



DAC Guidance

Textiles – care and protection

Every PCC will own a range of textiles, probably more than it realises. Fabrics and furnishings will be scattered throughout the building, ranging from vestments, choir robes, frontals and altar-linen to curtains, carpets, kneelers and banners. Different types of textile will be involved, both modern and of an unknown age, some on permanent display and others kept unused in cupboards or drawers. Some may be rare and valuable.

As with furnishings in the house, church textiles are vulnerable to all kinds of damage or decay. At the same time, a church is a working building, not a museum, and its textile items exist in order to be used. The aim of this guidance leaflet is to highlight the importance of basic day-to-day housekeeping (for instance, cleaning and good storage) so that the items can be kept in good condition as long as possible, and to give an indication of when it is best to seek outside professional help.

LIST THE TEXTILES

Most parishes are unaware of how many different textile objects they own. It is important to make a full inventory and to mark each item with the inventory number. If possible, allocate the job of looking after the textiles to one person or group of people who can build up experience and knowledge of how to care for the objects. Check and update the inventory regularly, at least at the time of the quinquennial report. If a textile is taken out of use, let all interested parties know, note what has happened to it, and decide what to put in its place. Finally, record any loose, detached or stored items including those which were once elements in a decorative scheme of an earlier period.

DECIDE WHICH ITEMS ARE VALUABLE

It is not always obvious whether a textile item is important or valuable. Broadly, ecclesiastical textiles can be divided into 4 main groups:-

i) Furnishings and vestments from the standard ecclesiastical suppliers

These are usually in constant use and will probably need good housekeeping but not

permanent preservation. They can be considered expendable in the long term but as they will be expensive to replace every care should be taken to extend their life and usefulness.

ii) Textiles designed and produced by important designers and manufacturers

Many churches own specially-commissioned textiles, mostly dating from the C19 or early C20. They may not now be in everyday use but they are part of the history of the parish. They may well be valuable in financial as well as historical terms. Most can be maintained by your church helpers provided you can draw upon basic training and experience within the parish. These specially commissioned items should never be regarded as expendable.

iii) Antique textiles

During the ecclesiastical revival of the C19, many antique textiles were brought into English churches from the continent (mostly from Italy, France or Spain) or parts were cut out and incorporated into new gifts. Antique damask cloths, lace, frontals and chasubles were commonly re-cycled in this way. These textiles are now of great historical interest and may be in need of conservation. Even if they are not in use, professional advice may be necessary as to how to store or display the items.

iv) Historically important textiles from Britain

Even rarer are surviving British textiles from before the reformation or the C17 or C18. These early objects may be of national importance. Expert advice should always be sought.

If you need help with the identification of what you have and whether it is old or of importance, please contact the DAC secretary in the first instance. A textile advisor is available for consultation.

THE CAUSES OF DAMAGE

The main causes of damage to any type of fabric are:-

Light

Direct light, particularly strong sunlight, causes fading and weakening of the fibres, occasionally even scorching when close to glass. Damage from light can never be reversed. Where textiles are stored or displayed, cut down light by using blinds, shutters or curtains (as you will see in National Trust houses or museums) and do not place artificial light sources too close to the object. If hanging a new banner or laying up a regimental flag, consider the location carefully and avoid sites where strong sunlight will fall on the item.

Damp

Most churches are damp and humid. Warm damp conditions encourage mould, while shifts in temperature (such as overnight changes) cause condensation. It is often difficult to arrange for adequate ventilation around textiles stored in cupboards or drawers. Fabrics such as banners or curtains which are allowed to trail on the floor can act as a wick, drawing up moisture. Carpets can be permanently damp. Textiles displayed in glazed frames are equally at risk; the frames can attract damp unless there is an air space between them and the wall. However expert advice is freely available as to how to construct and hang a display frame.

Generally temperatures and humidity can be controlled in the storage area (usually the vestry), perhaps with a small heater and ventilation through the windows.

Handling and wearing

Just as clothes or domestic furnishings wear out, ecclesiastical textiles also suffer from use. Vestments have to be worn so some damage must be accepted as inevitable, but this can be minimised. Being heavy, vestments can be damaged by being picked up without support for the full weight of the garment. Protect them in storage with padded hangers and washable cotton overcloth. Altar frontals are best hung over poles, with some means of preventing slippage, to take the whole weight. With any textile item, lifting is less harmful than dragging, which may cause weakened threads or stitches to pull apart or break. Avoid bunching up textiles or putting them down onto rough surfaces. The older the fabric, generally, the more fragile it will be. Try not to allow textile items to get to the stage of needing major repairs but keep an eye on them and follow the maxim "A Stitch in Time Saves Nine", whether they can be mended by your church helpers or whether they may need professional attention.

Dirt

Exposed textiles attract dust and dirt and (less obviously) atmospheric pollution. Even in store, they are susceptible. Items which are to be kept in drawers or cupboards can be protected by acid-free tissue paper. Clean the storage area regularly. Try to avoid storing in oak containers, as oak gives off acid vapours. If your chests or drawers are of oak, damage to textiles will be minimised by a washable cotton lining.

Insects

Check textiles regularly for signs of moth or carpet beetle. Mothballs can be used but it is better to inspect on a regular basis. Make sure that the textiles and their surroundings are not allowed to become dirty, as dirt will attract the pests.

CLEANING

Your textiles will be so varied that you will need a variety of approaches. It is important to establish good, regular cleaning routines. If necessary contact the DAC textile adviser for guidance.

Many modern textiles which are in everyday use can be cleaned by normal domestic methods. Most of the white linen can be washed. Damage can be minimised by avoiding biological detergents and bleaching, and by using soft water if possible. If the linen can be dried flat you will not need to iron and thereby risk heat damage.

For everyday upholstery and kneelers, the ideal cleaner is the Hoover Dustette which gently removes damaging grit and dirt. Industrial vacuum cleaners can be too powerful and commercial dry-cleaning of carpets or tapestry is not recommended.

Special cleaning techniques are needed for the more complicated items: embroidered fabrics, old or fragile textiles, multi-coloured items and even some white linen. Expert advice should be sought before you start to clean or great damage can be caused.

REPAIR

Whatever the item, new or old, the general principle is that all repairs should be reversible.

Modern items which are used on an everyday basis can be mended by normal methods. Always sew and never use adhesives which can harden and discolour and which cannot be removed.

On the other hand the methods used to repair and support old and valuable textiles are not the same as those used for household items. Darning or patching with the wrong method or material can cause damage. It is always wise to seek professional advice.

Where a particularly important item is involved, the option normally recommended will be conservation: ie, keeping the item in a repaired state and in the optimum conditions.

Restoration, which is to return the item to its original glory, may not be possible.

STORAGE

Careful storage will minimise damage but again will depend upon the item involved, its purpose, material and fragility.

Wherever possible most vestments should be kept flat, wrapped and interleaved with acid-free tissue paper. Only vestments in good condition should be hung. Make sure the hangers are the right shape for the item; a cope, for example, is cut differently from a chasuble. Hangers should be padded and the hooks should not touch the neck edge of the garment. Larger objects such as copes may have to be folded. In this case every fold should be padded, again with acid-free tissue paper, and the textile should be stored with the right side out. Ideally items should not be kept piled on top of each other; use separate containers or drawers or shelves.

Items which are woven or with a pile (such as tapestry, velvet or carpet), are damaged by folding and should be rolled for storage. Use a strong cardboard tube or plastic drainpipe, covered with acid-free tissue, and wrap the roll in cotton ticking. Be aware though that thick embroidery or fringing may be damaged by rolling and are best hung or stored flat. Frontals are difficult to handle, being heavy and unwieldy, and at least two people will be needed to move them. Any system of fastening to the altar should be kept in good repair and should distribute the weight of the frontal evenly. In storage each frontal should have its own cotton dust cover. Altar frontals are frequently stored together but make sure the size and number are not too great for the cabinet, causing unnecessary wear and tear.

Items on display should be carefully sited and in a suitable protective container. Ideally they should only be displayed for a limited period, but showcases can be covered with a curtain so that a fragile textile is only exposed for viewing. If the object is too large to be framed – perhaps a tapestry – it should be hung with an added sleeve, if a pole is used, or Velcro for a wooden batten. Again, seek specialist advice.

SOURCES OF ADVICE

This leaflet can only offer general points; it cannot possibly cover the full range of textile items to be found in a church. For initial help, perhaps in setting up a cleaning and storage routine, or where identifying what textiles should or should not be in daily use, please contact the DAC secretary who can put you in contact with the DAC textile advisor.

Further advice and basic training can be obtained, normally at no charge to the parish, from a variety of sources. And finally, there are a number of conservation specialists in the Bristol area. Again the DAC secretary will put you in touch.

Books are available on various aspects of the subject of textiles. Particularly recommended are the following:-

“A Stitch in Time”. Guidelines for the care of textiles. Published by the Council for the Care of Churches. Price £2.50 plus postage, available from Church House Publishing (tel 020 7898 1300, www.chpublishing.co.uk).

The National Trust Manual of Housekeeping. Obtainable direct from the National Trust, 36 Queen Anne’s Gate, London SW1H 9AS (tel 020 7222 9251, fax 020 7222 5097).

FINAL CHECKLIST

- 1 Textiles are an investment – with respect and care they will last much longer.
- 2 Keep an inventory of all the textiles that the PCC owns and allocate someone to look after them.
- 3 Analyse what type of item you have. Are some older or more valuable than others? Do some need special care? Do you need to seek advice?
- 4 Prevent damage – this is more efficient and less expensive than repair.
- 5 Look at storage – improve if necessary – adapt to the individual item.
- 6 Establish good cleaning routines.
- 7 Inspect your textiles regularly. Carry out “a stitch in time” where appropriate. Arrange for professional repairs if necessary.
- 8 Have appropriate training.
- 9 Consult the DAC textile adviser or other specialists, as necessary.

USEFUL ADDRESSES

Church Buildings Council

Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3NZ tel. 020 7898 1866

Web-site: www.churchcare.co.uk

National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS)

NADFAS House, 8 Guilford Street, London WC1N 1DA tel. 020 7430 0730

www.nadfas.org.uk

The Royal School of Needlework

Hampton Court, Surrey KT18 9AU tel. 020 8943 1432

www.royal-needlework.co.uk

The Victoria and Albert Museum

Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL tel. 020 7942 2000 www.vam.ac.uk

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