Three Historic Houses, Three Conservation Approaches: Three Decades in the National Trust for Scotland

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Abstract

This paper examines three properties in the care of the National Trust for Scotland that reflect three different approaches taken to their conservation over the course of three decades. The different approaches reflect changing attitudes as well as the benefits of implementing continuously developing sector standards. The authors conclude that comprehensive scholarly and technical research is essential to achieving a coherent and holistic philosophy, which can then be used to inform all stages of project planning and delivery. Preventive conservation measures and activities are core to the on-going operational life of each of these three historic houses.

Keywords

Significance, preventive conservation, conservation management plan, project

House of Dun

The opening of House of Dun to the public on 12 May 1989 can be seen as one of the most successful initiatives by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS), not least in fund raising terms. The house is exquisite, a miniature classic pavilion anchored by giant Wellingtonias within the wider landscape. The plan of the house resembles an intricate nest of Chinese boxes, fitted around the surprisingly spacious central Saloon with its exuberant stucco-work projecting in 3-D. The late Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, Patron of the NTS, was alleged to have said after cutting the ribbon at the opening “one could imagine living here oneself” (Figure 1).

Fig. 1. House of Dun, looking towards the house with Montrose Basin behind, 1999. © National Trust for Scotland/Jonathan Smith

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And yet, behind these official celebrations, there was disquiet. At the press preview, the late David Learmont, the Trust’s Curator at the time, explained the extent of his interventions: dado rails had been introduced where none had been, grates stripped out, and more. Certainly William Adam’s published design had been restored, but there was unease that day that a significant nineteenth century layer had been completely erased [Adam, 1812]. Not a single surface texture came through the restoration process, and much of the eighteenth century furniture that filled the rooms had been introduced from elsewhere; Chippendale horsehair chairs, for example, having been borrowed from the Duke of Atholl. A ‘before’ and ‘after’ comparison of the Saloon reveals the extent, not just of the colour change from blue to green, but of how almost none of its earlier contents had been returned (Figures 2 and 3). Viewed from the perspective of 2012, it is clear that the Saloon (conceived as William Adam’s great Dining Room), had become the Drawing Room by the early nineteenth century and, as new contents were introduced by the Erskine family, items were selected which did not diminish the splendour of the stucco-work. In 1829, the heir to Dun married Lady Augusta FitzClarence, an illegitimate daughter of King William IV, and many of the contents must have been princely if not actually royal, for example, the “King’s breakfast service from Windsor Castle” recorded in the 1966 inventory [1] [NTS Archive].

Few of these nineteenth century contents were returned to the principal rooms in 1989, and the few that were suffered to remain at House of Dun were exiled to the bedrooms, along with all the nineteenth century portraits. But, in these bedroom settings, their significance as material culture components was diminished, if not rendered meaningless. An eighteenth century ambience had been created on the principal floor at the expense of rich layers of history and meaning and, today, the 1989 arrangement looks like the work of an
interior decorator, reflecting the taste of the 1980s and at odds with the integrity of the Erskine family’s arrangements. In retrospect too, this imbalance seems reflected in NTS’ research that underpinned this restoration. The Trust had benefited from recent academic research into the period c.1720-1750 of the history of House of Dun and, perhaps understandably, focussed on the eighteenth century story and restored much that could have been conserved, whilst the significance of the royal connection went overlooked [Kay, 1987].

**Newhailes**

As a direct consequence of the wider unease, the then President of the National Trust for Scotland, the late Marquess of Bute, strengthened the Trust's Curatorial Committee and brought together a group of experts advocating conservation, which resulted in an immediate shift of approach throughout the Trust. These events were timely because, during the early 1990s, discussions had begun with the Trust over the future of Newhailes, a late seventeenth century classical villa on the outskirts of Edinburgh (Figure 4). Newhailes contained the most important collection of decorative art from the second quarter of the eighteenth century, still in situ in Scotland in splendid rococo interiors, and the house and its wider estate finally passed into the care of the Trust in 1995 with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) [2]. Newhailes was home to the widowed Lady Antonia Dalrymple whose Trustees were protective of her security and privacy and, although so close to Edinburgh, the villa remained sequestered and little known. The palpable ‘sleeping beauty’ aura of the house was however long standing and, as early as 1917, Sir Lawrence Weaver, architectural editor of Country Life, wrote “it is the more pleasant, therefore to be able to illustrate a house which shows the decorative art of the first half of the eighteenth century untouched by the hand of the ‘restorer’”[Weaver, 1917].

![Fig. 4. Newhailes, seen from the front, 2004. © National Trust for Scotland/Mike Bolam](image-url)
The view of Lord Bute's new Curatorial Committee was that it did not want another House of Dun, and the wider world was changing too. For example, at both Brodsworth Hall in Yorkshire and Chastleton House in Oxfordshire, English Heritage and the National Trust had pursued a conservative approach to these two houses with their parallel histories to Newhailes of ‘untouchedness’. Furthermore, Historic Scotland and the HLF, as well as other funding bodies, insisted that the National Trust for Scotland set out the significance of Newhailes and establish a ‘Newhailes philosophy’ before any work could begin.

The Trust employed Drs Bill and Eila McQueen, a husband and wife team of historical researchers, to go through the family papers; a management plan was embarked upon; a comprehensive body of reports was commissioned from specialist conservators; and ‘Newhailes Study Days’ provided a focus for debate and ideas, presenting the new research alongside technical papers [University of Edinburgh, 1997 and 1998]. Jonathan Marsden, now Director of the Royal Collection but previously with responsibility for the National Trust’s Chastleton House, gave key advice that NTS frame a solution tailor-made for Newhailes, and not be unduly dazzled or distracted by Brodsworth or Chastleton.

‘As little as possible, but as much as necessary’ became the philosophical leitmotif guiding the planning and delivery of the project phase of work at Newhailes, 1999-2002. And the phrase still holds true today for informing the extent of on-going care and maintenance, as well as the future presentation of not only the fabric of the house and its collections, but also of Newhailes’ designed landscape. Whilst finding its clearest expression in the revised Burra Charter, the phrase surely has its origins in William Morris’ 1877 call to arms against the “reckless stripping [of] a building of some of its most interesting material features” [ICOMOS, 2000; Morris et al., 1877]. In preparation for work getting underway at Newhailes, the phrase helped the Trust’s conservator determine appropriate levels of cleaning and surface intervention and, once work began, informed those day-to-day activities overseen by the project conservator on site. All contractors were inducted in working within Newhailes’ exceptional and fragile environment, and all who crossed the threshold or worked on the external fabric conformed to procedures designed to protect and preserve.

The conservation philosophy for Newhailes had depended on the assumption that the green paint in the Dining Room was eighteenth century, as described in the 1739 bill for painting the room olive colour. It therefore came as a shock to learn, through the McQueens’ research, that an extensive programme of repairs had taken place during 1872 so that the house could be let to tenants for ten years, and that
Moxons, the leading house painters of the day, had been commissioned to repaint all the rooms. This disappointment was tempered by the knowledge that the Dalrymples had insisted on the careful repetition of the original colourways, and that Moxons’ men carefully cut around the original gilding [3] [Newhailes Guidebook, 2004] (Figures 5 and 6).

The Trust’s policy, therefore, was to retain all existing surface textures and that no repainting could be contemplated. Remedial treatments, for the conservation of the contents (dispersed to freelance conservators’ studios), were carried out in accordance with the agreed philosophy and this sometimes meant that collection items had to be returned to the house and re-assessed in situ. This cohesive and consistent approach ensured that an overall harmony was achieved when contents and room settings were reunited. Surprises of course lay in wait: one such was that the portrait collection, with its outstanding series of inset portraits by Allan Ramsay (1713-1784), had been previously lined and cleaned when loaned by the Dalrymples for major exhibitions. By
contrast, the Dining Room’s decorative overdoor paintings had never been removed from their panelled surrounds and, with 250 years of accumulated dirt on their fragile unvarnished surfaces, were the subject of lively discussions between curators and conservators regarding the extent of cleaning [Sheldon, 2000].

In the light of the Newhailes experience, it is interesting to reflect on how different House of Dun might have been if subjected to the ‘Newhailes approach’. But, paradoxically, the future of Newhailes may be less static than this account might suggest, as items thought to have been lost, known to have been sold, or accepted as having been transferred, might one day be returned [4, 5, 6].

Canna House

The third historic house considered here is found on the Isle of Canna, one of the ‘Small Isles’ of the Inner Hebrides, off Scotland’s west coast. In 1938, Dr John Lorne Campbell bought Canna and its neighbouring island Sanday, and Canna House became home to Dr Campbell and his American wife, Margaret Fay Shaw. John Lorne Campbell gave Canna and Sanday to the Trust in 1981, but Canna House remained the Campbells’ home until his death in 1996 and Margaret Fay Shaw’s, at the age of 101, in 2004. Canna House is, therefore, a completely different conservation proposition for the Trust, being not the seat of a great Scottish dynasty, but a private treasure house of the lives of John Lorne Campbell and Margaret Fay Shaw [Campbell, 1984; Shaw, 1994] (Figure 7).
Canna House was built around 1865 and, with its orthodox layout and generous rooms, would not be out of place in a Glasgow suburb. Once through the front door, however, the visitor is transported to the worlds of two scholars. John Lorne Campbell was the pioneer of the modern collection and preservation of Gaelic song and story, the author of 16 books and a great many articles, and the assiduous collector for over 40 years of Hebridean butterflies and moths. He amassed a remarkable sound recording archive of some 1,500 Gaelic songs and 350 folktales, a library of over 3000 items (including rare Gaelic texts and first editions), and over 30 cabinet drawers of Hebridean Lepidoptera. Margaret Fay Shaw was, too, a distinguished collector and editor of Scottish Gaelic song and folklore, and also a noted photographer, musician and prolific correspondent (Figure 8).

Canna House sits within an exceptional Hebridean walled garden, with the house now the repository of everything connected with the Campbells’ scholarly work and wider enthusiasms. Their elegant and idiosyncratically decorated home remains stuffed to the gunwales with personal manuscripts, a scholarly Gaelic library, many hundreds of other books, sound recordings (wax, wire and tape), the eighteenth century family archive, musical scores, personal diaries, farm records, objects d’art, spools of film alongside thousands of photographic slides, negatives and prints, reference notebooks, a splendid family portrait attributed to George Romney (1734-1802), early Christian archaeological finds, china cats and feline ephemera galore, taxidermy, fine Georgian furniture, the field equipment and clothing of an entomologist, and an eclectic collection of musical instruments (including the Steinway celebrated by the poet Kathleen Raine) [Raine, 2000].

Fig. 8. Margaret Fay Shaw in her study, 1991. © National Trust for Scotland/Patxi Bello
John Lorne Campbell’s own wishes for future arrangements for Canna House and its collections are expressed in a prospectus drafted by the Trust, where it was first set out that Canna House was to ‘remain a centre of Gaelic traditions in music, language and folklore’ [NTS, 1973]. Indeed, the material and scholarly assets of Canna are considered ‘a concentration of wealth for Celtic civilisation in one place unequalled in the British Isles, and are of national importance and international status’ [Canna Advisory Group, 2001]. Local, national and international interest in the Campbells and their collections can now only be assuaged by enabling remote access, and digitisation of discrete parts of the collection is underway in advance of wider decisions [7].

The Trust continues therefore to gather scholarly and technical evidence to help inform decisions regarding Canna House and its collections, fully recognising that issues of access and sustainability are major challenges [Wright, 2007]. The island of Canna is remote and the viability of its community fragile; there is no nearby conurbation from which to attract visitors or, for that matter, volunteers to assist the Trust in its efforts. And visitors? They might arrive by private sailing yacht, be staying in the island’s limited holiday accommodation, be passengers on a visiting cruise ship, or on a day trip on the scheduled (but not daily) ferry service. Modest visitor numbers are being achieved since Canna House first opened at fixed hours in 2011, but it is clear that in straightforward financial terms the sums will never add up.

The island of Canna is one of 129 properties in the care of NTS and, by necessity, with so many competing demands resources must be prioritised across the organisation. Until such time therefore that ‘the Canna House project’ can be formally taken forward, the conservation approach within the house is to implement discrete measures and activities, with minimal impact on the diverse collections which remain in place, as evoked by Raine in her poem [Raine, 2000]. Recent preventive measures include telemetric environmental monitoring, UV filter window film, window blinds, a conservation cleaning regime, druggets, and Integrated Pest Management (IPM). A ground floor spare bedroom has, however, become the archive room, with excellent environmental conditions achieved by a single humidistat-controlled oil-filled radiator.

Such routine preventive conservation measures and activities are core to the on-going operational life of nearly all Trust properties with historic collections. For example, House of Dun, Newhailes and Canna House are in the Trust’s IPM programme where agreed procedures are followed consistently and systematically by all properties in the programme [Houston, 2011]. By contrast, the application of UV filter film is considered on an individual basis and, as some window glass at Newhailes was considered too fragile for the comprehensive application of film, UV blinds are an alternative solution for some windows.

Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a discernible raising and embedding of standards of project planning and delivery throughout the heritage sector in the United Kingdom. For this, one needs look no further than the HLF and the impact of the requirements demanded by this public body. HLF wields both carrots and sticks: HLF carrots being the funding, often generous and across a wide range of activities and projects, and HLF sticks being the hoops of sector and industry standards for conservation and project planning through which would-be applicants are required to jump. On-line advice is plentiful, as is published guidance [8] [Hillhouse, 2009]. Fulfilling conditions and meeting standards, such as those demanded by HLF, might appear to be a sine qua non, but pressures of time, money and human capacity can so easily lead to other options being taken. The experience of NTS - for the delivery of projects of every scale - is that sound decisions are made and benefits flow when good practice is followed. Furthermore, the focus on significance, or spirit of place, is central when determining what should be the outcome in terms of both the conservation and presentation of an historic house to the public [ICOMOS, 2008]. Once a project is underway, the concomitant energy of a multi-disciplinary team follows inevitably and naturally. But it is at exactly this point, with its myriad distractions,
that an agreed philosophy or leitmotif will ensure thinking and actions remain coherent and consistent. And if in stringent times securing the sustainable future of an historic house might appear a chimera, there is comfort in putting in place responsible, but basic, interim measures: to better understand, to monitor, to maintain and to protect.

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**Endnotes**

1. During her long widowhood, Lady Augusta, embroidered lavish pelmets for the Saloon with huge floral sprays and colourful parrots, fully in keeping with the verve of the stucco-work.

2. The Heritage Lottery Fund, established 1994, disburses funds raised through the National Lottery to support heritage projects throughout the UK.

3. September 1739, account from James Norie to Sir James Dalrymple, “to painting at Newhailes the Dining Olive Colour meas: 136 yds@4d, £2 5s 4d” [NLS MS 25818.ff.77-8].

4. During the project phase, the hangings of the ‘best bed’ were found in a lacquer chest in the Vestibule and are to be returned to the Best Bedroom.

5. In 1928, a low point in Newhailes’ fortunes, trustees sold the Drawing Room suite of furniture with its tapestry depicting shells and coral. If traced and returned, together with the reinstated bed, one of the most innovative suites of early Georgian rococo decoration in Scotland could be presented (see Newhailes Guidebook, 2004, p27).

6. Following the death of Sir Mark Dalrymple in 1971, the Government accepted c7000 volumes from the Newhailes Library in lieu of estate duty (tax). The books were allocated to the National Library of Scotland.

7. Digitised sound recordings can be listened to at http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk (accessed 28 October 2013)


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