

CAMBRIDGESHIRE ARCHIVES SERVICE

PRESERVATION ADVICE SERIES

PROTECTING ARCHIVES IN THE HOME

Protecting Archives in the Home

Keeping family treasures or historical records is both a pleasure and a responsibility. Not only should we ensure that they will not be damaged by poor storage and handling, but we must do our best to foresee and forestall possible harm from more serious events outside our control. Every year, collections are damaged or destroyed by fire or flood, war or weather, and irreplaceable material is lost forever.

The Cambridgeshire Archives Service, like other Record Offices and manuscript libraries, has a Disaster Plan. This is a list of people, services, and procedures which can help prevent damage to the records in their care and help salvage them in the event of a fire, flood, or other calamity. We keep it up to date with an annual review, to make sure we don't have obsolete phone numbers or contacts, and are aware of new suppliers or recovery techniques. If you keep documents or valuable family history items at home, here are a few things you can do to help keep them safe.

1. Be aware of natural features around you. Is your house built near a river or in an area with a history of flooding? Is it at risk from high winds or lightning? Does heavy rain tend to get driven into certain areas of the structure?
2. Make sure that your home is as well-protected against fire as you can make it. Check gas and electrical fittings; install a smoke alarm, and keep a small extinguisher handy. Information about fire prevention is available from your local fire service, which may be willing to give specific advice. If you have substantial, valuable collections, you should consider a commercial fire alarm system.
3. Make sure your home is secure, that doors and windows have reliable locks. Go round it as if you were a burglar: where might you enter undetected? Do they leave a key under the flower-pot? How would you get out? Again, the police are usually ready to offer advice on securing your home against intruders.
4. Keep a list of essential phone numbers near the telephone, including a plumber and electrician. For help with salvaging documents, add a cold storage firm (also good for freezer

contents) and the local Record Office.

5. If you can afford it, keep your documents in a fireproof safe. A metal deed box or filing cabinet, lined with hardboard to keep documents from contact with the metal, is a second best. Even strong cardboard boxes with lids will provide immediate protection from water, whether a broken vase of flowers, or a leak from the flat above. Keep document boxes in a place away from extremes of temperature and humidity, and from which they can easily be taken to safety in an emergency.
6. Don't store them near water pipes or sources of damp, and see that they are at least five inches above floor level, in case of a flood. Remember that fire goes up, but water goes down; both upper and lower levels of storage carry a certain risk.
7. If documents become wet, they will begin to grow mould in about 72 hours. Lower temperatures inhibit mould, and refrigeration can buy valuable recovery time. Consult a conservator before treating wet books, parchments, photos or sound recordings.
8. If you can, make copies or transcriptions of photographs and documents, and keep them in a separate location. That way, even if the originals are lost in a disaster, the copies will preserve valuable information for the next generation. The appropriate local record office will probably be pleased to accept such copies, on condition only of making them available for public consultation, and will be able to advise on the best means of copying them.
9. It is worth considering whether deposit (which implies no change of ownership of the document) or donation of the documents in a local record office could be, on balance, the best course of action. An archivist will be happy to discuss this without placing any obligation on you to deposit.
10. Lastly, it is important to make provision for your documents when you die, or your efforts will be wasted. What is appropriate will depend on the circumstances.

If your documents should happen to be damaged in a fire or flood, the Archives Service can supply you with the names of recovery firms, or tell you how best to preserve them yourself. Our conservator has lists of suppliers of materials such as blotters, newsprint, and other clean-up items, and will be happy to advise whenever she is available. She is Mrs. Deborah Rohan, and is available on (01223) 717297 most weekdays. If she is not in that day, her voicemail will usually provide an alternative number.

Cambridgeshire Archives Service

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