

Professional conservators in practice: an introduction to the conservation of air and land transport collections

Chris Knapp

Question and answer session

John Ashton: How long has the course been going?

Chris Knapp: We're going into the fourth year this year. I've just got authority to start a second course where we'll start demonstrating hands on skills.

Question unknown

Chris Knapp: No, because what we have found is that most museums cannot, or will not, let their staff go that long. What we have got up and ready to run, as soon as we can get a museum director to agree to it, is a similar course cutting out a lot of the conservation techniques and aimed at museum professionals from non-traditional disciplines, such as commercial fundraising, business development, finance, admin, so that they can see why we do things, how we operate. We actually had a lady take a place on the course last year from our commercial development department because we had somebody drop out at the last minute, and she said that it's come as such a shock to her, and an eye-opener and now when she's selling the museum she knows more about what she's actually selling. So we're looking at ways to develop that way, but for this particular course no, no plans to lengthen it.

Dave Lee: What's the cost for your course?

Chris Knapp: Seven hundred pounds for the week, and that's fully inclusive – that's lectures, accommodation, food – the only thing you buy is your drink. I will point out, actually, that the college is a beautiful place – if you look from the front door you cannot actually see civilization – you can't even see the lights from the car park. You've still got all the stuffed animal heads, carpets piled up to your knees, very historic surroundings to actually work in. One reason we like it there is because it is so historic, it keeps the students working, all the time they're thinking about it.

Alison Wain: Given that people who actually train as conservators spend three or four years doing it, what do you think is the difference between the outcome from that and from your one week course – is there a difference, do you need follow up courses?

Chris Knapp: In the ideal world yes, we would have follow up courses. We're not trying to teach conservation skills, we're just trying to make engineers think differently, so they come at it from another angle, so they look at their problems differently. The knock on effect – it's saved me as a manager a fortune on my budget for materials and time, because they are now stabilising rather than over restoring. I found it quite amusing this morning listening to the Memorial's Director talking about the cost of conservation – conservation is actually cheaper than restoration and shiny objects.

David Hallam: Would you think about doing a similar course for conservators talking about how conservators should interact with engineers? Because that is something I think is desperately needed.

Chris Knapp: I'm open to suggestions on anything as long as it's legal and moral! I have been asked if we can come up with something similar for curators, so they understand where conservators are coming from, so yes – any suggestions will be gratefully received and when I get back I will be down in the college shortly and it's something we will look into.

David Hallam: I just think that quite often conservators tend to take the high ground and say no to everything, but one of the things that they really don't understand is the tradition and science of engineering.

Chris Knapp: Yep – I would agree with that. One of the universities in the UK was going to start a master's course for industrial conservators, and they were going to take conservators – or someone with a first degree in conservation, heritage, tourism, or museum studies, and in twenty four weeks turn them into an engineer, to restore any object of an industrial nature. We don't talk any more actually – I was quite blunt when I told them they were going to be making a big mistake - and they won't come near me any more. I'm afraid I'm very good on the Anglo-Saxon, especially when people rile me, and that is one thing that drove me to getting this going with the other college, so we could come at the same problem from a totally different angle.

David Hallam: We'd like to talk with you.

Chris Knapp: Yep, no problem.

Colin Ogilvie: I'm the other half of the staff at the NMA. I'm the engineering side actually. Under the two conservators I'm the engineer who has to do all the lowly work. The biggest problem I've had in the eighteen years I worked at the museum is the first fifteen - they let me run free. The last three I've had to work under conservators - it's been the best three of my life. The reason being – because I've learnt, they've learnt, we've had an interchange. And I think this interchange is what any teaching institution should be looking at.

Chris Knapp: I would agree with that. One thing, the lady from the Royal Armouries – Sue – she was very well received because she was learning as much from the students as they were from her and they were feeding off that and they got a very good rapport going. And anyone who says they know everything is really setting themselves up for a fall.