

Heritage Lottery Fund: Skills for the Future. *Conservation Skills Initiative*

Evaluation Report: SF-09-06861



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Image front page: Nora Meller (13/14 textile intern and now Assistant Textile Conservator at the RMG) mentoring Maria Pardos (HLF Endeavour funded intern, 2016).

1. Introduction

The Institute of Conservation's (ICON) *Skills Survey* in 2005 highlighted that, within the heritage sector, metal and textile conservation were two areas where professional skills are most in demand yet with very few formal training opportunities available. In addition, there are no formal training available for ship model conservation. Most conservators graduate from specialised (single discipline) courses (for example prints and drawings, archaeology and paintings), whilst a few graduate from 'general objects' conservation courses. The conservation generalists are expected to cover highly specialised areas without the necessary in-depth knowledge or expertise.

The *Conservation Skills Initiative* project was conceived to mainly target recently graduated students from the 'general objects' courses and individuals who can demonstrate strong metal, wood working or textile skills together with an interest in conservation of the movable heritage. The students from non-single focus conservation courses generally have a basic understanding of conservation and have worked briefly on a broad range of materials. The National Maritime Museum's *Conservation Skills Initiative* programme was designed to develop and build their specialist skills in conservation thus providing the necessary skills for the future long-term care of maritime collections.

The nation has, as a consequence of this project, an enlarged stable of skilled conservators, trained in the caring for the nation's treasures by UK-based conservators. The *Conservation Skills Initiative* project has also contributed to strengthening the conservation and heritage sector by meeting an identified skills gap and shortage in metals, ship model and textiles conservation skills which was identified in the *Skills Survey* undertaken by ICON in 2005 and the more detailed *Conservation Labour Market Intelligence 2012–13*, published in 2013.

2. Project aims and objectives

The overarching aim of the *Conservation Skills Initiative* project was to provide ten 12-months internships at the National Maritime Museum in three areas (metals, organic and textile conservation) through a high quality work-based internship programme that will equip interns with the skills to pursue a long and enjoyable career in the heritage sector. Six of the internships will be focussing on developing conservation skills of fine metals and scientific instruments; two on ship model conservation; and two will be focussing on conservation of predominantly uniforms and flags.

There are three overarching aims of the project that address the benefits to the conservation and heritage sector, the intern and to the National Maritime Museum.

2.1 For the wider conservation and heritage sector, the project aimed to:

- Enhance the capacity of the heritage sector to deliver sustainable training through the creation of an internship programme.
- Strengthen the conservation and heritage sector through sharing good practice about the *Conservation Skills Initiative*.
- Contribute to the development of the conservation profession on a national and international basis through practice, research and dissemination of information.



Paulina Drzwinska (2012, metals intern) in the process of mechanically removing corrosion products from a sextant.

2.2 For the intern, the project aimed to:

- Give experience of diversity of activity in conservation and associated disciplines through the anticipation and observation, within an international, academic and professional community.
- Provide opportunities for specialist study and research across a range of conservation skills, which are both innovative and responsive to the needs of the profession.
- Provide an environment in which the interns can develop practical, academic, professional and personal abilities according to their potential and aspirations.
- Equip junior conservators with the skills required to pursue and have a long and rewarding career in the heritage sector.

- 2.3 For the National Maritime Museum, the project aimed to:
- Create a pool of specialist conservators with skills and knowledge relevant to the Museum's future recruitment needs.
 - Provide a centre of excellence in training, education and research in conservation.
 - Contribute to the preservation, understanding and appreciation of cultural property through the activities of staff and interns.



Hannah Young (2013/14) and Laurie Price (2013/14) working together on an Enfield Maxim machine gun, ready for display in the Museum's *Forgotten Fighters* gallery.

3. Project approach

3.1 Description of the internships

The *Conservation Skills Initiative* project was mainly, but not exclusively directed toward recently graduated students within conservation who have limited work experience. The interns each undertook a year-long experience within the NMM's Conservation Department where they had the opportunity to work with very experienced conservators in either metals, organic or textile conservation.

The interns will be expected to develop the core skills of a conservator through practical work while, at the same time, they take part in the daily routine of the studios. At the end of their one year internships they should be able to work on objects exhibiting complex conservation issues stretching the individual.

The metal interns will have unique opportunities to gain a solid understanding of basic metal working skills and develop conservation expertise of fine metal objects working alongside the Senior Specialist (metals). The metal conservation studio at the Museum has excellent facilities including a well-equipped metal machine workshop. The interns will be working on historic edged weapons beginning with dirks leading on to full swords with high decoration, medals from the plain to the very detailed, scientific instruments ranging from the simple terrestrial telescopes leading to more complex engineering models.



Conservation in Action - Helen Robertson (2012/13) cleaning ship models in the *Ship of War* gallery helped by Senior Conservator (Ship Models) and two conservation students.

The ship model intern will be given a fantastic chance to develop a range of conservation skills that come together in the most complex of composite objects – ship models – working with the Senior Conservator (Ship Models). Not only do ship model conservators need to master conservation of textiles, metal and organic materials, but also be extremely familiar with ship technology and in particular rigging while working at miniature scale. The interns are expected to work on a range of organic objects building their understanding and expertise of organic object conservation interspersed with objects exhibiting complex conservation issues that will stretch the individual. The interns will be requested to make basic demonstration components encompassing various wood and metal working techniques, thus increasing their understanding of the objects that they work with.

The textile interns will be given an unparalleled opportunity to improve and develop their textile conservation skills. The interns will be working alongside the Senior Specialist (textile) on a range of objects that are required for the Museum's public programme. These may include small flags requiring stitched support leading to more complex degraded flags needing adhesive support, printed and embroidered textiles which will need treatment and mounting on fabric covered

boards, uniforms requiring simple support of areas of minor loss leading to more complex support of silk linings before being mounted for display and accessories such as hats and sword belts to be treated and mounted.

Part of the internship encompassed an opportunity to work with the Preventive Conservator to gain a basic understanding of the impact of the environment on the long-term stability of objects.

The sources of the intern's objects came from the Museum's programme of gallery redisplay, new galleries, temporary exhibitions, loans in and out and routine maintenance of the Museum's displayed objects. If the intern had a specific need which these programmes do not contain, an object from the Museum's storage area was identified.



Joeske Voets (2012/13) steam cleaning a marble bust to gain a broader knowledge of materials and techniques to complement her metal skills.

The interns contributed to and developed condition assessment skills, writing basic condition reports, developed treatment proposals and carried out conservation treatment.

At the completion of their internship, the interns emerged with the bedrock skills of a conservator, including:

- Developing and conducting condition assessment of an object and, if damaged, its probable causes.
- Maintaining, conserving and restoring objects to a museum standard.
- Evaluating and specifying the necessary conditions required, and materials/ techniques used, for display and storage of museum objects.

- Acquiring the techniques of designing and making mounts for a variety of objects.
- Maintaining accurate records and documentation in a museum-specific system.
- Understanding the necessary Health and Safety procedures for safe practice in the studio and the protection of the Museum's visitors.

3.2 Learning programme

The training was primarily done in the studio on a one-to-one basis with the Senior Specialist who was also the intern's immediate supervisor. The supervision of interns was built into the respective conservators work programmes (annual performance agreements). There was also an input from the other members of the section, as well as temporary attachments to other conservators in the department as needed e.g. when an object had other materials which needed treatment.

Initially, a needs analysis was carried out by the supervisor and the intern. This was based on the training to date that the intern had received and any other relevant experience compared to the skills the intern must have to progress in the field. From this assessment, the learning objectives in keeping with the learning programme were drawn up and suitable objects for treatment were selected.



Emily Akkermans (2015) stabilising severely degraded green silk on a time signal relay, under the guidance of Nora Meller, Assistant Textile Conservator (former intern 2013/14).

The Learning Agreement was based on the Museum's performance agreement programme and student progress assessments from several conservation training institutions that the Museum has had personal working experience of. It was amended to suit the training nature of the *Conservation Skills Initiative* project, incorporating the best from all assessment systems.

4. Outcomes

The four expected outcomes of the *Conservation Skills Initiative* programme were:

1. Increase the range and quality of work based training to develop skills in the heritage sector
2. Meet identified skills gaps or shortages in the heritage sector
3. Increase the capacity of the sector to deliver training and share good practice
4. Increase the diversity of the heritage workforce

4.1 Outcome one

Increasing the range and quality of work based training to develop skills in the heritage section (outcome one) has been met.

The interns gained substantial conservation experience and confidence during their internship. The expected necessary professional standards that a conservator must demonstrate are:

- Experience with, and a proven ability to effectively solve, complex conservation problems.
- Display in both assessment and treatment a meaningful understanding of the profession's ethical standards.
- Project management skills.
- Sensitivity to local and cultural sensibilities when proposing treatments.
- A multi-layered understanding of possible treatments and their differences.
- A good understanding of preventive conservation practice and the ability to communicate such to non-conservators.
- The ability to explain various levels of treatment choices and their implications to non-technical clients.
- Be familiar with and comfortable contributing to the delivery of an organisation's strategic aims.

All the interns gained experience of the above and of the 11 interns we accepted, eight have secured a conservation job within the sector, one has returned to designing jewellery and two have dropped off our radar.



Helen Robertson (2012/13) working on a Napoleonic Prisoner of War straw work box.

The feedback from the interns on completing the internships also provides evidence that the internship provides value and often has been a contributing factor to securing that all important first job. Listed below are a few quotes from some of the interns on what the internship meant to them personally.

'This internship has proved to be an invaluable professional development experience. It has helped me to improve my treatment and organisation skills whilst introducing me to the multifaceted nature of an active and progressive museum. This has all been achieved in a wonderfully supportive and friendly environment where colleague's time and experience has been willingly given without hesitation. [...] I feel that this year has built my confidence and allowed me to develop into a safe and competent conservator. I believe that this experience will prove essential in my future employment and was pivotal in securing a position with [...].'

'I have gained valuable experience and knowledge from this internship which will continue to contribute to the development of my career. I have been able to develop a better knowledge of conservation within the museum environment, to work to exhibition and display deadlines and have been allowed the opportunity to manage my workload and to develop my skills in other areas of conservation and making.'

'It has been a great pleasure to be part of the Conservation Department of the Royal Museums Greenwich. I have been here for a short time, which proved to be incredibly intense and full of new challenges and information. I feel my skills have improved considerably and I have gained more confidence. It was also an invaluable experience of working in a museum environment, alongside a wide variety of very skilled and knowledgeable professionals. The internship has contributed greatly to me getting a full-time position as Assistant Conservator.'

4.2 Outcome two

Meet identified skills gaps or shortages in the heritage sector (outcome 2) has been met. The *Conservation Skills Initiative* programme has trained conservators in three key areas with identified skills gaps or shortages.

- Two textile conservators, both have gained some experience of flag conservation and are working as textile conservators.
- Two organic conservators with ship model conservation skills: one is employed working on ship models and one decided pursue a conservation career in Canada.
- Six metal conservators: four are working as conservators and one decided to pursue post graduate research. One internship, shared by two individuals, are not working as conservators: one decided that conservation was not a future career choice and one found it impossible to gain entry to conservation without formal qualifications. (Both came from metals craft background.)

'Not only have I developed a great deal of new skills and gained confidence in performing conservation works, I have also thoroughly enjoyed my internship at the museum. The whole department has been inspiring and motivating and absolutely great to work with. I don't think my first conservation position could have been better nor my return to the UK more welcoming anywhere else. I'm very grateful for the opportunity that was given me and find it provides a wonderful start for a career in conservation.'



Rebecca Schult (2012/13) taking part in an internal training session on the use of cyclododecane as a temporary consolidant with Liesa Brierley (preventive Conservator) and Elisabeth Carr (Paper Conservator).

These internships have provided a platform for building a sustainable and resilient skills base for the future.

4.3 Outcome three

Increase the capacity of the sector to deliver training and share good practice (outcome 3) has been met. This is principally evidenced through the interns' publications (internally such as the Museum's blog, and externally in conservation journals), presentations, interviews and generally word of mouth. For example Natalie Harding *Conservation of a pair of Siebe' Gorman weighted diving boots*, Hannah Young *Conservation of a Lewis Mark I machine gun* and Laurie Price *George Knott and the Eddystone Lighthouse* are representative examples of interns' blogs posted on the Museum's website www.rmg.co.uk/blogs/collections



Natalie Harding (2011/12) is mechanically removing corrosion products from a pair of Siebe' Gorman weighted diving boots; the conservation is written up as blog on the Museum's web site.

Nora Meller gave a talk 'Learning from interdisciplinary collaboration during an internship at the National Maritime Museum at the ICON Forum 2015. In her talk she explored the opportunities for collaboration between paper and textile conservators. The topic of interdisciplinary collaboration in a medium-sized department where the opportunities of engaging and learning from a range of conservation disciplines is big. Helen Robertson *Can you help identify this mystery vessel?* posted this blog enlisting help from the public in trying to identify the purpose behind the ship model.

The need for good and effective communication skills in conservation is a high priority, so the interns have been pushed to participate as much as possible without jeopardising meeting the key learning outcomes set out in the Learning Agreement. They have been requested to talk to about their work to VIP visitors to the Studios, many of which are being encouraged to sponsor signature Museum projects/programmes. Hannah Young talked about her experience as a metal conservation intern to the Worshipful Company of Cutlers.



Helen Robertson (2011/12) represented conservation at the Museum's Winter Reception, an annual event thanking funders, current and past, for their support to the Museum.

The Museum will continue to be recognised as a leading sector provider for developing practical conservation techniques as evidenced through the skills acquired by the interns and the success rate with which nine out of eleven have been offered jobs or future training opportunities within the heritage sector.

4.4 Outcome four

Increase the diversity of the heritage workforce (outcome 4) has been difficult to achieve. The *Conservation Skills Initiative* project was conceived to mainly target recently graduated students from the 'general objects' courses and individuals who could demonstrate strong metal, wood working or textile skills together with an interest in conservation of the movable heritage.

The applications from the BME communities were few and the applications from candidates with a non-conservation background were equally disappointingly small in numbers. We did accept two on the programme without formal conservation training; both demonstrated excellent craft skills and understanding of the raw material.

'This internship has been a learning curve through the whole year. I never expected that I would enjoy it this much and that it would give me such a good idea about what I want to do with my working life. I know now that I would love to work in conservation, especially in a cultural heritage setting.'

'The downside of the internship for me as I don't have a degree in conservation, it hasn't opened any doors to work within the conservation field. My passion is still to work in conservation and restoration.'

However, both have chosen not to pursue a career in conservation for slightly different reasons. One candidate who found the programme really stimulating (see quote below) was offered an unconditional place on a conservation course as a direct result of the internship, but found the cost of training prohibitively expensive and had to shelve the dream of a career in conservation. The one year internship did not open up a new way into conservation; there is still a lot of work to be done within the profession to enable alternative routes into the profession.

5. Conclusion

The overall consensus is that the Conservation Skills Initiative has been very successful. The interns have built up some very impressive portfolios during their time with the National Maritime Museum which have undoubtedly been instrumental in securing that all important first job in a very competitive niche market. Feedback received from a recent follow up survey on all our interns supports this statement.

From a Museum perspective, the programme has been equally successful. It has been very motivating for senior staff to be able to pass on skills and knowledge to a younger generation. It keeps them alert and an opportunity to challenge their own ways of working and grow in tandem with the interns. It has also identified a need for 'training the trainer' sessions. The interns all have different learning styles and a one programme-fits-all is not a viable approach. There has to be flexibility in the programme to adapt to the individual intern's skills, aptitude, interest and learning style.

The programme has increased the specialist recruiting pool and provided some much need comfort as regards sustainability issues in disciplines with no bespoke training opportunities. Without the support from HLF this project would not have been possible and we are very grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund for being given this opportunity.

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