

Caring for your Keepsake Collection

The following factors should be considered in ensuring the preservation of your collections - packaging, storage, handling and display.

Check, before packaging, that the item is free from dust and unaffected by mould or insects. Keep any affected item separate and consult a professional conservator for advice or treatment.

The main causes of damage and deterioration to collection materials are from inherent acid chemical degradation (mainly from the materials themselves), excessive handling or environmental elements such as light, humidity, dust and grease.

The best quality packaging material should always be used to protect your collection. Look for materials that are acid free, 'lignin free,' 'alkaline buffered,' or 'permanent'. Also, storage products made from inert polyester such as Melinex™ or Mylar™. (See Archival Glossary)

Don't use PVC plastic sleeves, folders or albums, as they give off damaging vapours. Cheap photo albums with sticky pages or the older type albums with black mounts are also unsuitable. Use only archival quality mounting card, archival acid-free glue or polyester mounting strips for mounting smaller items and archival marking pens for annotating your records. Never use sticky tape to repair or mount paper document and photographs. The adhesive on sticky tape will cause tacky yellow stains and are difficult to remove.

Pack items individually where possible to reduce risk of friction and movement using acid-free tissue paper, polyester sleeves or acid-free envelopes. Don't use coloured papers for packaging, not even plain brown paper. These papers are generally acidic and can cause harm to your records. Some coloured papers may also cause staining. Bespoke products for outsize items such as newspapers, maps and plans are available from Memory Boxes. Polyester sleeves, acid-free folders and polypropylene tubes are suitable for the storing these items. Please contact us direct for special order products.

When packaged, items can then be stored in acid-free boxes. Boxes with metal fastenings and full depth lids offer greater protection, strength and stacking ability for collections. These are more expensive than off-the-shelf boxes, but investing in good packaging will greatly help to extend the life of your collection.

Storing Your Collection

To safely store your packaged collection, choose an area that is clean, dust free, fairly dark and maintained at a stable temperature and humidity level i.e. not too dry or damp, not too hot or cold. Where possible the area chosen should also be fairly well ventilated to inhibit mould growth. Areas inside the house, such as under the bed or at the bottom of a chest of drawers, can be suitable but avoid areas that are close to water pipes, heaters and food. Storing records near external walls should also be avoided, as these areas have high fluctuations in temperature and humidity. In flood prone areas; try to place things above known flood levels.

Non-paper based materials, such as family videos, coins, medals, gramophone records and textile materials, require similar storage conditions as described above. Excessive heat and humidity, insect attack and light are again the main concerns for these types of media. Textiles, fur and leather are susceptible to mould growth in humid conditions and insect attack, and wood has a tendency to crack in dry conditions. Textiles fade in light, high temperature ruins videotapes, and metal corrodes in humid/wet conditions.

It is important to make an effort to inspect the storage area regularly so that any problems can be dealt with quickly. Try to look inside boxes or containers at least every 6 to 12 months.

Handling & Use

Access to collections for pleasure or inspection is important, but try to avoid excessive handling of your historical material. One way to minimise direct handling of items is by storing them in inert polyester sleeves. These glass clear products allow you to view each item without touching its surface, and they are especially useful for photographs and paper-based items. If you have to handle the materials make sure your hands are really clean, dry and free from moisturiser or wear white cotton gloves (available from Memory Boxes).

Support fragile or oversized records carefully with board or paper whilst handling or moving. Be particularly careful with large items which have been tightly rolled, as any attempt to force them flat will certainly cause damage. Don't place food or drinks nearby, and use pencil rather than pens or ink markers to take notes.

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Displaying Your Collections

If you want to display any of your records, consider having good quality copies made and to display the copies rather than originals. Even short periods of exposure to light can cause severe fading and deterioration. Watercolours are particularly susceptible to fading caused by light, as there is very little pigment in the paint medium. Colour photographs will also not last as long as black and white prints and copies for the same reason.

If you must display originals, have them mounted and framed by a reliable, quality framer using archival materials. Choose a place to hang them that does not receive direct sunlight or strong artificial light. If you suspect that they may be fading, remove them from display immediately. Areas above or near fireplaces where there is heat should never be used for displaying items.

Even if you don't intend to display originals, it is still a good idea to have them copied, especially if they are very old, fragile, unusual or historically significant. Making digital (scanned) images of documents and records can provide an alternate means of accessing materials without handling.