



Cleaning is an effective preservation measure

This sheet will outline:

- when to clean;
- what tools to use;
- techniques;
- precautions to take.



Dirt is surface debris that has accumulated over time on or within an archive document. Soot, pollutants, mould spores and skin cells can all be found in the grey dirt which can become embedded into the surface. Sooty deposits can be darker with oily characteristics.

Dirt can obscure the content of a document and be transferred to other items when handled. It can also cause abrasion to the surface and is attractive to pests. Mould spores within the dirt can germinate in damp conditions. Dirt is often acidic and can cause discolouration to paper; it will also permanently stain if it becomes wet.

Loose dirt

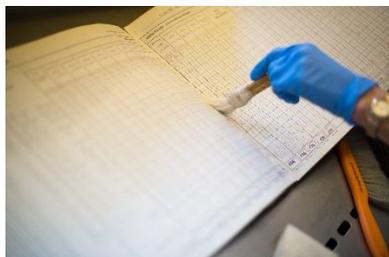
Loose dirt can be removed particularly effectively and should be a priority to address. This can be done with appropriate brushes or sponges which will lift the dirt away without spreading or smearing. All surface cleaning is carried out dry.

Ingrained dirt

Ingrained dirt is embedded into a surface. An assessment should be made as to whether cleaning will significantly improve the condition of the document; cleaning which is intended only to improve the appearance of the item, may be less of a priority. Ingrained dirt should be addressed by or with advice from a conservator.

Risks to the document

- Dirt may be spread to clean areas of the document. Mask parts you are not working on with a clean sheet of paper. Brush thoroughly after cleaning.
- Loose inks may be lifted by surface cleaning. Test a small, unobtrusive area first. Treat pencil with extreme caution.
- Weak areas of a document, around tears, mould damage are easily damaged further during cleaning. Take extra care or avoid the area altogether.
- Smearing can occur when heavy dirt is carried across a surface. Use a dabbing action to avoid this.
- Uneven cleaning - prevented by a light, overall clean rather than trying to remove ingrained dirt over a large area.



Tools

Soft, brushes of goat or pony hair will help gently dust dirt and debris from surfaces. A stiffer, but pliant brush such as a dry shaving brush can be suitable for the outside of books. Ensure metal ferrules do not catch or scratch the document, perhaps tape up any sharp edges. Clean the brush regularly and ensure it is dry before use.

Vulcanised rubber sponges ("chemical" or "smoke" sponges) are effective at picking up and trapping sooty or mouldy dirt. Edges of the sponge can be cut off once dirty and small pieces cut to deal with delicate areas. A "dabbing" action will help prevent smearing and streaking.

Purer polyvinyl chloride erasers (e.g. Staedtler Mars) can reduce ingrained dirt from paper. The eraser can be grated using a nutmeg grater and the granules carefully rubbed over the paper surface.



Techniques

Use a clean flat surface, cover with clean scrap paper and open out the document flat, supported with weights. Cover areas you are not working on to protect them. Test an area and examine carefully for signs of damage to the inks or paper. Clean the front of the item first, ensuring all debris is brushed away before turning over. Repeat on the reverse. Clean tools after completion.

Health and safety

Dirt can be irritating to hands; wear disposable gloves if this is a problem. Wash and dry hands regularly, particularly before eating. Wear overalls to protect clothes.

Inhalation of dust is also an irritant. Wearing a mask (FFP2 or 3) will prevent this. Consider others who are using the space too.

Mould is also an irritant and repeated exposure can cause sensitisation. Cleaning with specialist equipment is recommended.