

A sticky issue – labelling library collections

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ABSTRACT

The use of sticky labels for call numbers and bar codes on library material are a cause of concern to conservation staff for a number of reasons. The adhesive used on the label is often poor quality, leading to labels falling off and leaving the item unidentified. As it ages, the adhesive may bleed through into the paper causing permanent staining. The removal of labels from collection material is problematic and often results in damage to the item. The National Library of Australia has developed guidelines about where labels should be placed on collection material in order to protect both the value of the collection item and the information content on the pages. This is particularly the case for rare books and pamphlets. Several different methods of sticking labels onto collection material have been devised to minimize the impact of the label.

KEYWORDS

barcode, label, adhesive

INTRODUCTION

The National Library of Australia currently holds more than 10 million items within its collections and houses these collections in three buildings. The Library's collections are used and handled extensively by researchers, both within the Library in its reading rooms and outside the Library through inter-library loans. The use of labels and other identifying information on collection material helps to maintain the control of the collection. The challenge for the Library's conservators is to find ways of applying labels so that the collection material does not get damaged.

LABELS AND THEIR USES

There are two main types of sticky labels used on the Library's collections:

- Zebra thermal labels and foil backed labels – the call number is printed on the label which is then applied to the spine of the book
- Barcode labels which are used for stock control of the Library's collection and as a security device.

All of these labels have different types of adhesive and finding out the type used by manufacturers is often impossible. The adhesive needs to be strong enough to bind the label to the collection material and not fall off. Replacement of labels is time consuming and expensive.

The requirement for labels to stick permanently to collection material, though, contradicts the desire of conservators to use reversible techniques when working with collection material. It is easy to accept that a label on a modern book is a necessary library management requirement. The label can be put on the cover or binding of a book and will therefore only affect the outer covering of the item. However putting labels on other types of collection items such as a small pamphlet, map or art work, is less easy to accept.

The Library has procedures that ensure that most unique and rare items have their accession details written in pencil on the item, however the use of barcodes is widespread in the Australian printed collections.

PROTECTING THE COLLECTIONS FROM THEFT

The National Library is not a browsing library – the stacks are closed to researchers except in special circumstances. Collection items are ordered via the catalogue and delivered to the relevant reading room.

The Library's collections are divided up by type; we have the General Collections (monographs and serials, both Australian and Overseas), Maps, Newspapers, Oral History recordings, Asian Collections, Pictures, Manuscripts, Rare Books, Music and Ephemera. The collections are delivered through a number of different reading rooms within the main Library building. Most readers come to the Main Reading Room, where general collections are delivered. Other reading rooms include Asian Collections, Newspapers, Maps, Pictures, Manuscripts and the Petherick Reading Room, where researchers work and rare collections are accessed.

The collection is controlled by the Library's catalogue and is catalogued either at the item level (each book) or at the collection level (a group of material not individually identified). In order to manage the physical location of collection material, and to protect it from theft, the Library uses a number of different methods of putting identifying marks on collection material, including black ink ownership stamps, and prior to this, embossing the pages with the Library's name.

Ink stamps and embossing

Ink stamps are also used to identify collection material and may be used instead of, or in addition to, the embosser. The ink used is permanent (will not shift when wet) and is usually applied to the top edge of a book or on a page with no writing. These ink stamps cannot be removed once made, so the appropriate placement of the stamp is important and staff refer to a manual for guidance.

Embossing used to be a common way of marking Library books and is still done on occasion by the National Library for selected rare publications.

The non-print collections do not have labels or stamps put on them. Accession details are written on the item in pencil so that they can be removed if required and don't adversely affect the item.

Security labels: barcodes

Most libraries have some kind of security system that protects their books from theft. These systems include tattle-tags, placed inside the book, and magnetic barcodes, which are usually adhered onto the collection item. A detector is placed at all exits and the alarm sounds whenever a magnetic device that has not been deactivated passes the detector. The National Library incorporates the magnetic security device and the barcode into the one label.

The barcode is used as the collection management device. Staff scan the barcode when the material arrives at a destination and this tells the Integrated Library Management System (ILMS) where the item is now located. When users request the collection item via the online catalogue, the item is retrieved from the shelves, 'checked out' to that person and delivered to the reading room.

APPLYING BARCODE LABELS

Barcode labels need to be applied to items as consistently as possible so that Library staff can easily find the label and so that the label sets off the detectors at the exits. The Library has procedures for the placement of barcode labels that have been developed in consultation with the collection managers, stack managers, cataloguing staff and Preservation Services. These procedures require staff to place the barcode label on the inside of the back cover of a book or on the last page of the book if the end paper is particularly decorative. For a small selection of material, including high priority Australian collections, non-standard methods of applying barcode labels have been developed with the aim of minimising damage to the collection item. This usually involves finding ways of securing the barcode to an item without actually sticking it directly to the paper or binding. These variations to the procedures are developed on a case by case basis in consultation with the collection manager and Preservation Services.

1. Mylar® jacket: Some items which have only a few pages or are printed on very thin paper have a Mylar® jacket made for them and the barcode label is adhered to the Mylar®. The jacket is sewn to the collection item through the original staple holes (see Figure 1)



Figure 1: Mylar® jacket sewn to booklet with the barcode inside the back cover.

2. Mylar® pocket: Where the collection item has no vacant space to place a barcode label and the item needs more protection than a Mylar® jacket, it is placed inside a Mylar® pocket and the barcode label is attached to the pocket. In this way the barcode label doesn't obscure the text. Single sheet material is also treated this way (see Figure 2)



Figure 2: Item secured inside Mylar® pocket with barcode label on the pocket.

3. Archive Text tag: When the item is a book that has no vacant space for the barcode label to be adhered it may also be put onto a piece of Archive Text which is then attached to the gutter area of the last page with starch paste. The barcode label adhesive doesn't come into contact with the item at all (see Figure 3)



Figure 3: Barcode label is adhered to a piece of Archive Text which has been pasted to the last page.

4. Japanese Tissue patch: When the item is a rare book with valuable endpapers the barcode label is adhered to a piece of Japanese tissue which has been pasted onto the endpaper with starch paste. The Japanese tissue provides a barrier between the item and the adhesive of the barcode label (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Barcode label is adhered to a piece of Japanese tissue which is pasted onto the endpaper.

These relatively low-cost strategies have been well-supported by collection managers. When new acquisitions are received, consideration is given to the item's special qualities, its rarity and display potential. A selection of material is identified for this non-standard treatment. From time to time an unusual item requiring a new solution comes along and this is then added to our inventory of creative treatments.

DAMAGE CAUSED BY BARCODE LABELS

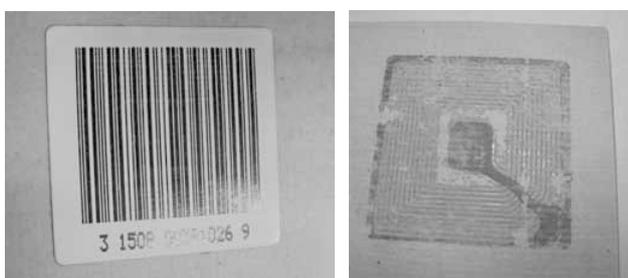
Preservation Services is often asked to remove a barcode label because it obscures something on the paper, or because the item is needed for exhibition and the barcode is felt to be obtrusive to the viewer. Barcode labels can be removed by applying petroleum spirits with a paintbrush to the paper in the area in which the label is adhered. The adhesive layer dissolves, releasing the paper label and leaving the adhesive layer on the collection item. This adhesive layer, now swelled and softened by the petroleum spirits, can be removed from the paper surface. If this process is not conducted carefully the paper can be badly damaged, and even in the best case scenario, the paper surface is often left with surface

abrasion marks (see Figures 5 and 6).



Figures 5 and 6: Removal of a barcode label, and an example of the damage left behind after removal.

Conservators at the National Library have noticed that as barcode labels age, the adhesive seems to make the paper transparent and causes the barcode label to become embedded in the paper. Removal of barcodes that have dissolved into the paper is usually impossible without causing damage to the collection item (see Figures 7 and 8).



Figures 7 and 8: An image of the top of a barcode, and the view from the other side of the sheet of paper, with the magnetic strips in the barcode label clearly visible through the fibres of the paper.

CONCLUSION

Libraries need to permanently label and stamp collection material in order to safeguard it from being stolen, however this practice may result in the collection material being damaged in some way. A compromise has been achieved at the National Library of Australia where labels and stamps are placed on less important parts of a collection item, for example the end paper of a book. For high priority or rare collection material preservation staff have developed a number of non invasive methods which ensure the adhesive label does not attach to the item itself but rather to a support of Mylar® or paper.

As with most conservation activities, there is never sufficient time or resources to treat all items equally. The sheer quantity of published materials received by the National Library every day means that only very special items will receive this attention to ensure that the barcode label is not coming into contact with the item itself. For the bulk of the Library's printed collection, which is used for its information content and research potential, the pragmatic need for call number labels, stock control and security of library materials necessitates that the standard approach of applying labels suffice.

BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Lloyd completed her Degree in Conservation of Cultural Material at the University of Canberra in 1989 and commenced working at the National Archives of Australia in the Preservation Services section. In 1997 she undertook a project to manage the relocation of Archives staff into the newly refurbished East Block Building in Canberra and then continued as the Facilities Manager for that building for a further two years. In 2001 she moved to the preservation area at the National Library of Australia working on preservation outreach programs in the South East Asia region as part of the ILFA-PAC program. In 2004 she became the Manager for Preservation Services at the National Library and has worked in this position ever since.

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