



Figure 1. Wester Kittochside Farmhouse, East Kilbride, Glasgow.



Figure 2. Museum of Scottish Country Life, East Kilbride, Glasgow.

A COMPARISON OF CONSERVATION PHILOSOPHIES: A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT BETWEEN THE NATIONAL MUSEUMS OF SCOTLAND AND THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Wester Kittochside farm and farmhouse (fig.1) in East Kilbride near Glasgow were donated to the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) in 1992 by Mrs. Margaret Reid in fulfilment of the wishes of her late husband Mr. James Reid. The Reid family had farmed Wester Kittochside for generations and, when arriving to survey the farm for the first time, conservationists were amazed to find the land virtually untouched by modern farming methods. Having used little of the machinery thought necessary to manage a late 20th century farm, the Reids had gifted NTS a time capsule of 1950s farming: to modern eyes, a bucolic idyll. It was James Reid's desire that the farm should be kept, as he had left it, for the enjoyment of all.

In a collaboration between NTS and the National Museums of Scotland (NMS), part of the gifted land was used to build the new Museum of Scottish Country Life (MoSCL) (fig. 2). The museum was planned to house the NMS collection of country life artefacts and, while part of the collection had been displayed at the (now closed) Agricultural Museum at Ingleston near Edinburgh, many of the artefacts, particularly the larger objects, were previously unseen by the public. Both farmhouse and museum were opened in July 2001.

Although the farmhouse dates from the eighteenth century, the NTS felt it was appropriate to present the house to the public in the mid-twentieth century, pre-1960s style in which the farmhouse was last used as a family home.

With tight time constraints, a new museum building, restoration of the farmhouse and conservation of the artefacts for both museum and farmhouse, and the preparation for the opening of the Wester Kittochside site to the public was an exciting challenge for all concerned. For the conservators, particularly those working on the furniture and wooden artefacts, an additional challenge was set by the requirement to work on artefacts from both the museum and the house simultaneously within the same workspace. NTS and NMS are two large and important Scottish institutions with distinct roles within the heritage sector and, as a result, each organisation has its own specific conservation requirements. With one collection destined for a museum and the other for a house to be opened to the public, very much not a museum, the differing needs and philosophies of each organisation and ethical approaches of individual curators were brought into contrast.

The conservation of both the wooden artefacts from the NMS Scottish country life collection and the NTS collection of furniture from Wester Kittochside farmhouse was undertaken by NMS conservators at the NMS conservation workshops at Granton in Edinburgh. While the conservation treatments themselves were not ground-breaking, the experience of simultaneously working within two distinct approaches to conservation was particularly thought-provoking.



Figure 3. The dining room as viewed by the public today.

PHILOSOPHIES

NMS Conservation

Ethically, the approach to the conservation of artefacts for display in MoSCL was similar to conservation within the museum environment generally. However, the creation of a new purpose-built museum is not an everyday occurrence and the conservation of the MoSCL collection proved to be a rewarding and, occasionally, testing experience as the conservators worked with designers, architects and curators to present artefacts in entirely new ways and create innovative displays. Many of the normal considerations for conservation have to be re-thought when considering the mounting and display procedures required, particularly for fragile objects.

NTS Conservation

Treatment proposals were made in close collaboration with NTS curator Ian Gow and NTS conservators Wilma Bouwmeester and Libby Finney. The NTS approach was to do “as much as neces-

sary and as little as possible.” While it was necessary to stabilise furniture, to prevent it from deteriorating further, treatments had to be carried out without changing the appearance or the surface patina of each piece; it was important that the house should look as though the Reid family had just that moment walked out. In addition, as Mrs. Reid still lives locally and was to be invited to view the house before its opening, there was a general consensus that it was particularly important to take her views into consideration so that the house would be presented in a way which would be acceptable to her.

CONSIDERATIONS

Wester Kittochside Farmhouse

- i. Wear and tear of visitors on interior furnishings such as carpets and soft furnishings.
- ii. The layout of room settings taking into account “traffic” through the house.

iii. The environmental considerations of the doors constantly being open, lights on in the rooms and natural daylight coming through the windows.

iv. The interpretation of living spaces, the house itself telling a story of the family who occupied it and what their life was like.

v. Considerations for preventive conservation for the long term protection and stability of the collection.

Although the original intention was to return the contents to exactly how they had been when the Reid family left, in practice this was not fully possible as provision had to be made for visitors circulating around the house. Furthermore, in order that no objects were in danger of being accidentally damaged, some of the room settings were adjusted accordingly; however, as many of the original fixtures and fittings were used as possible. (fig. 3)

MoSCL

i. Interpretation of the artefacts by curators and designers.

ii. Settings designed for the artefacts which help with the interpretation of the object by the public.

iii. Mounting the objects, to allow proper support for each artefact on display which also fits the architects' and designers' brief.

iv. Access to the object; as part of the design scheme some artefacts were mounted twenty feet high on the wall or needed to be built in as part of the museum.

v. Environmental conditions following the guidelines set down by the Preventive Conservator for objects on display.

vi. Whether the object is on open display or in a case and the preventive measures which are required accordingly.

Having had experience working with a team of conservators conserving and installing artefacts for the new Museum of Scotland three years earlier, we were aware of potential hazards which might occur and did our best to avert them, although it must be said not always successfully.

PREPARATION

Wester Kittochside Farmhouse

A programme of work was drawn up for the treatment of furniture, allowing time for conservation, transportation from Granton to Kittochside and installation.

Prior to the contents being removed from the house to make way for structural refurbishment, a series of very detailed photographs were taken by the NTS of the interior. These photographs were invaluable during the conservation process, the additional knowledge of the final setting of each particular piece of furniture helping with the choice of conservation treatment as well as acting as an accurate pictorial inventory for reference. After a period in storage, the farmhouse furniture and contents were brought to NMS Granton Centre and a condition survey carried out. This provided both an overview of the general condition of the objects and a basis on which to decide upon appropriate conservation treatments.

The quantity and range of objects within the house was extensive and, as might be expected from a home developed over generations, eclectic. Boxes containing the contents of kitchen cupboards and drawers, walking sticks, umbrellas and tennis rackets from the stand in the hall, paintings, documents and photographs, carriage lamps and coal buckets, clothes and shoes all had to be condition surveyed. Carpets, curtains and some light fittings were all retained for re-installation.

There was also a wide range of furniture, including an extraordinary number of dining chairs, several long case clocks, various desks, bureaux, tables, mirrors and beds. Many of the drawers in the bureaux and chests were full of personal items belonging to the Reids; spectacles, letters and cards, photographs, milk bills, cheque books and other documents all providing insight into the lives of the Reid family.

MoSCL

Much of the collection of working life objects to be installed into the MoSCL had previously



Figure 4. The crannan gad plough before conservation.

been on display in the agricultural museum at Ingleston, just outside Edinburgh. These objects were surveyed as they were taken off display and the appropriate treatment carried out before they entered the new museum. As a precaution to make sure the new museum was completely pest free, all wooden objects were either frozen or treated with residual pesticide. Many objects were taken from storage to be displayed for the first time; these items also underwent pesticide treatment or freezing to eliminate the risk of pest outbreaks. All conservation treatments were discussed with the relevant curator, with additional consideration being given to the proposed mounts for each object as sometimes higher levels of intervention were required in order to ensure the artefact was stable enough to be mounted in the way required for display.

CONSERVATION TREATMENTS MoSCL

The oldest plough in the collection is a stilted plough, originally from the Western Isles of Scotland, known as the Crannan Gad plough, which

was traditionally said to be dragged by the wife and guided by the husband. This artefact came to the studio in extremely poor condition—in fact in four separate pieces. The plough was to be put on open display in “Breaking the soil” in the Museum of Scottish Country Life, suspended twenty feet on a wall with a range of other ploughs also attached to the wall.

The plough was extremely badly wood wormed and crumbling and the iron work corroded. (fig. 4) It was frozen as a preventive pest measure to ensure that any previous pest infestation was dead. The treatment plan had to take into account the way the plough was to be displayed; as the plough was in such poor condition it was necessary not to just stabilise it but to reconstruct parts of it. In this case, the plough was the only one of its kind in the collection; where a choice of several similar objects is available, the most complete object would usually be chosen.



Figure 5. The plough after conservation and on display in MoSCL.

The treatment proposal was to consolidate, pin, fill and, where necessary, reconstruct. Had the plough had not been required to be free standing on open display, the treatment might have involved stabilising the separate pieces and mounting them in a way which suggested how the plough had been used without the requirement to pin and reconstruct some areas. However the treatment was sympathetic to the object and technically reversible materials and methods were used. The consolidant was Paraloid B72 in acetone and the fill made up of Paraloid B72 and microballoons. The percentage was varied as required and the fill was tinted with pigments to achieve a unified base colour.

The curator, designer and conservator met to discuss the requirements of the plough. From a conservation point of view a suitable method to support the plough was required due to its fragility even after conservation. Careful consideration went into the plough mounts which were made in the NMS workshop to meet our specific requirements. The curator required that the mount did not alter or interfere with the interpretation of the object and the designers were insistent on

the mount matching the other mounts within the museum to present a unified effect in keeping with the architects' design. (fig. 5)

The Shandwick Hearth Room is a re-creation of a room, believed to be inhabited until the 1950s, from the Scottish Highlands. The hearth and two doors are the only part of the original dwelling in the museum collection and the curator and the design team decided to incorporate these original features into the room re-creation. However, the hearth was found to be extremely dilapidated and would have required hundreds of hours of conservation to stabilise, so it was decided that the hearth itself would also be replicated and the original would remain in storage.

The doors were both in a poor state and required considerable conservation before being suitable for display. One door had traces of original wallpaper, cardboard and drawing pins remaining around the frame where it had been cut out of the wall, which added to the provenance of the door and illustrated how the room was decorated and used. The painted surface of the door was flaking and the



Figure 6. The Shandwick door before conservation.



Figure 7. The Shandwick room re-creation with replicated hearth and door to the left of the hearth, the door on the right is original.



Figure 8. Detail of the hall chair seat before conservation.

threshold was rotten. (fig. 6) When the contractor charged by the design team to build the room reconstruction within the museum came to inspect the doors, it soon became clear that they wanted to replace the rotting threshold, paper over the original wallpaper and cut down the door to fit the aperture they had made for it. After listening to the argument from conservation staff, that so much historical evidence would be lost by adapting the original door to fit the room reconstruction, it was decided that, like the hearth, the door would go into storage and a replica made. The other door, to the left of the hearth, was conserved, successfully consolidating the flaking painted surface and was installed in the room re-creation. (fig. 7)

Wester Kitchside Farmhouse

The challenge for the conservation of the furniture and contents of the farmhouse was to preserve and protect a massive range of artefacts which were to be returned to their original surroundings and to allow visitors the privilege of seeing these objects without the intervention of glass cases or barriers in the open surroundings in which they were used and loved by their past owners. Working closely with curator Ian Gow and conservators Wilma Bouwmeester and Libby Finney the aim for the NMS conservators was to present the objects in the farmhouse as if the Reid family had just walked out.



Figure 9. The hall chair after conservation.



Figure 10. The bedroom chair after conservation in the farmhouse.

The condition survey showed that, generally, the furniture from the house was in very good condition. If any treatment was required the “as much as necessary and as little as possible” approach ensured that each object was stable, that any broken fragments or mouldings were re-attached to prevent loss, lifting veneers were re-laid, excessive dirt and dust were removed and minimal consolidation and pest treatments carried out.

A small hall chair had suffered badly from a previous woodworm attack resulting in the loss of much of the decorative surface of the seat (fig. 8). The edges of the area that had been eaten by woodworm beetle were very fragile and in danger of further loss with the surrounding area very spongy and crumbling. It was necessary to use a consolidant to stabilise the crumbling veneer; a 10% solution of Paraloid B72 in acetone was injected into the worm holes and along the edges of

the loss. As the chair was in a very conspicuous position in the hall of the house, it was decided to tone down the light area of beetle damage using a water-based stain (fig. 9).

An upholstered pink bedroom chair also required substantive treatment as the upholstery was shredded due to wear, tear and, particularly, light degradation; the farmhouse faces south and the main rooms catch most of the sunlight throughout the day. To prevent further damage of furniture by the sun, UV film and blinds were placed at the windows to control light levels. Again keeping to the NTS philosophy of “as much as necessary and as little as possible,” only the worst affected area, the left arm of the chair, was treated by sewing fine net, dyed to match the upholstery, along the arm to provide added support and to protect against further degradation. The net was shaped along its edge to match the floral pattern of the fabric,

enabling it to blend in better and resulting in an almost invisible treatment (fig. 10). The treatment as in all cases was fully documented.

SUMMARY

When embarking on the conservation for both projects, it was assumed that conservation treatments for the artefacts from the MoSCL would differ from those of the farmhouse furniture. However, in practice, with a few exceptions, the treatments were remarkably similar.

While conservators constantly strive for treatments which involve minimum intervention, applying this code to the entire contents of a family home is a very challenging prospect. When conserving artefacts to enter displays in a new museum, having to be involved in the design and making of mounts is an interesting process. Inevitably, in the conservation of such artefacts, compromises are made, not only to ensure the long-term stability of an object, but also to take into account the use for which the object was intended and the best way to interpret and display that use.

Working on both projects was stimulating and rewarding. The creation of a new museum presented a unique opportunity to conserve a wide variety of objects brought together in a display which represents Scottish country life, while the conservation of the furniture and artefacts from the farmhouse provided a very rare opportunity for insight into another family's daily life. The contents of the house were very personal and completely absorbing and the satisfaction of seeing the house fully installed was particularly fulfilling. The project was not only important in terms of the right conservation approach, but also in presenting the house to the public in a way which was acceptable to Margaret Reid, who attended the opening as guest of honour.

BIBLIOGRAPHY & CONTACT DETAILS

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