

Collections Management and Conservation

by Curator, Philip Magrath

I am delighted to have the opportunity to reflect on the curatorial achievements made following my initial guidance which was to professionalise the Museum. This covers a multitude of activities under the heading of collections management, and I quickly identified two areas for attention. Firstly, the display itself and secondly, the need for preventative conservation. The first would make an immediate impact and the second would be largely unseen.

By modern museum standards in 2015 Emsworth Museum could be classed as 'of the old style'. Most of the cabinets although functional had seen better days and I noticed how 'busy' many of them had become. In other words, too many objects crammed into small areas and oftentimes label text too small for comfortable reading. Several objects were moved into storage and labels were upgraded. Old curtains and other textiles used as backdrops were removed and replaced with modern materials.



Old cabinet showing maritime trades and tools

The most notable advance in museum display came a few years ago when we were able to replace two of our older display cases with two state-of-the-art models from

Germany. Florea design of Frankfurt provided showcases of museum-grade quality in terms of conservation and functionality as well as airtightness, non-damaging lighting, security, smoothness of operation, easier maintenance and long-lasting appearance. They now house the Free French and WWII display and the Edwardian wedding dress.



Modern cabinets with the WWII, Free French and Edwardian wedding dress displays

Preventative conservation involves the practical measures taken to slow down the inevitability of material deterioration which all matter is subject to, and some objects more than others depending on material type, proximity of metals and storage conditions. The Museum stores' wood racking was of the highest concern.

Wood has great advantages for museum use. It is tough, hard and durable but most wood species are naturally acidic. Hardwoods like oak can release both acetic and formic acids due to the breakdown of hemicellulose influenced by factors such as fluctuating temperature and relative humidity. The wood composite board MDF or medium-density fibreboard has immense strength making it especially attractive for racking, but it is especially acidic due to the process involved in its manufacture. A preferable option was to strip out the wood and replace it with modern metal racking which was achieved at no cost.

Although some preventative conservation techniques are beyond our control such as temperature and relative humidity, in the absence of air conditioning and central heating other simpler practical measures are possible. These involve the use of acid-free tissue, acid-free card, Renaissance wax, plastazote and insect traps.

Acid-free tissue resembles the tissue that off-licences wrapped up our bottles of wine and spirits in in former times but with an entirely neutral acidity/alkalinity profile. It has a multitude of uses from wrapping store objects to being made into supportive bundles for textiles, especially for jacket arms when they are taken off display and placed into close-season storage.

Acid-free card available in sheets can be used to make storage boxes of any size and represent a much cheaper option than those ready-made from conservation suppliers. These in effect create a micro-climate for the stored object and we use them for delicate books and for textiles such as Black Rod's attire, the Edwardian wedding dress and the Free French jacket.

Renaissance wax is microcrystalline wax and is used extensively in museums for non-intrusive light cleaning and for providing a layer of protection. It can be used on all surfaces and is the best material for removing the dreaded Blu Tack currently banned in the Museum!

Plastazote is a lightweight, crosslinked low-density polyethylene block foam discovered in 1962 by the Zotefoam company. It was in immediate demand for medical and healthcare applications and due to the purity of its materials was recommended for museum use. It is entirely neutral and available in different thicknesses and colours. We use it in grey or black and of 3 mm thickness to line store shelves or display cabinets safe in the knowledge that no colour or corrosive material will degrade the object.

Insect traps are small, easily assembled card units containing an extremely sticky surface.

This exudes pheromones which invading insects find more attractive than the material surrounding it and come to a sticky end. It is both interesting but worrying to report that some insects are now developing a double annual life cycle thanks to global warming!

Controlling the deleterious effects of ultra-violet light is another challenge facing the museum curator/conservator. Two ways in which this was achieved was to apply blocking film to the windows and replacing the old deteriorated vertical blinds with museum grade Roman blinds from Sun-X of Worthing.

In 2018 the Museum committee were able to successfully achieve accreditation renewal from Arts Council England and one of the major changes which found reflection in our Collections Management Policy was to only consider taking objects into the collection that had a demonstrable link with Emsworth and the parish. This did not prevent the Trust from having to use external storage at cost for about a year before being able to accept the kind offer of free storage from Geoffrey Marsh at Marsh Plant, New Lane, Havant.

This year the focus has been more on collections management and specifically ensuring that object information on the Museum database is accurate and detailed. This has raised importance since the database is available for public access. Between November last year and April this year the in-house Museum store was completely emptied and the store cleaned. Exact locations were assigned to each object, photographs taken and the details recorded on the database with a note for any other necessary action such as object number marking or conservation.

I often wonder what the next decade will bring. It may be linked with the fire station and its survival but for the moment the old has to work as best it can with the new. QR codes have been introduced and it maybe that these will replace the good old-fashioned museum label.