

Archival Care of Textiles and Other Objects

Advice for Girl Guide collections

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Introduction

There are many Girl Guide Districts out there with a lot of history behind them. Some have come, and some have gone, and many of their histories have been amalgamated and moved on, and sometimes become jumbled, or even lost.

Losing these histories would be a terrible shame. Guiding Heritage and Traditions is a Fundamental of the Australian Guide Program, as well as a core part of the Junior BP, BP and Queen's Guide Awards. You'll find that when Guides get their hands on their histories, they are fascinated, actively engaged and keen to learn more.

Quite aside from this, there is a great deal to be learned from the preservation of our historic textiles. Names, embroideries, odd shapes and variations lead to questions, which lead to research, which in many cases has gone on to change the given histories of Guiding and give us a better understanding of our background, as well as the people who were a part of it, including Lord Baden-Powell himself. But that story is for another day ...

I've written this document as a manual for local Girl Guide volunteers to use when sorting through cupboards. You're likely to find lots of surprises in there ... like the group who found letters from Lady Baden-Powell herself!

This manual is divided into sections covering the different types of material you may encounter in the typical combinations for Girl Guiding uniform and ceremonial. Throughout the text I've tried to provide basic information of the supplies I use, and at the end of the manual is a little bit about my own background as a historian, conservator, and professional historical costume consultant.

I hope you find your voyage of discovery as exciting as we have found ours, here at Archives!

Yours in Guiding,

Bess Elwell-Cook



Caring for Linen and Cotton Woven Cloth

The earliest Australian Girl Guide uniforms (until about the end of the 1950s) were made of either a cotton drill or a plain-woven linen or cotton blended cloth, while the badges on the sleeves were often made of wool through the 1920s and into the 1930s. If badges were still sitting around in the back of Captain's cupboard, these woollen badges continued to be handed out, even into the 1940s.

Later uniforms, of the sort with the pale blue shirts, were made of cotton headcloth until the late 1970s, when the availability of cheaper synthetics made these a more affordable option for parents on a budget.

From the 1940s through to the early 1970s, it is not uncommon to see proficiency badges hand-embroidered on navy blue or white waste uniform linen, or, for patrol emblems, to see them hand-embroidered on light (saxe) blue to match the scarf and shirt cloth.

While the backing fabrics are fairly sturdy, anything with hand embroidery will tend to be delicate. Hand embroidery on wool is even more so. This is further complicated by the addition of woollen, woven shoulder knots (the flappy bits on the left shoulder), pin badges, and the old-style annual service stars with their tiny felt-backing discs.



Assessing Uniforms for Wear

- Check seams for rotten stitching and tears.
- Check the rest of the cloth for tears, thin patches and signs of wear (including moth holes).
- If the cloth is very delicate, consider whether you are game to try cleaning it yourself, or whether it is best to contact a conservator (especially if the piece has provenance attaching it to someone significant).
- Check edges of all cloth badges for signs of fragility and detachment from the garment.
- Check all cloth badges for signs of being moth-eaten. Some may literally be in small pieces or about to disintegrate. This should be dealt with by a professional conservator, as it needs to be removed and mounted on gauze before individual cleaning.

Preparing Early Uniforms for Cleaning

Carefully remove pins, year stars and shoulder knots before washing, being careful not to lose felt discs and small parts.

Shoulder knots (before 1968) should be held in place by a safety pin hidden under the left epaulette. If they are not, now is the time to gently remove them by unpicking, and sew them together using back stitch along the fold. The pin

remains separate. These can be gently hand-washed separately to avoid too much agitation.

Any particularly loose cloth badges should be carefully photographed for position, and removed for washing with the shoulder knot, then returned to their correct place after cleaning.

Washing Early Uniforms

Run a bath of tepid (blood-heat, or basically neither hot nor cold to touch) water, adding a capful of eucalyptus wool wash under the running tap.

Place the uniform in the bath and gently agitate with your hands, keeping the uniform basically flat.

Drain the bath after ten minutes (and a bit more agitation) and run again to loosen more dirt. Finally rinse the uniform under the tap and lay it flat for two hours to drain as much as possible. *DO NOT WRING.*

Roll the uniform in a towel to remove excess water (as you would for a knitted jumper) and dry flat, out of direct sunlight.

Loose badges, shoulder knots and felts should be carefully washed in a low dish in the same way, dried flat, and reapplied in the appropriate manner with careful stitches underneath once dry. If the edges of felt badges are extremely worn (and it hasn't already been done by the original owner), use matching *pure cotton* thread (not any old synthetic: Gutermann is best), doubled, and blanket stitch around them ~3mm apart before reapplying, and using the blanket stitches as an anchor point underneath.

Steam press gently from the inside, pressing badges into an old towel on the outside.

Cloth Hats, Ties and Scarves

Cloth hats and accessories can also be washed in the above manner.

Be especially careful not to stretch bias-cut ties out of shape while washing.

Caring for Wool

Many early leaders' uniforms (and some later Sea Ranger skirts) are made of wool serge and require careful treatment. Dry-cleaning is not recommended.

Check linings to ensure they are not made of silk, which may be shattering or shredding with age. Even if you wash undamaged silk, you can cause this process of shattering to begin. If the lining is silk, the outfit *must* go to a conservator. Mould will only cause more damage, so its march must be stopped.

Washing Woollen Garments (Including Knitting)

Remove all cords and badges and place in a bag so they don't get lost.

Items not lined with silk should be safe to wash. Treat in the same manner as for linen and cotton uniforms (it's the gentlest way).

Allow all garments to drain in the bottom of the bath for two hours, then lift them out, supporting the weight of the garments *fully* in your hands to avoid stretch (especially with knits) and roll in thick towels to remove excess water before drying flat in the shade.

Berets

Berets are made of felted wool and can be washed in the same manner, even with a leather band (leaders' berets). They must be dried slowly and without application of heat. Some Laceol leather conditioner can be carefully added with a cloth afterwards.



Caring for Metal Badges

You've probably seen the old-style brass and bronze Promise badges (originally known as Tenderfoot badges), and occasionally seen them worn flat with polishing. This is usually because polishing compounds such as Brasso and Silvo are abrasive, and will slowly wear away at the metal until all the detail is lost.

The added issue with using these compounds is that it sticks in corners and is hard to get out without use of that other abrasive: a toothbrush. It also breaks down enamel, common on camp badges and Ranger Promise badges of earlier times.

Basically, anything before about 1979 needs to be cleaned occasionally, unless it has a glazed surface similar to the surface of modern World badges, or the Ranger badges with the boomerangs under the trefoil.

True enamels, too, need cleaning if they have the brass/bronze backing.

Some metal badges, such as those for Commissioners, and older Australian Friendship badges, are actually made of sterling silver (in an age when silver was a far cheaper metal than it is today!). To find out if the badge is made of silver, you should find stamps on the back saying either 'sterling silver', '925', or silver hallmarks, which are very useful for dating! Ask your local jeweller to date the piece, if your badge has a full set of hallmarks on the back.

Safety Chains

Many of us have older Promise badges passed down from mothers, aunts and grandparents. It's fine to wear these, but a good idea to add a safety chain in case of loss. Please ask your jeweller to do this by adding a chain *around the stem of the trefoil* and *not* by drilling through a part of the badge.

Cleaning Older Badges

Once again, we must stress *never use Brasso!*

- For all-metal (that is, no enamel), it is always best to ask your jeweller to clean your badges. These will be cleaned thoroughly using an ultrasonic cleaner and polishing mop.
- For enamelled badges, these must not be placed in an ultrasonic cleaner, so ask your jeweller for advice, or to do the cleaning for you.

If you must clean your badges at home (particularly if you want to do it weekly), the safest and cheapest way to do it on a regular basis is to use an archive-safe electrolytic cleaning kit, and finish with a jeweller's silver-polishing cloth. These will also work with the later plated badges (e.g. those plain metal trefoils with the boomerangs issued between 1979 and 1998), as they won't remove the plate.

Caring for Leather

Leather belts and flag frogs/holsters should first be treated with a cloth *just dampened* with bleach to kill mould. Liquid bleach will discolour the leather, and cause damage.

Once treated, clean immediately with saddle-soap, according to instructions, then apply Laceol, a leather conditioner. Both are available from your local saddlery, or from www.tandyleather.com.au

Caring for Belt Buckles

The old decorative Girl Guide-issued belt buckles with rust should be taken to a local metal polisher or jeweller for polishing, and then coated with Carnauba Wax to prevent further damage.

Strap buckles of the sort used on flag frogs and holsters can have surface rust removed by rubbing with some steel wool before wiping with a clean cloth and coating with Carnauba Wax (from most car-care stores). Buckles with serious rust should potentially be replaced with new ones, easily available by mail order from www.tandyleather.com.au

Storing Belts and Leather Goods

Belts intended to be kept with historical uniforms should be stored in a separate ziplock bag (open) or container from the uniform with which it belongs. This prevents contamination from the leather and oils. Of course, the container or bag should fit in the box with the rest of the uniform.

Holsters and frogs, once treated, are best kept in a plastic crate, with some air flow, away from damp. Do not store in your shed!



Caring for Parade Flags and Brasses

Sometimes you might find an older Unit flag in your store cupboards. It might still be mounted on a pole, or folded away. You might still be using it, but it's worn, or outdated, and you're considering 'retiring' it.

Retiring an Old Unit Flag

Unit and District flags with names on them were usually dedicated in a church, and they officially belong to all members of the District (past, present *and* future). Therefore, they must be kept, *not* destroyed, even respectfully, in the manner of an Australian flag when it gets too old and worn to be used.

Older flags were usually made from a woollen material, so were susceptible to moths, especially if they haven't been stored in a tightly-closed canvas bag, as all flags and parade poles *should* be between uses. Put a couple of camphor balls in the bottom of the bag to help scare moths and silverfish away.

Cleaning a Unit Flag

Carefully and gently dismount the flag from its pole, by untying it, or by gently removing tacks and staples with an appropriate blunt implement.

Examine the flag for tears and holes. If the flag is almost in tatters, seek professional advice (contact the Facebook page, or contact Tess Evans - <http://www.heightsheritage.com.au/tess.htm>). If there are only a very few small holes across the flag, you can carefully wash it yourself, using tepid (blood-heat water that feels neither hot, nor cold to touch) water in a bath, with a capful of eucalyptus wool wash.

Agitate the water gently and leave to soak for 20 minutes, before draining and refilling the bath. Agitate again to remove any more muck, and drain. Rinse carefully under the tap, supporting the weight of the flag, and spread out in the bath to drain for a couple of hours. *DO NOT WRING*.

Once the flag is only damp, lift it out of the bath and drape it carefully over a drying rack, so that it is supported and not hanging on its own wet weight, until dry. Keep out of direct sunlight, and try to choose a dry day.

You can then remount the flag on its pole if it is still to be used (even more recent World flags need to be cleaned sometimes). Try not to use pins and things that will rust!

Storing a Retired Unit Flag

If you have the space, take a plastic underbed box (something long enough to take the height of the flag without folding), and three to five lengths of cardboard tube from fabric store bolts (they always have spares; just ask). Place the flag

between two layers of acid-free tissue paper, and gently fold it into the box, using the tube to support the length of the folds and avoid creases (creases are where fibres break and tear).

Keep all flags away from damp areas, and allow air to flow around the box or bag, preferably off the ground and bottom shelves. If the poles are needed elsewhere, do not discard the trefoil finials. They can be kept in the box with the flag (especially if they have presentation plates on them), or consider offering them to new units in your Region or beyond. If they really have no home to go to, some international Guiding organisations like South Africa have difficulty getting hold of these finials, and still use the older styles. Archives can put you in touch, if you have permission to donate the finial from your District.

Basic Flagpole Maintenance

All parade poles should be given a shakedown every year in the weeks before ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day if your District is taking part.

Dismount flags, polish timber with a beeswax polish (making sure it is dry before re-mounting—leave it off for a couple of days if possible), and ensure all fittings are secure. Repair if necessary.

The next time you do this, take finials to a jeweller or metal polishing company. *Do not use Brasso!* Once polished, apply a coat of Carnauba Wax immediately, which should last several years if the tops are not banged about.

Storage for Flags Kept on Poles

Store any flags living on their poles in a proper flag bag, preferably made from canvas for strength, and cut to cover the entirety of the poles and finials, tied tightly with cord at the ends to keep out moths and silverfish. Ask your local canvas suppliers for offcuts. They will usually be happy to oblige!

If you are unable to store older and more fragile flags in a box, consider wrapping the rolled flags in a piece of felt before bagging them, to stop rubbing and tearing, and *please do not store more than one flag per bag, or keep leather frog holsters in the bag with them!* Leather can introduce mould far more easily.



Storing and Displaying Archival Material

Not every piece of archival material is significant enough to be included in the NSW & ACT Archives, but that doesn't mean that it isn't interesting, or that it's not worth keeping, as a part of your Unit or District history.

If you find pieces, notify us first, by contacting the Project Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/groups/GuideUniformArchiveProject> and sending in photos of the whole piece, and of any details, including names and labels, or interesting badges. We're an active group, and are happy to help with research, dating and other advice. Otherwise, contact Guide House and ask for the current Archivist.

Storage

Some forms of storage have been covered in other sections of this manual, but here's a brief rundown of how to store anything else:

- Heavy leader uniforms from the early years are best stored on padded coat hangers (yes, even the crochet sort!) in a bag made from Tyvek®, which keeps moisture out, and still allows the fabric to breathe. This is not always suitable for storage in Guide halls, however, especially if you don't have hanging space.
- As with flags, early uniforms should be folded carefully into boxes with a cardboard tube to support the folds and prevent hard creases.
- Do not use cardboard boxes. These absorb moisture and mould from the air around them, and can contaminate textiles.
- Try to use plastic crates, available in a range of sizes, to store uniforms. NSW Archives use a range of 5, 10, 15 and 25L boxes with a low profile, giving enough space to fold a uniform as you would fold one into your drawers at home.

The 25L flat-profile boxes (about the size of half an under-bed box) are best to use with a combination of uniforms and the matching broad-brimmed early felt hats and other stiff hat styles, as there is space to fit the entire brim without bending, and head-room to stop the crown from being squashed. The little bit of airflow allowed by crates around the lid makes sure the fabric can breathe, while also keeping moisture out.

The 10--15L boxes will fit a whole uniform from periods after 1948 (when berets came in), with room to fit the hat without damage. Wide-brimmed camp hat styles worn after 1991 can use these boxes too, as the crowns are designed to squash.

- Loose proficiency badges, blanket badges, and patrol emblems are best stored in a zipped ring-binder (3-4 rings for stability), in acid-free pockets designed for coins. See your local coin dealers for the right thing. Larger pieces can go in collector-card or banknote-sized pockets of the same material.
- Loose metal badges are best stored displayed in stackable ring trays with perspex lids, available from jewellers' wholesale suppliers like AJS (Australian Jewellery Supplies).



Display

Some Districts have come up with wonderful ways to display historic pieces, from memorabilia, to uniforms and letters from Lord and Lady Baden-Powell. These things are to be treasured and enjoyed, especially if they are significant to your Guiding history.

You might like to hold a fundraiser to make sure you can do your display properly, and invite local dignitaries and Trefoil Guild members to the unveiling!

Here are some ways to display your Guiding memorabilia in a way that attracts the interest of your members, without causing damage:

- Impressive letters and photographs, especially old ones with ink on them, should be mounted on acid-free paste-board by a professional framer and placed in a frame with 'Museum' glass, which is a type of glass that doesn't allow UV rays to pass through and fade what is inside.
- If there are lots of photographs, sort them by date as best you can. Invest in an acid-free professional album (even scrapbooking albums are acid-free these days!), and mount the photos in date order with acid-free tapes or mounts. Invite people who might know to come along and help you label them, if you can't find details on the back. *Do not use plastic sleeve or sticky albums with plastic sheet covers, as they cause damage to photographs.*
- Uniforms, badges, and even hats make a fabulous collage display to be put in a big acid-free box-frame, under Museum glass. Make sure that anything you plan to use this way is carefully cleaned and thoroughly dried before you make a night of it, and work with your Unit to make something amazing out of your bits and bobs.

About the Author

Elizabeth 'Bess' Elwell-Cook is an experienced historical costumier with her own business, and over 30 years of experience in theatre, film and television. Her re-creations are diverse: ancient Egyptian to High Renaissance to the 20th century. She prides herself on accuracy, having researched museum collections worldwide for detailed knowledge of cut and construction. Her needlework skills are equally diverse, and can be applied to almost any technique from fine embroidery to knitting design.

As well as having designed a range of historically based theatre and independent short film productions, she has spent the last 20 years researching costume, accessories and social history, and has published papers in these fields.

She is frequently consulted by small museums, archives, churches and individuals on historical textiles, having worked on pieces ranging from historic vestments, processional banners and regalia for St James' Anglican Church, King Street, in Sydney, to stabilising and restoring embroideries that survived the Holocaust, working with rare surviving panels of Beefeater uniform from the Royal Household of King Edward VIII, and documenting pieces of Fabergé from the Russian Royal household. Her Leonardo da Vinci replica costume was featured in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra, in the exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci: Anatomy to Robots*, and now resides as a permanent exhibit at the Da Vinci Museum in Seoul, Korea.

Bess is currently undertaking post-graduate research in Australian Girl Guide uniform history. Her 2017 Wagga Wagga exhibition of a replica 1918 Girl Guide uniform brought her work with the Girl Guides NSW & ACT Historic and International Uniform Archive to international attention, and has resulted in invitations from multiple archives under the auspices of GirlGuiding UK and WAGGGS to attend archival trainings overseas. In 2016, she was presented with the Charles Sturt University Executive Dean's Award for Academic Excellence for her research on historical Girl Guide uniforms.

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