

Principles for the Care of Paper Documents

Helen Lindsay, Collections Care Consultant

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Report by Francis Nicholls

Helen Lindsay trained as a paper conservator and chose to go freelance in 2005. She began her talk by identifying the main causes of paper deterioration. These are:

- light
- heat
- humidity
- fire
- water
- pests
- pollutants
- incorrect storage temperature
- handling
- quality of the paper
- use of adhesive tape (Sellotape)

She emphasised the importance of the correct temperature for storing paper. For each 5 degrees C. reduction in temperature, the life expectancy roughly doubles. Sometimes, storage under deep-freeze conditions is recommended but is costly. Also, high humidity causes mould and insect attack.

Another factor is paper acidity. From the mid-19th century more acidic paper began to be manufactured. After that, the life expectancy of paper decreased because acid tends to break down the fibres in the paper.

Early photographs (c. 1830 onwards) are very vulnerable to damage, particularly to a problem called 'brittling'. Fading is another major concern to conservators. In any event, the treatment and repair to photographs is always difficult.

Protective storage packaging of both paper and photos is very important. Often, custom-made boxes and files have to be made. She pointed out that cheap plastic storage folders are a poor medium to use as it is possible for the ink or pictures to transfer to the plastic surface.

Helen Lindsay concluded with a short history of her recent involvement with the conservation and cataloguing of the Mycenae Excavation Archive (1920-1969) held at the Museum of Classical Archaeology at Cambridge. The file held modern and old papers, notebooks, plans, newspaper cuttings, maps and photographs. The most important section was a file of original drawings. The whole collection has now been completed and digitised, with proper filing, conservation and repairs having been made.