



Introduction

Textiles contribute greatly to the character of church interiors. Many items may have been made by members of the congregation, past and present, or have other strong local associations. They all need to be cared for a way that is appropriate for the nature and condition of those materials.

This guidance will help you identify the signs of damage to church textiles and understand the causes of damage. You will also find practical maintenance tips and guidance on how to address the conservation needs of historic objects.

Often in a range of styles and materials and from different historical periods, the pieces may be:

- embroidered ceremonial clothing such as vestments, copes and stoles
- other decorative items such as altar cloths, frontals, decorative panels, banners and kneelers (hassocks)
- historical relics such as old flags
- more 'domestic' items such as carpets, curtains and drapes

If you have military banners in your church special rules apply to their care. These are explained in guidance available on our [website](#).

Signs of damage

You should regularly check textile items in your church for damage. Look for the following signs:

- thin and broken threads and fibres
- a dusty, dirty appearance
- staining and watermarks
- weakened seams, with loose or broken stitching
- fading of colours where exposed to light
- the smell of mould when the item is taken out of storage
- evidence of insect infestation, such as moth-holes
- corrosion of metal fittings and dulling/blackening of silver embroidery

Causes of damage

The main causes of damage to church textiles are:

- **Wear and tear.** Many church textiles such as vestments, frontals, kneelers, pulpit falls, will be in suitable condition for regular use. However the most fragile or delicate items may need to be stored away carefully and brought out only on very special occasions.
- **Direct sunlight** will fade and weaken most fibres so care must be taken in selecting the position where a textile object is sited for permanent display.
- **Dust and dirt** is not only unsightly, but can contain damaging pollutants from the atmosphere.
- **Insects**, particularly moths, will chew holes in textiles and cause them to disintegrate. They are attracted by dirty textiles, particularly wool.
- **High relative humidity.** Warm, damp conditions encourage mould, and a sudden drop in temperature can cause condensation and water damage.
- **Water damage** can mark and distort fabrics and can cause colours to run.
- **Inadequate storage** may result in permanent creasing and crushing as well as many of the above problems.
- **Inadequate display cases** may accumulate condensation.
- **Inappropriate repairs** can weaken the original material.
- **Inappropriate alterations**, particularly of clothing, may have diminished its historical significance.
- **Inappropriate cleaning and handling** can damage fragile historic textiles.

Maintenance

Protection

- Protect textiles from direct sunlight. Position them out of direct light, or consider using curtains in front of the object. Rare items on display can have a time-limited light which is activated only for viewing.
- Maintain cool, dry conditions as far as possible.

Cleaning/dusting

- For textiles in good condition, you can remove dust using a vacuum cleaner on a low suction setting with a small square of net or gauze held over the nozzle with an elastic band. Never use a brush fitting.
- Only vacuum when necessary. This may only be about once a year. Test a small area to see if a visible greyish-brown fluffy layer of dust is removed. If there is none there is no need to vacuum yet.
- Consider protecting precious textile items from dust and dirt behind glass. Take specialist advice on the design and siting of the case.
- Regularly inspect walls behind hanging items and display cases for damp and signs of damage. Ideally textiles should not be sited against external walls for display.

Storage and handling

- When handling large and heavy textiles, copes, altar frontals and even chasubles, it is essential to have 2-3 people to assist with the handling of the object.
- Vestments in good condition may be hung up, but ensure the hangers are well padded and the right shape to support the whole length of the shoulders.
- Where possible, keep other textiles flat in a drawer or box. Wrap and pad them with acid-free tissue paper. Use separate boxes or shelves for each object; do not stack several textiles in layers. Label outside of box or drawer with written details of what is within and, if possible, a small photograph.

- Store copes in a cope chest or hung by the centre back over a padded roller. Remove stiffened hoods and store separately.
- Avoid handling old and fragile textiles where possible. Where they have to be moved, support their weight when moving them.

Carpets

- Use a natural felt underlay for carpets to allow damp to evaporate.
- Store carpets rolled with the right side out, horizontally but not directly on the floor.

Get specialist advice

Consult an accredited conservator for advice on cleaning and repairing multicoloured or embroidered pieces and old and fragile items. Do not use water, modern cleaning products or dry cleaning.

You can find out more on the care and conservation of textiles on the [Institute of Conservation](#) (ICON) website.

Further information and advice

The conservation of textiles is a specialist task. If an item is showing signs of damage you should contact a professionally accredited conservator to inspect it and advise you on required treatments. You can obtain details of accredited conservators on the ICON [Conservation Register](#).

Some conservators may charge for visits and the preparation of [conservation reports](#) but we can help you with a grant towards this initial work. Our [Churchcare grants](#) also support conservation projects.

The conservation of significant items of church textiles is likely to require formal approval. If you are a church, contact your [Diocesan Advisory Committee \(DAC\) Secretary](#) at an early stage about a faculty. If you are a cathedral please contact your [Fabric Advisory Committee \(FAC\)](#) for advice in the first instance. Please follow the links above to get the contact details of your DAC and FAC.

