

# a Stitch in time

**Guidelines for the care of textiles**

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# Preface

Of the varied contents of a parish church, the textiles are the most demanding in terms of upkeep and long-term preservation. As with household furnishings, they can imperceptibly move from pristine condition to a faded and shabby state, while vestments, like secular clothes, also suffer from changes in fashion which can result in their drastic alteration, inadequate storage or unthinking disposal.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide guidance on basic housekeeping, to suggest practical aids towards good storage, and to indicate when outside professional help might be needed. Many Diocesan Advisory Committees (DACs) offer advice on textiles and include amongst their members people with particular expertise on the subject.

In most churches the vestments and textile furnishings are looked after by a small number of volunteers, many of whom have built up considerable knowledge and expertise over the years. Routine good practice is seldom written down, nor is it always possible to pass it on directly to new volunteers.

The Council hopes, therefore, that these *Guidelines* will encourage good practice, which will ensure the survival of the very many fine textiles in English churches and serve to avoid radical and expensive repairs.

Santina M. Levey  
Chairman

*chapter 1*

# Guidelines for the care of textiles

Churches contain many items made or decorated with textiles. Most will have sets of vestments, altar-linen and altar frontals. There may also be carpets, hassocks, banners, pulpit-falls and many other smaller pieces. Parishes generally want to keep these objects for as long as possible and there are some simple, practical things that can be done to prevent damage and deterioration. The textile objects in the care of parishes are usually varied in date and style and are made using a wide variety of techniques, which will affect what can be done to conserve them. Treatment will also be influenced by their relative importance as historic objects.

Ecclesiastical textiles can be thought of in four main groups:

1. *Furnishings and vestments from the standard ecclesiastical suppliers.* These items are likely to be in constant use and will require the care afforded by good housekeeping. However, their permanent preservation may not be possible and in the long term they will have to be considered expendable.
2. *Textiles designed and produced by important designers and manufacturers.* Care should be taken to preserve these specially commissioned pieces which are a distinctive part of the history of the church. They should never be regarded as expendable.
3. The ecclesiastical revival of the nineteenth century and reintroduction of vestments resulted in gifts of *older vestments*, often brought back from Italy, France and Spain by the donor. A number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century items, notably chasubles, frontals, damask cloths and lace, entered English churches in this way. Some of these items are of high artistic merit and historical interest. Most of them are now in urgent need of conservation and it may be damaging to continue to use them. Even when no longer in use, their proper care in storage or on display can present major problems. Expert advice may be desirable to assess both their historical importance and their conservation needs.

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4. Some churches preserve rare examples of *the ecclesiastical furnishings produced in Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*. Even more rare are the surviving pieces of pre-Reformation material, some of which may have been remade into other objects, e.g. part of a cope made into a pall. These early objects may well have a national importance and expert advice should always be sought on their care and conservation.

## chapter 2

# Causes of deterioration and their remedies

Textiles of all kinds are damaged by light, damp, dirt, insects and by incautious handling whether they are in use, in store or on display.

### **Light**

Never leave textiles in direct sunlight or strong light of any kind. Both natural and artificial light cause dyes to fade and fibres to weaken. Use blinds, shutters and curtains at the windows or directly in front of objects on display to cut out as much light as possible. Lights for display should not be too near the object. Not only will the light level be too intense but there is also danger of damage by heat. Ideally light should only fall on the object when it is being viewed. In museums the amount of light falling on textiles is generally kept down to a measurement of 50 lux. The architect or surveyor who carries out the Quinquennial Inspection Report should be able to arrange to have light levels measured if there is any doubt.

### **Damp**

Textiles should be kept at an even temperature, cool rather than hot. The air should not be too damp. The dampness of air is measured as its 'relative humidity' and the reading should be about 50–60 per cent. Again, an architect should be able to organize for measurements of temperature and humidity to be made. Warm damp conditions encourage the growth of mould. A sudden drop in temperature can cause condensation, which may do damage. If there is a danger of damp, the area in which the textiles are kept should be adequately ventilated. A free flow of air around the textiles will help prevent condensation or mould. This also applies to textiles which may be displayed in glazed frames. The frames should not sit directly against the wall. If the case is directly against a wall it may get damp. This can be avoided if the case has been properly constructed using good materials. The back of the case or frame may require facing with a specialist barrier material to prevent moisture ingress. In addition, cork spacers *must* be fitted to the reverse. These will hold the frame away from the wall surface, allowing air to circulate behind, and preventing moisture build-up behind the frame.

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Some of the cheaper construction materials can cause damage to ancient textiles. If the object is historically important it is safest *to seek expert advice*.

### **Dirt**

Any exposed textile is liable to attract dust and dirt and is vulnerable to harmful pollution in the air. Textiles in store should be checked and advice sought on suitable methods of cleaning. The best way to protect textiles is behind glass in a well-sealed case. Care must be taken in the siting and choice of materials for constructing a case.

### **Insects**

All textiles should be checked regularly for signs of moth or other insects. Mothballs (wrapped in tissue or muslin) can be used, but the best safeguard is regular inspection and good housekeeping to make sure that the textiles and their immediate surroundings are not allowed to get dirty.

### **Handling**

All textiles are fragile; ancient textiles are exceedingly so. Handle them as infrequently as possible. When handling a textile object, try to support the weight overall. Never pick it up by one corner or one edge. Try to lift it rather than drag it, otherwise weakened threads may pull apart and stitches will break.



### chapter 3

## Storage and display

Careful storage is very important as serious, often irreversible, damage can result from the wrong conditions. Whenever possible, keep textiles *flat* in a drawer or box. Wrap and interleave the object with acid-free tissue paper. This can be obtained from a good stationer but make sure it is authentically acid-free. Larger objects may have to be folded. Keep the right side of the textile to the outside and pad every fold with a sausage of tissue paper. This will prevent the formation of creases, which if they become permanent, could cause the fabric to split. Do not pile one on top of another; embroidery and velvet will be crushed. Use separate drawers, boxes or shelves for each object. Only simple linen with a flat, even weave can survive stacking. Altar frontals and super frontals are often stored together, suspended within a large chest or cabinet. A great deal of damage can be caused by handling and wear and tear to the edges or ornamentation, if the size and number stored are too much for the cabinet. It may be possible to modify the cabinet or to select those items that must be stored in this way, whilst organizing alternative storage for others. Again, specialist advice should be sought.

### **Large flat textiles**

An object with a pile (such as a carpet) or one that is firmly woven (like a tapestry) will be damaged if it is folded, so it should always be rolled for storage with the right side *outside*. Textiles with thick embroidery or with fringing may be damaged by rolling and will have to be hung straight or stored flat.

### **Rolling a textile**

Use a strong cardboard tube or plastic drainpipe of sufficient length and not less than 7–8 cm (3 inches) diameter. If the roller is longer than 1 metre (3 feet), two people will be needed. Lay the textile out flat, face downwards on a clean surface. Cover the roller with tissue and lay it at right angles to the warp of the textile (rolling *along* the selvedge, if there is one). Roll the textile up carefully, smoothing out any wrinkles and interleaving with tissue paper. Wrap the rolled tissue textile in clean cotton ticking. (Do *not* use polythene). Secure this in place with broad, flat tapes or webbing tied loosely in a bow. (Never use string or tie tightly as this will cut in to the object.) Store rolled textiles horizontally but not directly on the floor or in great piles; never store them vertically or leaning against a wall.

### **Vestments**

All very heavy or fragile items should be kept flat, well padded with tissue. Special attention should be given to sleeves, shoulders and side seams. A vestment should only be hung if it is in good condition and the hangers should be specially shaped for each particular object. The arms of the hanger must be of sufficient length to support the shoulders of the vestment without falling short or poking through the tops of the sleeves. The shoulders of dalmatics are square, but those of a chasuble are rather long and at a steep angle. Strong wood or plastic hangers can be padded out to the correct shape, using polyester wadding covered in white cotton fabric or sheeting sewn in place. Often the metal hooks of such hangers are not long enough and the neck edge of a vestment can be abraded as a result. Extra long hooks can be purchased from a specialist supplier. It is best for copes to be stored flat in a cope chest, though they can be hung along the centre back, over a padded roller, stretching from hem to neck. In both cases, stiffened hoods should be removed and stored separately.

### **Frontals**

Frontals are difficult objects to handle; some are secured to a rigid backing, others may be unsupported, but all are unwieldy. They are particularly vulnerable when being fastened to, or unfastened from, the altar and when being taken in and out of a storage unit. It is important that any system of fastening to the altar should be easy to use, put no strain on the frontal and be kept in good repair. At least two people are needed to change a frontal, especially if frontals have to be moved within the storage unit, when particular care is needed in lifting them past one another. Each frontal should have its own dust cover of cotton ticking.

### **Carpets**

All carpets should be treated with care but some may be especially valuable and should not be subjected to constant use. When a carpet is strong enough to be used, the correct underlay should be employed. This is 'contract quality hair underfelt'. Modern foam rubber or plastic underlays break down in time, becoming granular or sticky. Synthetic underlays will not allow the damp to evaporate from the floor of an ancient church.

### **Display**

In ideal circumstances, textiles should only be displayed for a limited period and should be protected in a frame or on a display board. Never display an object in strong light or near a source of heat. Showcases can be covered with a curtain so that the textile is only exposed for viewing. Ensure that damp cannot be transmitted to the case from floor or walls. The Diocesan Advisory Committee and the church architect should be able to advise about a suitable site in the church. If the object is too large to be framed, e.g. a tapestry, a safe method of hanging must be used. This will generally mean the addition of a 'sleeve' or velcro sewn to the top edge. A 'sleeve' will allow the textile to be suspended from a pole, whilst velcro will require a wooden batten to be fixed to the wall. Specialist advice should be sought.

*chapter 4*

## Cleaning and repair

Many of the modern textiles in everyday use can be cleaned by ordinary methods, and much of the white linen can be washed. Washing should involve soft water and a liquid, non-biological detergent. Avoid bleaching. Starching can be avoided by simply laying out linens to dry flat on stretched clean polythene. Once dry, the linen can be rolled or folded as required without the need for ironing. With multi-coloured or embroidered fabrics, old and fragile textiles, and some white linen, special cleaning techniques are needed *and expert advice should be sought* or considerable damage can be caused. The same is true of repairs to old and valuable textiles. Methods of repair and support used in the conservation of historical materials are not the same as those used in the everyday repair of household fabrics. Darning or patching with unsympathetic methods and materials causes unnecessary damage and it is always wisest to seek professional advice.

*appendix 1*

## Sources of expert advice and useful addresses

Deterioration of textiles can be held at bay by good care, but they will sometimes reach a condition when expert advice is needed. Parishes should not hesitate to seek such advice, both on the historic importance of a particular item and on technical problems of conservation. Your Diocesan Advisory Committee Secretary will be able to direct you to local sources of information and assistance, while the Conservation Officer here at the Council for the Care of Churches (CCC) will tap into national bodies with the relevant expertise. Such advice comes at no charge to the parish. The CCC is also able to offer grants towards the conservation of textiles of historic or artistic interest, grants that are scrutinized by our specialist committee.

### **Useful Addresses**

Council for the Care of Churches  
Church House  
Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3NZ

Victoria & Albert Museum  
Cromwell Road  
South Kensington  
London  
SW7 2RL

*appendix 2*

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