Handling collection items

Introduction

A key component of the research process is accessing primary source and secondary source materials. However, use – and the activities associated with it – can pose one of the biggest risks to collection items. This is because while we can anticipate some risks even careful handling when retrieving and using collection items can cause wear and tear which increases the risk of damage.

We aim to make items available to users while at the same time protecting them from degradation and potential damage. To do this we need to understand the specific risks that collections and individual items face. By understanding these risks we can all preserve these collections for future generations.

General risks to collections

All library collections degrade as they age and some materials are more vulnerable to decay than others. These natural degradation processes can be accelerated by environmental factors such as heat and lighting etc. as well as physical factors such as the way they are stored and used.

While collection items may now be stored in climate-controlled environments which minimise most of these risk factors, this will not have been the case in the past and so items may have already suffered degradation and/or damage. Not all of these vulnerabilities will be visible.

Damage can also be caused or worsened because:

- An item is constructed from poor quality materials
- Because its format or size makes it vulnerable
- Even careful handling and use can cause wear and tear which can eventually lead to damage.

Understanding collection items and anticipating risks

It is possible to anticipate some of the issues that those using primary and secondary source materials will face by understanding their construction. Early bindings pre-date mass production and so are often unique and idiosyncratic in their construction with binding techniques varying between binders. Modern mass-produced binding styles are more consistent but often use poorer quality materials and can be less robust in structure.

Early western papers were well-made and have often lasted well in comparison with more modern paper while certain inks and pigments can be very unstable. Parchment reacts to changes in environment and, along with leather, can become brittle and inflexible as it ages.
Archives can consist of a wide range of items, often of different sizes, condition and format housed together and it is this which can make them challenging to use. They may be loose, connected together in small bundles using fasteners (such as treasury tags, paper clips or pins) or bound together into bindings or folders. They may have been working documents that have undergone heavy use or been stored in unsuitable conditions. Materials can vary from the robust to poor quality materials, such as cheap paper or typewriter and Iron Gall inks.

An understanding of the materials and techniques used in the construction of collection items can help you to handle them appropriately and to anticipate problems.

COLLECTION HANDLING GUIDANCE

The following general good practice and guidance when using specific items will help you to use the collections safely. Further guidance can be found in Resources below.

1. Basic good handling practices
   - Clean, dry hands
   - Handle all collection items with care
   - Only use pencils
   - Lift collection items rather than sliding or dragging them
   - Don’t carry too much and ask for help with oversized/heavy items
   - Be aware of jewellery, clothing etc. which can catch
   - Remember to take your time – damage can be caused if items are handled roughly

2. Space management

   Ensure that you:
   - Have all the space you need for the item to be consulted
   - Work neatly, make sure nothing is resting on collection items and that you aren’t leaning on them
   - Ask for help if you are unsure how to handle something

Remember:
   - Large items often need far more space than you think
   - Make sure you can walk around an item to adjust it rather than leaning across it
   - Ask for assistance if you think there may be a problem
3. **Book supports and their uses**

- Book supports provide gentle support while limiting the amount that the volume can be opened
- Most bindings are not designed to open flat on a surface. Book supports generally restrict the opening to around $120^\circ$
- Islamic, side-sewn and tightly bound items may require a more restricted opening
- Several types of support are available from foam wedges to cushions and cradles with cushions:

![Foam supports](image1)
![Cradle and cushion](image2)
![Cushion](image3)

4. **Know your bindings**

When using bound volumes, it helps to understand how different styles of binding look and behave such as:

- Their opening characteristics
- How best to support them

**Spine and board profiles**

![Spine and board profiles](image4)

**Main Western binding styles**

- **Flexible tight back**
  - The foam spine support provides gentle support along the length of the spine, which is particularly vulnerable to damage

- **Hollow-back**
  - The spine is positioned between the foam wedges so that it does not get crushed but the board and joints are supported

- **Rigid tight back**
  - The spine is un-supported between the foam wedges but the boards and joints are fully supported

*Szirmai, J.A. The Archaeology of Medieval Bookbinding, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999 (page 271)*
- Most bindings sit best with both sides supported by the rest. Additional wedges can be added to reduce the opening angle further.
- Books with foldouts within sit best with one single wedge under the binding while the folded page is being viewed as this reduces strain on the binding and the inserted pages.
- If pages don’t remain flat you can use snake weight to lightly hold them open.

Be aware that you may be handling historical bindings with unusual features as clasps or chemises or fragile original end bands. Be extra careful with those bindings and ask for advice if in doubt.

**Guard volumes**

Archives have often been bound into volumes; individual documents are sewn or glued onto paper guards which then form the body of the book. This allows differently sized items to be viewed together but can be problematic.

- Individual documents may be different sizes and formats, e.g. single pages versus multiples leaves
- Items are sometimes folded so that they to fit into the volume
- Avoid damaging items by lifting each document one by one and turning it carefully
- Be aware of catching the document underneath

5. **Using unbound and loose items**
• Keep all unbound and loose items tidy and in the order that they are issued
• In some reading rooms you will be provided with trays in which to keep and consult the items
• Lift and turn papers one by one
• Keep them in two neat piles to make the most effective use of space

6. Using items secured with fasteners

Items secured with fasteners should be consulted flat on a table and not placed on a book support.

Treasury tags

• Treasury tags should never be removed
• Make sure the strings is slack enough to turn pages one by one; the tag should be long enough so that you can turn the pages when the file is fully open
• If the tag is not slack then pull it gently to extend it; if the tag is still not long enough please take the document to a member of staff
• Keep the documents flat in a neat pile and make sure the tag is not taking the strain

Above left and right: Check string is slack and gently pull through if not

Paper clips and pins

• Fasteners will tend to have restricted openings – be careful not to strain or try to force them
• Lift papers up one by one: this avoids the risk of pins and paper clips catching
• Older fasteners may have rusted or may have adhered to the page so handle them with care
• Keep pages in order

7. Using other formats

Using folded items

• Folded items will always be weaker at the folds
• Brittle paper may split and tear when turned/unfolded
• Don’t place weights on directly onto folds
• Remember which way an items unfolds and folds back again
Using rolled items

- Only roll/unfold what you need to see at one time
- Make sure items can’t roll away or fall off – use weights to lightly hold things down or open

Remember that undamaged items can be deceptive as they may:

- Not be as robust as they appear at first sight
- Be constructed from poor quality materials
- Made from materials which are now weak and brittle
- Brittle paper may split and tear when turned/unfolded

You may also need help from a colleague, curator or conservator to:

- Handle very fragile items
- Handle very large or very small items
- Set up and support unusual items if standard set-ups don’t work
- Report that you have noticed some damage

RESOURCES

Below are some links to more information about using and caring for library collections.

Preventive Conservation Team
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Other Resources: