

West Dean College
Conservation of Books & Library Materials
Jessica Hyslop – 7th September 2017

I extremely grateful to the Stationers' Foundation for granting me a Major Award towards attending the second year of the Conservation of Books & Library Materials programme at West Dean College. Completing the second year was absolutely invaluable to my development as a conservator, allowing me to build on my existing skill-set and apply myself with more confidence, speed, and ability than before. Compared to the first year, I tackled more complex objects and treatments that required some serious head-scratching and consideration of conservation ethics—all very good practice for when I come across these trickier projects in my career. As part of the course, I also completed a six-week work placement at Oxford's Bodleian Libraries—an amazing opportunity that gave me insight into how conservation is conducted in a large, prestigious group of research libraries, as well as more essential benchwork practice.



Helping with pest identification at the Bodleian Library during my placement. Credit: Lucy Cokes.

Practical experience

During the year, I worked on a combination of binding and conservation projects, as well as completing an independent MA research project. The binding projects included two paper conservation bindings, a semi-limp laced-case parchment binding, and a late 16th/early 17th century Spanish ledger binding. The ledger binding in particular was fascinating (and fun!) to research and make, with its leather overbands and Islamic-inspired lacing patterns. It was also gratifying to gain more experience with parchment bindings, which have become one of my particular interests.



Making parchment tackets for laced-case parchment binding. Credit: Jessica Hyslop.

Alongside these binding projects, I also had the chance to work on a variety of conservation items during the year, which helped me to both consolidate existing skills and expand my treatment repertoire. In the first term, we second-year students were tasked with completing two conservation books within short periods of time. The aim of this was to simulate a more realistic working pace, and to teach us what is possible to achieve within shorter timeframes. It meant that we had to prioritise the most important facets of the treatment rather than painstakingly repair each and every tiny tear or fold. This is an important skill to have, as clients do not always have the money for a conservator to carry out extensive treatments and merely need the object to be stabilised so that it can be used without causing further damage. The same is true when large collections are to be treated, as there is often not enough time and resources to give every book a complete treatment.

Another key project completed in the first term was the conservation of the original plans for the famous 'footprint

carpet' at West Dean College, which was designed by Edward James in the 1930s. The story behind the carpet's conception is an intriguing one: the tale goes that Edward James came up with the idea after seeing the wet footprints left behind by his wife, ballet dancer Tilly Losch, as she got out of the bath one day. The carpet was supposedly designed to immortalise the otherwise ephemeral marks of her passage. However, the couple's famously tumultuous marriage ended not long after, and so later Edward James had a second carpet commissioned, this time depicting the pawprints of his favourite wolfhound—or as he put it, his 'more faithful companion'...

The plans for the carpet had been stored folded in the archive of West Dean College for decades, so it was given to us as a group project to conserve them in a manner that would make them suitable for display and more accessible for researchers. There was a larger and a smaller plan, and we conserved the smaller of the two. This was a really interesting experience, as the plan was a large, flat work with painted designs on the front—a format unlike anything I'd worked on previously. The treatment we decided on was to gently humidify the folds in the paper with water vapour so that the plan could once more lie flat, and then to repair the torn edges with Japanese tissue and wheat starch paste. This treatment gave very satisfying results. Excitingly, we then had the opportunity to present our work and research at the 'Edward James and Mexico' symposium that took place at the college in October. Two of my classmates presented at the event, and we then showed our work in a small exhibition space so that the symposium guests could see the plans first-hand. In addition, our whole cohort contributed to an article about the conservation of the footprint carpet plans for publication in the symposium's post-prints. Seeing our work in print was extremely gratifying, and it was a privilege to be involved in the symposium, which brought together speakers from the spheres of art, architecture, literary studies, and conservation, as well as from the UK and Mexico.



Applying paper repairs to the verso of the footprint carpet plan. Credit: Jessica Hyslop.



Trying out leafcasting at Southampton University. Credit: Jessica Hyslop.

Other conservation projects completed during the year included a leather reback treatment to a book from the Royal College of Physicians, a joint repair to a parchment-covered binding from the Portsmouth Admiralty Library, and treatment of a heavily damaged volume from the Natural History Museum—the latter being the most challenging item I encountered during my studies.

Another major element of the year's work was my MA research project, which was an investigation into the efficacy of a cationic fixative—usually used to fix leather dyes—in fixing certain water-soluble inks that are often found on books, manuscripts, and archival documents. Fixing the inks would allow the documents to undergo aqueous treatment if required. My experiments showed some promising results in certain cases, though further tests would need to be carried out to determine whether the product is truly suitable for this kind of conservation use.

Alongside all of this, we somehow found time for some visits too, including a day at Southampton University's conservation studio to learn about leafcasting, and a visit to the British Library's conservation department. These were great opportunities to witness conservation work in different institutions and environments, and learn about different techniques and treatments from other professionals in the field.

The Future

With my time at West Dean College now at an end, I feel that I completed the course as a confident and able conservator, with an excellent grounding in practical skills, materials science, ethical considerations, and workplace experience. I am also delighted to report that since graduating from West Dean I have completed a fixed-term contract as the project conservator for the Minton Archive Conservation Project at the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Archive Service (more information can be seen on their website at <http://www.themintonarchive.org.uk>), and have now moved on to take up the role of Book Conservator at the Oxford Conservation Consortium.

I am immensely grateful to the Stationers' Foundation for supporting me through my conservation training. Without your assistance I would not be where I am today. Thank you!