

A collection care milestone: 2000 items through quarantine

State Library Victoria's Preservation team recently celebrated a milestone, marking 2000 collection items passing through quarantine since 2009, when the program was established. The quarantine program ensures that collections entering the Library are clean, free of pests and mould, and safe to handle. Quarantine is a central component of the Library's preventive conservation program and can involve a range of assessments and treatments, as determined by the Library's expert technicians. These steps reduce the risk of contamination and damage to Library collections.

In July 2009, the first collection items to enter quarantine were a series of mounted photographs. Since then, the team has peered inside myriad boxes, envelopes and bags, unrolled and de-framed plans, drawings and artworks, and turned hundreds of pages – brushing, vacuuming and freezing as they go.

Responding to fishy textiles

Preservation Manager Kate Holloway explains how the team made the decision to quarantine a recent acquisition from the donated Saunders Family Archive (YMS 16332).

'When assessing a large textile component in this collection, two scarves were discovered, smelling distinctly of acetic acid – think fish and chips. This

*A mouse skin glued to the inside cover of *An atlas of modern geography: constructed from the latest observations and discoveries for the use of schools* (1842) by J Arrowsmith, from the library of Thomas Scott. RARETS 912 AR698A.*

1 51' 2 27
 7 41 121
 9 2 206
 1 11 271

54.

Jerry
 George Scott
 George Scott
 44/19



1001

STONE
 WALL

Signed by George Scott



Left The preservation team placing the scarves from the Saunders archive in the freezer. Photo by Kate Holloway. **Right** Checking the Saunders scarves using A-D strips. The green strip indicates the presence of cellulose acetate. Photo by Christine Mizzi.

indicated the presence of deteriorating cellulose acetate. Acetate is autocatalytic, meaning it feeds off its own deterioration and affects other materials stored nearby.

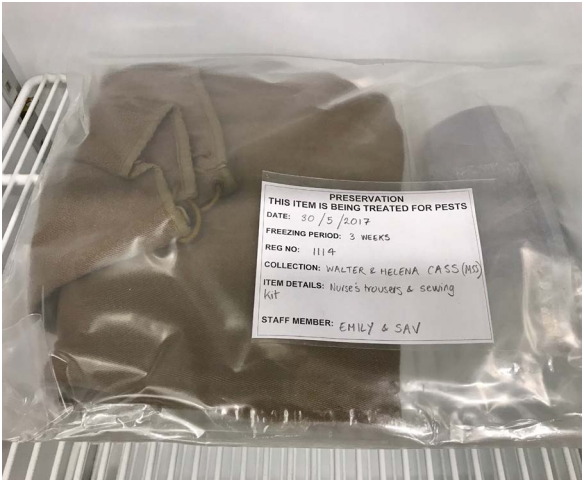
‘We decided to separate the scarves from the rest of the collection and stored them in a well-ventilated enclosure to reduce the build-up of acetic acid and slow down the deterioration. Their condition will be checked and monitored over time.’

Frozen winter woollies

Freezing textiles ensures they are free of pests, such as silverfish, carpet beetle and clothes moth. Freezing for three to four weeks at temperatures of minus 18 to minus 21 degrees ensures all lifecycles (egg, pupae and adult) are gently but effectively extinguished.

Preservation staff carefully wrapped and froze woollen military uniforms from the Walter and Helena Cass Archive (YMS 15488) and HD Campbell Collection (MS 14447), and clothing worn by Andrew Keith Jack in Antarctica (YMS 14946).

Kate explains: ‘Jackets, trousers and under garments were frozen for four weeks. They were wrapped tightly in plastic to ensure direct condensation wouldn’t cause damage. Jackets had their metal buttons removed, to avoid the risk of corrosion. Once the items were returned to room temperature, they were checked for pest activity, vacuumed and released from quarantine.’



Left Frozen trousers and sewing kit from the Walter and Helena Cass Archive.
Right Preparing textiles for freezing. Photo by Leah Williams.

Unexpected discoveries

Preservation staff have the privilege of seeing collections as they start their Library journey. Sometimes these collections contain the most unexpected items.

A Tasmanian family donated a rare book collection in 2011. Among the items were a number of books that had obviously belonged to the younger members of the family.

Kate recalls: 'As the boxes were opened and the books were checked, a shriek was heard, as a preservation technician discovered the skin of a mouse carefully glued inside a front cover.' The book – a 19th-century atlas – was badly damaged, with loose or missing pages and plates. 'It seems young George Scott, in 1857, had doodled and drawn his way through the volume, signing his name over again, while adding colour and coding to land masses.'

Whether this was a memorial by a boy devoted to his now-deceased pet or a punishment for a greedy pest, the decision was made to retain George's mouse within the pages of the atlas. The book was furnished with a custom-made box and sits safely, skin and all, in the rare books collection.

Unusual opalotypes

In August 2022, the Library received a collection of large, framed photographs, discovered under a Melbourne house about ten years before by its new owners (Collection of Elizabeth Maisey, uncatalogued).



Three circular portraits with their frames removed, awaiting conservation assessment. Photo by Savina Hopkins.

The portraits appear to be members of early Ballarat family the Suttons. Henry Sutton (1855–1912) was born in a tent on the Ballarat goldfields and became a well-known Australian designer, engineer and inventor, contributing to early developments in electricity, aviation, photography and technology.

The framed portraits, along with a small quantity of household papers, were left behind by the house's previous owners – who were Sutton descendants – and, more recently, offered to the Library.

There were four wooden frames: three portraits in circular frames with padded velvet mounts and one image in a rectangular frame. This acquisition was unusual due to the heavy glass onto which the three portraits were printed. The preservation technicians sought advice from the conservation team, who determined that the photographs were, in fact, opalotypes. This is an unusual and uncommon form of photography produced between 1857 and the 1930s by Glover & Bold of Liverpool, England.

The opalotype process involved exposing negatives or a carbon print directly onto opaque, translucent glass, which had been painted with a light-sensitive emulsion. Sometimes hand-tinted with colour, it resulted in soft, delicate detail, similar to pastel or watercolour media.

'The photos were carefully separated from their frames and mounts and set aside,' Kate says of the preservation process. 'Even unframing them offered up treasures – as well as the expected insect detritus, there were full sheets of *The Argus* and *The Ballarat Star*, both dated 1885. The wooden frames, velvet mounts (showing extensive pest damage) and internal supports were frozen



A page of *The Ballarat Star* used as padding in the circular opalotypes. Photo by Savina Hopkins.

for four weeks to ensure any active infestation was extinguished.’

Once a collection passes through the assessment and treatment processes, it is re-housed before it continues its journey to the descriptions team. Descriptions staff carry out detailed listing and cataloguing before it is added to the Library’s online catalogue. The Library’s storage team helps it to its final home, whether onsite or in offsite storage, where it can be requested by any Library member.

‘The world of quarantine at State Library Victoria is a busy one, with a wide variety of collections arriving each day,’ says Kate. ‘The collections can be large, small, clean and dirty. They can offer up surprises and unexpected discoveries. I often wonder what treasures will have been revealed by the time we hit 3000!’