

GUIDE TO MANAGING HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

Developing a significant collection

Storage of collection items

The safe storage of collection items will prevent damage to the item, extending the life of the item within the collection. Conserving and preserving collections is an important role for societies with collections. Preventative conservation is closely linked to good storage, display and handling processes.

In the Resources section of the Museums Australia (Vic) website – www.mavic.asn.au/services/resources information sheets no. 7 and no. 8 provide information on providing safe storage for museum items.

Recollections: caring for collections across Australia – www.collectionsaustralia.net/sector_info_item/3 is a useful resource as are the Collection Management and Preventative Conservation sections of *Museum Methods*.

National Archives of Australia – www.naa.gov.au in the Records Management section provides useful information in the Frequently Asked Questions section.

The State Library of Victoria – www.slv.vic.gov.au/services/conservation/guides/index.html - provides useful information guides for conserving collections

Museums & Galleries NSW fact sheets – www.mgnsw.org.au/resources/fact_sheets/

The National Archives (USA) website is another information source – www.archives.gov/preservation/

Items in collections need to be protected to ensure that they will be able to be accessed by future generations. Safe storage of material is required to protect the item from damage, improve accessibility to the item, save space and in some cases provides improved and safe portability for items if they are in boxes, for example.

Environmental threats to a collection are heat, light, humidity, water, air pollution and insects and rodents.

Possible long-term effects to exposure of environmental risks are fading and discolouration of print from paper, weakening of textiles, mould growth, foxing of artwork and fading of photographs.

Heat causes desiccation and embrittlement of most materials. Chemical changes tend to happen at higher temperatures. The least stable the material the lower the ideal temperature required. Ideal temperature for storage is between 20° and 22°C.

Humidity is the level of dampness or water in the air. Higher levels of humidity encourage mould growth while very low levels of humidity can cause organic materials to dry out and to become brittle. Humidity is measured as a percentage referred to as relative humidity. The stability of relative humidity is important for the well-being of most collection materials.

Light, both unfiltered sunlight and artificial light, can be harmful to collection items. Two influencing effects of light are intensity and wavelength. The damage to items caused by exposure to light is cumulative. Ultraviolet light is the low wavelength end of the spectrum.

Air pollution also affects collections. Dust is abrasive and can disfigure some items. Some forms of dust and dirt are difficult to remove from some items. Smoke can also stain material. Building materials can give off gases that can harm some items – for example, fresh paint, unsealed wood and cement dust.

Insects and rodents are able to chew and gnaw at many materials and their droppings may cause staining and corrosion.

Water can cause major damage, particularly if not detected immediately. It is necessary to be aware of all water resources within the storage facility and to ensure that the storage facility is watertight.

Good housekeeping procedures can ensure that items are protected from dust and dirt and from pests such as insects and rodents and other small animals – including possums. Food and drink should be kept away from collection areas to avoid accidental damage to collection items but also ensure the adequate disposal of food waste that might attract pests. Regularly inspect the building to ensure that there are no pest intrusions and immediately deal with the problem if it occurs. New items to the collection, especially paper based items, should be checked and, if necessary, quarantined, to ensure that they are not hiding silverfish, for example.

Storage of paper based collections

Any treatment conducted on items should be potentially reversible, of minimal intrusion and structurally sound.

The most common forms of damage to paper based items are tears, creases, folds and dog-eared corners, punctures (especially from staples), faded text, discoloured paper, mould and brittleness.

Damage can occur through poor handling, poor storage methods, inappropriate display methods, excessive use and chemical changes within the paper itself. Flat paper items should be checked for metal fasteners to be removed, provided that the removal does not damage the item. Carefully unfold creased corners and, where practicable, open out folded items. Interleave associated items with archival tissue paper if items are to be stored together, Where possible store each item in a separate acid free bag and if items are fragile, also place an acid free support in the bag.

When storing oversized paper items try to keep them flat – only roll them as a last resort. However an item that had been rolled for a long period of time may be damaged if attempts are made to flatten it. If it is necessary to roll an item use a large diameter acid free tube and roll face out covered with archive quality paper. Where possible store each item separately either in an acid free bag or interleaved with acid free paper.

Bound items should be placed vertically on shelves. Do not overfill shelves – always give books room to “breathe” but also ensure support by using bookends. Books may be bagged or placed in acid free boxes, especially if they are rare books. Over sized items can be laid flat but do not stack more than three items high.

Most damage to collects occurs during handling, Damage relating to handling tends to be cumulative and is often not immediately obvious. Such damage can be difficult and costly to repair.

Basic equipment required when working with paper based collections include gloves, supports, a solid work surface, archival boxes, bags and paper and for some work, a dust mask.

Prevention is the best way to preserve items in a collection. When collections are in use avoid eating, drinking and smoking near the collection items. Hands should be washed before handling materials as dirt and oil from hands will damage paper. Allow for adequate workspace when working with collection items. Do not over handle items – this will only increase the risk of damage. Do not use any form of ink pen near the collection, only grey-lead pencils. Where possible try not to touch the text on the page. Do not mark pages with post-it notes or dog-ear pages. Turn pages of books from the top right hand corner. Do not rest or lean on top of collection items. Items should be supported at all times and always use both hands when moving materials.

Boxes

Any box can be used for storage of local history materials but some are more suitable than others – especially when storing paper-based materials.

If money is an issue boxes used for storing photocopy paper can be an inexpensive option – especially for short-term storage. The Reflex A3 Boxes are the right size for storing local newspapers and the A4 boxes can be used for storing a variety of items. These boxes of course are not acid free and should not be used for long-term storage but they will provide protection for materials and it may be better to use such boxes if other options are not immediately affordable.

Archive boxes come in a variety of sizes. They are often made from cardboard and are readily available at variety stores such as K-Mart and at office supply stores such as Office Works. These boxes are inexpensive but they are often made from cardboard that is not acid-free and are therefore not recommended for long-time storage of paper-based materials.

Albox – www.albox.com.au – in Adelaide provides a solution for organisations unable to afford the cost of conservation standard archive boxes. They can supply polypropylene box liners suitable for standard archive boxes for 28c each. More than one bag may be needed for larger archive boxes.

Polypropylene boxes are an alternative to the traditional cardboard box. Polypropylene is an inert and stable plastic suitable for storing paper based material. It is moisture resistant and will not rot or support mould. The boxes are strong and are easy to keep clean. Albox provide a large selection of polypropylene boxes for all storage needs ranging from the large textile storage box to boxes suitable for storing newspapers and archive boxes in several sizes.

Acid free cardboard boxes are available from conservation suppliers such as

- Archival Survival - www.archivalsurvival.com.au/ - and
- Zetta Florence - www.zettaflorence.com.au/.

Acid free boxes, although more expensive to purchase, are recommended for the long-term storage of paper-based products.

Boxes, both cardboard and polypropylene arrive flat and need to be assembled.

Boxes and cardboard sleeves can also be constructed from acid free cardboard. Instructions for doing this are available in this guide and also in the Shared Files of the History Victoria Support Group mc².

Bags

Bags are useful for storing paper based local history items. There are many types of bags available and they come in a variety of sizes. Bags are available for storing large maps. You can also purchase bags for storing small photographs.

Only bags made from inert substances should be used. The chemicals in some plastic bags can damage paper items, sometimes resulting in print from paper becoming imprinted on the plastic covering.

Inexpensive copysafe sleeves for folders are now available and can be used for filing items such as photocopies or newspaper articles in folders.

Bags recommended for storing paper-based materials are made from polyethylene, polypropylene or mylar. These bags are chemically inert and will protect the items kept in them.

Polyethylene and polypropylene are both high-density inert film ideal for storing items requiring continual viewing and handling and for storing documents and prints. Polyethylene is less expensive than polypropylene and is a cloudy plastic compared with polypropylene.

Mylar is a strong, stable and inert polyester film recommended for long-term storage of prints, negatives, transparencies and documents. Mylar is also used for enclosures for protecting documents when on display. It is expensive and is normally used by

historical societies only for storing rare and 'valuable' items. Mylar can be purchased as a roll as well as bags of various sizes.

When purchasing bags be aware of the material from which they are made. Bags also come in different thicknesses. 75 micron or 90 micron is suitable for protecting most paper-based items.

Inert plastic bags can be purchased from archival suppliers such as Archival Survival. It is a good idea to compare the price of similar items from a number of suppliers before placing the order. Most suppliers now have catalogues of their products available online. Other sources for purchasing bags, especially in bulk, include Pinpack and Venus Packaging – firms that manufacture polyethylene and polypropylene bags in many sizes.

Polystring storage bags and polypropylene folders are also suitable for storing larger items such as collections of papers on one topic or small diaries or minute books. Many of the larger newsagents and office supply stores also supply polypropylene folders suitable for storing local history items.

Archival suppliers also stock storage sleeves in acid free card as well as acid free card for supporting photographs and articles stored in bags.

Photographs

Photographs should be protected from light, dust, heat and dampness. Photographs should not be stored against external walls or near windows or heaters. They should be stored in conditions where the heat and humidity levels are stable.

There are many ways to store photographs. Photographs come in a variety of sizes so more than one storage option may need to be used.

Albums

Older style albums had slits to insert the corner of photos or post cards. Photo corners can be used to display photographs in albums. Acid free photo corners can be purchased from archival suppliers. Photo corners can also be made from acid free paper. Albums with self-stick pages in vogue some years ago should be avoided at all costs. Albums with pockets for various sized photos are now available but check that the pockets are suitable for archival storage. Archival suppliers sell polypropylene albums and pages for storing photographs in a variety of sizes. The acid free plastic pages for storing photographs can also be purchased without the album and filed in folders. Albox and Archival Survival specialise in supplying albums for storing photographs.

Acid free sleeves

Acid free sleeves can be purchased for storing photographs. The sleeves are made from polyethylene, polypropylene or mylar and are available from archival suppliers in a variety of sizes for different sized photographs. Grayson Packaging and Venus Packaging will produce polyethylene sleeves in requested sizes.

The photographs in the sleeves can then be stored in boxes on shelves or in filing cabinets. Small cabinets or drawers can be used for small photographs and map

cabinets for large photographs. Photographs filed in filing cabinets should have supports to keep the photographs upright.

Labelling photographs

Labelling should be confined to the sleeve protecting the photograph. Information may be written on the mounting board if there is one. A piece of acid free paper or card with the number and additional information about the photograph can be placed in the sleeve. Photographs can become separated from their sleeves so it may be necessary to number the photograph itself. Only number the back of the photograph. If possible use a soft grey lead pencil. Unfortunately it is difficult to write with grey lead pencils on the back of most modern photographs. Some suppliers have pens with acid free ink. Ensure that any writing on the back of a photograph is kept to the minimum (number only) written near the edge on the back of the photograph.

Negatives

Negatives can be stored in sleeves from the photographers. Special sleeves are also available for storing negatives. Negatives may be given the same number as the photograph. Numbers can be written on strips of acid free paper stored with the negatives. Some organisations store their negatives off site or away from the image collection as a precaution in case the collection is damaged..

Slides

Some organisations also have slides in their collections. Storage sleeves and boxes are available for the safe storage of slides – check the catalogues of archival suppliers. Slides may have the same numbers as the corresponding photograph if there are also photographs of the same image in the collection.

Scanning images

Increasingly societies are scanning the photographs in their collections and attaching a link to the scanned image to the catalogue record. The actual photographs are stored safely and rarely need to be used. This aids in the preservation of the photographs and the accessibility to the image is increased. Researchers can easily search for images on the screen rather than sorting through the photographs. The selected images can be sorted and grouped in searches. The scanned image can also be viewed by researcher in locations outside the historical society through publication of the images on CD-ROM or on the Internet. An image can be printed from a high resolution scan of the image if required or from the negative if there is one. The scanned images, especially high resolution scans, may be stored on an external hard drive or on CD-ROM and viewed on the computer screen.

When scanning images for preservation of the image collection or for publication it will be necessary to scan the image at a higher resolution – usually 300 dpi. The quality of an image printed from a screen is affected by the quality of the printer and also the quality of the paper. When scanning photographs to be viewed on a computer screen and the Internet, a low resolution is sufficient – usually 75 dpi. The size of the scanned image depends on the intended use of the image. If the image is likely to be enlarged on the screen (for example for use in DB/TextWorks) the photograph will need to be scanned at 100%. If the size of the image will remain static (for example on a web page) the size of the scanned image can be reduced for example to 50%. As

with all electronic records it is necessary to back up the records and store a copy of the records off site.

Displays

Photographs are frequently used in local history displays. Photographs can usually be displayed for a short time and then returned to storage. Framed photographs should be in acid free mounts or in mylar sleeves. There are other alternatives to displaying actual photographs. Scanned images of photographs can be used in displays instead of the actual photographs and displayed in frames or laminated or displayed in plastic sleeves. Never laminate an original item.

Newspapers

Newspapers are designed for reading current news and are normally discarded after a day or two. Newsprint is not produced for long time information storage. The paper used for newsprint contains a large percentage of unpurified wood pulp. Impurities in the wood pulp remain in the processed paper and when the paper is exposed to light and / or high humidity acidic reactions occur, resulting in the paper becoming brittle. Mould forms on newspapers stored in conditions where there is high humidity.

Newspapers however are an important resource for local history often providing information not available in other sources. Local newspapers therefore are often included in historical society collections.

For newspapers to be useful for research they need to be kept in chronological order and they need to be accessible.

Because newsprint becomes yellow and brittle with age newspapers need to be kept out of the light, stored in a stable environment, protected from dust and dirt, protected from pests – silverfish, possums – and stored flat (avoid folding newspapers if possible).

Polypropylene boxes, available from archival suppliers, are strong, sturdy and made from acid free material. The A3 boxes are the right size for local newspapers. The boxes are easy to assemble, easy to stack and easy to label. The newspapers are therefore safely stored and accessible for researchers.

Newspaper cuttings

Instead of keeping newspapers, many historical societies clip newspapers and keep files of newspaper cuttings.

Storage options for newspaper cuttings include scrapbooks, articles glued on to paper and stored in bags, and articles stored in bags with a sheet of paper for support and for identification.

Newspaper cuttings are usually filed in a classified (subject) sequence in filing cabinets or in boxes. Small collections of articles can be filed in folders. To be relevant for research, newspaper articles must always include source details – name of newspaper, date and if possible page number.

Newspaper articles are usually kept for their information value rather than their value as an artefact. Articles required for a collection can therefore be photocopied on acid free paper and kept in sleeves or in folders or bound.

An alternative to keeping newspaper cuttings is to index the local newspapers. The newspapers may be stored at the historical society or at another location such as a library. The newspaper index allows relevant articles to be easily located in the actual newspapers. The indexes can be prepared using a word processing program or a database and can be published in a paper format or made available electronically online or viewed on a computer at the society.

Formulating a storage plan

Make an assessment of items in the collection that need storage. Investigate which rooms or spaces are suitable for the storage of items. Undertake an environmental assessment of the proposed storage area. Use results of environmental assessment when arranging storage areas and storage equipment. For example try and avoid storing paper-based items near external walls, near windows and near heaters and / or place coverings – curtains or blinds - on windows.

Prepare a plan for present and future storage of collection items. If suitable, utilise storage facilities already available at the historical society such as shelves, cupboards and filing cabinets,

Determine which storage items may be already available or accessible such as boxes and then investigate other possible storage facilities and / or storage items. Decide what the historical society can currently afford to spend on storage of materials and include a section for safe storage of materials in budget.

It may not be possible to purchase all the boxes and bags required for the safe storage of collection items immediately – the project may need to be undertaken in sections. Remember the basic principles for safe storage of collection (particularly paper based) items – protecting the items from light, heat, humidity, pests, water etc. Storing paper based items in cardboard boxes that are not acid free for a short period is better than leaving the items exposed to light and dust. When funds are available transfer the items to more suitable storage options.

All members of societies working with collections should be aware of issues regarding the safe handling and safe storage of items in their collections.

Although it may not be possible to immediately achieve all the standards required for the provision a safe storage environment for collections, every effort should be made to provide adequate storage of collections using the finance and equipment available.

Archival suppliers

The Links page of the History Victoria Support Group mc2 contains a list of suppliers and resources under the heading – Caring for Collections.

Albox – www.albox.com.au

Archival Survival – www.archivalsurvival.com.au/

Conservation Resources – www.conservationresources.com.au/html/

Zetta Florence – www.zettaflorence.com.au/.

Bags

Pinpak (incorporating Grayson Packaging) – www.pinpak.com.au/

Venus Packaging – www.venuspack.com.au/Venus-Hartung-Pty-Ltd-FS.html