GARNITURES DE CHEMINÉE AT THE V&A

In October 2016 the first-ever museum display focused on vase sets, also known as garnitures de cheminée, opened at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Titled ‘Garnitures: Vase Sets from National Trust Houses’, the display borrows from 13 National Trust properties. It is also the first themed display of National Trust ceramics in a British museum. The National Trust has the world’s largest collection of matching vase sets (and also the largest collection of chimneypieces and doorways). Fifteen garnitures are included, which come from Blickling Hall, Norfolk; Dunham Massey and Tatton Park, Cheshire; Nostell Priory, Yorkshire; Ickworth, Suffolk; Kingston Lacy, Dorset; Stourhead, Wiltshire; Saltram, Devon; Clandon Park, Surrey; Scotney Castle and Knole, Kent; Petworth, West Sussex; and Upton House, Warwickshire. Many of the vase sets have never been seen outside of these houses.

In 1683 the term ‘garniture’ (from the French garnir, ‘to garnish’), was used to describe a masquerade where courtiers were dressed as the vases, jars and beakers that were typically found above a chimney in elite French interiors. However, the fashion probably began in the Netherlands in the early 17th century with the arrival of large blue-painted porcelain jars and tall, thin, beaker-shaped vases from China. These exquisitely decorated vessels were displayed as symbols of wealth on top of a large cabinet, known as a ‘Kast’, a furniture form relatively unknown in England. Such ornamental wares were often purchased in pairs and arranged symmetrically on cupboards.

When the export of Chinese porcelain to the West ceased because of internal civil wars in the 1650s, Europeans ordered...
sets of vases after Chinese porcelain shapes, often painted with the same pattern, from potters in Delft and Nevers. Dutch merchants also ordered Chinese-style jars and beakers in porcelain from potters in Japan, where again they often had matching decoration. Many of these Japanese jars and beakers were in historic English collections. In England, wealthy tastemakers at the start of the Restoration ordered vase sets from London silversmiths, which were displayed on cabinets, many imported from France, as at Knole, and the Netherlands. Two five-piece silver garnitures survive at Knole: one was listed in the 1690 inventory of plate as ‘1 Chast Jarr & Cover, 2 Chast Beakers, 2 Chast flower basons’, and the other is of five jars made around 1670-80.

When the Chinese export porcelain trade resumed in the 1680s, matching vase sets were among the new products produced for the West; these were often displayed above chimneys, above doorways on ledges, or on furniture. Many of these displays remained undisturbed into the late 18th century. The discovery of antique vases at Herculaneum and Pompeii in the middle of the 18th century offered potters an entirely new repertoire for vase shapes. Josiah Wedgwood in particular, self-proclaimed ‘vase-maker general to the universe’, capitalised on the success of Sir William Hamilton’s publication illustrated with antique vases in his famous collection, faithfully copying their design in his Staffordshire wares, as at Saltram.

The preparations for the display have involved curators, registrars, content editors for digital media, press officers, photographers, editors, graphic designers, conservators, museum packers, technicians, and event managers from both the National Trust and the Victoria & Albert Museum. The Headley Trust generously sponsored the project with most of the cost associated with conservation and transport. Condition reports made by house staff and Trust conservators were vital to budget the costs, and the final results are breath-taking. Many of the objects will be returned in better condition than when they left thanks to the skilled conservators who cleaned and repaired them, including Fi Jordan, Ros Hodges, Bouke de Vries and Zoe Firebrace.

The transport was co-ordinated by the National Trust Registrar Fernanda Torrente and Assistant Registrar Susan Paisley, and at the V&A by Assistant Registrar Sara Miticca. When the crates were unpacked all were on hand, along with Hanneke Ramakers, a V&A ceramics conservator, and Helen Lloyd, National Specialists Consultancy Manager (Collections & Interpretation) and Preventive Conservation Adviser, who had advised throughout the process.

A small catalogue was published by the V&A: Garnitures: Vase Sets from National Trust Houses, edited by Christopher Rowell, National Trust Furniture Curator, who added many helpful comments. The display itself was carefully orchestrated by the V&A senior ceramics curator Reino Liefkes, who wrote the introduction to the catalogue. He also appeared in the V&A video, showing how garnitures were displayed on furniture at the V&A (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qqw2d74PePM). Dawn Hoskin, Assistant Curator, Ceramics and Glass, was also on hand to place the objects in the display cases.

While the National Trust vases have temporarily been separated from their historical settings, until 30 April 2017 visitors to the V&A display can have a unique and personal look at these extraordinary objects bathed in the bright sunlight of Gallery 146 on the sixth floor. A symposium ‘Garnitures: Vases in Interiors’ is planned for 17 March 2017.

Patricia Ferguson, National Trust Adviser on Ceramics

Three-piece ‘Hamilton’ vases from Saltram, Devon, about 1770-80, black basalt, Wedgwood and Bentley, Etruria, Staffordshire

The installation at the V&A, with Reino Liefkes, Senior Curator, Ceramics, V&A, Helen Lloyd, National Specialists Consultancy Manager, Susan Paisley, Assistant Registrar, NT, and Sara Miticca, Assistant Registrar, V&A

Patricia Ferguson, National Trust Adviser on Ceramics
For any member of the National Trust’s staff who attended an Attingham Summer School, Giles Waterfield’s tuition at Uppark, usually on the second day of the course, always revealed something of the riches to come: a pithy introduction to family history on the coach from West Dean, a clear explanation of the house’s architecture, often delivered in a howling gale or driving rain outside the south front (‘On a clearer day you can see the Isle of Wight’), the impact of the fire of 1989, and then a masterful interpretation of Uppark’s Grand Tour art collection. Giles not only taught his scholars what to see, but how to see—and thus how to question, and search for answers.

Giles described himself, with characteristic brevity, as a ‘writer and curator’, and indeed he was both, as has been recorded in the many obituaries and tributes since his sudden death on 5 November 2016. He was also a superb teacher and mentor to generations of students, both at the Courtauld, and also on the courses delivered by the Attingham Trust. From 1995 to 2003 he co-directed the Attingham Summer School for the study of historic houses and collections, and from 1996 he directed Royal Collection Studies, occasional overseas study tours, and latterly the biennial Attingham London House programme. Together with Annabel Westman, he developed the international character of the Attingham Trust’s courses: from having been been primarily US-focussed, they evolved to embrace scholars from academic and heritage organisations across the world—eastern Europe, Cuba, Russia, Turkey, India, Australia, New Zealand, and most recently China. The benefit of this internationalism for the participating scholars is a superb network of professional links which long outlast the courses themselves, and which were nurtured carefully by Giles. In addition, he promoted expert collaboration between heritage organisations, nationally and internationally, to deliver innovative exhibitions.

Giles moved effortlessly between the structured world of museum and gallery curatorship to the more diverse responsibilities of curators in the National Trust, and donated his experience and wisdom to the latter through membership of the Regional Committee for the South East from 1982 to 1988 (whilst Director of Dulwich Picture Gallery), and more recently on the Trust’s Arts Panel from 2004 until its demise in 2015. He would have been an excellent chairman of the Panel had not his overseas travel, teaching and study made it too difficult to undertake that role. In any event, the Panel and many of the Trust’s historic properties benefited from his magisterial knowledge of galleries and museums, apparent in his The People’s Galleries: Art Museums and Exhibitions in Britain 1800-1914 (2015) for which he was awarded the Berger Prize for Art History. They also benefited from his deep understanding of English country houses in all their aspects, from architecture, interior arrangement and collections of works of art to social history, demonstrated in his curatorship of the exhibition ‘Below Stairs’ at the National Portrait Gallery in 2003. This ensured that National Trust staff received, through Giles, the highest standard of advice—whether on the hanging of magnificent paintings or the interpretation of servants’ rooms—delivered with sympathy, dry wit and immaculate timing. The National Trust has lost one of its best ‘critical friends’, as well as one of the finest teachers of his generation. His early death leaves a huge gap, but also a treasured legacy.

Lisa White
Chairman, National Trust Arts Panel 2010–15
Director, the Attingham Summer School, 2004–2011
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY LETTERS

Surprise finds at Knole during the conservation project

Knole, Kent is one of the country’s most precious and exceptional historic houses, containing world-class collections of royal furniture, silver, paintings and tapestries. It was built in 1456 for Thomas Bourchier, Archbishop of Canterbury, given to Henry VIII in 1538, and remodelled in the 17th century by the Sackville family. The house, set in a medieval deer park, has inspired writers, artists and visitors for centuries. Knole was the birthplace and childhood home of Vita Sackville-West, as well as being the setting for Virginia Woolf’s novel Orlando. Knole became a National Trust property in 1946 and is still home to the Sackville family. It is always known as Knole—not Knole House.

The Knole conservation project is a five-year, £19.8 million project of building and conservation work—the largest ever undertaken by the National Trust. External repairs to Knole’s buildings were completed in 2014 and the new visitor centre and bookshop opened in 2015. The Gatehouse Tower and refurbished Brewhouse Cafe and shop opened in summer 2016. The Conservation Studio and Hayloft Learning Centre are due to open in early 2017. Visitors will be able to watch as conservators clean, repair and protect Knole’s collections in the new conservation studio. Work on the state rooms and interiors began in 2016 and includes refurbishing, rewiring and fitting new insulation and conservation heating. The project will end in 2018 with the opening of Knole’s renovated showrooms and previously unseen attic spaces, although conservation work will continue beyond this date. The project is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the National Trust, with a continuing programme of public fundraising.

As part of the Heritage Lottery-funded project, 40 volunteers at Knole have been trained in a variety of archaeological methods and techniques including landscape archaeology, geophysics, standing building recording, graffiti survey, and finds retrieval and processing. Since 2014 the volunteers have engaged with the public archaeology programme (see ABC Bulletin, Spring 2014) through supporting evening lectures, Family Mondays and other community events such as ‘Knole Late’, as well as leading ‘tail-ending’ landscape walks and behind-the-scenes tours. During 2015 the Archaeology Team, working alongside a professional team from Museum of London Archaeology, have been directly involved with the investigations in the house to retrieve artefacts revealed during building work under the floorboards (see left) and behind panelling in the Ballroom, the King’s Room, the Reynolds Room, the Cartoon Gallery, and in the Attics.

The ‘excavations’ in the house have discovered a range of
The 1633 letter after conservation

artefacts, largely relating to people visiting the house or as part of maintenance and repair, the majority of which date to the 19th and 20th centuries. However, during work in the Attics, three 17th-century letters were discovered: it is the first time such objects have been uncovered at Knole. Two of the letters were found by an Archaeology Team volunteer, Jim Parker, under the floorboards in the South Barracks. A third letter was recently discovered in a ceiling void above the King’s Closet by Dan Morrison, the site foreman from the project contractor team. The three letters are dated 1603, 1622 and 1633. Having lain hidden since then, the letters required careful cleaning and conservation. Knole’s UCL intern, Jan Cutajar, used cutting-edge equipment including infrared imaging at the Institute of Archaeology Conservation Lab to uncover the letters’ secrets.

This painstaking work has successfully conserved the letter dating 1633 (see above) so that it is now completely legible. It requests that household items should be sent to Copt Hall, Essex, from an unnamed house in London. The script of the letter is beautifully written, with the quality suggesting it was composed by a high-ranking servant. It reads:

1Mr Bilby, I pray provide to be sent to morrow in ye Cart some Greenfish, The Lights from my Lady Cranfield[es] Chamber 2 dozen of Pewter spoon[es]: one great fireshovell for ye nursery; and ye o[th]ers which were sent to be exchanged for some of a better fashion, a new frying pan together with a note of ye prises of such Commoditie for ye rest.

Your loving friend
Robert Draper
Octobre 1633
Copthall

The 1603 letter requires further work to be deciphered. The 1622 letter is also fragmentary and is currently undergoing conservation but the partial transcription reads as follows:

The xviiith of February 1622
[Received] by us the poore prisoners in [ILLEGIBLE] the [ILLEGIBLE]

The references in the letters to the Earls of Middlesex are due to the marriage of Frances Cranfield, daughter of the 1st Earl of Middlesex (owner of Copt Hall), to Richard Sackville, 5th Earl of Dorset (owner of Knole) in 1637. The collection at Copt Hall was moved to Knole during the early 18th century and forms a large proportion of the contents of the showrooms. In addition to furniture and textiles, a late-18th-century documentary source describes ‘Papers [which] had been lying for a vast number of years tumbled together in a chamber at the top of the house; they were collected by the Duke’s orders, roughly sorted and moved to the evidence room’ (which was located near the Outer Wicket on the West Front). It is possible that the letters found during the recent archaeological work may have fallen out of this collection and ended up ‘left behind’ when the remainder of the collection was moved to another part of the building.

The letters are now on display in the Visitor Centre at Knole for the public to see for themselves.

Nathalie Cohen, Archaeologist

1 Transcription by Alden Gregory (curator at Historic Royal Palaces and author of a PhD on Knole)
2 Greenfish: Fresh, unsalted fish; specifically cod before it has been salted or cured. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/greenfish?q=greenfish
3 Transcription by Alden Gregory

Mottisfont Abbey, near Romsey, Hampshire, is hosting a major exhibition of work by one of Britain’s foremost 20th-century artists.

‘Rex Whistler: More than Murals’ includes large-scale paintings, working designs, sketches, and personal items. The exhibition borrows work from Plas Newydd, the Whistler Archive at the Salisbury Museum, and the Welsh Guards. Sketchbooks reveal Whistler’s intricate detailed drawings and paintings, and letters are adorned with his cartoons and elaborate flourishes. Personal items on display include the artist’s own paint box, a selection of photographs, and compelling studies of members of his tank regiment. The exhibition runs until 23 April.
A COMPLEX LOGISTICAL CHALLENGE
The formidable task of removing the collections at Lindisfarne

Scaffolding is being erected around Lindisfarne Castle, Northumberland in preparation for the major building project that is about to begin. Lutyens’s castle is a victim of its own dramatic location; iconic and theatrical it may be, but it means that the castle is exposed to the weather. This, coupled with Lutyens’s determination to keep his building stark and austere (it lacks those architectural details thatthrow off the rain), has meant that his castle needs major work to help make it both weather-proof and also able to manage its internal environment more successfully. This piece reflects on some of the challenges involved in the packing and removing of the collections so that the building work can start.

The castle’s collection numbers just over 2,000 objects. This includes hinged curtain brackets and shelves that hitherto had not been on the inventory, but were included to allow their removal and storage to be documented. There are approximately 300 ceramics, 139 pieces of metalwork, 55 prints, and 126 pieces of furniture—and a few indigenous complications such as the Wind Indicator.

There were challenges to meet that are common to other properties: a very small house team, and limited spaces to store packed materials. In addition we needed to take the tides into account; we had only a short period of time in which to pack and document the collections; and during the packing the power line from the mainland was severed, so the island had no power. And at the castle this meant we also had no water, as a pump is needed to get the water up to the castle. On that particular day we stopped work early, abandoning the castle to darkness. For the removal firm the endless steps and the ramp were all factors that made this project one of their most complex.

From the start of the planning it was clear that we would have to bring in staff and volunteers from other properties to help with both the packing and the documentation. I worked with properties in the north-east of the region, recruiting experienced members of staff, and also asking some of their most skilled conservation volunteers to help. In the end we had volunteers from five other properties and staff from four. That Cragside, Seaton Delaval Hall and Wallington had all in their time packed up their collections meant that there was a reservoir of experienced staff and volunteers to help us. The most southerly property was Souter Lighthouse (most appropriate in view of the maritime setting of the castle) and the smallest Cherryburn, whence two diligent volunteers came.

In preparation we ran two training days for the volunteers at Cragside, making sure everyone understood how to pack objects properly and also explaining the documentation procedure. I was very keen to ensure that we documented the packing and removal thoroughly, and so I used a case study from the Snowshill project on the Trust Intranet as a template for my documentation plan.

The castle has some volunteers skilled in photography who took photographs of each room in great detail; these, along with the inventory for that room, formed the basis of the room folders we prepared in advance of the packing.

A time-consuming and repetitive task was the printing, cutting, laminating and puncturing of labels for each and every object in the castle. This led to the demise of one laminator and the
scouring of every property office I visited for laminating sleeves.

Small objects were packed into crates, but there were several larger or more vulnerable pieces that had special crates or transit frames made for them. Of these the most fragile was the model ship that had hung from the ceiling of the eponymous Ship Room: the Henrietta was set in her crate on a cradle of conservation-grade foam and lashed down with cotton tape—this ‘dry dock’ kept her safe. The huge armoires had to be taken apart, and left the castle in carefully labelled and numbered pieces.

The actual move was carried out by a firm based in Edinburgh; they had emptied two rooms at the castle in the run-up to the investigation work earlier in the year, and were well versed in the challenges the building would offer. We planned the move around the tides, and had scheduled it for the most favourable time. But of course we could do nothing about the difficulties of access: tight doorways, low ceilings and sharp corners all meant that in the end we could not get six pieces of furniture out of the castle. Some of these could not even be extracted from their rooms—they had been assembled there, or the doorways had changed—let alone got down the Portcullis steps. The other factor we could not improve was the weather, and for the days of the move we had showers and wind. The removal men worked around these squalls, making runs down the ramp when the rain held off. This was a little worrying at times, as the furniture was uncovered; I had agreed to this in view of the great distance and awkward lifts involved, and in the end all went well.

The media were, as expected, very interested in the whole project, and arrived at the castle for the first day of the packing. We had scheduled a couple of key tasks for them to photograph—the taking down of the Wind Indicator and the lowering of the Henrietta and mooring her in her crate. Running through the operations beforehand and removing the safety lines from the Henrietta ensured that all went smoothly.

The project went very well. We had all the collections packed by the fourth day; the removal took the same time. We even had time to tamp and vacuum the rugs before rolling and wrapping them, something I had wanted to do, but had thought we would not have time for. It took a lot of planning beforehand, in particular trying to quantify the protective materials we needed and calculating the time it would take to pack each room. Despite my planning we ran out of bubble wrap—the packing teams had to hoard it and protect it from all comers! We had stressed the importance of the documentation, and the staff, volunteers and removal men totally understood this; nothing left the castle without being recorded.

The training and familiarisation days we had held previously paid dividends, ensuring that the volunteers and staff from so many different properties had met each other and had had an introduction to the castle.

This is clearly a very brief summary of two busy and intense weeks of work, not to mention the weeks of planning that preceded them. The time spent planning was invaluable, and meant that when it came to the work it went smoothly. The days we had for training or familiarisation and the careful matching of volunteer teams with staff resulted in focused and effective work. The selection of volunteers and staff who had been asked to help gave us teams with members with the particular skills each required. For example, we had support from volunteers who work on the inventory daily, and so are used to that level of detailed and careful work; this made them ideally suited to documentation. This is, I think, one of the reasons we achieved such a good standard of recording. The engagement of the volunteers with the process and their work was excellent. The staff from other properties took on the responsibility of managing their teams and maintained a high standard of work throughout. And as important as all the preparation was the good will of all involved—everyone met every challenge with good humour.

John Wynn Griffiths, Conservator, North region
THE TRUST’S PLANT COLLECTIONS
Rethinking the significance and the curation of plants

C ultivated plants are essential contributors to the ‘spirit of place’ of many National Trust gardens and properties. They tell us a lot about the landscape fashions of the day, and often reflect the horticultural interests of the owners, designers or influential gardeners. In many properties plants were not grown merely to give structure and ornamentation but were living artefacts within the outdoor ‘gallery’ of the garden. There are many examples of Trust properties with a legacy of passionate plant collectors: Reginald Cory at Dyffryn, Leonard Messel at Nymans, Dr Wilfred Fox at Winkworth, and many others. For these owners, plant collecting and display was as important as the collecting of static objects. Their collections were recorded and added to through new accessions collected from the wild, by purchase or exchange, and by meticulous selection and breeding to produce new and notable varieties. Some gardens became places of great botanical diversity; we know from extensive records of plant purchases that the park and gardens at Croome were ‘inferior only to Kew’, according to Arthur Young in his Annals of Agriculture and other useful arts (1801). At Croome, as in many other gardens, today’s remaining trees and longer-lived shrubs are just the vestige of this once-magnificent horticultural treasure trove, and the challenge is to understand and, where appropriate, restore the plant collection.

Curating Plants
People are often perplexed by the idea of a collection of living things. In fact, the skills required and the kinds of information recorded are very similar to that of any collection, and it is only through accessible information that the value of a plant collection (like any other) can be fully realised. The biggest difference, of course, is that plants will at some point die, and planning their succession through propagation and replanting makes accurate curation particularly important.

One of the biggest challenges of curating a combined plant collection of this size, diversity and dispersed nature (over 200 gardens and over 500,000 recorded plants) is deciding what to record. Many plants are grown for short-lived ornamental or productive purposes only, and there is certainly no need to record and map every rhubarb in the walled garden or annual in the summer bedding. On other hand, it is not always the large, long-lived shrubs and trees that best reflect the distinctive horticultural tradition of a garden. Reginald Cory at Dyffryn established an arboretum full of rare and newly introduced trees, but he was also a leading light in the breeding of dahlias. Both groups of plants have significance in their own right and require conservation by different means.

Defining Significance
To help develop our understanding of the importance of the plant collections and focus effort on conserving them, the Trust has recently reviewed and revised the way it defines significance in relation to plants. From a hierarchical system based on sphere of importance – local, regional, national – we have moved to a more descriptive one:

✦ Individual plants of historical or cultural significance
✦ Individual or groups of plants of significance to landscape or ‘spirit of place’
✦ Plants of horticultural significance
✦ Plants of significance for wild plant conservation
✦ Plants of significance for supporting nature conservation

Of course these are not mutually exclusive descriptions—out there somewhere is the perfect plant that fulfils all five!

One important consideration is that like archaeologists we can become distracted by what has survived at the expense of considering what has been lost through time. Trees and other long-lived plants punch above their weight in this respect; through careful research we must consider more ephemeral but equally significant plants that are no longer present. These lost species and varieties, such as the dahlias at Dyffryn, may have been among the most significant plants during the garden’s heyday.

As well as describing why a plant (or group of plants) is important, defining significance in this way also helps in the practical aspects of planning and implementing programmes of replacement. Some plants—cultivars associated with a particular property, for example—have a distinctive genetic makeup, and their
conservation requires propagation by vegetative means such as cuttings or grafting to ensure that they remain ‘true’. Others are significant not for their genetic composition but for their location and historical associations. Newton’s apple tree at Woolsthorpe Manor and the Tolpuddle sycamore have gained significance simply by chance. Many properties have trees planted by famous historical figures, and in these cases determining the most appropriate way to conserve them is more subjective. Is an acorn grown from an oak tree planted by Queen Victoria any more significant because of the credentials of its parents, or would any oak tree be a suitable replacement? Is it even necessary to perpetuate plants such as these? Is their value bound up purely in the current living object, relinquished with the death of the plant itself? This philosophical question about how literally to replace like-for-like is similar to those faced in all areas of restoration.

New Challenges

With trees and other plants, questions of modern appropriateness are complicated by practical considerations such as adaptability to a changing climate or new diseases. When the characteristic cedars of Croome and the rhododendrons of Cragside were planted, Siroccoccus blight and Ramorum disease were unknown. These and many other diseases make us question the future viability of these species and consider alternatives, and how much these may change the appearance and make-up of our plant collections and treescapes.

Simon Toomer, National Specialist for Plant Conservation, National Trust
LADY ELEANOR’S HOURS? 
A re-examination of the Powis Hours medieval manuscript

The National Trust has few medieval manuscripts, as many were sold off before being bequeathed. Medieval manuscripts are a specialist area, and advice on them has often not been sought, or has only been undertaken in a piecemeal fashion. Currently, the largest set—at Coughton Court, Warwickshire—contains seven manuscripts. The remaining ones in the Trust’s care are housed in various properties in England and Wales. On the transfer of Powis Castle, Powys to the National Trust in 1952, the Herbert family gave two manuscripts, one of which was what is now called the ‘Powis Hours’. It is one of those items in the farthest reaches of the National Trust portfolio: despite being on permanent display, it receives little attention.

Looking through N.R. Ker’s *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries*, it is clear that the author visited some of the Trust’s collections, or that someone gave him information. In the case of the Powis Hours, it appears from his detailed description given in his book that he probably did visit the collection. Unfortunately, there is no evidence in the files to show when he visited, or whether there was once more information available than the abbreviated version which appears in the finished printed volumes. Though the world of manuscript studies has moved on since Ker, we are currently reliant on his information for our online records and for the information which is provided to the public. Scholars are now asking more questions about sources than they have in the past, as well as expecting more resources to be available when they need them. It is necessary to re-visit the Powis Hours and re-examine what is already known about it and whether there is more information that can be extracted.

Powis Castle on the English-Welsh border had a long and distinguished history before it was bought by Sir Edward Herbert (d.1595), second son of the first Earl of Pembroke, in 1587. His son William (c.1572-1667) married Lady Eleanor Percy, daughter of the 8th Earl of Northumberland. It is through this marriage that assumptions have been made that as she has annotated it, Lady Eleanor brought the Book of Hours to Powis on or after her marriage in 1595.

Inscriptions in the Powis Hours appearing to be by Lady Eleanor

Books of Hours

The most obvious question anyone would ask when looking at the Powis Hours is: what is a Book of Hours? What is it that makes it any different from just any old book on the shelves? They are rarely found in our increasingly secular, multi-cultural world, and are held in awe when they are exhibited. Apart from the Bible, a Book of Hours was just one of the items used in the medieval period as part of devotional life. The name is a good outline description of what it was: essentially a layperson’s daily service book. A phenomenon most common in the 13th to 16th centuries, it is a shortened and less prescriptive version of the monastic Breviary used by the clergy for their daily services throughout the clerical year.

The core of a Book of Hours is the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, made up of eight services designed to be said at certain times of day. Modelled on the clerical Breviary’s Divine Office, both books share the same names for the Hours, though the Little Office is much shorter and simpler. In addition to the Little Office, the Book of Hours also contains a number of other texts and devotions. These most commonly include a calendar, extracts from the Gospels, the short Hours of the Cross and of the Holy Spirit, the Seven Penitential Psalms, the Office of the Dead, and special prayers to the Virgin Mary, the Holy Trinity and various saints.

A Book of Hours was usually written in Latin, reflecting the clerical practice of services held in Latin. Unlike the Breviary, though, Books of Hours could be personalised to varying extents, depending upon the preferences and depth of purse of the buyer. Increasing lay literacy and a growing merchant and urban middle class led to a growing demand for Books of Hours. The book trade’s response to the rise in demand was to increase pace of production and to simultaneously standardise the process as much as possible. Standardisation out of necessity leads to specialisation in order to maintain as high a rate of workflow as possible. Script and illustrations often ended up being produced by separate workshops, or separate individuals within a workshop. A growing trade in stock images, which could be bought off-the-shelf, caused concern in Bruges for regulations to begin to creep in. ‘From 1427, onwards, artists who wished to supply such images for the art market in Bruges were obliged to register their individual marks with the painters’ guild and stamp them on their works.’ It would be interesting to see if the market managed to enforce such a practice, and how effective such enforcement was in reality.
Provenance and Usage

To what extent was the Powis Hours personalised, or was it just bought off the shelf ready for use? Personalisation could be achieved by precise instructions to the workshop on the content of the Book of Hours. The patron could ask for the inclusion of specific texts, or of particular favourite or local saints or prayers. Bindings could also be tailored to specific requirements and budgets.\textsuperscript{9} If the buyer’s pockets were not quite so deep, material of local or personal relevance could be added before or after the binding up of the leaves. A lesser degree of personalisation could be achieved after the purchase by modifying the finished item, perhaps by adding family notes into areas like the calendar, copying prayers into blank spaces, or attaching items to the leaves.\textsuperscript{10}

Although the 16th-century Percy family was both strongly Catholic and well-read\textsuperscript{11}, there is no evidence within the Powis Hours itself to suggest that any member had a connection with it before it came into Lady Eleanor’s hands. Hers appear to be the first set of inscriptions in the volume (previous page, top). An unknown 17th-century hand confirms Lady Eleanor’s ownership, stating at the top of the page that ‘This Booke belonged to ye Earles of Northumberland and was brought from Petworth by ye Lady Elianor’ (see above). The writer did not sign his or her name at the foot of the notes, so we are left to assume that the writer had some close connection to the family and was certain of the facts. There is no paper-trail anywhere to suggest that the facts behind these assertions have been checked in more recent times.\textsuperscript{12} The other annotators are later hands than hers; they include that of her grandson Thomas Abington, who signed the endleaves several times—one of his signatures is dated 1721.

It can be reasonably assumed that the Powis Hours has been at Powis Castle since the early 17th century, but it is rather more of a stretch of the imagination to assume that it was in the Percy family for around the previous 150 years since its creation without additional proof. The inclusion of a full-page illustration of St George could indicate a male owner (see below). Given the lack of any earlier provenance, it would be equally possible that Lady Eleanor could have received it either as a gift, or as an heirloom from her mother’s family\textsuperscript{13}, or from her in-laws. Being personal property, the transmission of Books of Hours from mothers to daughters is not unheard of. We often forget just how portable books can be. Though it may have been cropped slightly in its modern re-binding, the Powis Hours has always been easily portable. It is that same portability which makes it ideal as a layperson’s devotional aid.

If grime and portions of rubbed-away paint on illustrations are anything to base a theory on, then the Powis Hours was a reasonably well-used item. Various full-page illustrations, and their corresponding opposite leaf beginning the text, have differing amounts of wear and tear, either on the images themselves or on the corners of the leaves.\textsuperscript{14} The most obvious damage to the leaves is on the illustration of John the Baptist, where the paint and ink has come away in the bottom corners. There is also some loss of gold leaf or paint from the single-leaf initials in the text opposite. Other full-page illustrations of both the male and female saints and Christ’s Passion have also suffered to a lesser extent. It is possible to imagine someone holding the book open at that
inch wide, at the foot of the text of ff. 120r.-v. This may or may not indicate that something like a pilgrim badge had been inserted there as a memorial. There are sewing holes at the top of fo. 71r. and also around three sides of the text on fo. 87v (see left). The different numbers of holes suggest that something different was going on in each of these cases. A single row of holes could indicate a piece of cloth over the text. Three rows of holes would be more likely to be the insertion of an additional devotional image for veneration. As there are no loose items with the manuscript it is impossible to tell what the user intended. Although we have some straightforward signs of devotional use, we are left with some small tantalising mysteries which may never be solved. After the signatures of Katherine Herbert and then Thomas Abington were inscribed, the Powis Hours seems to have fallen into disuse. Unless later provenance material has been removed, particularly in the modern re-binding, then the book has probably been left to one side as a family heirloom for the last 200 years.

Yvonne Lewis, National Trust Assistant Libraries Curator

3 Ibid. p.20.
4 Janet Backhouse, Books of Hours (London: British Library, 1985) gives a brief overall summary of the contents of a Book of Hours. For a more detailed description working through the individual parts of a Book of Hours and their purpose, see works by Roger S. Wieck, Margaret Manion, Eamon Duffy. See also Rowan Watson’s course notes for LRBS, 2016.
6 Christopher De Hamel, Medieval craftsmen: scribes and illuminators (London: British Museum, 2nd impression, 1993) takes you through the whole process of producing a medieval manuscript.
7 Ibid. p.17.
8 The Powis Hours does not appear to have any marks on the full-page illustrations, though to date it has yet to have an exact centre of production assigned to it.
9 Unfortunately, as the Powis Hours was rebound in the early 20th century, there is no record of the binding which was removed, nor any trace of it having been retained within the new structure.
10 Kathryn Rudy, ‘Kissing images, unfurling rolls, measuring wounds, sewing badges and carrying talismans: considering some Harley manuscripts through the physical rituals they reveal’ in eBLJ, 2011, article 5. The author includes several images showing how curtains were sewn in to cover images, or pilgrimage badges and other devotional objects were attached to various leaves.
11 The regulations and establishment of the Household of Henry Algernon Percy, the Fifth Earl of Northumberland, at his Castles of Wressle and Lethfield in Yorkshire. Began anno domini M.DXII. [Edited by T.P. ie Thomas Percy, Bishop of Dromore.] (London: British Library Historical Print Collections, 2011). Entries throughout the volume show that the Percys had libraries at Wressle, Leconfield and Syon. There was also another library at Petworth in the 9th Earl’s time and possibly beforehand.
12 A conversation with the regional curator for Wales, August 2016, reveals that they have no proof of provenance on record in their office either. All this suggests that it is being assumed that the Book of Hours has been continuously in Percy family hands since its production in the mid-15th century.
13 Her mother, Catherine Latimer (d.1599) was daughter and heiress of John, Lord Latimer.
14 The following pairs of full-page illustrations with opposing text leaf show possible signs of wear and tear: 8v.-9r., 10v.-11r., 12v.-17r. (St. George), 15v.-16r., 20v.-21r., 22v.-23r., 24v.-25r., 33v.-34r., 40v.-41r., 67v.-68r., 92v.-93r., 107v.-108r., 120v.-121r., 137v.-138r.
16 They may have been removed on early 20th-century re-binding, if not before.
17 Mark Purcell, Powis Castle (Unpublished survey of the library done for the National Trust, 2003). See the foot of p.8 for a list of book sales. The Book of Hours is likely to have been examined on several occasions between 1923 and 1967.

point, either in private contemplation, or as part of a wider communal service. If consistency of grime is anything to go by, then it is possible that it was used by one person or a small number of people over a limited period of time, as the patina is reasonably consistent. More active devotees also added things to their Books of Hours. There is the mysterious possible cut or slash, about an
THE BUSY WORLD OF COLERIDGE COTTAGE
A year in the life of a newly appointed Visitor Experience Officer

We all, I think, know the feeling we have when we visit a property we have never been to before. That place holds a special sort of new magic: the excitement of every bit of interpretation, and the smell of paper and books and meticulous, regular cleaning mixed in with the slight scent of ‘an old place’ that will never go away. You only notice these things somewhere you rarely go, or have never previously been to. The feeling usually vanishes after a week or so. At Coleridge Cottage, after arriving in February last year, that feeling stuck with me and I was excited for months. I still am. To put this excitement in context, on my interview day I was shown around the cottage and, packed full of nerves, I asked to be forgiven if my enthusiasm went over the top a little bit at encountering the fireplace where Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote Frost at Midnight. I had loved Romantic poetry since reading Nutting and There was a Boy by William Wordsworth at school, and I had studied Romanticism at university. This role was a dream come true. I still sometimes can’t quite believe I’m here.

Coleridge Cottage is tucked away at the edge of the village of Nether Stowey in West Somerset. Last year it was voted one of Somerset’s top small attractions. The poet, preacher, political activist, critic and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge lived here for three years. So brief was his tenure that some wonder why the National Trust has taken such pains to maintain his tiny cottage. The answer can be found in the drama and ghostly horror of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, the bizarre and exotic imagery of Kubla Khan, and the soft and creeping imitation of semi-conscious thought in Frost at Midnight. Here, in this bolt-hole away from the world, Coleridge wrote poetry as it had never been written before. He and his friend Wordsworth, who was living nearby at Alfoxton in the Quantock Hills, collaborated to write Lyrical Ballads, and ushered in the Romantic Movement.

The secret, beautiful landscape of west Somerset—its hills and moorlands, strange twisted trees, hidden dells, sudden heights and changeable seasons—provided the fuel Coleridge’s unique imagination needed. The landscape is the same today, and his cottage has endured—wrapped in places within the shell of a Victorian pub, but still here.

It was in February 2016 that I met the volunteers. The pre-season meeting for Coleridge Cottage fell the day after the pre-season meeting at Kedleston Hall in the Derby portfolio, where I had previously worked as the Volunteering and Community Involvement Officer. From saying goodbye at one meeting to saying hello at another—with the M5 in between—made for a formidable two days. I remember looking at everyone’s faces and wondering how on earth I would remember their names, and then, afterwards, being amazed at the warmth of everyone I met. The volunteers at Coleridge Cottage are special—visitors, staff, and new volunteers all say so. They are open and easy, and excited, and there is a freshness and happiness about them that is contagious. I caught the enthusiasm, and was reassured. A few days later, the cottage opened its doors for 2016.

As Coleridge Cottage is a very small property, it is natural to imagine that it never gets terribly busy; that occasionally we might be visited by hard-core Coleridge fans who drift in and out on a pilgrimage, but that most of the time we have an easy time of it, lying on the grass and writing verse. I’ve been asked several times whether I get bored working at the Cottage. The reality is that we never stop being busy. In terms of visitor numbers, a busy day for us is well over 100 in a day. Most of our visitors know very little about Coleridge, and despite this they almost always stay longer than they had expected. We have known people to relax for hours on the Reading Room’s comfy sofas with headphones perpetually on their ears, listening to poetry. The General Manager has described the Cottage as being ‘a National Trust property in miniature’, which means we are fully equipped with tea-room, shop, and garden. This also means a great deal of cleaning.

For two hours every morning on an open day (we are open five days a week between March and October), Tina Mitchell, the House Steward, and I, as the only staff members, hoover and mop the Cottage, clean the loo, set up the three tills and the tea-room, and set and light the two fires in the colder months. It still stuns me how Tina managed to do this almost single-handedly before I arrived. At 10.45, the volunteers come to the door and we all pile into the tearoom for our morning briefing. Tina rallies the team by joking about something, room duties are assigned for the day (where a volunteer goes depends on how many people we have, and where they are most needed), before we throw open the doors at 11am, often to an already waiting public. Although this sounds very formulaic and structured, each day the visitors who come through the door bring a different story, or anecdote, or joke. One of them said to me that they had never been to a National Trust property so full of laughter.
On a beautiful day in May, I sat in the Lime Tree Bower at the end of the garden with two cameras pointing at my face. If Coleridge Cottage is a hidden gem, its garden is the hidden gem within the hidden gem. Designed to reflect the rustic, smallholding-style life Coleridge wanted to lead (but never quite had the determination to see through), the garden is mainly given over to a wildflower meadow, which in the summer forms a sea of long grasses and flowers. Throughout the year the garden volunteers meet once a week to maintain it; there are no clipped borders and box hedges here, but there is always something new blossoming. It amazed me throughout the spring and summer, and even far into autumn, how whenever something died back some other plant bloomed almost instantly in its place. Now, in May, the replica Lime Tree Bower that Coleridge wrote about in his poem *This Lime Tree Bower my Prison* provided some welcome shade from the sun on a beautiful day. The cameras facing me belonged to ‘Flog It’, who had come to the cottage to film a segment for their episode set in Bridgwater. Most of the questions I had prepared for, but at the end I was asked whether Coleridge would have liked Iron Maiden’s version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I laughed for a second, surprised. What else could I say but ‘Yes, I think he would have’?

The spring and summer flew by. The poet Ian McMillan rounded off the Cottage’s ‘Writing Places’ project with an evening entertaining a large audience in Nether Stowey Church Centre—despite being helpless with laughter at times, we managed to create our own poems. On Dress Like a Georgian Day, we donned our Georgian costumes to bring Coleridge’s times to life. On the other side of summer, we pressed apples on Apple Day, read from Gothic literature on Halloween, and finally at Christmas the Cottage was transformed with greenery and the smell of spice bags and pomanders. For a time, with so much going on, I struggled to work out how to fit everything in; I needed to manage the website and social media, and plan events and the education programme, as well as deal with the day-to-day running of the cottage and all its distractions. Now that I have been here for a whole year I can claim that I have done it all. At one point in the autumn Tina suggested that my role title should be changed to ‘What an Experience Officer’, and I suggested she should be called ‘the High Steward’!

Many properties in the National Trust have a Visitor Experience Officer. What is fascinating, and wonderful, is that no Visitor Experience Officer has quite the same role. Some focus on education, marketing, or events, while some do all and more. I quickly realised that being a Visitor Experience Officer at Coleridge Cottage meant being in the latter category. It also meant serving in the Tearoom or the Shop and stewarding in the Welcome Parlour (sometimes all three in the space of half an hour); dealing with sudden turns of events; always working closely with the volunteers who keep the cottage running; occasionally panicking about whether a 40-person coach would fit down the lane; and once being treated to live Welsh opera from a man who was travelling around Wales and the South West on foot, bicycle and by boat as part of the Coleridge Festival in Wales.

What has amazed me most over the course of the year is the passion and energy of the people who visit, volunteer, and work in and around Coleridge Cottage. Tina’s seemingly bottomless energy and good sense of humour has kept us going over what has been a busy year. There have been volunteers who continuously come up with new ideas as well as provide our visitors with their famous warm welcome. The Friends of Coleridge—a group of academic experts and keen enthusiasts—secured well-earned Arts Council funding for their ‘Imagined Worlds’ project to celebrate 200 years since the first publication of *Kubla Khan*. Nether Stowey earned ‘Walkers are Welcome’ status, further promoting this area as a place to explore and follow in the poet’s footsteps. Coleridge Cottage is an example of a Trust property where the Spirit of Place is not just contained within its four walls and whose influence spreads out widely. Tina’s redubbing of my role as a ‘What an Experience Officer’ has been pretty accurate so far!

Kate Chandler, Visitor Experience Officer, Coleridge Cottage
‘WE NEVER SAW SUCH SIGHT BEFORE’
The Whale’s Tale: recent discoveries at Cotehele, Cornwall

Cotehele’s Great Hall, with its arch-braced roof, stone floor, high windows and large fireplace, is an impressive space. In 1789 it was described by Queen Charlotte as ‘a large Hall full of Old Armour and Swords and Old Carved Chairs of the Times’.1 Peter Beaucham, in his recent development of Pevsner’s guide, referred to Cotehele as the ‘most extensive, complete, and important Tudor house of Cornwall’.2 Yet despite these accolades, the item that generates by far the most interest from visitors is a pair of whale’s jawbones.3

The questions are many and frequent; the answers are few. What type of whale was it? We know, from the absence of toothsockets, that our whale was a baleen, a filter feeder, of a type that once provided the raw materials for parasol spokes or whalebone corsets. Where did it come from? In 1647 members of the Edgcumbe family, who owned and lived at Cotehele, exchanged letters with the Admiralty concerning a whale that had been washed up at Mevagissey.4 Could this have been our whale? When were the bones brought to Cotehele? A number of early 19th-century descriptions of Cotehele observe ‘elephant’s tusks’ in the Hall.5 Might this have been a case of mistaken identity? Were the so-called tusks actually jawbones? Or were the bones introduced some time later by Dowager Countess Caroline, who came to live in Cotehele’s East Range in 1862? One of the principal rooms was the Breakfast Room, situated to the east of the Hall, the entrance to which is flanked by the jawbones. A photograph shows the bones in situ in the late 19th century, but they are absent from an earlier photo of c.1865.

Evidence to support any of these theories was, until recently, frustratingly elusive. David Bullock6 joined the debate in May 2016 during a visit to Cotehele, and suggested that we might consider DNA testing the bones. Simon Moore7 collected samples, which were sent to Dr Catherine O’Reilly for analysis at Waterford Institute of Technology. She subsequently revealed that the jawbones belonged to a fin or common roqual whale (Balaenoptera physalus).8 These marine giants can grow to be over 80 feet long—almost twice the length of the Hall itself.

Questions concerning the age of the bones, and the date they came to the Hall, remained unresolved until serendipitous timing led to a chance discovery. A poor-quality drab-looking photocopy of a document (in the to-be-sorted-and-filed pile) turned out to be a partial inventory and description of Cotehele, probably written by William 4th Earl of Mount Edgcumbe (1832-1917). One of the pages contained a photograph of the bones in situ. The caption read: The jawbones on each side of the centre door are those of a whale (about 61 feet long) landed on Colona Beach, near Bodrugan, January 2nd 1875.9

This information about Colona Beach prompted a search for contemporary evidence of the whale’s landing, which uncovered the following entries from local newspapers which endorse the DNA findings:10

North Devon Journal – Thursday 7 January 1875

A WHALE OFF MEVAGISSEY. – A huge object floating in the sea, about five miles off Mevagissey, was seen on Saturday morning, and on a party of Gorran fishermen going out they discovered it to be a dead whale. Fastening ropes to the fins of the huge fish, five boats commenced to tug away, and after many weary hours they succeeded in landing it on Colona beach, about one mile from Mevagissey, where hundreds of eager spectators were awaiting the arrival of the monster, which proved to be a roqual, or black whale, of the following dimensions:—Length, 61 feet; girth, about 42 feet; spread of tail, 14 feet; expansion of jaw, about 15 feet. The lucky captors at once offered it for sale, asking for their prize the sum of £100, but ultimately sold it to a Mevagissey firm for...
The mystery of Cotehele's jawbones was thus resolved. The exact details of how they were acquired for Cotehele remains a matter for speculation.

Rachel Hunt, House & Collections Manager, Cotehele

Acknowledgements:
Sincere thanks are due to David Bullock, Catherine O'Reilly, and Simon Moore, without whom the identity of our whale—eponymously named Finella—might never have been discovered. Also to Jane Evans for her research.

1. Excerpt from Queen Charlotte's journal (Royal Archive, Windsor), with the permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.
3. www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk, item number 348036.
5. There are references to elephant's tusks in 1799 (Lipscomb); 1824 (Byrh); and 1831 (Fisher). No elephant's tusks are known to have existed at Cotehele.
6. Head of Nature Conservation for the National Trust.
7. Simon Moore, MScT, RSci, FLS, ACR, Conservator of Natural Sciences and Curatology, and the National Trust's advisor for nature conservation.
8. In an e-mail from Dr Catherine O'Reilly to Rachel Hunt, 8 December 2016.
9. www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk, Item number 349531.1. It is tempting to speculate that this might be a copy of the missing inventory of 1875, to which Lena Andrew refers in 'The Cotehele Annunciation Panels'. Cotehele Journal, vol 9 (due to be published in March 2017).
DECORATIVE PLASTER CEILINGS

Are they at risk? The National Trust Fibrous Plaster Survey

Following the collapse of the plaster ceiling in the auditorium of the Apollo Theatre, London, in December 2013 there was some concern about the condition of the plaster in other theatres also built at the turn of the 19th century and the likelihood of further collapses.

The fall at the Apollo of a large expanse of thick and heavy decorated plaster apparently came without warning. This raised two questions: what was it that caused the theatre plaster to collapse? Could it be that other ceilings in historic properties were also at risk? On investigation it became clear that the theatre’s plasterwork was of a specific form of manufacture, one commonly found in more elaborately decorated buildings, and only introduced in the mid-19th century.

To address these concerns Cliveden Conservation was asked to survey similar ceilings in the National Trust portfolio. The method and findings of the survey are described here.

Lime plaster or fibrous plaster?

For this survey of historic buildings it was necessary to have an understanding of both the making and the nature of the building material. The way the Apollo Theatre’s plaster ceiling was made is partly described by its name—fibrous plaster. This highly popular kind of plaster is plaster reinforced with fibre; it can be made from various ingredients, and to varying aesthetic standards.

At the time of the building of the Apollo Theatre in 1901, its architect, Lewin Sharp, had a choice of two forms of plasterwork for his interior scheme. On the one hand he could have formed the plasterwork traditionally in lime plaster. His plasterers or stuccoists would have worked in situ with stucco or decorative lime plaster made from burnt limestone, a material which had been used extensively for many centuries. Decorative lime plaster lies at the heart of the best examples of plasterwork in churches and country houses, ranging from the beautifully entwined decorated Jacobean ceilings at Chastleton and Knole to the more sophisticated decorative plasterwork in churches and country houses. Though challenged today by the revival of lime plaster, initially in the reconstruction of the ceilings at Uppark after the 1989 fire, it remains the first choice for decorative plasterwork.

In many respects the use of fibrous plaster represents the industrialisation of plasterwork. In the early 19th century the Neo-Classical Revival encouraged the development of repetitive cast work in gypsum plaster. The introduction of the technique of casting decorative panels in gypsum reinforced with jute fibres allowed the mass production of lightweight plasterwork in purpose-built workshops, away from the construction site. Leonard Alexander Desachy patented the particular system and materials for modern fibrous plasterwork in 1856. Decoration using fibrous plaster soon replaced the use of lime plaster, especially in public buildings such as theatres; the plasterwork, being moulded, was economical to produce,
and the somewhat formulaic repetitive forms of caryatids and garlands, often garishly gilded, would be partially disguised by the subdued lighting (see photographs, this page).

The most common way of forming ornate fibrous plasterwork ceilings is to suspend them, anchoring the light plasterwork with wires, hessian bandages and dabs of plaster (see diagram, page 17). Gypsum and hessian were also used during the 20th century for repairs to historic ceilings.

The manufacture of fibrous plaster
Firstly, a flexible mould is created, formerly of gelatine, now of silicone. To ensure that the plaster will have a smooth, unbroken surface a thin solution of gypsum and water is brushed all around the mould. Then the thin first coat of plaster—known as ‘firsts’—is poured into the mould and distributed with a brush, and as it ‘picks-up’ (starts to set), a layer of jute hessian scrim is pushed in. Once the first layer is set, usually after 20-30 minutes, the second layer—known as ‘seconds’—is prepared. This coat starts with another layer of hessian scrim; this is first dipped into wet gypsum plaster before being laid on the first coat with a brush. Gypsum plaster is poured on to cover the hessian. Within this coat, stiffening and supporting battens of soft wood are placed strategically across and bound with hessian. These bindings are known as ‘wads’; these in turn are extended to form fixing wads, which can be tied over, and to, the supporting framework of the building. Unlike the manufacture of traditional lime plaster, there are no rules for the making of fibrous plaster – simply guidelines for the most effective ways of making it.

Fibrous plaster: causes of decay and the necessity for assessment
Investigations into the collapse of the Apollo ceiling showed that the failure was caused by degradation of the suspension mechanism—not necessarily the suspended plaster ceiling itself. Hessian and gypsum wadding inevitably fails in time. The brittle nature of gypsum plaster meant that the failure occurred suddenly and extensively.

As fibrous plaster has been used for around 140 years, and the normal life of hessian scrim is approximately 80 years, some of the older examples of fibrous plasterwork in both public and private buildings clearly require condition assessment, monitoring and possibly remedial conservation. The causes of decay are several, ranging from environmental exposure and the structural weakness of supporting elements to general wear. Owing to the high organic content of fibrous plaster, and its attachment to timber struts, moisture-related decay and bio-deterioration from cellulose-eating micro-organisms will occur. Environmental influences—including moisture ingress from leaking roofs, condensation from thermal changes, humidity variations, and poor ventilation—are also detrimental.

Structural shortcomings can also damage fibrous plaster. The supporting battens behind the fibrous panels may be too small; undersized ceiling joists and rafters may give inadequate support. With roof spaces prone to large temperature variations there are risks of thermal movement in the principal supporting structure, which in turn affects the joints between the fibrous plaster panels beneath. In the general wear category of decay, access will cause problems unless it is controlled. Loose crawl boards can damage the wads, and similarly access for maintenance of mechanical or electrical services can result in damage from people treading on the fragile wads as they walk above the plaster panels.

It is obvious, therefore, that controlled arrangements are needed for viewing the rear of fibrous plaster ceilings. Clearly-defined access strategies for roof voids should form an important element of the building maintenance plan.

It is equally important to understand that vibration will have an influence on ceiling performance; the relocation of mechanical plant in roof areas above decorative plaster should be
considered. Vibrations from mechanical and electrical plant may contribute to accelerated deterioration of fibrous plaster wads.

The survey and its findings

Although knowledge about Trust buildings is extensive on an individual property and regional level, this kind of information is not generally available at a more national level. Accordingly the aim of this survey was to create a national inventory and assessment of the condition of fibrous plaster ceilings within the buildings of the National Trust.

Fibrous plaster is made in moulds, and as it is far quicker to use a trowel to make flat plaster, only decorative ceilings were made of fibrous plaster. The survey therefore concentrated on the larger, grander properties. Initially the regional building surveyors were asked to identify which ceilings could be at risk. They told the survey where ceilings were to be found that were known to be or were probably made of fibrous plaster, their age (ceilings over 70 years old are at greater risk), and whether any structural damage or water ingress had occurred in the past. With priority given to those ceilings on or below public access routes, some 60 ceilings in 22 properties were identified for the risk register.

As Plaster Adviser to the National Trust and Managing Director of Cliveden Conservation I led a series of physical investigations of those ceilings, assessing their present condition, collecting data, and recording with photography and drawings. With the great support of property staff, a huge amount of valuable data was collected, enabling the following conclusions to be made:

✦ Across the National Trust portfolio, by far the larger proportion of ceilings takes the form of lath and plaster
✦ Of the wholly fibrous plaster ceilings identified within the National Trust portfolio, all appear to be fully secured to the timber structure above using nails directly into joist timbers—they are not the suspended ceiling form found in theatres
✦ Some of these fixings were supplemented with plaster wads; however, these appeared to be strong and never independent of a mechanical fixing
✦ Those areas where decay was apparent were either due to water ingress (Powis, see photograph, this page), or where significant building or structural movement put pressure on the plaster and support (Montacute)

✦ In the course of this review, it has become apparent that the same possibly weak materials and methods and materials used for fixing fibrous plasterwork have also been used for repairing traditional plasterwork—using gypsum and hessian across the back of the plaster. This is a system of repair that has been in use for the last 40 years or so, and involves pouring gypsum onto the back of the plasterwork and reinforcing it with hessian. With gypsum-and hessian-based repairs the main issue appears to be the incompatibility between the two materials; with wholly fibrous plaster ceilings (or replacement panels in sections of the rooms) the main causes of concern are active deterioration of the support system.

The current system of care, monitoring and surveying should pick up any major issues. This includes:

✦ House staff monitoring and raising awareness of any change noticed in the face of the ceiling
✦ Building Surveyors ensuring that ceilings are considered to be part of the general inspection routine
✦ Noting of incidents of water ingress
✦ Taking care not to place items directly on the back of any ceiling and avoiding vibrations
✦ Regular inspecting of the support system (hessian/wire/nails) of identified fibrous plasterwork
✦ Introducing additional fixings promptly at any sign of deterioration
✦ For gypsum repairs—possibly introducing additional mechanical fixings, to support both the weight of the gypsum fill and the ceiling itself

With continued cooperation between house staff and volunteers, building surveyors, conservators and curators, and conservation contractors, the National Trust can develop its knowledge of these important ceilings, monitor them closely, and ensure their long-term preservation.

Trevor Proudfoot, Managing Director, Cliveden Conservation, and Plaster Adviser to the National Trust