Abstract

This paper introduces Knole, one of the treasure houses of the National Trust. Knole is unquestionably one of the most precious and fragile houses owned by the National Trust and it is poised to undergo its most significant transformation in more than 400 years. This paper outlines some of the issues there are at Knole, balancing the needs for conservation with access and visitor enjoyment. Further it describes how the conservation process and the discoveries made during this long term project are being used to tell the stories of Knole. Thus, the conservation process enables visitors to understand and better enjoy this magnificent house and its internationally significant collections.

Keywords

Historic house collection, conservation, preventive conservation, engagement, interpretation, visitor experience

Inspired by Knole

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Knole: a treasure house of the National Trust

Knole is one of the great ducal palaces of England and its story, spanning 500 years, also makes it one of the most extraordinary. Knole’s footprint is vast, covering four acres; it is the largest private house remaining in the country. Remarkably, architecturally it remains largely as it was by about 1610. Knole is first mentioned by name in a land grant of 1281, referring to properties belonging to the heirs of Robert de Knolle. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the Manor of Knole passed through a succession of owners until it was conveyed to Thomas Bourchier, Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1456. Bourchier was a man of considerable consequence in fifteenth century England and he began work on the creation of his palace at Knole shortly after his acquisition of the estate. It is his archiepiscopal palace that remains as the core of the present extended house. Ownership of Knole was surrendered to Henry VIII in 1538 to be used as a private retreat and hunting ground. After a lengthy campaign to acquire Knole, Thomas Sackville, 1st Earl of Dorset, transformed Bourchiers’s medieval building into an early seventeenth century Renaissance palace.

Thomas Sackville used his royal connections to secure the services of the finest craftsmen to rebuild, decorate and furnish his home in lavish splendour. A fine collection of family portraits dating from the first half of the seventeenth century survive, however much of the rest of the collection was seized and sold by Parliamentary order during the Civil War. The significant collection of seventeenth century Royal furniture and textiles seen at Knole today was brought to the house in 1701 by the 6th Earl of Dorset. They were obtained from the palaces of Whitehall and Hampton Court as a ‘perquisite’ of office in the Earls role as Lord Chamberlain. Further additions to the collections we made in the eighteenth century by successive Sackvilles, the most notable of which, the 3rd Duke of Dorset, who was both a collector of the antique and patron of contemporary artists. During his Grand Tour of Italy he
purchased Old Master paintings and Sculptures. On his return he commissioned portraits from English artists such as Sir Joshua Reynolds.

In the late seventeenth century the family created their own living apartments at Knole and the state-rooms became a destination for visitors, allowing the family to show off their wealth and history. The Sackville family still live at Knole, with the National Trust accepting ownership and responsibility for its care in 1946. As a consequence, there are few properties where the house and collection have stayed intact to such an extent and for so long, and the rooms today retain their timeless untouched quality.

Looking deeper at the collections and their history, reveals however the impact that visitors have had on the interiors and the collection therein, and the attempts that have been made to reverse these effects and preserve the collection. By 1874 some ten thousand people were visiting Knole every year, making it one of the most popular show houses in England [Sackville-West, 2010]. This had its down side, Mortimer, the 1st Lord Sackville complained that ‘people strayed from their parties, broke into our rooms, tore the fringe off the chairs and couches, and did all manner of things…’ [Sackville-West, 2010]. This led to the inevitable need for repair and early attempts at conservation and preservation, many of which are documented in the historic inventories of Knole [Knole Sackville Trust, 1864].

The 1864 Knole Heirloom Inventory has extensive annotations recording movements, modifications and losses to the upholstered furniture collection throughout the house [Knole Sackville Trust, 1864]. Transcription and analysis of the inventory shows that the original entries, written in copperplate script in
black ink, had in some cases been either entirely or partially crossed through. Annotations in purple pencil record movement, damage and loss. Close examination of early historic photographs supports the evidence found in this 1864 inventory. For example, the inventory establishes the link between The James II Bed, made in 1688, and objects located in the Brown Gallery that are upholstered with embroidered fabric matching the fabric panes in the head-cloth and panels inside the tester of the bed. The annotation for the counterpane reads that ‘this has been cut up to cover chairs, stools etc’ [Knole Sackville Trust, 1864]. The evidence is therefore clear then that some of the upholstery seen today in the Brown Gallery originated as the cover for the James II bed.

Knole, therefore, offers a unique opportunity to glimpse into the past by seeing objects in the settings for which they were intended, but also how conservation and repair has always strived to balance the effects of access. Most regard this as an essential part of the evocative atmosphere of Knole, imparting the Spirit of Place, which is as important to preserve as the physical collection. Vita Sackville West wrote of the Venetian Ambassadors bedroom in 1922, ‘It had a bloom like the bloom off a bowl of grapes and figs…Green and pinks, originally bright, now dusted and tarnished over’ [Sackville-West, 1934].

Fig. 2. The Venetian Ambassadors Bedroom, Knole. ©NTPL
However, this heavy air of history and antiquity can also viewed as a sign of neglect. Some visitors do not like seeing the worn and decayed fabric of the collection, and respond to it in a negative way. This is not a new phenomenon. Throughout its history Knole has caused extremes of reaction. In 1752 Horace Walpole commented: ‘The furniture throughout, ancient magnificence; loads of portraits not good nor curious…’ [Sackville-West, 2010]. And in 2009 a visitor to Knole complained that he was forced to peer ‘through the gloom resulting from a ridiculous attempt to preserve a mass of already faded and rotten fabrics’.

Conservation in Action: Inspired by Knole

This creates a challenge today in the National Trust. Balancing the needs of conservation and access with ever increasing visitor numbers, and offering a good experience for all visitors, is becoming harder and harder to achieve. One of the key performance indicators used to compare the success of a particular property nationwide is its visitor enjoyment (VE) score. The aim at the National Trust is to have 75 per cent of our visitors responding that they have had a very enjoyable visit in surveys carried out at the end of their visit.

The National Trust is the United Kingdom’s largest conservation body; but it is a private charity, dependent on visitor income, membership, donations and legacies, and fund raising to support its properties. All National Trust properties strive to operate as far as possible as independent business units. This an increasing challenge in economically straitened times which has seen the amount visitors spend in tearooms and shops drop, despite increasing visitor numbers. Many properties, including Knole, currently operate at a loss. Therefore, Visitor Enjoyment scores are extremely important, as an indicator of the overall performance of a property. Without generating an income the property is unable to finance and manage its conservation needs.

Problems with visitors not understanding what they are observing, and therefore not enjoying their visit to Knole, are compounded by major conservation issues at the property today. The leaking roofs, crumbly walls, failing windows and poor wiring have all contributed to a place that is losing its battle with the outside elements. There is no heating in the showrooms and the relative humidity levels reach 90 per cent and above in winter. As a consequence, the condition of the highly significant collection is deteriorating.

But now Knole is now poised to undergo the most significant transformation since the interventions of Thomas Sackville over 400 years ago. The project, ‘Inspired by Knole’, will work to secure the future of the house and collections by undertaking work to improve the building envelope, installing environmental
control in the showrooms and starting conservation of the collections. In peeling back Knole’s layers, we will understand and repair the rapidly declining house and collections. But this is not just a conservation project, ‘Inspired by Knole’ is being designed to enable links with local communities to be developed and strengthened, to engage and involve a much broader range of people in the care and conservation of Knole, deepening their knowledge and appreciation of what makes it special. The visitor experience at Knole will, through conservation, be transformed.

The concept of displaying conservation work in progress as part of a property’s interpretation has become more widespread in the National Trust [Lithgow and Boden, 2012]. This has been shown to act as a powerful lever to generate support and funding [Kay and Hughes, 2011]. It has been recognised that showcasing the fascinating skills of conservation in a transparent and engaging way can engender huge support for its vital work, by deepening relationships and increasing understanding.

At Knole, Conservation in Action is a tool that has been used successfully in recent years and has given positive visitor feedback. Over the past year where conservation activities have increased, Visitor Enjoyment scores at Knole have risen by 16 per cent. This paper will briefly set out what has been done to date at Knole and how there are ambitions to go much further in developing the concept of Conservation in Action.

It is recognised that people learn and absorb information in different ways – some enjoy reading, others by watching or hands-on activities and therefore information has been delivered in a wide range of format and styles and also to take advantage of new technology available [Measures, 2009]. Handling frames, which have examples of different materials found in historic houses that visitors can touch, have been a good hands-on tool to show visitors the effects of touching fragile objects and surfaces. Digital photo frames are an unobtrusive and user-friendly tool for delivering updates and information on conservation projects. The conservation team at the property now write a hugely popular blog about their everyday work at Knole – in its first year it received 17,000 views [see www.knolenationaltrust.wordpress.com]. They also carry out some of their day-to-day routine in front of the public and hold regular ‘meet the team’ sessions. Freelance conservators, working in-situ at Knole on remedial conservation, also do as much of their work as possible in front of the public, giving practical demonstrations and showing authentic Conservation in Action. Built into their brief is an allowance of time and resource to talk to the public and provide interpretive material. It is important to do this as it has been found working in front of the public can add up to 30 per cent extra time to complete a project [Lithgow, et al 2012].

Wide consultation has been undertaken over the last year with our visitors, and all...
conservation related events and activities have been evaluated. It is important to get feedback from the visitors to ensure that we are offering information that is interesting to them and is being delivered in the right way. It is also important to have a range of activities to engage with all ages and abilities and focus activities to target audiences. New technologies are being looked at, such as the use of apps, but again to inspire visitors to look at Knole in a new light.

**X Radiography**

Last year, as part of a project to carry out detailed documentation of some key pieces of furniture in the collection, Kate Gill, an independent upholstery conservator worked with a company to produce X-radiographs of furniture. The images show details of construction, tacks used, modern interventions using screws for repairs, the presence of tarnished and degraded gold and silver threads, layers of upholstery and of course the tunnels and damage caused by woodworm. The potential for using X-radiographs as a tool for condition assessment, and to aid conservation decision making and curatorial studies, is well known by conservators and curators alike. The resulting images, beautiful in themselves, were fascinating and provided a focus for a popular exhibition for the uninitiated visitors.

*Fig. 5. The Reynolds Room, Knole. ©NT/J Millar*
The Reynolds Room Project

The Reynolds Room Project at Knole is another example of how we are using new technologies and equipment and also experimenting and testing visitor’s reactions to conservation work and interpretation. In the future the aim is to have environmental control in all showrooms, but before major interventive building work is undertaken, the theories and proposed strategy needed to be tested. The model was to reduce air leakage and introduce low level heating, the combination of these two factors hopefully being sufficient to reduce relative humidity to a more acceptable level. The Reynolds Room has no history of heating apart from its impressive fireplace, now no longer in use, so any intervention would need to be unobtrusive; again an awareness of the Spirit of Place is important at Knole. Heat mats offered a good solution. The mat would sit hidden under the historic carpet, responding to a humidistat and letting out a low level heat when the relative humidity rose to above 65%. A fake room was constructed within the space rather than creating a sterile space. Facsimiles of the walls and paintings were printed onto vinyl screens. The screens imitated the effects of forthcoming building repairs intended to reduce air leakage. Monitors were placed in various locations in the space to monitor changes in temperature and RH and the effectiveness of the heat mat. Results could also be directly compared with conditions in adjoining non controlled spaces [Curteis, 2011]. Visitors were intrigued, and a conservation trial became a great talking point. This year the trial was changed slightly. The heat mat had proved successful in reducing relative humidity but could it withstand our 95,000 visitors walking on it? A fake carpet was produced – an extremely convincing digital representation of the original and visitors are invited in to walk on it. Through interpretation in the room and the presence of trained Room Stewards, this trial has enabled a dialogue to be created with our visitors – giving them an insight into how collections are managed and cared for, but also the debates surrounding conservation, access and authenticity.
Knole in Flux

This year has seen the start of the biggest challenge at Knole so far – to secure the building envelope at Knole through essential roof, wall and window repairs which will stop the rain and elements getting in. The work is extremely interventive: roofs will be stripped of tiles and repaired, inappropriate cement render will be replaced with lime, and windows will be removed and conserved. By carrying out this work, conditions within the showrooms will be improved and progress can then be made on tighter environmental control and collection conservation. However during the work there would be a huge impact both on the collections and the visitors to Knole. Collections needed to be protected from possible dust ingress and impact damage, and visitors have to remain safe, but also informed and excited by the project. Their continued support is vital. After careful risk assessments, it was determined that both collections and visitors could remain in the showrooms affected by the building work. It was hoped that by being allowed to see into the heart of the building work, visitors would understand the scale of the problems at Knole and be supportive of the project being undertaken.

Visitors currently walk through a polythene tunnel running through the showrooms, which prevents dust from external repairs entering the house. Windows in the tunnel allow visitors to look out onto the scaffold and see building work in progress and in, to see showrooms. These also allow visitors to view rooms and collections differently. Some are covered up, but in other places secret doorways have been revealed and walls previously hidden behind tapestries. A box surrounding the magnificent Spangled Bed for protection allows the visitor to glimpse into the previously hidden canopy and see the textile in all its unfaded glory. There is an atmosphere
of work in progress, leading to a buzz of activity. New discoveries being made all the time. Furthermore, visitors gain a sense of privilege as they are allowed to see behind the scenes. Outside visitors have been able to go on tours on the scaffold to see the bare bones of Knole and appreciate the scale and urgency of work required. Interpretation will aim to bring visitors into the heart of the building works, expressing their importance, explaining the work and revealing new aspects of Knole’s history, while engaging audiences in the next stage of Knole’s development.

Fig. 8. The Barn, Knole which will be the site of the Knole Studios. ©NT/J Millar

Knole Studios

Finally plans for Knole Studios – the most ambitious part of the proposals for ‘Inspired by Knole’. A bespoke conservation studio and learning complex titled ‘Knole Studios’ will be created. The space will allow conservators not only to work in front of the public on objects from the collection but also to give opportunities for those visitors to view the work and potentially get involved in some projects and gain new skills. By developing and strengthening links with local communities, it is aimed to engage and involve a much broader range of people in the care and conservation of Knole, deepening their knowledge and appreciation of what makes it special. Research undertaken at Knole and other heritage organisations has shown that visitors want to be more involved—not only to ‘watch’, but to ‘learn’ and ‘do’ as well. Visitors want to have direct contact with the experts involved, to talk to conservators and see close up the conservation work in progress. There is a precedent for this at Knole. In the past volunteers have not only been used in opening the house to the public but also in essential conservation work. A fantastic example was the
conservation of the magnificent King’s Bed in the 1970s and 1980s. Over a period of seventeen years a group of trained volunteers spent many thousands of hours painstakingly conserving the delicate fabrics of the golden bed. The work they did can be seen today on the King’s bed and has ensured its survival for the future. Some of these original volunteers are still volunteering at Knole today.

Knole Studios will allow this tradition to be continued on a more ambitious scale. There will be opportunities for work placements and internships, giving trainee conservators much needed hands on experience and ensuring skills for the future. But there will also be opportunities catering for all levels of skill and interest, whether its basic cleaning, simple conservation work, research, cataloguing, documentation, creating replicas. The Hayloft Learning Centre will complement the studio, providing a facility where a variety of activities can take place - whether schools groups, adult education, art and craft groups – all being inspired by Knole.

Conclusion

Knole is a wonderful property. The building and collections are of international significance and the fact that they have survived and are still on open display today should be celebrated. However it is clear that the condition of the building and collections, and restrictions imposed by preventive conservation measures has made Knole a difficult place for visitors to understand and enjoy. In recent years Conservation in Action activities at Knole have started to address this. Our visitors are starting to understand and enjoy Knole through learning about Conservation. ‘Inspired by Knole’ will enable this to continue on a bigger scale.

In the past Knole has been compared Knole to being more like a medieval town than a house, full of life and activity. ‘Inspired by Knole’ will once again bring Knole alive. The project will enable the National Trust to enhance Knole’s reputation, raising its profile as a place of extremely important heritage and a centre of excellence for learning conservation and craft skills. It will address the long term conservation needs of the building and collection and enable visitors to Knole to learn about conservation, its importance and relevance today.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank the Cloth Workers Guild and the Anna Plowden Trust for their generous grants which enabled me to attend this conference.

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