

## Access to damaged, fragile or contaminated records

One of the joys of archival research is the opportunity to handle original records; to touch and read a document that may have been handled by a prominent national leader or by one's forebears. Wherever possible the National Archives provides opportunities for researchers to use original records in our research centres. But there are occasions when, in order to safeguard the long term preservation of records and to protect the good health of those using them, the National Archives has to withhold from public use records that are damaged, fragile or contaminated by dangerous substances. The National Archives is able to do this under provisions of Sections 36 and 37 of the *Archives Act 1983*.

### **Which records are affected by these conditions?**

If a record you are seeking to use is withheld because of a preservation concern it will normally be because the record is affected by one or more of the following conditions:

The record has decayed to such an extent that the information contained within it is no longer readable. Such records include items that are disintegrating because of the materials used to create them (such as iron gall ink, which corrodes papers) or because they have been badly damaged by insects or other pests.

The record is in a format or condition that means it needs to be stored in a carefully controlled environment. This includes photographs, which are stored in low temperature and relative humidity to ensure their preservation.

The record is in an extremely fragile condition and is at risk of further damage from handling. Such items include records constructed from thin, delicate papers.

The record is currently receiving preservation attention, such as conservation treatments, repackaging or digitisation and so cannot be accessed immediately.

The record is contaminated by a potentially dangerous substance, such as pesticides, asbestos or mould, which may cause or trigger allergies and respiratory problems.

The National Archives has in place a range of proactive preservation programs, meaning that very few records are completely withheld from public access on these grounds.

## **Can I still access these records?**

In most cases, you will be able to access the record in some way, normally one of the following:

### **A copy of the record is provided**

In cases where the original record is stored under particular environmental conditions (such as photographs or film), is a large size and awkward to handle (such as certain maps or plans), is in a very fragile state, is affected by mould or is possibly contaminated by a dangerous substance, it is usually possible to provide a copy of the record for use in the research centre.

The copy will normally take the form of a photocopy, a photographic print or a digital copy.

If the record to be copied is in an audiovisual format (such as a film, video or sound recording), delays may be experienced in having a copy made. The National Archives does not have the facilities to copy every type of audiovisual format, and it may be necessary to have copying done by external suppliers. In some cases damaged items will require treatment before they can be copied.

### **The record may be viewed under supervision**

Where a record is very fragile and cannot be readily copied for use in the research centre, you may be asked to view it under the supervision of trained preservation staff. This is common with large books or volumes made from delicate paper, tightly bound volumes, or with maps, plans or other large format documents that are in poor condition. The conservator may need to set up a suitable workspace, or instruct you in correct handling techniques that will minimise damage to the record. Where the record is extremely fragile the conservator may sit with you to turn the pages or otherwise handle the record.

### **Access is delayed while preservation treatment is carried out**

Records that are receiving conservation treatments or are being repackaged or digitised, may not be immediately accessible. Such records will usually become available once the treatment or project is completed.

### **A copy cannot be made of the record**

It will normally be possible for us to provide a copy of a record for you to purchase online through RecordSearch. This may not be possible if for some reason (such as those listed above under *The record may be viewed under supervision*) the process of copying would be likely to cause damage to the record.

### **The record cannot be made available at all**

If a record is in a severely degraded condition the National Archives may have to withhold access altogether.

## **Can I appeal?**

If you are refused access to a record in the form in which you have requested it because of concerns for its preservation, you will be given a statement that sets out the reasons for this decision. If you are not satisfied with the reason you may apply for an internal reconsideration of the decision. This is a reassessment of the decision under section 42 of the Archives Act, and is undertaken by a different person from the one who made the initial decision. For information about your right to have access decisions reviewed see *Fact sheet 46 - Why we refuse access*, and *Fact sheet 12 - What to do if we refuse you access*.

## **Further information**

Information about the appropriate handling of archival records is provided in our *Fact sheet 3 - Research centre rules*.