The Good Fight: Conservation of the Rouse Hill House interiors

Matthew Scott
Conservation & Curatorial Advisor / Preventive Conservator and Curator, Historic Houses Trust, Sydney, Australia

Abstract
One of only a handful of publicly-owned early colonial houses in Australia, Rouse Hill House is set apart by the evocative atmosphere of intact interiors that span 165 years of continuous family ownership. Managed by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, the conservation of the property is guided by a policy of minimal intervention. This paper tracks elements of the conservation work within the framework of the policy over the past decade, and considers the likely future of these interiors given their already advanced state of deterioration.

Keywords
Conservation policy, historic house, housekeeping, pest management, preventive conservation, textiles, gilded timber, paintings

Introduction
Rouse Hill House and Farm is located approximately forty kilometres northwest of the Sydney, New South Wales. Managed by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (HHT), it is one of only a handful of early colonial houses in public ownership in Australia.

Worn down by hardship in the twentieth century, the interiors of Rouse Hill House are to the modern eye a time capsule of the Victorian era. Faded, crumbling, cluttered and remarkably intact, the nineteenth century decorative schemes, furnishings, objects and ephemera constitute an intensely evocative experience for visitors and a treasure trove for researchers.

Acquired by the state government in a decade noted for heavy-handed restoration of publicly owned historic buildings, a strict conservation policy of minimal intervention was developed to preserve this unique cohesion and ambience. Abhoring accepted forms of repair and restoration as fakery, the abiding...
principle of the policy is to intervene lightly and only to ensure survival of the individual and the wider whole [Broadbent, 1990].

Informed and driven by this policy, the history of conservation of the Rouse Hill interiors has been of incremental holding actions rather than grand projects. Over the past decade, however, a conservation strategy whereby decision-making is based upon an hierarchy of significance as well as the importance of preserving the wider integrity of the interiors has evolved.

The aim of this paper is to provide a brief discussion of preventive and remedial conservation of the interiors while taking into due account the role of the policy in conservation decision making.

After more than thirty years in public ownership, the importance of these nationally significant interiors as a representation of Australian life from the early nineteenth to the late twentieth century has been increasing exponentially with each generation, just as the drift towards disintegration has been accelerating.

**Background**

Unlike many historic houses, Rouse Hill House does not make a grand statement. It is not designed by a prominent architect. Nor are its interiors the product of fashionable decorators capturing a single moment of high style. It is rather an accumulation of furnishings, decorative styles, personal items and the ephemera derived from six generations of ownership and occupation by the one family.

Constructed by Richard Rouse during the second decade of the nineteenth century, the substantial double storey sandstone house made a clear statement of economic success as a country seat [Thornton 1988]. Little survives of these interiors apart from a handful of furniture, a scant selection of silver, a few ceramics and the physical evidence of somber paint schemes, but these suggest an austere Georgian household with a vernacular elegance.

Richard Rouse died in 1852, and over the next sixty years, successive generations of the family undertook improvements to the farm, garden, house and interiors. The interiors were gradually transformed by a rolling series of modest renovations that added new elements and replaced older ones. Even without a single comprehensive renewal of decorative schemes and furnishings, a continuity that spanned the full period of occupation developed over time.

After 1920, economic hardship and ageing owners meant little change in the house, establishing a pattern that prevailed for the remainder of private ownership. During this time a growing awareness of the unique longevity and evocative ambience of Rouse Hill was developing amongst the family and the wider community, and from 1935 onwards the interiors featured in newspapers articles and publications [Thornton 1988].

In the early 1970s ownership of the house and its contents devolved to two descendants of Richard Rouse, each residing in separate parts of the house. With the no likelihood of single ownership being re-established and the distinct possibility of sale and dispersal, the New South Wales state government intervened, acquiring the property and a provenanced in situ collection of more than 18,000 objects.

**Conservation Policy**

Differing substantially to the conservation policies of other properties managed by the HHT, the Rouse Hill policy is philosophical [Carlin 1997] in its approach, accepting the condition and arrangement of the house, interiors, garden, farm buildings and paddocks at the time of acquisition in 1978 as representative of its continuous history and integral to its national significance.
Rejecting restoration and extensive renewal, the policy requires intervention only when essential to prolong the life of the place. Where physical failure occurs, conservation interventions should seek to support rather than renew, replace or reconstruct, and this support should be of the most minimal nature, the intention being to prevent conspicuous change through excessive intervention and preserve the authenticity and emotive power of the interiors [Broadbent, 1990]. These elements of the policy have become widely conceptualized as stipulating minimal intervention.

**Policy in Practice**

The simple tenets of the policy become difficult when applied to a complex property comprising landscape, buildings and collections. Conservation decision making can become an endless evaluation of options and outcomes, each with its own broader ramifications. Various impracticalities and the confusion of fundamental concepts that exist within the policy are discussed by Hedditch [1999] and Ruddock [2007].

Uncertainties in decision-making arise from the policy’s deliberate lack of guidance for conservation prioritization. This problem is compounded where the significance of individual components are intricately tied to and derived from the wider entity, and decision-making becomes even more seriously impaired where elements are in advanced stages of deterioration that lie beyond the reach of a doctrine of minimal intervention.

**Prioritisation**

Around 16,000 provenanced objects are displayed or stored within the house. The quantity of material requiring rudimentary conservation: simple cleaning, encapsulation, improved storage or other intervention is substantial. With no policy guidance for the prioritization of conservation, initial planning has tended to be informal, and failed to achieve either consistency in approach or cost efficiency.

Gradually over the last decade, an assessment system that takes significance into account has consequently evolved. This has improved conservation decision-making, and enabled objective prioritisation within the diverse collection. Three primary factors are considered:

- the role of the object or finish within each interior;
- the significance of the object or finish divorced of its provenance;
- and interrelationships between disparate elements of the collection.

**Conservation Factors**

Perched on a arid hilltop, the summer temperatures at Rouse Hill are amongst the highest in the Sydney; in winter they drop amongst the lowest. Extended dry periods are normal, but are frequently broken by heavy rain, gale force winds, and occasionally devastating hail storms. The house interiors are an equally harsh environment for the display and storage of a museum collection. Readings can range between 20% to 90% RH and 5º to 40ºC, whilst light levels may reach 1000lux and 500um. Fluctuations within a twenty four hour period are dramatic. Options for moderating these extremes are very limited: natural ventilation and portable fans encourage air movement during periods of high relative humidity, whilst window shutters can control light. Nearly two centuries of building movement has left substantial gaps around windows and doors and these allow the ingress of hot, dry, and dusty westerly winds. Any approach to conservation, whether preventive or remedial, must respond to these harsh conditions.
As one of the smaller cultural institutions in New South Wales, the HHT does not have a conservation department to assess, plan and carry out the conservation of its collection. All remedial conservation work is outsourced to private practitioners. Within the organisation, the Collection Management Unit provides advice, information and assistance for preventive conservation and recommendations for remedial work.

**Preventive Conservation**

Due to the importance and perceived fragility of the interiors, combined with the complexity of its policy, Rouse Hill is the only HHT property with staff dedicated to managing the conservation of the interiors and collections. With the exception of pest management all preventive conservation is carried out in-house including general housekeeping, storage, monitoring the impact of museum operations, environmental monitoring and logistics of public access.

*Fig.1  Condition of wallpaper prior to conservation highlights the need for care within the interiors.*

*Historic Houses Trust©*

**Housekeeping**

When first acquired by the state, the interiors presented a highly evocative and emotive experience. The clutter of Victorian furnishing under a delicate shroud of dust decided the housekeeping course: accepted and inevitable, dust is considered part of interiors.
Helen Lloyd and Sarah Staniforth [2000] explored the synthesis of traditional housekeeping and modern conservation employed by the English National Trust. Similarities exist at Rouse Hill, and a number of their strategies have been adopted, but there are key differences. The housekeeping at Rouse Hill must balance appropriate presentation against the spectre of excessive change within the interiors [Broadbent, 1990].

For the last three decades, the HHT has interleaved cyclical schedules of regular presentation cleaning of interiors with major or ‘deep’ conservation cleaning episodes. Where appropriate to conservation and interpretation, this system is still followed, but nine years ago the housekeeping routine for Rouse Hill evolved away from a rigid schedule of cleaning to a reactive approach that assesses and identifies the need for cleaning before undertaking it.

Primarily assessed by visual inspection, a sliding scale without rigid categorizations is used to weigh the necessity of reducing dust levels against other conservation work. The fragile condition of the collection, decorative finish and building fabric precludes excessive activity within rooms [Figure 1]. When undertaken, cleaning a room can be a slow process. It is typically done by a single staff member over the course of a day, care being taken to ensure minimal movement of objects.

Though not without its failings, given limited staff resources this permits reasonable flexibility within housekeeping and allows an intelligent response to other conservation issues as they arise.

Pest Management

The HHT’s pest management is undertaken by a private contractor specialising in biological issues within museums. Like many historic houses, Rouse Hill has and remains prone to infestations. An integrated approach is standard across the HHT, including monitoring (adhesive/pheromone traps), monthly or bi-monthly visual inspections, and low toxicity gaseous or residual powder treatments of interiors. Regular communication between Rouse Hill staff and the HHT pest management contractor remains invaluable in identifying both infestations and the housekeeping issues contributing to them.

Over the last decade, through a combination of pest treatment and improved housekeeping, severe infestations, by silverfish (Lepisma saccharina), carpet beetle (Anthrenus verbasci), case bearing clothes moth (Tinea pellionella), borer (Anobium punctatum) and...
rodent (Rattus species) have been brought under control. Outbreaks still occur, but experience has shown these are frequently induced by dramatic or seasonal climatic changes over which there is little control.

The single greatest threat to preservation is posed by termites. With long history of depredation on the property, the most destructive termite—Coptotermes acinaciformis—can be credited with significant structural damage to the house, including collapse of lintels and weakening of floor joists, as well extensive damage to the interiors and collection [Figure 2].

Spot treatments relying on localised reactive use of arsenic proved unsatisfactory as substantial damage occurs before visible evidence of activity emerges. In 1999, focus shifted to identifying and tracking termite activity back to primary nests located in trees and fence posts within two hundred metres of the house. Holes were drilled into tree trunks and nests poisoned with synthetic pyrethroid. Coupled with the installation of an encircling bait station system, this approach reduced termite activity in the vicinity of the house [Lavrencic & Roach 2001].

Remedial Conservation

The interventive treatment of the collection and decorative finishes present substantial challenges within the doctrinal framework. The abiding principle of minimal intervention has set substantial challenges for house staff commissioning work and external conservators conducting treatments [Clayton et al 2004].

As a client, the HHT is not always the most desirable one to have, frequently requesting minimal treatments to solve major problems. An initial site-visit is vital for new conservators undertaking work on the Rouse Hill collection as verbal or written explanations do not always convey the nature of the interiors and why particular outcomes are important. Site familiarisation promotes clear understanding between house staff and conservator, and allows a balance to be achieved between desired outcomes and what is realistically practical. Remedial conservation is guided by five goals:

1. Preserve the object holistically, including all components regardless of perceived value or significance;
2. Minimum loss and/or change to the original fabric;
3. Extend the serviceable lifespan of the object within the interiors;
4. Medium to long term stability of treatments within the poor house environment;
5. Consideration of financial cost of reversing treatment in the event of future conservation.

Drawing Room

The drawing room contains a significant collection of furnishings, with the visual cohesion and evocative ambience of the room being as important as the long term survival of individual objects. Over last five years the focus has been upon key soft furnishings, a number of which are the only known examples of their type in Australia.

Because of the prominent role played by these pieces within the rooms, and because much of their character is the product of dirt and degradation, the conservation of the textiles is fraught from the HHT’s perspective.

One of the most prominent features in this room is the chimney glass. Representing the last redecoration of this interior, the frame is upholstered in green silk velvet and its arched top is festooned with a drapery of a green wool crepe, pattern printed in bronze powder and trimmed with a bobble fringe [Figure 3]. As a
product of the late nineteenth century aesthetic movement this is a unique object. The mirror and drapery exhibit a professional degree of competency not present in other ‘home’ decorated and upholstered pieces at Rouse Hill.

Treatment focused primarily upon the drapery: the crepe was very soiled and faded, the bronze printing was tarnished and locally corroding (Figure 4), the silk and cotton bobble fringe was very fragile.

Fig.3 Drawing room chimney glass and drapery. Historic Houses Trust©
Investigation revealed the drapery is made up of seven components: two pleated tails, two pleated swags and three individual chou, attached by nails and the occasional stitch to the frame.

![Image of floral motif printed in bronze powder](image)

*Fig. 4  Floral motif printed in bronze powder exhibiting various levels of corrosion. Tess Evan, Heights Heritage Conservation©*

Removed from the mirror frame, the textile was surface cleaned before undergoing wet cleaning in a de-ionised water bath with 1% anionic detergent and 10g of sodium carboxymethyl cellulose, followed by rinsing, drying and reshaping. The most tenuous of the hanging bobbles were reinforced with additional threads. The silk velvet of the mirror frame is extremely deteriorated, with the pile disintegrating easily on contact. Few satisfactory options exist for treatment other than gentle brush cleaning. In the collection, examples of deteriorated silk velvet upholstery have been successfully encapsulated with dyed silk crepeline, protecting the pile and making cleaning easier without loss. The complexity of the mirror frame ruled out similar treatment.

The drapery was rehung using monel tacks and the existing nail holes in both textile and frame. Little perceptible change occurred apart from a very modest brightening of colour, most notable in the bobble fringe.

**Sitting Room**

As the primary daytime reception room, the sitting room was intended to make a statement about the owners of Rouse Hill. Primarily furnished between 1855 and 1880, the interior finishes date from redecoration in 1885. Perhaps the most typically Victorian of the ground floor rooms, the sitting room
features several large nineteenth century paintings. Two of the works, an ornately framed copy of a Carlo Dolci painting from the Florentine workshop of Louis Pisani in 1876, and a homely painting by a family member in the mid 1890’s are representative broader themes in Australian social history. Both paintings exhibited heavy fly spotting, mould and general soiling from generations of fuel lighting, whilst the gilded frames also had fly spotting, accretions of dust, areas surface instability and structural instability at the joints [Figure 5-6].

*Fig.5  Heavy accretions of fly spotting and mould on the surface an oil painting prior to conservation. Historic Houses Trust©*

*Fig.6  Cracking to picture frame caused by movement of timber substrate. A crude re-gilding of the frame, has left gold leaf on the surface of the painting. Historic Houses Trust©*
Remedial treatment of the paintings sought to consolidate areas of instability in the paint surface, reduce and neutralize fly spotting and reduce the layer of dust and soot that had accumulated on the surface, all factors contributing to the long term deterioration of the works. Areas of loss, disfiguration and over-painting were not altered [Figure 6].

Conserved separately, the ornate gilded frames required extensive cleaning and stabilization of the gilt surface and numerous cracks along the construction lines, threatening the gilt surface. Diluted Plectol®B500 was used to consolidate fragile areas of the surface whilst large structural cracks were filled with cotton bandage saturated in undiluted consolidant.

Modern clips and framing techniques were avoided. Spaces between the frame and canvas were filled with cubes of polyethylene foam and the canvas fixed in place using fine gauge stainless steel nails utilizing existing holes. Additional cubes of polyethylene foam protect the wallpaper from the nail heads [Figure 7].

Fig. 7 Reverse of framed painting. Historic Houses Trust©
The Future

The preservation of the Rouse Hill interiors in their current form is unsustainable in the long term. The natural decay and deterioration of objects, particularly transient organic materials, will leave substantial gaps within the cohesion and integrity that is a key element of the place’s significance.

Within the next twenty years objects will not only disintegrate beyond the ability and economic viability of conservation techniques to stabilize, but the HHT’s responsibility as a custodian of state heritage will require the retirement of rare and significant objects from open display. Already our ability to retain the most fragile textiles in situ is being challenged (Figure 8).

In the short term, the loss or retirement of the most transient aspects will have little impact against the sheer quantity of objects in each room. Eventually though, as erosion of the interiors accelerates the outcome will be irrecoverable change. Beyond this point, historical evidence and authenticity may survive, but survive as a series of disconnected threads, boxed and shelved, de-contextualised and perhaps impossible to reunite in a meaningful way.

Conclusion

The conservation of the Rouse Hill House interiors has been one of evolution within the framework of the conservation policy. The systems and methods employed in the preventive and remedial work within the interiors are constantly assessed, reviewed and revised.

Though problems exist within the practical application, the guiding mantra of minimal intervention and respect for all elements regardless of current perceived importance, can be attributed as a primary factor for the survival of the emotive atmosphere of the interiors after thirty years of public ownership. With many objects soon to face their second or third remedial treatment since 1987, and as the frequency and aggressiveness of the treatments increases, the practical conservation and budgetary options to hold the interiors together decreases.
References:


Matthew Scott has a background in Australian Historical Archaeology and Materials Conservation. He has worked at Rouse Hill House & Farm since 1998 and is responsible for the conservation of the interiors and collection across the thirteen acre property. A gradual cross over into the curatorial field has been a necessary element of his work. Since 2004, his role has also included conservation advice and assistance across the properties and activities of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. Specific areas of interest include mitigating the impact of museum operations, monitoring wear & tear, logistics of public access, presentation, housekeeping and collection storage within historic houses. (Historic Houses Trust of NSW, P: 10 Macquarie Street, Sydney, NSW Australia 2000, e-mail: matthews@hht.net.au, tel: +61282392367)

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