

Icon NEWS

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Conservation Awards 2005

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Personal passion and public perception

David Odgers, Chair of the Stone and Wall Paintings Group, reflects on how the cleaning and conservation of the interior of St. Paul's brought into focus a fundamental predicament of conservation.

One of the stated aims of the Institute of Conservation is to bring to a wider audience the crucial role played by conservators in the preservation and enhancement of our heritage. Although an obvious statement which, not unnaturally, would find wide support amongst those of us who carry out conservation work, it will be a considerable challenge given the current understanding of what we do and how we do it. Who amongst us has not inwardly groaned when we are referred to as 'conservationists' - bringing to mind David Bellamy lying in salt marshes or the crew of the Rainbow Warrior - all equally committed people but certainly a world away from our day to day existence?

In May of 2005, the cleaning and conservation of the interior of St. Paul's was completed after more than four years of endeavour by a committed collection of conservators, craftsmen and craftswomen, ably directed and supported by the Surveyor to the Fabric, Contract Administrator and other client representatives. The techniques that were employed had been the subject of significant trials carried out by the consultant conservator and have been covered in other articles elsewhere. But the project, much like any conservation project, required a

mixture of technical understanding, manual dexterity and a bottomless supply of those less tangible qualities that are an essential part of a conservator's make up - patience, diligence, intelligence, pride - and best thought of as a 'state of mind'.

The main work involved the cleaning of over 15000 square metres of stonework using the Arte Mundit latex system but also the cleaning of tens of thousands of mosaic tesserae as well as conservation of monuments, repairs, minor amounts of recarving and other associated works. When the contract was awarded, it was suggested by one person that the bulk of the work was boring and essentially mundane and could be done by anybody with a sound mind and some manual skills. We felt however that the majority of the team should be those who had a background in conservation or related fields - people who could appreciate the quality of the object/building on which they were working, people who had the vision to see beyond the small area on which they were working, people who had the motivation to work through the mundane to achieve the stated aims and people who could work as a team with a shared ethic to complete the project to the highest standards. These criteria may seem obvious, for they are principles for work perhaps in any field but they are particularly pertinent for conservators of whatever discipline. None of us can deny that much of our work can be repetitive and even monotonous but it is, to coin a modern idiom, the 'value added' that makes the difference.

In the middle of 2001, we started to build the team, hoping to find around a dozen people who would enthusiastically embrace the work and the relentless programme that was set for its completion. Because the cleaning process itself was new to this country and certainly new on this scale, it was imperative that the lessons learnt were not then lost by a constantly changing group of personnel. Over four years, there were inevitably a number of changes in this team but some stayed for the whole term and many others for a significant part of it. But there were also those who could not work on a macro scale and a small number who were probably put off conservation work for life; and in delightful contrast a few who started hesitantly but then embraced conservation wholeheartedly.

The first task facing the team (for no obvious reason, a very cosmopolitan collection of individuals) was to vacuum all the surfaces to remove the detritus of decades of London life. This may have seemed a dull and innocuous task but,

Cleaning areas of gilding



Removal of significant deposits of dust using vacuum





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North Nave aisle of St Paul's Cathedral after completion

used creatively, it also enabled a close study of the condition of the fabric and acted as a startling reminder of the extraordinary quality of the carved stonework, mosaics and decoration. There followed perhaps the most tedious element of the work which was the protection of all areas prior to the application of the latex – this involved not only the covering of all the gilding and other embellishments but also the complete encapsulation of each area to be sprayed in order to avoid dust and fumes from entering the main area of the Cathedral. Throughout this process, again it was the care and attention to detail shown by conservators and craftsmen which ensured its efficiency. Thereafter, the Arte Mundit was applied, and within 48

hours, removed and the stonework brushed clean with water – a seemingly simple statement that hides a mountain of effort and dedication particularly to the vividly carved and undercut detail. These indefatigable efforts of the team are reflected in the now gloriously light and vibrant interior.

It is interesting to reflect what motivated those who stayed the course to clean and conserve metre after metre of stonework. I suspect that it is much the same as that which motivates a textile conservator to work away millimetre after millimetre on some gem of tapestry or a paper conservator to pick away at a backing. It is firstly the pleasure of what they are achieving, secondly it is the appreciation (even if not the admiration) for the object and thirdly the belief that the object is also of importance and value to a wider community.

This last fact is where conservation provides wonderful opportunities but also grave risks. Although much of what we do may be hidden from view, we are responsible for working on objects, buildings, monuments and artworks of importance to others outside our profession. Whether this wider constituency consists of a few 'interested parties' or the public at large, our work is often under the spotlight.

The work at St. Paul's was, not surprisingly, very much in the public eye. Apart from fulfilling its principal function as a place of worship, it is also a place for music and an internationally significant place to visit which requires constant maintenance. It may be imagined therefore that to become a conservation contractor in that environment was to be like another ingredient in a cauldron of soup. Although many welcomed the addition, others were resigned to it and, to a few, it was an unnecessary intrusion. It was perhaps no surprise therefore that some disquiet was expressed and, as a consequence of that, statements were made and opinions aired that had repercussions which, apart from being an immense trial to all concerned (particularly those who had worked with such vision to establish the project), were also a strong reminder of how the best intentions are often perceived very differently.

Regular articles appear in the papers in which the result of conservators' work is subject to criticism – whether it be a claimed 'over-restoration' of an easel painting or a supposed inappropriate display of an object. The work at St. Paul's attracted its own share of such publicity catalysed when an art historical magazine published an article questioning the need for, and method of, cleaning the

Cleaning of Richmond mosaics with cotton wool buds



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Detail of mosaic tesserae (over 50,000 cleaned)





Washing of intricate carved detail after removal of Arte Mundit

interior. This was picked up by a major national newspaper which started the article with the emotive claim that 'what the Luftwaffe failed to achieve in the 1940's, well meaning but ill informed conservators were now carrying out – the destruction of St. Paul's Cathedral'. Apart from this hyperbolic soundbite, the lack of research and indeed truth in the article was a great disappointment to all of those who had set up the project and were working tirelessly for what they genuinely believed to be an inspirational goal. In this particular instance, it was hard to know how to react to such defamation. The temptation was to enter the debate but the original magazine article was so adamant in its approach, it somehow felt as though there would be no chance of coherent discourse.

It is certainly the case that we as conservators need to appreciate the variety of taste and opinion that exist within the public domain. We can reassure ourselves that what we do is well thought out, justifiable and well executed, but how much does that count for if people do not like or appreciate the end result of what we do? A traditional response is to call for the need to 'educate' so that people will be more aware of what we do and indeed many of the initiatives in this direction have been very effective and well received. If delivered in the way that 'we know what we are doing and you do not', then that call can seem disrespectful and self indulgent.

When the work at St. Paul's was complete there took place

a press launch to which the media could come and (hopefully) admire what had been achieved and convey to their readers and watchers the glory of the Cathedral. This day happened to coincide with a press launch for the English Heritage sponsored research into the paucity of training for craft skills such as thatching, masonry and dry stone walling. On at least two occasions, the inevitable question was asked as to whether, given the lack of skills, the work at St. Paul's could take place in twenty years' time. Apart from the obvious response that it would not actually need doing for another century or more, it struck me that, for most people, conservation is categorised as a craft skill. This should perhaps be welcomed, as conservators share many of the characteristics such as technical and materials knowledge, dexterity, respect for the object and the ability to make choices based on experience. Often however, conservation sees itself, and certainly can be perceived, to be rather more refined and almost operating on a higher plane. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for conservation is to demystify what the profession is all about and to demonstrate to the wider public that we too offer those less measurable talents that can only be summarised as a 'state of mind' and which are displayed so eloquently in our day to day toils.

Main Contractor	Nimbus Conservation Ltd (The team were Jenny Jacobs, Helen Thorne, Pablo Cal Fernandez, Sam Lenders, Elspeth Morgan, Magda Rogers, Petra Jean Philipson, Oli Don, Joanna Puisto, Patricia Maestre and others)
Surveyor to the Fabric	Martin Stancliffe
Project Architect	Ulrike Knox (Purcell Miller Tritton)
Wall painting sub contractor	Paine & Stewart
Decorative surfaces sub contractor	Hare & Humphries
Mosaic sub contractor	Trevor Caley Associates
Consultant conservator	Deborah Carthy

The author left Nimbus Conservation at the completion of the project and has now set up his own business (david@odgersconservation.co.uk)