

Temporary Withdrawal of Record Series FCO 141

Earlier this year, while staff were carrying out digitisation work on the FCO 141 record series, they came across several bound volumes bearing a sticker stating, 'A poisonous insecticidal solution has been used in binding this book'.

At that point there was no indication of what the insecticides were, how harmful they may be, or how many records were affected so we took the decision to temporarily withdraw the entire series.

Our in-house heritage science team carried out [X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy](#) (XRF) tests and determined that mercury-containing insecticides such as [mercury chlorides](#) were still present. The overall presence of chlorine could also hint to the presence of [organochlorine pesticides](#). Samples from the record series were then sent to three external laboratories for further, more extensive testing, which included possible organic insecticides.

The Food and Environment Research Agency ([FERA](#)) carried out [Gas Chromatography Mass Spectroscopy](#) (GC-MS). These two techniques (XRF and GC-MS) were also applied to a set of samples sent to Integrated Contamination Management ([ICM](#)), a private company specialising in the analysis of heritage items for contaminants. A further set of samples was tested in collaboration with Imperial College London, again via GC-MS.

Scientific investigation carried out by FERA and ICM did confirm in-house analyses and highlighted the presence of mercury chloride in about half of the samples analysed. Both laboratories also confirmed our in-house analyses and identified various chlorine-based organic pesticides, including but not limited to [DDT](#), [dieldrin](#), and [PCP](#).

Pesticides and insecticides have been used all around the world to prevent collections from being damaged by insects and mould.

We want to be satisfied that the FCO141 record series can be accessed safely. We know it is frustrating for those who need to look at the records, but it is in the best interest of our readers and staff to take full precautions and limit further exposure until we have more information.