

THE NATIONAL TRUST FOR SCOTLAND

Approved by Council on 23 July 1999

COLLECTIONS CARE¹

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The National Trust for Scotland was established in 1931 and has the statutory purposes of ‘... *promoting the permanent preservation for the benefit of the nation of lands and buildings in Scotland of historic or national interest or natural beauty and also of articles and objects of historic or national interest ... and of their architectural or historic features and contents so far as of national or historic interest*². These were extended in the 1938 Act to include the promotion of: ‘... *(b) the preservation of articles and objects of any description having artistic or antiquarian interest; (c) the access to and enjoyment of such buildings places articles and objects by the public*³.

Historically, preservation of the collections has been the task of the Curator and the two Assistant Curators. In 1997, with the appointment of a Conservator within the Curatorial Department, the Trust embarked on a new phase in the development of its professional approach towards conservation of the many collections in its care.

This policy sets out the Trust’s aims and priorities as perceived at the start of this phase.

2.0 AIMS

The Trust aims to preserve the collections in its care within their historic context as part of the material culture of a property, and/or as part of the decorative scheme of interiors. The historic interiors and their collections are at the core of the Trust’s activities and it is therefore essential that their long term preservation be ensured.

2.1 Holistic Approach

The majority of items in the Trust’s collections gain significance from their role as elements of an historic interior. In order to ensure that the balance of an interior is not disrupted, the conservation needs of individual items need to be assessed within this wider context.

2.2 ‘Prevention rather than cure’

¹ Throughout this document the term ‘collections’ is used to indicate those groups of items forming part of the material culture and the displays in historic interiors, including books and archives. It does not relate to contents used for the management and day-to-day running of a property (office equipment etc.), or to any other collections in the Trust’s care (e.g. plant collections).

² The National Trust for Scotland Order Confirmation Act, 1935

³ The National Trust for Scotland Order Confirmation Act, 1938

The most cost-effective and satisfactory approach to the preservation of collections in the long-term is to concentrate on **preventing damage and slowing down deterioration**, in favour of (but not ignoring) repair after damage has occurred. Conservation work within the Trust has traditionally focussed on repair of items that have become damaged or deteriorated. This often involved replacement of damaged parts with new material. Loss of original material inevitably leads to loss of information regarding history, style, structure, technique, function or use of an item. Repair does not return it to its 'original' state, no matter how skilful the work and how invisible the result, and the emphasis therefore needs to move away from work of this nature. A more conservation-sound approach focuses on activities that prevent damage from occurring in the first place.

Good preventive practice cannot entirely eliminate the need for remedial treatment, as accidents will occur from time to time. However, remedial treatment must only take place if at the same time the cause of the damage is identified and addressed, to prevent items from being exposed again to the same situation that caused the damage in the first place.

3.0 PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION

The Trust will give priority to actions of a preventive nature, as these constitute the most efficient and cost-effective way of addressing conservation needs and requirements. Experience has shown that it can considerably reduce the need for (and therefore expenditure on) remedial treatment in the long term.

A preventive approach involves assessment of the issues that threaten the preservation of the collections, followed by the development of a programme to address these in a structured way. This concentrates on two areas:

- gathering knowledge on the current situation through condition assessments and environmental monitoring, and addressing any backlog in these areas;
- setting aims and standards for conservation, and developing a programme to achieve and maintain them.

Where standards for the care and maintenance of the collections exist and are appropriate, these will be adopted. Where none exists or is appropriate, a standard will be developed. Areas to be covered are outlined below.

3.1 Condition Assessments

The Trust needs to become more knowledgeable about the condition of its collections and the actions that need to be taken to ensure their preservation. Assessments are required for this. Condition assessments must take place whenever a property is acquired and after that at regular intervals (10 year maximum). Existing properties that have not undergone assessments should gradually be brought in line with this programme.

Following assessments, preventive issues aimed at stabilizing the condition of entire collections must be addressed first. These should concentrate on ensuring that:

- the way the collections are displayed is not harmful;
- items not on display are stored in a dedicated storage space, in which appropriate environmental and security conditions can be maintained, and where items can be located and accessed easily (for research or other purposes);
- all collections care and housekeeping activities, as well as any other Trust activities (whether educational, commercial or managerial) are not damaging or detrimental to the collections.

3.2 Environmental Control

Providing and maintaining the appropriate environment is important for the collections (as well as the building). ‘The key to providing a stable collection is a stable environment’⁴. In order to ensure stable environments, temperature, humidity, visible light and UV radiation must be monitored and where possible controlled to within desired levels.

3.3 Visitors and Events

Opening properties to the public is an essential part of the Trust’s role, but it must ensure that this in itself does not become damaging. Active wear and tear as a result of visitor access must be minimized wherever possible, by addressing the following:

- research to assess the detrimental effect of visitors/users on the collections;
- define more clearly per property the maximum allowable number of visitors at any one time, throughout the season and at events; and
- increase awareness of the adverse conservation impact of events for all staff involved in organising them (whether at a property, a Regional Office or Head Office).

3.4 Record keeping

All collections care activities involving items or (parts of) collections must be recorded and documented; staff at the Curatorial Department and at properties should be aware of the existence of this documentation and have easy access to it. Where it concerns documentation referring to treatment of individual items, a reference to this documentation must be made on the Curatorial Inventory.

4.0 REMEDIAL CONSERVATION

Care of collections in sound condition is the role of property staff, through regular housekeeping during the open season, and more detailed attention during the closed season where required. The *National Trust Manual of Housekeeping*⁵ acts as the standard for this, while the Trust is considering the development of its own handbook.

⁴ May Cassar, *Environmental Management; Guidelines for Museums and Galleries* (Routledge, London, 1997), p.xi.

⁵ Hermione Sandwith and Sheila Stainton, *The National Trust Manual of Housekeeping*. Penguin Books, London, 1993.

The treatment of items in unstable condition (as identified through assessments) is a skilled task for which trained conservators must be commissioned. In order to ensure that the treatment is consistent with current professional practice (including minimum intervention; reversibility where possible; and full documentation of the applied treatment) conservators should normally be included in the Conservation Register⁶ or be accredited through one of the schemes currently under development. Conservators are expected to carry out treatments with an adequate understanding of, and with sensitivity to the context of the item.

Where insufficient information exists to aid the conservator's understanding of the context, Curatorial research must take place to establish and record the cultural significance of item(s). It is imperative that this takes place **prior to** the commissioning of conservation treatment, in order to adequately brief the conservator and provide the necessary background information.

All treatment to items should be carried out to the same standards, regardless their value or importance. To quote the Trust's sister organisation, the National Trust:

'It is likely that in future [NT] will be the only resource for the study of certain categories of object which may currently be considered by many people to be of little significance'.⁷

However, in order to ensure appropriate allocation of resources, prioritisation of work will be required. This must take place in a methodical and consistent way and must be informed by the cultural significance as well as the physical condition of items.

5.0 PEOPLE

All staff involved in the care of collections need to possess the required skills and knowledge to do so. This should be achieved through the following:

- appropriate background and experience on appointment, or training in relevant areas as soon as possible after appointment;
- familiarisation with the Trust's policies, aims and approach through induction; and
- keeping up-to-date with changes and developments through on-going training, workshops, seminars etc.

⁶ The Conservation Register is a regularly revised and updated database, administered by Historic Scotland's Scottish Conservation Bureau and containing names and details of conservation practices in Scotland and the UK. It helps potential clients make an informed choice when commissioning conservation and collection care work.

⁷ National Trust, *Historic Buildings, the conservation of their fixtures, fittings, decorations and contents*. (National Trust Policy Papers, 1996), p.12.

Where volunteers are (encouraged to become) involved in collections care activities, their need for training and guidance should also be recognised and addressed. This includes access to and/or supervision by a collections care professional.

The need for on-going training and development applies to all involved in collections care, whether full-time, part-time or seasonal, at Head Office, Regional and Property level, as well as any interns or students working with staff.

6.0 PLANNING

A planned approach is the key to successful management and preservation of collections. The Trust is tackling this for its properties through the development of Management Plans. Collections care actions should fit in with the overall philosophy for a property as outlined in its Management Plan and collections care input must therefore be sought and included whenever a Management Plan is developed or updated. Good planning will place collections care within the wider picture of all Trust activities and ensure commitment and consistency.

The implementation of plans can only take place if the necessary funds are (made) available. Financial planning is therefore equally important. The Trust needs to maintain an adequate annual budget dedicated to collections care work to ensure that the work is properly and continuously sourced.

7.0 PARTNERSHIPS

The Trust maintains close links with organisations and agencies with a collections care interest. These include Historic Scotland, the Scottish Museums Council, the Scottish Society for Conservation and Restoration, the UK Institute for Conservation, the National Trust, English Heritage and the Museums & Galleries Commission.

8.0 IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEW

To ensure the implementation of this policy, the Trust will:

- distribute the policy to all relevant staff;
- make the policy available to the membership, the public and interested organisations;
- bring the policy to the attention of contractors commissioned to conduct collections care work;
- create a programme for implementation and review; and
- develop a means of monitoring and evaluating its effectiveness.

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