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Ancient communion vessels provide a unique continuity of worship, and you may still be using them regularly. We can help you see the signs of damage, understand their causes, and help you with tips on practical maintenance. Church plates can be kept in regular use, but the most valuable pieces should only be cleaned by a specialist.

Download our guidance



The term church plate is a collective term for church objects made of precious metals.

As a first step in caring for your church plate you need to identify which items are of high historic and/or artistic significance.

- The most significant plate is likely to be used only for special occasions. It will need appropriate security arrangements and specialist cleaning.
- Items of more modest value are often suitable for more frequent use and can be cared for by the informed non-professional.

The following guidance mainly applies to gold and silver items. However, most advice is also valid for other precious metals and alloys.

Signs of Damage

You should regularly check your church plate for damage. Look for the following signs:

- Candlewax drippings
- Dust
- Fingermarks
- Tarnish
- Flaking
- Worn lacquer or paint
- Fresh scratches
- Failing joints or repairs
- Loose fixings
- Active corrosion: on iron objects this shows as orange or red rust, on copper or copper-containing alloys as green spots and on lead, tin and pewter as white eruptions. Impure gold and silver may also show signs of corrosion.

Causes of damage

The behaviour of metal objects depends on their materials and construction – they may be made of one solid metal or a thin layer of one metal overlying another.

The main causes of damage to church plate are:

- Airborne gases and moisture: a reaction with oxygen in the air causes all metals apart from gold to lose their lustre and darken if they are not kept polished:
- Silver and gold do not react with oxygen at normal temperatures. However, other metals, often present in gold and silver objects as alloys, are affected by high moisture levels. Crusty green deposits can form where the silver contains a high copper content.
- Silver tarnishes (gradually discolours to brown and black) because of sulphur compounds in the air from the burning of fossil fuels and other industrial activity.
- Copper corrodes to form green crusts or powdery spots.
- Brass, an alloy of copper and zinc, is sensitive to damp and develops a brown tarnish and green copper corrosion products.
- Pewter, an alloy of tin and lead, is particularly vulnerable to corrosion by organic acids, for example in wooden boxes, especially where conditions are damp. It develops a darkened surface or patina where left unpolished.
- Dust can contain chemical contaminants and can also hold moisture on metal surfaces which causes them to corrode, even under appropriate conditions.
- Frequent handling: the salts and grease from fingerprints can corrode silver and copper surfaces.
- Frequent cleaning can wear away engraving, gilding and silvering, particularly if there is abrasive dust on the surface. Vigorous wiping of the communion vessels can also distort their shape.

Maintenance

Our detailed [guidance](#) for the maintenance of church plate provides practical tips on looking after your church plate

You can also find more information on the care of church plate on the [Institute of Conservation \(ICON\) leaflet Care and Conservation of Silver and Plate](#).

Conservation

The conservation of a church plate is a specialist task. If an object is showing signs of damage you should contact a professionally accredited conservator to inspect it and advise you on required treatments. You can obtain details of accredited conservators on the **Conservation Register website** (~~click here to access the Register~~).

Some conservators may charge for visits and the preparation of conservation reports but we can help you with a grant for this initial work. Our grants also support conservation projects.

The conservation of significant items is likely to require formal approval. If you are a church, contact your **Diocesan Advisory Committee Secretary** at an early stage about a faculty. If you are a cathedral please contact your Fabric Advisory Committee for advice in the first instance.

Storage

Keep valuable church plate in a suitable safe when not needed for worship:

- When closing the safe door, make sure that items are not crushed together.
- The plate should be stored in purpose-made cloth bags or wrapped in a soft lint-free cloth or acid-free tissue paper.

Pewter should not be stored in wooden boxes but rather in a dry metal cabinet.

Also of interest



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