

Guidelines 1 - The Care of Records

Notes for the owner or custodian

Records are unique and irreplaceable. Those selected for long-term or permanent preservation are subject to many dangers. The principal are neglect, fire, damp and mould, animal and insect pests, dirt and wear and tear, misplacement and unauthorised removal. Their proper protection depends upon continuous care, backed by specialist knowledge and experience.

The following notes on the basic requirements for the care of records apply equally to a cupboardful of papers or the contents of a large store-room. For collections of a larger size than this the services of a qualified archivist or records manager may be needed. In the first instance professional advice about storage, conservation or equipment may often most conveniently be sought from a local record office, whose address can be obtained from the directory *Record Repositories in Great Britain*, 10th edition (London: H.M.S.O., 1997). This is compiled by the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, whose advice is also available free of charge to owners and custodians.

Accommodation

A fire-proof, air-conditioned room with a thief-proof entrance provides the only entirely satisfactory type of storage. Where this is not practicable certain minimum standards are essential.

The accommodation must be solidly built, weatherproof, dry and adequately ventilated to allow free circulation of clean air to all its parts. If there are windows they should be protected against vandalism and illegal entry. It may be helpful to open them on dry days but at all times direct sunlight on stored records must be avoided. There should be no possibility of flooding, either from surface water, burst tanks or blocked gutters or drains, and preferably there should be no water pipes running through the room. Outer walls should be checked periodically for signs of damp or overflowing gutters, and the roof, if there is one immediately above the store, maintained in good condition against rain and snow penetration.

The temperature should ideally be kept at 13°-18° C (55°-65° F) and the relative humidity at 55% - 65% and the store equipped with a thermometer and hygrometer for these conditions to be checked daily or at frequent intervals. A cool atmosphere is better than an overheated one. In either case it is most important that both temperature and humidity should be kept as constant as possible to avoid condensation. Photographs, films and tapes require more stringent specialised storage and care, usually colder and drier, about which the manufacturers' advice should be sought.

All risk of fire must be avoided. The store-room itself should aim to provide four-hour fire-resistant walls, ceiling, doors and windows. Inside it, smoking must be forbidden and open fires, stoves, gas, radiant electric and paraffin heaters never be used. Central heating is permissible if precautions are taken against leakage from pipes and radiators. Electric convection heaters or small air-conditioning units are the best. Electric wiring is a potential fire risk and all heating and lighting circuits should be within metal conduits controlled by master switches outside the room. Smoke detectors should be fitted, if possible, both inside and outside the store-room, linked to the building's main fire alarm system and the fire brigade. Various kinds of burglar alarms for doors and windows are also available.

The store should be cleaned regularly and inspected periodically for signs of damage or decay among its contents. For any growing collection there must be provision to extend the storage space or alternatively to weed out ephemeral papers. The expedient of microfilming, or transferring records to compact disk solely in order to save space cannot usually be recommended on the grounds of its expense and the inconvenience of use.

More detailed recommendations on all these matters, to be carefully studied if new accommodation is being planned, are contained in the British Standard *Recommendations for storage and exhibition of archival documents*, 1989 (BS 5454).

Equipment

Open shelving, preferably of metal, is better than closed cupboards or filing cabinets, as it allows the free circulation of air. Adjustable shelving is convenient. The lowest shelf should be about 150mm (6 inches) from the floor and, if possible, the highest not more than 2 metres (6 feet 6 inches). The racks should be arranged to stand clear of the walls and of any heating or other

water pipes, and preferably placed in double rows back to back with adequate gangways between. Mobile shelving running on rails set in the floor has fewer gangways than static shelving and is therefore less wasteful of space, but it is more expensive, requires a dead-level floor and restricts air circulation. The quantity of shelving in a room may have to be limited by the weight-bearing capacity of the floor.

Boxes made of acid-free fibreboard are the best containers for storing records. A useful standard size is about 450 x 300 x 150mm (16 x 12 x 6 inches) but other sizes are manufactured. Air-tight containers and plastic folders are to be avoided, and brown paper and cardboard boxes are usually acidic and therefore harmful.

Maps, plans and other awkwardly shaped records require special accommodation. plan cabinets are obtainable in which maps can be laid flat or hung. In some circumstances the maps may become distorted if they are hung. Large maps must be rolled round cylinders and wrapped in linen or book cloth. They are stored horizontally on shelves, not stood on their ends.

Safes, if used for storage, must be opened frequently to allow ventilation, and their contents must be loosely packed and regularly examined for the appearance of mould.

Other equipment may include library steps, a trolley, and table or hinged shelf fixed to the wall for the use of the custodian when consulting documents.

Fire-fighting equipment should be installed in accordance with the advice of the local fire brigade. Hand-held CO₂ gas or other non-aqueous extinguishers are used in many record repositories. On no account may chemical fire extinguishers be used, and water-filled ones should be avoided.

Arranging and packing the records

Care should be taken to retain the original arrangement of the documents. If this has been lost, rearrangement should not be undertaken without the advice of either those who created the records or a qualified archivist.

Before putting them away the records should, if necessary, be cleaned and treated for the effects of damp, mould, vermin and acidity. Corrosive metal clips, pins and fasteners, rubber bands, string ties and unused gummed envelopes, all of which can damage documents in various ways, should be removed and replaced where needed by non-rusting brass or plastic paper clips or wide tape. A note may be made at this stage of any documents in a fragile or damaged condition. Brief notes on the first-aid treatment of documents are given below.

The less documents are folded the better. They may be arranged in convenient bundles within acid-free paper or folders, tied with tape, before being placed in their storage boxes. The boxes should each be comfortably filled and then marked clearly with an indication of their contents or, if a numerical sequence has been chosen, with the box reference number. Unboxed items should have their reference on both the wrapper and a tie-on label.

Volumes can usually be placed directly on the shelves in numerical or chronological order, but will be better protected if placed in boxes. If the bindings are weak they should be boxed or parcelled and laid flat.

An inventory or list should be prepared as soon as the arrangement of the documents allows.

Access

As far as possible access to the place where the records are stored should be restricted to those responsible for their care, and a separate room should be used for those consulting the records. If the storage has to be shared for other purposes, the records should be clearly separated and only their custodian permitted to handle them. No one should be allowed the free run of the shelves unless they are entirely to be trusted to replace everything exactly as they find it. No document should be removed from its place without a note being left to indicate its whereabouts and an appropriate entry being made in a register of withdrawals. Regular checking of the records against the inventory is essential.

First-aid for conservation

Damp documents should be segregated. Note their original order before drying them out slowly by laying them loosely in a well-ventilated place. Any affected by mould, the spores of which spread very readily, should be isolated for further treatment. Before drying them remove the mould in the open air by brushing them gently with a soft brush. If after thoroughly cleaning, drying and replacing them in order they are stored as recommended the mould should not grow again, but

their condition should be monitored and at the first sign of recurrence an expert conservator's advice should be sought.

Documents damaged by insects, which thrive particularly on bookbinding glues and may therefore be evident in the spines of books, should be similarly treated by thorough but gentle brushing.

The repair of documents in a fragile or damaged condition is a job for the expert. They may be protected temporarily in a folder, but makeshift repairs (for example with plastic adhesive tape) should never be attempted, or worse permanent and irreversible damage may follow.

Leather bound volumes should be treated periodically with a book-binder's leather dressing to preserve the bindings from becoming brittle and the hinges from cracking.

Disaster control

prompt action is vital in reducing the damage caused by flood or fire. prepare and keep at hand a list of addresses from which help can be obtained, and have available stout plastic sheeting and bags, string and labels and torches. protective clothing, buckets and mops may also be needed.

Water-soaked documents (the most frequent source of damage) should be put, as found, in plastic bags, sealed airtight and labelled and placed in a deep freezer - preferably a powerful commercial one. Later the documents can be slowly thawed, dried and cleaned under expert guidance. Swollen book-bindings will need special treatment. Fire-damaged documents may be similarly kept temporarily in plastic bags to await expert examination. Handle all documents gently.

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This is a revised version of British Records Association Memorandum 22, first issued in 1965. Further copies may be obtained from the British Records Association, c/o Finsbury Library, 245 St John Street, London EC1V 4NB. it is issued free, but donations to help our work are greatly appreciated.