

Replacing rusty staples: a simple technique for pamphlet preservation

Modern printed pamphlets can be very fragile. Not only are the papers used since the early nineteenth century less stable and durable than the rag paper of earlier years, but they are typically held together by staples down the fold. Over time the metal of the staples rusts, damaging the paper.

This guide will show you a simple, safe and low impact technique for replacing the staples with stitches, which maintains the pamphlet's integrity whilst solving the problem of staple damage.

Tools and materials

- **A simple flat-tongued staple remover or a microspatula.** Pictured is the Rapesco 101 Staple Remover which is available from stationers. Other styles of staple remover using teeth or levers are unsuitable as they may damage the paper. Alternatively use a microspatula (a small flat tool which can be purchased from conservation, book-binding or science equipment suppliers).



- **Unbleached linen thread.** Typical weights are 25/3 for normal use and 18/3 for thicker paper or larger pamphlets. These can be bought from book-binding suppliers, haberdashers or conservation equipment suppliers.

- **A medium-sized darning needle**

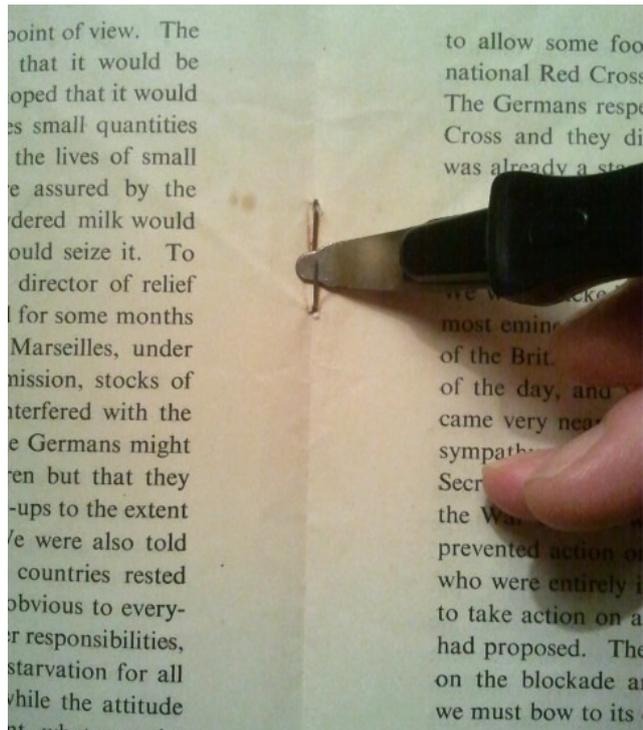
- **A soft bristle brush, such as a shaving brush, and a tray**

- **A piece of coloured card**

Instructions

Step 1: Carefully remove the staples using the staple remover.

This is the riskiest part of the whole process as there is a danger of pulling the whole staple through the paper. Place the pamphlet on a flat surface, with the staple prongs facing up. Gently insert the staple remover or microspatula under the prongs and carefully pry them open, one at a time. Then turn the pamphlet over and use the staple remover to lift the opened staple out of the puncture holes.

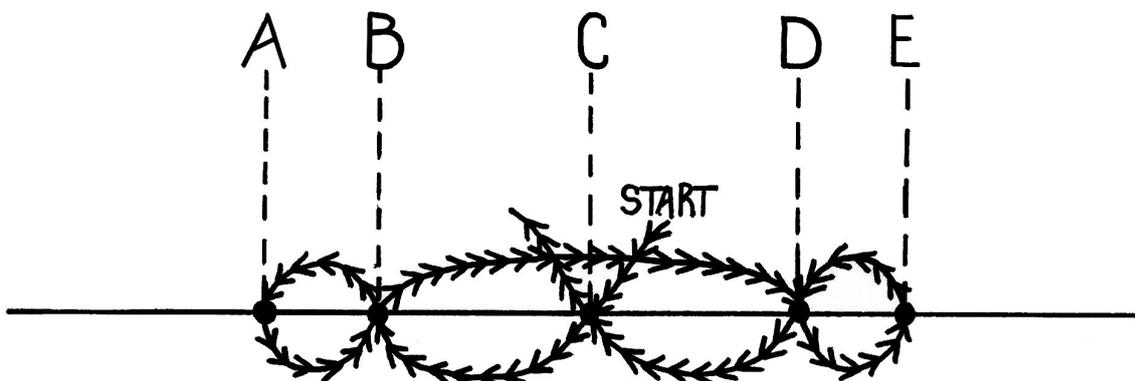


Note: if the paper is particularly fragile, or if the staple has rusted to it, you can reduce the risk of damage by first inserting a small v-shaped piece of polyester (such as the kind used for document wallets, cut to size) between the staple and the paper on both sides.

Step 2: Brush out any fragments of rust onto the tray to be discarded.

Step 3: Thread the needle with a longish piece of thread and push it through the mid-point of the pamphlet's fold (C in the diagram below), from the inside to the outside. Draw the thread through, leaving about 10cm of thread behind.

Step 4: Return the needle to the other side, and continue to stitch along the fold, following this pattern (C – B – A – B – D – E – D – C). You can use the former staple holes if they are sound, or create new ones. The thread should end up at the mid-point inside the fold (C), where you began.



Step 5: When you have completed the pattern tighten the thread gently. Take the thread ends either side of the long central thread going from B to D and tie a double reef knot around the central thread.



Step 6: Trim the ends to 1 cm each and fray them with the needle over the piece of coloured card to flatten the thread. The card protects the pamphlet.

This process can be carried out by volunteers with aptitude and a small amount of training. An experienced sewer can complete a straightforward pamphlet in about five minutes. They are also able to note if an item has other damage that needs professional attention. The end product is attractive, free from sharp or rusty metal, and safe to handle.

Links

Removal of Damaging Fasteners from Historic Documents. Online guidance from Northeast Document Conservation Center

Lucy Saint-Smith and Tabitha Driver
Library of the Society of Friends 2018
Historic Libraries Forum