Historical and Current Perspectives on the Care, Presentation, Interpretation and Use of Collections in Historic Houses

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Introduction

For the past five years I have been working on a book for the Getty Readings in Conservation series on ‘Historical Perspectives on Preventive Conservation’ which was published in April 2013 [Staniforth 2013]. This has given me the opportunity to reflect on and re-evaluate the relationship between collections and the context in which they are now presented in historic house museums compared with when the houses were lived in.

In this paper I will cover the origins of historic house museums, the end of family ownership, opening historic houses to visitors, care of collections in historic houses when they were lived in and as museums, and the presentation, interpretation and use of collections.

The origins of historic house museums

It is worth reflecting on why we have historic house museums that are open to the public. All of these houses were once lived in by the families who owned them, their friends - for some of the time - and their servants. Collections were made through commissions from artists and craftsmen, by inheritance and were added to from century to century. Some houses survive with collections largely intact, for example at Kedleston Hall, which was designed by Robert Adam and completed in 1765. Robert Adam was responsible for every element of the design, including creating niches in the walls with plaster frames to house the Curzon collection of paintings (Figure 1).
new context in which their historic, architectural and artistic significance was interpreted to the public as museum collections. By and large, collections were there to be looked at rather than to be used. During the twentieth century, thanks to increased scientific understanding of materials and their interaction with the environment, a sophisticated understanding of preventive conservation, including demonstrating why many historic and traditional housekeeping methods had been effective, has been developed. In the twenty-first century the National Trust is moving away from a risk averse presentation of historic houses in which the precautionary principle is exercised and all objects are treated as being equally fragile, to a risk assessed approach in which objects which are sufficiently robust are used by the visitors. This can mean that visitors walk on carpets, sit on chairs, play pianos and engage more fully with the collections to enrich their experience. This paper will look at the relationship between the history, significance, scientific understanding of preventive conservation, curatorship and the visitor experience of National Trust houses and their collections at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It will draw on the experience of looking after and presenting to visitors collections in over 300 historic houses open to the public.

**Keywords**

Preventive conservation; precautionary principle; visitor experience; presentation; interpretation

In the Los Angeles area there are some fine examples of twentieth century houses with largely intact interiors and furniture including the 1908 Gamble House, Pasadena, designed by Greene and Greene for David Gamble, of Proctor and Gamble fame, and lived in by generations of the Gamble family until the family gave the house and its contents to the City of Pasadena and the University of Southern California Architecture department in 1966.

Some important historic houses still have uncertain futures. The Arts and Crafts House, Stoneywell, was designed by Ernest Gimson for his brother Sydney and completed in 1898 (Figure 2). The site foreman was Dettmar Blow, who like Ernest Gimson, had studied under William Morris and John Ruskin. Dettmar Blow restored the first historic house owned by the National Trust – Alfriston Clergy House acquired in 1896, one year after its foundation. Stoneywell is furnished with furniture made by some of the heroes of the Arts and Crafts movement including Sidney and Ernest Barnsley and Ernest Gimson. The chest in the spare bedroom is by Joseph Armitage and bears an oak leaf carving very similar to the one he entered into the competition to design the NT logo in 1935. He won and the oak leaf symbol remains in use today. There are one or two pieces made by Donald Gimson, the present owner and great nephew of Sydney Gimson. Donald is elderly and his health is failing and he has offered the house for sale to the National Trust with a gift of the furniture which was gratefully accepted in December 2012.
But many houses, particularly in continental Europe and Ireland, have lost their collections, often because of war and revolution. The empty French chateaux bear witness to the violence of the French revolution, and subsequent wars. Not only did the majority of houses in Ireland lose their collections, but many were also burnt down. So the houses that have survived with some or all of their collections intact in Great Britain, the United States and other countries are precious and something to be celebrated.

The end of family ownership

In the twentieth century the social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, which resulted in a movement of the workforce from country estates into factories in town and cities, and the loss of a whole generation of men in the First World War, sons of land-owning families as well as the men working on farms and in houses, meant that country estates were no longer self-sustaining. Changes in inheritance tax and other taxes sounded the death knell for many historic house estates in Great Britain. Other calamities affected the occupation of houses by the families who owned them. Throughout the centuries, there have been sales of chattels from historic houses. Financial disasters have befallen owners, sometimes self-imposed through gambling or drinking, and in other cases through poor investment and lack of financial prudence in estate management. In some cases, this resulted not only in the separation of collections from houses, but also the loss of the houses themselves.
Fig. 3. Portrait of Nancy Astor by John Singer Sargent. ©National Trust
One solution, that addicts of Downton Abbey know only too well [1], was to find an injection of cash. American heiresses were a popular source of income for English country house owners at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many houses now in the hands of the National Trust have also benefited from American cash. In 1893 the Cliveden estate was purchased by a very wealthy American, William Waldorf Astor (later 1st Lord Astor), who made sweeping alterations to the gardens and the interior of the house, but lived at Cliveden as a recluse after the early death of his wife. He gave Cliveden to his son Waldorf on the occasion of his marriage to Nancy Langhome in 1906 (Figure 3) and moved to Hever Castle, which had been owned by the Meade Waldo family from 1749 to 1903 when it fell into a poor state of repair. William Waldorf Astor restored the castle. In 1942, the Astors gave Cliveden to the National Trust with the proviso that the family could continue to live in the house for as long as they wished. With the gift of Cliveden, the National Trust also received from the Astors one of their largest endowments at the time (£250,000 in 1942 which is equivalent to £8.6 million today). The Astors ceased to live at Cliveden in 1968. Today Cliveden is leased to a company who run the house as a hotel; the garden and park and ground floor of the hotel are open to NT visitors.

The National Trust (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) was founded in 1895, to preserve countryside from encroaching development. Octavia Hill, one of the three founders, wrote about the need for ‘outdoor living rooms for the poor’ and she campaigned for the purchase of green spaces on the outskirts of towns and cities, which lead to the development of urban green belts. By the start of the Second World War, it was apparent that country house estates were in serious financial difficulty, and many houses were being pulled down because their owners could not afford to look after them. The country houses scheme (begun by the National Trust in 1937) was designed to enable country houses and their collections to be kept together, and in most cases for the donor families to stay living in their houses. The country house scheme was a partial saviour for houses, which could be operated in surplus, or with sufficient endowment for income from investments to sustain the estate. The 1975 V&A exhibition ‘The Destruction of the Country House’ drew attention to the crisis of houses being demolished or put into inappropriate use. The National Trust came to the rescue of many but by no means all of these furnished houses. The website Lost Heritage records a total of 1,842 country houses that have been destroyed from the eighteenth century to the present (2).

Opening historic houses to visitors

Some houses were open for visitors from when they were built. A visit to Kedleston Hall in 1794 by Samuel Johnson and James Boswell described Mrs Garnett, Housekeeper from 1766 to 1809, who took them round the house with a copy of the inventory in her hand, as ‘a well-drest housekeeper, a most distinct articulator’.

This low level of visiting went on through the nineteenth and early twentieth century. By the mid-twentieth century some owners of houses reacted to the downturn in their fortunes by opening for longer and more enthusiastically. Probably the highest profile example of this was at Longleat when the 6th Marquess of Bath opened the first safari park outside Africa in 1966. Expert opinion was divided about whether the venture could ever succeed. The lions would fight, they would escape, visitors would be hauled from their cars and eaten. ‘No amount of soothing assurance,’ The Times leader proclaimed, ‘... can persuade sensible people that a quite gratuitous and unnecessary risk to life is not contemplated.’ Needless to say this scaremongering guaranteed queues of cars on opening day which have continued ever since. Of course, as a by-product of this some of the visitors also went into the house!

Most National Trust houses were open to the public as soon as they were acquired, although some, particularly those that came with very few or empty of contents, were leased to tenants who opened on an occasional basis or by written request. In the early days, the membership of the National Trust was tiny. There
were 100 members in 1895, the year of its foundation; 7,850 by 1945; just under quarter of a million by 1970; half a million by 1975; one million by 1981; two million by 1990; three million by 2007; and four million in 2012. The National Trust has a target membership of five million by 2020. The rise in visitor numbers mirrors this exponential growth in members (members get free admission to over 300 pay for entry sites, houses and gardens). A million members roughly equates to five million visits. Numbers for 2012 were 19.5 million visits and 25 million visits are anticipated by 2020. The National Trust does not need the lions of Longleat! In fact the Trust’s challenges are the reverse of those facing the owners of country houses in the middle of the twentieth century and the paper presented by my colleague Helen Lloyd at this conference will show how the Trust will capacity plan and manage for this number of visitors [Lloyd et al 2012].

Care of collections in historic houses

My research for the Getty Conservation Institute Readings in Preventive Conservation book [Staniforth 2013] has given me a wonderful opportunity to review traditional methods of housekeeping when houses were lived in by their owners. The needs of the family, to use the furniture and furnishings on a daily basis, has resulted in methods of care that have been passed down through generations of servants. These traditions carried on until the twentieth century until the changes in fortunes already talked about meant that few families could afford to live in historic houses with the armies of servants they had employed in the nineteenth century.

The philosophical background of preventive conservation can be found in the mid nineteenth century writings of John Ruskin and William Morris. In ‘The Seven Lamps of Architecture’, John Ruskin presented the seven principles that he believed should govern the practice of architecture [Ruskin 1849]. In the chapter titled ‘The Lamp of Memory’, focussing on the importance of tradition, Ruskin passionately advocated the importance of proper maintenance of monuments so that restoration, which he believed caused damage to historic buildings, would not become necessary. The most pertinent words are: ‘Take proper care of your monuments, and you will not need to restore them. A few sheets of lead put in time upon the roof, a few dead leaves and sticks swept in time out of a water-course, will save both roof and walls from ruin.’ In 1877 William Morris published a manifesto stating the principles of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). Morris co-founded SPAB in protest of the practice, widespread in Victorian England, of intrusive restoration of old buildings, a practice that had also alarmed Ruskin. Morris promoted what has become known as the ‘little and often approach’ putting ‘protection in place of restoration, to stave off decay by daily care’ [Morris 1877].

Traditional housekeeping embodies the philosophy of daily care, and predates either Ruskin or Morris. There are writings about practices of care that date back to the sixteenth century, but traditions of housekeeping practice were mostly handed down by word of mouth and only recorded from the seventeenth century in a number of housekeeping manuals. Very often these manuals took the form of instructions for servants and included recipes as well as instructions about household care. Susanna Whatman (1753-1814) originally wrote her manual in a small quarto notebook between 1776 and 1789 [Whatman 1789]. The directions for the housemaid include a number on instructions about keeping the sun out of rooms using blinds, with quite specific notes about the time in which sun comes into rooms.

Time and time again, modern preventive conservation practices, that are based on scientific understanding of the agents of deterioration on museum collections, are seen to replicate the recommendations of traditional housekeeping practice. For example, the science underlying light damage, and why high levels of illumination, and shorter wavelengths of radiation have a particularly potent effect are understood, and a number of methods to reduce visible light levels and eliminate ultraviolet radiation are used. In fact, the only measure taken now that was not a traditional housekeeping practice is to use ultraviolet filters, which were not
invented until the twentieth century. The National Trust Manual of Housekeeping, first published in 1985 and published as a new edition in 2006, updated in 2011, draws heavily on traditional housekeeping practice as well as injecting a dose of late twentieth century science and technology [National Trust 2011]. For example, the concept of conservation heating, humidistically-controlled heating, replicates the sort of gentle heating that houses would have received when heated by open fires and kitchen ranges with their flues passing up through the building.

**Presentation, interpretation and use of collections**

Once houses came out of family ownership and were managed by institutions, charities or run as museums, their use changed dramatically, as did the number of people who visited the house each year. I have already touched on the challenges of hundreds of thousands of visitors each year to some houses. Historic houses are presented in a new context in which their historic, architectural and artistic significance is interpreted to the public as museum collections. The collections are there to be looked at and studied, not used. This new context can make it more difficult for visitors to understand how these houses are used. Even the existence of town houses and country houses is alien to most people nowadays. State bedrooms cause immense confusion, and the idea of having a bedroom which was only there in expectation of a king or queen’s visit, which invariably never happened, is not a challenge that most people encounter in the twenty-first century. Visitors relate more easily to kitchens and other servants rooms. Contrary to many visitors belief, the National Trust is not showing below stairs as a result of the current popularity of Downton Abbey! The first house to be turned ‘upside down’ was Erddig on the Welsh-English border. In his 1978 book ‘The Servant’s Hall: Domestic History of Erddig’, Merlin Waterson describes the ground-breaking work of redesigning the visitor route so that visitors enter through the estate yard and kitchens and come into the house by the servants stairs [Waterson 1978].

Many visitors find the palatial formality of Kedleston a cold place and have little emotional engagement with it. This is particularly the case as they only see the formal state rooms, and not the family wing, where the Scarsdale family, descended from Lord Curzon, now live.

In order to address this lack of emotional engagement the National Trust has been working on a strategy to present the houses in a way more like they would have been when they were lived in. The Trust has called this initiative ‘bringing places to life’. Where possible the Trust has removed barrier ropes, and allowed visitors to play pianos, sit on chairs and read books in libraries. Conservation in action is how the Trust does conservation nowadays, and Siobhan Barratt will describe how this is built into the major conservation project at Knole [Barratt 2012].

At Lyme Park the Trust recently acquired the Lyme Missal, printed by Caxton in 1485, for the collection. This enabled a complete re-presentation of the Library from its rather dull mid-twentieth century decoration to a restoration of the Victorian decoration with re-created wallpaper, re-upholstered chairs which visitors can sit in and a re-organisation of about half of the book collection into shelves from which the visitors can select volumes to read (Figure 4). The Missal has been digitised and can be read on a computer console in the room, and it is also available as a facsimile.

Bringing places to life presents challenges for conservators since it increases access to collections and the use of some objects, which means that custodians and conservators have to make decisions about the fragility of objects in their collections. The National Trust has moved away from a uniform approach, in which all objects in historic interiors were considered equally fragile, to one in which decisions have to be made to distinguish between the fragile and the more robust. In other words, the National Trust is no longer exercising the
The precautionary principle in which it assumes that in the absence of evidence to the contrary all objects are fragile and must be treated as such. Helen Lloyd and I wrote about this in our paper ‘Use it or lose it: the opportunities and challenges of bringing historic places to life’ at the IIC Vienna Congress in September 2012. [Staniforth and Lloyd, 2012] Siobhan Barratt will cover some aspects of bringing places to life in her paper ‘Inspired by Knole’ [Barratt 2012].

In the absence of other methodologies, the precautionary principle is a safe position to adopt, particularly in an organisation such as the National Trust where the day to day care of collections is provided by local staff and volunteers, few of whom have professional conservation qualifications. Until recently, our training for housekeeping staff recommended the same high levels of preventive conservation care for all objects in a room. The National Trust is now moving to a risk-based approach in which it assesses an object’s fragility and tailor its preventive conservation measures accordingly.

The idea that not all objects have equal significance requires museum professionals to think about collections in a way that resembles the approach of heritage professionals, who ascribe values to the historic environment in order to make choices about what to preserve. Yet museum professionals tend to resist such hierarchies when considering objects in their collections, whether of fine or decorative art.

One of the few examples at a national level, of grading collections in terms of value and significance, was carried out in The Netherlands in the 1990 Delta Plan for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage. [Talley 1999]. The plan assessed the conservation needs of all of the country’s collections, and graded them in terms
of their importance, leading to a practical programme for clearing conservation backlogs.

There is no internationally agreed way of evaluating the significance of collections, and while this would inevitably be problematic to introduce, not least because we must accept that the significance of an object may change with time, it may become more of an imperative as museum managers struggle with the demands of maintaining ever increasing collections in the context of diminishing resources.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have talked about the origins of historic house museums and the care of collections while they were lived in, the end of family use and opening these houses to the public. I have covered presentation and interpretation of houses and opened up the possibility of using collections more to increase visitors’ emotional engagement with the houses. None of these issues are straightforward but I think that conservators who work with objects in the context of historic houses should consider moving from the relatively safe ground of treating all objects as fragile and rare to the less comfortable place where the relative significance and fragility of objects are considered so that historic places may be presented and interpreted in a way that enables visitors to understand their use before they became museums.

**Endnotes**

1. Downton Abbey is a popular BBC programme first shown on television in the UK in 2010.

**References:**


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