

## Looking after important papers at home

Most of us have collections of documents and photographs in our homes that need to be kept safe from loss and damage. They may be important legal or financial papers such as certificates, wills or tax papers. Others may be of more sentimental value, such as photographs, letters or newspaper cuttings recording special events and family life. You may also find yourself in charge of official records of a company, club or society.

### How should I store documents?

- Do not store documents or photographs in attics, cellars, garages or sheds. These areas of your house are vulnerable to extremes of temperature, damp, dust or flooding.
- In any area where there is a risk of flooding it is advisable to keep important documents in containers stored well above the flood level, where they can be quickly removed to safety.
- Documents should be stored flat in acid-free folders and acid-free boxes, in a cool, stable environment, for the best chance of long-term preservation.
- Remove all paperclips, metal staples and elastic bands. These will deteriorate, leaving stains and damaging the paper.
- If you maintain a set of minutes or other official papers, they should be kept loose in a file or folder. Never stick documents into a blank bound volume, as the glue will damage the paper and the bulk will put pressure on the volume's spine.
- Newspapers are particularly difficult to keep as they are printed on poor quality paper that becomes brittle very quickly. If you have any really significant news cuttings, consider photocopying them onto better paper.



### How should I store photographs?

- Use good quality photograph albums with inert (polyester or polypropylene) plastic sleeves.
- Avoid 'sticky' photograph albums, as these have chemicals that over the long-term will react with the prints.
- We don't yet know how long digital photographs may last before becoming corrupted and unreadable. Your digital collection should be backed up onto a high quality CD or DVD, or preferably an external hard drive. Remember to check old files regularly to see if they need to be replaced with the backed-up versions.
- You can print out any particularly important digital photographs onto good quality photographic paper. It is likely that prints will last longer than the digital versions.
- Do not hang original pictures or photographs in damp bathrooms and kitchens, above radiators and open fires, or in direct sunlight. Exposure to light and heat will fade them very quickly.

## What can I do about damaged documents, books or photographs?

- It is never advisable to attempt repairs yourself on any really valuable items. To find a local professional conservator try the Conservation Register at <http://www.conservationregister.com/index.asp>
- Do not apply self-adhesive tapes or glue to repair tears or bindings. They will cause further irreversible damage to the item.
- Do not laminate papers or photographs, as this is an irreversible procedure and the heat and chemicals will damage fragile originals.
- To protect torn or fragile items, and prevent further damage, you can store them in an inert polyester sleeve. You can buy these sleeves from specialist conservation suppliers. Do not use commercial products as they contain chemicals which will damage originals.
- If books become wet, they should be fanned out and placed in a current of cold air to minimise the risk of mould growth. Interleaving the pages with clean white blotting paper or plain white paper towels can also help them to dry out.
- If a small number of documents are damaged by damp or water they should be carefully separated into single sheets and laid on blotting paper to dry in the air. Do not hang them over radiators or in front of direct heat.
- Photographs are especially difficult to deal with when wet and if possible should be very carefully separated and laid singly onto blotting paper. Do not attempt to separate photographs if they are stuck together. Seek professional advice.
- If you find evidence of book mites or other nasty creatures then isolate the book by placing it in a securely fastened polythene bag, and seek professional advice. Note that this is only for emergency treatment, as books and papers should not be kept in polythene bags.

## Finally, remember that handling is one of the biggest causes of damage

- Keep all documents and photographs away from food and drinks that may spill and stain them.
- Use pencil, not pen, to make notes when looking at historical items.
- Never write on documents or on the back of photographs in indelible biro or felt-tip pen.
- Make sure that your hands are clean and dry when you handle documents as the oils in your skin, and any dust or dirt, can permanently stain and weaken paper and leave marks on photographs. Some conservators recommend using soft white gloves when handling very precious items.
- Items in bundles or files that are sewn, pinned, tied or tagged together are especially vulnerable to damage when the pages are turned. Take your time to turn pages, and move documents carefully, holding them flat and in both hands.

