

Caring for museum collections

The condition of objects is a vital factor in our ability to be able to display them to the public, items in poor condition often remain hidden in the stores.

CLARE HOWE
Torquay Museum

For our Secret Museum exhibition, we will be placing un-conserved objects on display to explain the processes involved.

Museum collections require constant upkeep and monitoring, particularly those in store, where if a problem occurs it is much less likely that it will be noticed.

One of the main threats to stored collections are changes in temperature and humidity (moisture in the air), these need to be kept stable to ensure the artefacts are not adversely affected.

Museums use relative humidity as the main indicator of environmental stability. This is a percentage figure showing how much water is in the air. The actual amount of water changes as the temperature rises or falls

and the warmer it is the more moisture air can hold.

If the relative humidity changes quickly some objects will swell or contract causing the materials to become brittle and crack.

If humidity is too high mould can grow and metal items can rust; but if it is too low glues can dry out and objects can start to come apart.

A figure of between 45 to 60 per cent humidity is ideal and this can be maintained with the use of dehumidifiers and heating; but as this needs to remain constant it is important that it is regularly monitored.

Pests can also be problematic. Museum or carpet beetles, silverfish and moths are particularly common pests that can eat objects.

It is important to have traps



The 18th century marriage bowl had been poorly repaired, partially with sticky tape

Pictures: TORQUAY MUSEUM

which are regularly checked to monitor this.

There are also objects that need conservation. This means that the object is treated to consolidate it and preserve as much of it as possible.

All of the changes made to an object should also be reversible, so that if something needs to be undone it can be.

trained by a conservator.

In 2018, Torquay Museum undertook an ambitious project, funded by South West Museums Development, to conserve a large collection of butterflies, including repining fallen insects where their pins had corroded.

During the project drawers housing almost 10,000 butterflies were cleaned and recorded.

Other items require a qualified conservator, but due to cost, staff must carefully preserve their current condition, until funds allow for conservation or the item

becomes a priority for display.

A good example of this is an 18th century marriage bowl which is part of the museum's ceramic collection. It was broken when it was donated to the museum and had been poorly repaired, partially with sticky tape.

This would take a conservator around two weeks to repair and cost up to £400.

Unfortunately, as it is not a priority for display and it is in a stable condition, the bowl is carefully packed in a box for now.

Some simple tasks can be carried out by museum staff who have been



A drawer of harmful insects destroyed by museum beetle.



Inter-Line
Building Supplies

PAIGNTON • BRIXHAM • EXETER • TOTNES



Inter-Line
Building Supplies

Your Local Independent Family Run Builders Merchant

Serving the Building Industry

IT'S EASY ONLINE, WITH INTER-LINE!

Proudly Supporting Torbay Weekly