

Archive Information Sheet

Caring for stamps and postal history

THE BRITISH
POSTAL
MUSEUM
& ARCHIVE

By Krystyna Koscia

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To most people a *stamp* means an adhesive postage stamp, a small printed, gummed label to prepay postage. Other stamps can indicate that a tax or fee has been paid.

A *postal history* item refers to a piece of mail with or without postage stamps, with postal markings or connected with postal services.

A *stamp* is built up of several layers. Its base paper is coated with adhesive (gum arabic, PVA or others) on one side and a medium (ink, pigments, dyes) on the other. On modern stamps there are also phosphorescent or fluorescent coatings.

Postal history items such as covers and envelopes are also normally made of paper, possibly with gummed areas (envelopes) with markings (franking, stamps etc) in ink, dye, pencil, crayon and/or with gummed paper labels or seals.

Avoiding damage

It's in your own interests to ensure your collection is safeguarded against easily avoidable damage. Damage can be caused most readily by the following:

- The way items are handled
- The storage and display materials used
- Methods of display
- The effect of the conditions to which they are subjected, e.g. relative humidity and temperature, light and dust levels.

Keep in mind that items other than mint stamps have already been subjected to adverse handling and

conditions through the postal system. They need all the help they can get from you.

There are several measures you can take to protect and preserve your collection.

Careful handling

- Before handling any paper items wash your hands
- Handle items as little and as carefully as possible, preferably using flat-headed tweezers
- Do not smoke near philatelic or postal history items
- Keep all drinks well away.

Storage and display materials

All materials that come into direct contact with your stamps and covers etc. should be made of archival quality materials. For album pages and mounts this means alkaline buffered paper, free of lignin and ground wood; and protectors (sleeves or envelopes for album pages etc.) of chemically inert polyester, e.g. Melinex®, Mylar™ without surface coatings or plasticizers.

Plasticizers, used to make certain plastics more flexible, can cause off-setting of colours; in particular, PVC should never be used. Albums should be stored upright, not too tight nor over-packed. Slip-cases for albums (preferably with dye-fast covers) or boxes, further protect against dust and other atmospheric pollutants. Avoid self-adhesive tapes.

Display

- Guard against sunlight or bright direct light (storage in albums is a boon)
- Avoid overlapping items as they will become unevenly discoloured either through light damage and/or by coming into contact with non-archival materials

- Black or coloured card, often used as a background when displaying stamps, is also a risk as it is acidic and the colours can run when damp, discolouring your stamps.

Environmental conditions

Atmospheric factors which affect your collection primarily involve relative humidity and temperature. Try to avoid any drastic fluctuations in either. A change in relative humidity and temperature can cause damage through the uneven expansion or contraction of an item's different layers. So aim for stability in environmental conditions. Excessive humidity can cause mould growth and gum to become sticky. Dryness can make gum become brittle. Monitor the conditions in which your collection is kept, ensuring they are stable with a good air-flow.

Location

Choose the location for your collection carefully. Avoid uninsulated attics, damp basements, over-drying central heating systems, outside walls and draughty windows.

A final word

If treatment is needed do **not** attempt to repair a damaged or deteriorating item yourself. If it is important enough, consult a professional paper conservator.

Krystyna Koscia set up the Conservation Studio at the National Postal Museum in 1993 and has been running it since then; dealing with and advising on problems encountered both at the Museum and by collectors. Her previous experience in philatelic and postal history conservation was gained over five years, working in a London-based private paper conservation studio. She attained her MA in Paper Conservation in the Conservation Department of Warsaw's Academy of Fine Arts in Poland. In June 1999 Krystyna moved the Conservation Studio to Freeling House, where she is now Conservator & Preservation Manager to the collections of the BPMA.

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Further reading/useful contacts

The Care and Preservation of Philatelic Materials, Collings T.J. and Schoolley-West R.F., The British Library

The National Trust Manual of Housekeeping, Sandwith, Hermione & Stainton, Sheila. Penguin in association with The National Trust, revised 1993. ISBN 0 14 0123344

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<http://www.icon.org.uk>

Conservation Register

Tel: +44 (0)20 7785 3804
<http://www.conservationregister.com/index.asp>

The Museums, Libraries & Archives Council (MLA)
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Conservation products suppliers

Conservation Resources (UK) Ltd
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Off Wallington Road,
Cowley,
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Tel: +44 (0)1865 747 755
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NB: This article gives only very general advice on this topic; for your own special requirements, you may wish to seek further professional advice. The inclusion of a supplier within this leaflet does not imply the approval or endorsement by the MGC (now MLA) or the BPMA of the product or service. You are therefore urged, in your own interests, to ensure that any product or service is appropriate to your needs.

The Royal Mail Archive Search Room at Freeling House is open Monday to Friday, 10.00am - 5.00pm, and until 7.00pm on Thursdays. We are open selected Saturdays 10.00am - 5.00pm, please call or see our website for dates.

Please bring proof of identity to get an archive user card. In most cases there is no need to make an appointment, but please contact us in advance if you have any questions.

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