

# COVID-19

## IMPACT ON WORKING PRACTICES AT THE UK PARLIAMENT

### A CLEANING PROGRAMME FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY HISTORIC WORKING COLLECTION



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Loredana is Conservation Manager for the Historic Furniture and Decorative Collections of the Houses of Parliament of the UK.

Loredana is an accredited (Italy) and experienced practical conservator, equally adept at complex treatments of traditional objects and contemporary art. She has worked as senior conservator at a London-based private company, before taking the role within the UK Parliament's Heritage Collections team in late 2019, moving from treatment conservation to preventive conservation. Loredana is subject leader in leather Conservation for the students of the MSc in Conservation at the Università di Torino and visiting lecturer at University College London (UCL). Loredana is a member of the advisory Committee of the Tainan Art Museum of Taiwan and member of the committee advisory for the Leather Conservation Center of Northampton (LCC).

## Introduction

Following the COVID19 outbreak, the Parliament of the United Kingdom required an accessible and safe environment to carry out its functions.

To prevent extensive damage caused by inappropriate common household disinfecting agents on historic furniture in daily use by both House of Lords and House of Commons, the Historic Furniture and Decorative Arts (HFDA) Collections' team published a custom policy to mitigate the risk. The guidelines aimed to assist those involved with the cleaning and safety of the Historic fabric and furniture during the pandemic.

Bespoke solutions were designed for the cleaning and sanitising of the historic surfaces exposed to handling, touching and use, after studying available literature on SARS-CoV-2 behaviour and identify the common material types composing the historic collection. Upon receiving official approval from PHE, a trusted Company was tasked with mixing and supplying the appropriately bottled and labelled solutions. The HFDA team delivered custom training to the housekeeping teams.

## Parliamentary Collections Care during the Pandemic

The World Health Organization declared the outbreak of COVID-19 to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and a pandemic on 11 March 2020. In the United Kingdom, the announcement was soon followed by the absolute must "Stay at home", resulting in the national lockdown. As many other professionals in the field, the Heritage team devoted to the safekeeping of the UK Parliamentary Collections set up an improvised home-office and started working remotely.

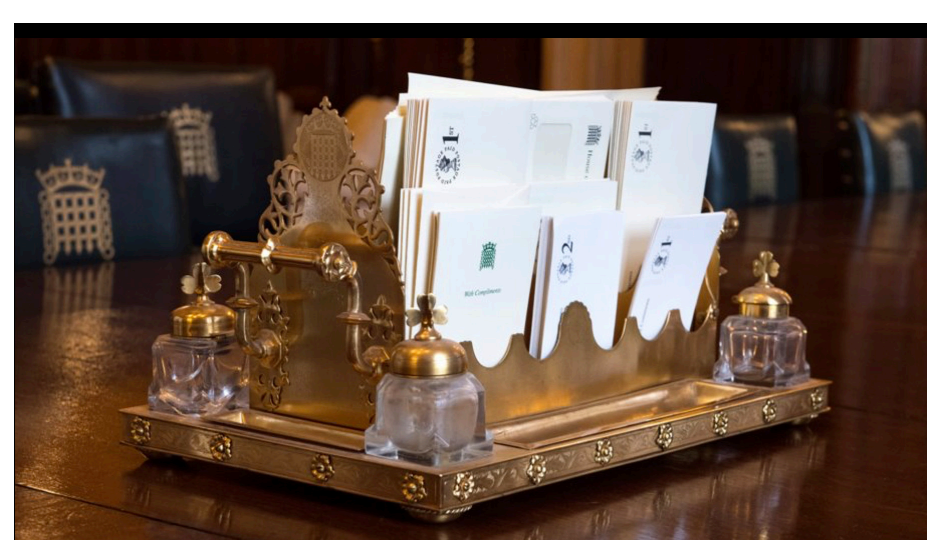


The Heritage Collections in the Palace of Westminster are of national and international significance with many of items specifically designed to complement the interiors of the new Palace of Westminster, a Grade 1 listed building and UNESCO World Heritage site. The collections form a fundamental part of the Palace's heritage, not just of the building's significance, but of its identity. They are the material culture of Parliament, invested with meaning through their association and continued use in the democratic process, both ceremonial and in daily use.

When lockdown was declared, unlikely other Museums and Heritage sites, Parliament never closed its doors to the core activity that enables the efficient government of the Country. The Historic Furniture and Decorative Arts (HFDA) collections contain over 10,000 objects, including chairs, tables, desks, mirrors, silver, ceramics, lighting, stationery, etc. Mainly consistent of objects designed in the gothic revival style by A.W.N. Pugin for the rebuilding of the new Palace of Westminster after the fire of 1835. There is also a large collection of items designed by Gilbert Scott for the House of Commons in 1950 after the Second World War bombings. These working collections support the work of Parliament: many of these are in daily use across the Parliamentary estate in offices, meeting rooms, dining spaces and the ceremonial areas of the palace such as the House of Commons and House of Lords chambers. Much of their value lies in their continued use for the purpose for which they were created, and as such their care and management



Clerk's Table by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and John Webb © Parliamentary Historic Furniture and Decorative Arts Collection, POW 01679  
Silver Gilt Stationery Rack By Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin © Parliamentary Historic Furniture and Decorative Arts Collection POW 09964  
X Frame Chair By Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and John Webb © Historic Furniture and Decorative Arts Collection, POW 06570  
Comport By Minton & Co. and Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin © Historic Furniture and Decorative Arts Collection, POW 00303



## COVID19 Handling and cleaning Historic Collections guidelines



The guidance was meant to assist the HFDA (Historic Furniture and Decorative Arts) and AF (Architectural Fabric) team and anyone directly and indirectly involved with the cleaning and safekeeping of the Historic fabric and furniture during the outbreak of the pandemic. Aim of these guidelines was to help educate and inform sustainable decisions on pandemic prevention and preparedness limiting the survival of the virus in the environments, safeguarding the Heritage Collections from the risk connected with unsuitable and inherently dangerous cleaning products and disinfection practice.

## Knowing the Virus to understand how to defend

Coronaviruses are named for their appearances under a microscope: the viruses look like they are covered with pointed structures around them like a corona, or a crown.

All viruses are bits of genetic code (RNA) that are surrounded and protected by proteins and in some cases an outside envelope of lipids.

It's this fatty envelope that elects the corona virus be susceptible to soap and water. When we wash the surfaces with soap and water that fatty envelope is washed away and it causes the virus to fall apart (some viruses like the Norovirus have a different kind of envelope and they are much harder to disinfect).

I consulted all the scientific publications at that time available to find out more about Covid 19 and its behaviour on heritage materials and surfaces. I discovered that Covid-19 virus can live varying lengths of time on different types of materials, although different studies had come out with discordant data. The virus was such a novelty at that time so that experiments were still ongoing or not gone through a thorough review yet.

The background study assisted with outlining the following guidelines and a cleaning routine strategy that could be as practical as possible, in consideration that the in-house cleaning teams were not Heritage professionals

1. Reduce handling of historic objects and surfaces as far as possible. Shelter in situ of objects exposed to touching or handling can be considered as a low risk preventive measure (e.g. Dispatch box).

2. Where possible, close the affected areas or rooms for 72 hours before attempting to clean. After this time the amount of virus contamination will have decreased substantially.

3. Bespoke cleaning products to be provided and cleaning staff to receive custom training

For the cleaning and sanitising of the historic surfaces exposed to handling, touching and use, we identify the common material types composing the collection: polished wood, leather, metals such as iron and brass. Based on this list, I designed cleaning solutions that were

- a) proved to be effective as disinfectant against SARS-CoV-2 virus based on the studied available;
- b) as safest as possible for our collection materials
- c) as practical as possible to be taken into practice by the cleaning teams.

Two solutions were designed and approved by Public Health England for their effectiveness as disinfectant against this particular virus:

**Solution A** for wooden and leather surfaces. To be rinsed off with deionised water.

**Solution B** for metals, such as knobs, handles and other touching points. The mixture being made and delivered upon order by a trusted supplier in the heritage sector, which appropriately labels and bottles the solutions. Cleaning teams were trained and periodic meetings held to ensure consistency and continuity.

