

Preserving and Caring for Lodge and Chapter records

Why is it important to look after Lodge and Chapter records?

Lodge and Chapter records provide a permanent record of proceedings at meetings and include information about former members. They help to form the corporate memory of the organisation. Sadly, if this information disappears answers to questions such as why, who, when, where and how may be lost forever. Lodges or Chapters unable to prove continuity of meetings may be unable to claim centenary warrants or charters. Over time these records also provide unique information about local communities and may be of interest to those researching local history.

Although rules on preparing Lodge and Chapter minute books is included in the *Book of Constitutions*¹, this guidance now provides specific advice on how to care for all Masonic records.

Why are Lodge and Chapter records at risk?

Secretaries or Scribe E's are the officers responsible for looking after the records of a Lodge or Chapter. If the meeting place of the Lodge or Chapter cannot offer space, storage of records in domestic situations can lead to damage and loss. Banks or other commercial storage facilities charge for storage, which may be unsuitable for paper-based records because of variable temperatures, or at risk from damp or water damage.

Loss or damage to Lodge or Chapter records is usually preventable. It is important for Lodges and Chapters to maintain and regularly check an inventory of their records.

Why does paper disintegrate?

Early Masonic certificates and some volumes are made of parchment. This is robust and will withstand considerable bad treatment. However most Lodge and Chapter records are made from card and paper, the quality of which can vary significantly.

In Britain, paper began to replace parchment as the preferred medium for documentation just as freemasonry began to emerge in the late seventeenth century. Usually expensive and of good quality, paper was made initially from cellulose fibres derived from rags. As record keeping and levels of official bureaucracy and literacy expanded in the nineteenth century, the demand for cheaper paper escalated. Poor quality wood pulp papers, which contain lignin that converts to lignic acid, replaced their more expensive, rag counterparts.

Bulking materials were often added to wood pulp and the mix treated with various chemical catalysts to accelerate fibre disintegration. Bleaching agents were added to improve appearance. Therefore paper fibres include high acid concentrations, which accelerate self-destruction over time. Poor-quality

¹ *Book of Constitutions*, Rule no. 144 states that all Lodges are required to keep a minute book. Similar rules cover Chapter and Lodge of Instruction records.

paper, such as newsprint, ages to yellow or brown tones and pages split and disintegrate.

Various preservation methods prevent further deterioration. Damage can never be reversed entirely but specialist paper conservators can repair many documents. However, prevention is always better than cure.

How can we prevent damage to records?

Damage occurs when paper is stored in unsuitable conditions. Temperature fluctuations and exposure to heat, damp and pollution can accelerate its self-destruction and raise the risk of mould and pest damage.

Wherever possible, records should be stored in clean, dry (but not too hot) areas away from direct sunlight. Fire prevention measures should be considered and filters attached to air vents can eliminate harmful pollutants. The British Standard for storing archives recommends a stable relative humidity between 45-60%, with an average mean temperature between 16-19°C, but achieving these levels often requires specially designed storage facilities.²

How can we protect records from further damage?

If providing a stable storage environment is achievable, placing volumes and papers in acid-free boxes can enhance the long-term preservation of records. Loose papers can be placed in acid-free folders within boxes, and items such as photographs and certificates placed in inert polyester sleeves.³ Volumes too large for boxes should be stored flat on shelves, wrapped in acid-free paper. Metal, roll-edge shelving provides the best storage for boxes; do not stack more than two or three high.

Documents damaged by surface dirt or smoke can be cleaned with care using smoke sponges or soft brushes. Always wear a mask when brushing mould spores and insects from documents. Replace metal paperclips and pins with brass paper clips that do not rust. Remove rubber bands and polythene pocket wallets. Handle fragile items with care – use thin cotton (not latex) gloves and wash hands regularly, especially when looking at photographs.

How can we find specialist help?

For help on coping with water-damaged documents, storage and repair contact the Archivist.

Advice is also available from:

British Records Association

c/o Finsbury Library
245 St John Street
London EC1V 4NB

² BS5454:2000 Recommendations for the storage and exhibition of archival documents

³ See list of suppliers and additional information Appendix A. Contact the Archivist at the Library and Museum of Freemasonry for further advice.

Tel:(+44) 020 7833 0428
Fax: (+44) 020 7833 0416
<mailto:britrecassoc@hotmail.com>

Guidelines 1: The Care of Records, Notes for the Owner or Custodian
Available at:
http://www.britishrecordsassociation.org.uk/publication_pages/Guidelines1.htm

National Preservation Office

The British Library
96 Euston Road
London
NW1 2DB

Tel: +44 (0)20 7412 7612
Fax: +44 (0)20 7412 7796
Email: npo@bl.uk

Leaflets on various aspects of preservation, photocopying guidance, handling and cleaning documents, dealing with photographs, etc is available at:
<http://www.bl.uk/services/npo/publicationsleaf.html>

Guidance on preventing and coping with disasters is available at:
<http://www.bl.uk/services/npo/disaster.html>

The Conservation Register

c/o Institute of Conservation
3rd Floor, Downstream Building
1 London Bridge
London SE1 9BG
Tel: +44(0)20 7785 3804
Fax: +44(0)20 7785 3806
E-mail: info@conservationregister.com

Provides guidance on how to find and choose a paper conservator with lists of qualified specialists working in your postal area.

What records should be kept?

Minute books
Signature books/Attendance registers
Declaration books
Membership registers/Record books
Lodge/Chapter committee minute books and associated records
Account books
Clearance certificate counterfoils
Correspondence files
Annual returns
Collections of summons
Photographs and photograph albums
Lodge of Instruction: minute books, membership registers, account books

Petty cash records, comprising cheque stubs, invoices, etc should be destroyed securely after seven years. Retain a copy of all year-end Annual Reports and Statement of Accounts.

Can anyone help look after our records?

The Library and Museum cares for the records of erased Lodges and Chapters on behalf of the Grand Master but has no space to care for the records of active ones. Some Provinces provide storage for records or have sought other solutions.

Compliance with recommended standards for archive storage is difficult to achieve. One solution may be to deposit records with local record offices, many of which can offer BS5454 compliant storage for records. In return for requesting contributions towards re-boxing and conserving records, record offices will catalogue the records and make them available for public research. They are subject to agreed minimum closure periods to protect the Data Protection rights of members. Records may be withdrawn on loan and can be consulted by Lodge or Chapter members in the repository's search room.⁴ Depositing such records represents a valuable contribution by freemasons in providing additional resources for local history. Busy Secretaries and Scribe E's could then refer requests for genealogical information about former members to local record offices.

Lodges and Chapters considering depositing records directly with local record offices should liaise initially with their Provincial or Metropolitan Grand Lodge before contacting the Library and Museum. The Archivist can provide advice for Lodges and Chapters on identifying, contacting and negotiating deposits with record offices.

How can digitisation help?

Some Lodges and Chapters have decided to digitise their records – this helps to preserve fragile, original records. Digitisation can offer searchable access to records if bespoke software technology is applied to index images. Digitising records before conservation or depositing them with local record offices ensures continued access for members to information. Do not destroy the original records - use digital versions as surrogate copies.

Storing images and documents, such as Lodge or Chapter minutes, on CD ROMs and other electronic storage devices, creates unexpected problems. Information and images recorded in digital formats must be managed actively, not passively, to ensure they remain accessible over time. New versions of software (such as Excel, Word etc) and hardware (a disc, laptops, hard drives etc) may cause documents created in older formats to become unreadable or obsolete.

⁴ Wherever possible, avoid depositing records covered by closure periods. If Lodge/Chapter representatives wish to view closed, deposited records, then record offices cannot differentiate against access by other users under information legislation. Alternatively, Lodges/Chapters could withdraw closed records on a temporary basis rather than inspecting them in record office search rooms.

Digitised data must be stored on discs of good quality and migrated every five years to avoid damage such as digi-loss. Update or migrate records written in older software programmes to the latest version on a regular basis to ensure they can still be read. Preservation guidance also suggests copying data in alternative formats as a back up for digital storage.⁵

How should Lodges and Chapters record minutes and other records?

Few Lodges and Chapters now maintain handwritten minutes but many continue to use bound minute books, which remain in use for many years. Word-processed minutes, together with summonses, copies of accounts and reports, are attached to pages. As a result, book blocks distort and separate from covers, overfull volumes are difficult to store and transport and they become vulnerable to damage. Self-adhesive tape, pins or glue used to attach sheets can damage pages or disintegrate over time, resulting in the loss of loose sheets.

Documents created by laser printers are more robust than those created by jet printers, whose inks may not be stable. Try the following test – if ink smears when a damp (not wet) cloth is run over a sample test page it is unstable and therefore not permanent.

Two recommendations for the maintenance of good minutes:

1. Slim line skeleton minute books into which minutes printed on permanent paper can be glued (stocked by Letchworths' Shop, price £57.50)
2. Minutes printed on permanent paper⁶ can be kept securely in a 4-post lockable binder and then bound into volumes.⁷

In addition:

- Only glue such as Pritt stick or an inert cold-water, starch-based paste should be used for pasting loose sheets into minute books (powder to which water is added, available from Conservation Resources, 01865 747755 www.conservation-resources.co.uk, c.£6)
- Self-adhesive tapes, such as Sellotape, or other solvent-based adhesives should not be used

⁵ Contact the Archivist for additional advice on selecting a bureau to copy your records, image file formats and types, image resolution, metadata, copyright, preservation, quality control and costs. Practical guidance on keeping electronic records and digital images is available at: www.savemymemories.org and the leaflet, Caring for CDs and DVDs, is available at <http://www.bl.uk/npo/pdf/cd.pdf> or by post from the National Preservation Office.

⁶ Permanent paper ISO 9706:2000: often identified by an infinity mark symbol within a circle Conqueror laid-paper and ranges such as Texture and Concept achieve this standard - a ream costs under c.£20. R K Burt & Co Ltd supply superior quality archive text paper, contact details: 57 Union Street, London SE1 1SG tel: 020 7407 6474 e-mail: sales@rkburt.co.uk

⁷ Shaw & Sons Ltd supply re-useable binders at c.£66 & VAT; they also offer over-cast binding of volumes at £80 & VAT, with blue or red cloth covers and gold lettering of name of Lodge/Chapter on cover and spine provided as optional extras. Contact details: Shaw & Sons Ltd, Shaway House, 21 Bourne Park, Bourne Road, Crayford, Kent DA1 4BZ Tel: (0)1322 621100 website: www.shaws.co.uk

- Brass paperclips not metal pins should be used (available from Conservation Resources as above)
- Each page of loose-leaf minutes should be initialled by the Master/Z and Secretary/Scribe E

Further information is available from:
 The Archives Team
 Library and Museum of Freemasonry
 Freemasons' Hall
 Great Queen Street
 London
 WC2B 5AZ

020 7395 9258/9256
 libmus@freemasonry.london.museum

List of Suppliers

The Library and Museum are available to supply limited quantities of acid-free archive boxes, which usually contain 3-4 smaller minute books, at a cost of £10 each.

Conservation By Design
 5 Singer Way
 Woburn Road Industrial Estate
 Kempston
 Bedford MK42 7AW
 Tel: (01234) 853 555
 Fax: (01234) 852 334
 E-mail: info@conservation-by-design.co.uk
<http://www.conservation-by-design.co.uk>

For archive boxes; photograph envelopes;
 specialist supplies – will sell small quantities
 of some supplies

Conservation Resources (UK) Ltd
 Unit 1
 Pony Road
 Horspath Industrial Estate
 Cowley
 Oxon OX4 2RD
 Tel: (01865) 747755
 Fax: (01865) 747035
 E-mail: criuk@conservationresources.com
<http://www.conservation-resources.co.uk/>

For archive boxes; photograph envelopes;
 specialist supplies

Preservation Equipment
 Shelfanger
 Diss
 Norfolk IP22 2DG
 Tel: (01379) 651527
 Fax: (01379)1379 650582
 E-mail: info@preservationequipment.com
<http://www.preservationequipment.com>

For archive boxes, photograph envelopes,
 soft brushes, smoke sponges

G Ryder & Co Ltd
 Denbigh Road
 Bletchley
 Milton Keynes
 MK1 1DG
 Tel: (01908) 375524
 Fax: (01908) 373658
 E-mail: sales@ryderbox.co.uk
www.ryderbox.co.uk

For archive boxes