



Introduction

Your church may own collections of historic books including old Bibles and prayer books, as well as more general works forming part of a parish (parochial) library.

You may have historic documents including registers of baptism, marriage and burial as well as legal, administrative, handwritten or printed records. As documents of the parish's life, many people find them of immense value for research into their families and parish lives. As such, they need to be cared for in an appropriate way.

This section will help you identify the signs of damage to historic books and manuscripts and understand the causes of damage. You will also find practical maintenance tips and guidance on how to look after your documents and books. However, the first step is to decide whether your books and documents should be cared for in the church, or deposited elsewhere for safekeeping.

Signs of damage

You should regularly check your books and documents for damage. Look for the following signs:

- brittle, yellowing paper
- discoloured top edges of pages
- a mouldy smell and signs of mould growth
- crinkled edges to paper
- tears and splits where the book cover joins the spine
- loose, creased and torn pages
- sticky, dirty leather bindings
- dry, crumbly leather bindings
- a fine red dust coming off leather bindings

Causes of damage

Books and manuscripts are easily damaged in poor storage conditions, by poor handling and the use of the wrong materials when trying to look after them.

Poor handling

Take care when removing old books from shelves and open them carefully. Take extra care when handling heavy books such as altar bibles, as their cover boards can split away from their spine if they are opened too far. Loose pages are easily creased and torn, and can be lost if they fall out of the book. Ensure your hands are clean and dry when handling old books and documents, and wash your hands after handling them.

Storage

Try to keep your books and manuscripts in a space with stable conditions. Dry and over-warm conditions can make books stiff and brittle, and encourage breakdown of poor-quality paper, such as that used in many 20th-century paperbacks. Damp conditions make paper crinkle, and encourages mould growth and insects which can eat paper and leather.

Constantly changing conditions from dry to damp will cause damage where the book cover joins the spine. If your books and manuscripts are exposed to too much light, particularly direct sunlight, the covers can fade and poor-quality paper may become brittle and yellow. Dust that collects on the top edges of books may lead to discolouration and encourage mould growth. If your leather book cover is breaking down into a fine red dust (known as 'red rot'), this is a sign that it needs treating by a conservator before it disintegrates completely.

Ideally, keep your books and manuscripts at a temperature of between 16-19°C and a relative humidity of 45-60%. Try to ensure there is good air circulation around the books. You can do this by keeping books on shelves with a gap behind them of at least 5cm (3 inches) away from the wall, and make space for air to circulate under the bookshelf or cupboard.

Place your books at the front of the shelf rather than pushing them to the back. If they are in a locked cupboard ensure that it has ventilation holes or a grill. Try to store your books away from damp external walls, and away from direct heat sources such as radiators, and away from high levels of light, in particular direct sunlight.

Keep books upright so they do not lean against each other and become distorted, but do not pack them too tightly. Very large volumes may need to be laid horizontally. Store books of a similar size next to each other for support, or use bookends.

Ensure that the bookshelves are sound, not rotten or infested with woodworm. Avoid shelves of unsealed wood as these can give off damaging organic acid vapours. Place sheets of stiff card between volumes with projecting metal fittings like clasps or chains, so that they do not damage others.

Keep books in a secure place to avoid theft or unauthorised borrowing. Maintain a catalogue and update it regularly as part of the Church inventory.

Care and maintenance

It is good practice to check your books and documents for signs of damage regularly. Oils and leather dressings that can be applied to book covers makes them sticky and dirty; it is best to not use them to avoid staining.

Do not use sticky tape, as this can cause pages to become stained, brittle and sticky. If the binding is broken or pages are falling out, keep them all together by tying the book with linen tape.

If you have a book that is damp, stand it on clean, white absorbent paper in a dry, ventilated place (but away from direct heat) with the pages fanned out to dry. If books and documents have become wet through a leak or flood, place each item carefully in a freezer bag in a deep freeze, and contact an accredited conservator immediately, who will be able to treat the books.

If you are thinking about having a book rebound, bear in mind that re-binding can reduce the historic and financial value of a book.

If you are dusting a book, hold it firmly shut and brush gently from the spine to the front edge with a soft brush. Never 'bang' a book shut to clear dust off: this can break the spine.

You can find more information on the [Institute of Conservation \(ICON\)](#) website.

Conservation

The conservation of historic books and manuscripts 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 Icon [Conservation 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 books and documents is likely to require formal approval. If you are a church, contact your [Diocesan Advisory Committee \(DAC\) Secretary](#) at an early stage about a faculty. If you are a cathedral please contact your [Fabric Advisory Committee \(FAC\)](#) your for advice in the first instance.

