

The architects' perspective

Andrew Harris and Martin Ashley, of Martin Ashley Architects, give us their view on working with professional conservators

The importance of collaboration

To work as an historic building conservation architect is to enjoy the privilege of working not only on some of the most historically significant and exciting buildings in the world, but also with an extraordinary assortment of talented and skilled conservators, craftspeople and experts. Few other professions require such a close degree of collaboration, trust and mutual respect.

At Martin Ashley Architects we are constantly working in close partnership with a wide range of expert conservators. These include projects at buildings such as St George's Chapel Windsor and the Old Royal Naval College at Greenwich, where our practice supports Martin in his role as Surveyor of the Fabric, and elsewhere such as Hampton Court, where our client – Historic Royal Palaces – has trusted our expertise and partnerships with conservators on a comprehensive series of external and internal fabric repairs.

Our area of architectural practice is, by necessity, intensely collaborative. John Ruskin before us correctly recognized the importance of involving specialist conservators and craftspeople in order to achieve conservation work of the highest order, whether on lowly vernacular or nationally important buildings. Without this input we would flounder, and we know that our best work arises out of close successful relationships with professional conservators – as well as our greatest understanding of the buildings entrusted to our care.

First catch your conservator

Knowing where to find specialist professional conservators can be difficult, given the often highly specialist fields in which they operate. Icon's Conservation Register and accreditation scheme are invaluable, and word of mouth recommendations from trusted colleagues and partners are important. Some well-informed and conscientious clients have their own

The Painted Hall at the Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich



Canon's Cloister at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle





Traces of medieval wallpaintings at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle

network of talented conservators with whom we are happy to work. Relationships are formed by attending talks, seminars and conferences, and we see it as an important aspect of our practice development to seek out opportunities to share ideas and experience with conservators.

Nurturing new talent

Our work on a series of fascinating conservation projects also allows us to do what we can as a practice to bring the next generation of professional conservators forward. We are enthusiastic supporters of schemes such as the SPAB Scholarship and craft-fellowship programmes, which allow us to share our own expertise with experienced and emerging conservators, and fulfil our duty to pass down knowledge and techniques to the next generation.

The selection process

The appointment of conservators is in most cases a direct appointment by the client to carry out a specialist function, usually under our oversight. We will often advise and guide the client on those appointments – particularly where we act as Surveyor of the Fabric, which is why a network of good relationships and a knowledge of how to identify the skills and individuals required is so important to our practice. This appointment arrangement can cause friction with main contactors – also a direct appointment by the client – particularly where one set of programme pressures comes up against another. Happily in our experience this rarely happens as contractors enjoy the opportunity to work with and learn

from professional conservators, and are anxious to do what they can to facilitate their work.

Exercising diplomacy

Our own softer people and management skills can often come in useful elsewhere too, where we sometimes find ourselves acting as the interface between conservators, clients and other project partners. Professional conservators are often so highly focused on their work – sometimes to the point of obsession – that whereas they express themselves beautifully fluently through their work they can struggle to articulate themselves with clients or on the more mundane contractual and project management aspects of a project. Here we are happy to step in to facilitate that dialogue – perhaps even to interpret – in order to keep the project running smoothly. It is a small price to pay for the privilege of working with passionate and extraordinarily skilled professionals.

Defining the project

A challenging aspect of any conservation project for us is specifying the project requirements. Some projects can be straightforward – for instance our recent work on Phase 1 of the restoration of the Thornhill wall paintings at the Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich. The key focus for the project was naturally the decorative scheme, and we initially brought in Stephen Paine ACR from specialist conservators Paine & Stewart to work alongside our team to scope the works. Once this had been done, Paine & Stewart were subsequently appointed as lead conservators through a competitive process, with other roles falling into place around their programme.

Voyages of discovery

Elsewhere it can be much more complicated. Take the Canons' Cloister at St George's Chapel for instance – a range of 14th century monastic buildings with later additions and adaptations and one of the oldest parts of Windsor Castle – where we have recently completed a two-year programme of external repairs and internal refurbishment.

Here we could not begin to specify the project at all until we had begun peeling back the layers and making a painstaking assessment of what was needed to successfully and sensitively conserve the buildings. The project, its programme and the team emerged on the scaffold, as we all came to understand the building and its needs. When the professional team prepare a specification and build a team in these instances, they do so on the basis of best expectation and what can be seen prior to work commencing. Every project is a voyage of discovery beyond that point as you find out more about the building and its character.

It is in those instances, perhaps, where the relationship between the architectural team and specialist conservators really comes into its own. In the detailed and specialist world of historic building conservation it is inconceivable that any one person will know the answers, and we are therefore highly



The Tijou screens at Hampton Court

reliant on the knowledge and experience of the conservators working alongside us to develop appropriate solutions.

Learning from the object

As conservation architects we spend our lives looking at failures – almost always because previous workmen, designers and, yes, conservators have completely missed the point about a building. We find that a building will always tell you what it needs if you are prepared to take time and care to look, and we would not be able to undertake this often highly forensic work without the knowledge and experience of the conservators alongside us. Our lives are made so much easier when we are working with specialists who can read the fabric and learn what it is telling them about how to solve its problems.

A number of examples spring to mind. At Kew Royal Kitchens we were charged with restoring this rare survival of Georgian domestic architecture*. The buildings had been neglected and abused over the years, and our immediate task was to understand the complex series of layers and surfaces within them. Every element was painstakingly studied as we decided what to discard and what to preserve – right down to a shattered charcoal stove where, together with Nimbus Stone, we traced how we could put it back together and restore something that would otherwise have been entirely lost.

At St George's Chapel, it was only thanks to the professional conservators carrying out stone cleaning that we discovered the faint surviving remains of some of the chapel's medieval

* Martin Ashley Architects and Historic Royal Palaces are shortlisted in the Restoration or Conservation category of the Museums + Heritage Awards for the Royal Kitchens project. The category winner will be known as we go to print.

wall decorations. It was a joy then to work with them to make further discoveries and to ensure the paintings' long term survival.

We both know that working with professional conservators brings out the best in us as architects. With lead specialist Paul Webb, for instance, our partnership has allowed us all to raise our game as we have learned from each other and encouraged each other to strive for the best. Our recent work on the roof of the Canons' Cloister at Windsor is some of the finest leadwork we have ever had the pleasure to encounter. With Brian Hall ACR from Hall Conservation at Hampton Court we are working on the Tijou screens, making an exciting series of discoveries about the ironwork and developing an extremely detailed understanding of their preservation needs.

Trusting the experts

Another lesson is that projects work best when conservators are given the space and the trust that they need. Their track record, our knowledge of their work and experience of working alongside them makes it easier for us to guide clients over that leap of faith. A good example is the Chapel Royal at Hampton Court where a creaking beam led us to suspect that something was seriously amiss beneath the Royal Pew. Despite panelling remaining in place, we persuaded the client and English Heritage to allow Ward & Co to dismantle a major part of one of the world's most important Baroque interiors. Thanks to them pooling their immense knowledge with us and other experts, we shared the problem and found the solution. Here, as in so many other cases, we guided the client to give the specialists the space they needed, and to concentrate on the qualitative outcomes rather than simply the cost.



The neglected Georgian Royal Kitchens at Kew Palace, originally designed by William Kent

The Kitchens revealed again as they would have been in 1789



Conservation v. restoration? No contest!

At times we have worked with people and organisations whose first instinct is to replace materials where there has been failure. More responsible individuals, like all professional conservators, will go to the ends of the earth to conserve, as would we. Professional conservators are our natural partners and we love being on the boards and scaffolds with them. As architects we are utterly dependent upon them not only for

the delivery of our projects but also our own professional development, and we would not want to work any other way.

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