

DOCUMENTS

# Preserving your Past

Tips from Derbyshire Record Office on how to look after your family documents



We all have photographs, letters, books, certificates or other documents that are precious to us as they link us to our own and our family's past. Often these fragile items develop tears, fade or simply start falling apart over time. This leaflet explains why this damage occurs and what you can do to prevent it as much as possible.

## Handling

Every time you open and close a book, fold a document or just hold on to a photograph you are causing a little bit of damage. All these small amounts of damage build up over time, causing spines and boards of books to drop off, tears to develop and images to fade.

Therefore try to:

- Handle everything with care
- Don't fold / unfold items unnecessarily
- Wear vinyl gloves when holding unprotected photographs
- Make photocopies or scans of documents and photographs and use these while keeping the original safely stored away
- Don't photocopy books as this damages the spine – consider taking digital photographs instead
- Avoid eating or drinking while looking at the documents

## Temperature

High temperatures (above 20°C) speed up the rate at which paper degrades, so try to keep your documents and photographs in a cool place.

## Light

Light is a very destructive force, which weakens paper and fades photographs, inks and colours. It is vital to store all items out of light and to try and reduce the amount of light they receive when they are being looked at. It is important to remember the irreversible damage light does when considering framing important documents or photographs in order to display them; it is always better to display a copy.

## Damp

Paper soaks up moisture from the air and will quickly get damp; once this happens it starts to lose its strength and develops mould, which will destroy the documents and photographs. Keep your documents in a dry place, well away from any water sources.

→ **If you do find mould has started to grow, please be very careful as mould is dangerous to your health.** Wear rubber or vinyl gloves and a face mask when handling mouldy material and ask a paper conservator for advice.

## Water

If any documents or photographs get wet, it is important to dry them out quickly without using heat: spread them out as much as possible on top of absorbent material (e.g. kitchen towel) in a well-ventilated area. Make sure photographs lie face-up as the image side may become sticky when wet. Regularly change the absorbent material and leave the documents to dry for at least a week. Wet paper that is not dried out properly will develop mould, so get advice from a paper conservator if you're not sure what to do.

## Insects

Some insects, like silverfish and woodworm, like to eat paper and are capable of causing a great deal of damage. They thrive in warm, damp, dusty conditions, so store your documents where it's cool, dry and clean.

## Self-adhesive tape

Do not let any type of self-adhesive tape come into direct contact with your documents. The adhesive will leak into the paper, causing substantial staining; it will then dry out, after which the support layer will fall off.

## Packaging

Packaging your documents, books and photographs in archival quality folders and sleeves is the most important thing you can do: good quality packaging protects from light, dust, insects and fluctuations in temperature and moisture levels. Small amounts can be obtained from the **Derbyshire Family History Society** ([www.dfhs.org.uk](http://www.dfhs.org.uk)) and the following suppliers all have an extensive range of archival quality packaging solutions:

- Conservation by Design ([www.conservation-by-design.co.uk](http://www.conservation-by-design.co.uk))
- Conservation Resources ([www.conservation-resources.co.uk](http://www.conservation-resources.co.uk))
- Preservation Equipment ([www.preservationequipment.com](http://www.preservationequipment.com))



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Please don't ever try to repair damaged documents, books or photographs yourself, as this is very likely to result in more damage occurring.

Find a qualified paper, book or photographic conservator on:

[www.conservationregister.com](http://www.conservationregister.com)

Or get advice from the Conservation team at  
Derbyshire Record Office:

Phone: 01629 538347  
or email: [record.office@derbyshire.gov.uk](mailto:record.office@derbyshire.gov.uk)

