival.

The notes outline some of the main principles to bear in mind. The conservator at the Shropshire Archives is happy to give advice on any conservation topic.

NB. The advice below is given in good faith, but the Shropshire Archives cannot accept any responsibility for any damage caused by following it.

Environment

The general rule is that these materials should be kept cool, dry, protected from light sources, including daylight, and as free of oxygen and air pollution as possible. The latter is difficult to achieve outside a specialist centre.

In the average household the closest possible to ideal conditions would be storing the items individually wrapped and in a suitable box in a dry, but minimally heated room, on the north side of the house. It is wise to keep a hygrometer with your archives and to check that the relative humidity remains constant between 45% - 55% for paper and 50% - 55% for parchment. This can best be achieved by using silica gel within the box. Temperature is normally difficult to control but excess heat or cold should be avoided.



Single Sheets such as certificates and maps

- Where possible, single sheet material should be stored unfolded.
- Paper clips and staples should be removed.
- Where an item, such as a map, is too large to store flat it is usually better to roll it *around* a suitable (acid free) tube (minimum diameter 3 inches or 7.5 cms) rather than to fold it. Before rolling, it should be sandwiched between acid free paper. It should then be boxed.
- Parchment items, if to remain flat, should preferably be kept under light pressure to control distortion.
- Seals are very fragile and should be protected from pressure.

Volumes

- These should be wrapped and laid flat on a shelf or in a box.
- They should have unnecessary enclosures removed in order to ease the pressure on the spine.
- Pamphlets should have any metal staples removed and replaced with cotton or linen thread.
- Parchment volumes should be stored under light pressure in order to control distortion. This can be achieved by wrapping and tying four ways with cotton tape.

Photographic materials

- These require special conditions and packaging materials; commercial albums are often very damaging to photographs.
- Archival quality albums and transparent sleeves are available from specialist suppliers.
- Colour photographs tend to fade unless extraordinary measures are taken, such as deep freezing. Alternative ways of preserving a coloured image include colour separation (making black and white representations of the prime colours in the image) or digital copying, although the preservation of the latter also presents problems.
- For long term preservation black and white photographs are to be preferred. They will survive if kept carefully and not unnecessarily exposed to light or the atmosphere.
- Sulphur free packaging in cool conditions is to be preferred.
- It is best always to wear thin cotton gloves when handling photographs or negatives, otherwise handle by the edge only.

Packaging

- The materials used to wrap and box should be of archival quality.
- Non archival materials may cause damage to the items they are meant to protect. Wrapping alone may not protect a document from sources of acid, such as wood, which can give off fumes which can penetrate through paper.
- Plastics (apart from special archival plastics) should be avoided both as a storage material and in the immediate vicinity of old records. Most paint gives off damaging fumes.
- Wrapping materials and boxes can be purchased from the Shropshire Archives.

Handling

- When handling paper and parchment intended for long term preservation a conscious effort has to be made to avoid slipping into the habits developed in handling everyday throw away paper.
- If hands are sweaty then thin cotton gloves can be worn.
- Pages of fragile volumes be turned by using a suitable tool such as a credit card.
- Documents should only be read on a clean, flat surface; avoid situations that could lead to accidents, e.g. avoid drinking or eating near the document; keep fingers off the text or image areas of documents.
- It is particularly important to keep fingers off the image area of photographic prints and negatives.

Cleaning

- Great caution needs to be exercised in cleaning old paper and parchment, both in the method and products used.
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- Ink is often very lightly adhered to parchment.
- Some erasers can damage paper by leaving a chemical deposit.

Repair

- In the case of documents with great value it is obviously best to get advice from an expert. Seek professional advice.
- Do not use sticky tape or proprietary glues or pastes on your documents, they may do more harm than good in the long run.

Marking documents

- Sometimes there are good reasons for marking documents, e.g. the backs of photographs.
- In most cases a pencil should be used as other materials may effect the document or simply fade.
- A soft 2B pencil should be used, but should not be so sharp as to make a deep impression in the paper. Make sure that there is a hard, smooth surface immediately underneath the document you are writing on.
- Photographs should be marked on the back with a permanent black ink, not ball point.

Copying

- It is a good idea to make copies of valued documents, if practical, as a security measure and to allow easy access without concern about damage. A security copy should be kept at another location, perhaps with a relative.
- Photocopying, which can damage archive material, should be kept to a minimum and only used for flat, sound, paper items, e.g. certificates.
- Acid free paper should be used if a long lasting copy is required.
- Digital photography is a good method but the normal prints or CDs produced do not currently provide long term preservation.

Depositing items

- Items of a local interest can be deposited at Shropshire Archives, where they will be stored in a secure and environmentally controlled way. Please speak to staff for more information.

Shropshire Archives

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