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Papers Given at the
2003 AGM at Manchester Museum

***“No Pain, No Gain?
Renaissance & Removals”***
7 — 8 April 2003

Changes in Conservation - Experiences at Manchester & Within The UK
Velson Horie, Keeper of Conservation, Manchester Museum

I was pleased to be the first speaker to congratulate NatSCA on its birth. I was present in the early days of NSCG. Rebirthing is a fashionable way to ease transition through change.

It is not a coincidence that many organisations are going through major transformations. The aftershocks of the changes initiated by Mrs. Thatcher are shaking existing relationships and structures. You may have heard that the University of Manchester and UMIST are due to merge because each on its own is too small to compete with the big players of the international university league. Small is no longer beautiful. Small means that you do not have expertise in depth or spare resources to take major risks. Big means that you have robust structures and solidity in place that government and business understands. Small means that you are likely to decline or be gobbled up.

Getting our standards right

Special interest conservation organisations proliferated in recent decades. An increase in expertise produces specialists who band together in specialist bodies. These were kept separate by the need to have the boundaries acknowledged, fig.1. All sorts of boundaries were drawn: between types of object worked on (furniture vs. paper); approach to the object (care of collection vs. treatment); national boundary (UK vs. national). The specialised group can be rewarding, giving mutual support, easy interaction and rapid development of one's competence. Unfortunately, it can also become inward looking and cut off from outside influences.

The rise in expertise leads to a rise in standards. Not so long ago, identifying practitioners with high standards was easy. You asked around a few colleagues and one or two names would emerge. This does not work any more. First because the field is bigger and there are many more good people around who may not be known by the colleagues you asked. Second at least in the public sector, the processes of selection must be open, transparent and auditable. Word of mouth does not count.

So accreditation was born, initially to ensure that every member of the club was up to speed and could be trusted by the peer group. Now, accreditation is widely used externally as a quality check by the public on the competence of practitioners. At that point, the public start asking what the accreditation is worth. In many fields, accreditation has become a necessary entry ticket to employment. So the practitioners start asking if it is worth the entry price.

Accreditation done properly isn't cheap, fig. 2. To achieve this requires resources, partly money but mostly a self-sustaining group of able people with time on their hands, committed to raising standards.

That brings us back to conservation. Within NCCR, there are 6 bodies with accreditation schemes: BAPCR, BAFRA, BHI and UKIC/IPC/SoA. The amount of duplication of effort is enormous. It costs money and the number of people willing and able to do the job is small. The contingency costs of running parallel schemes are significant. It sucks up the energies of activists and focuses them inward. It reduces the flexibility of organisations to respond to outside events. Some bodies such as SSCR decided not to participate because of the potential distortion of their aims.

This is recognised and a Common Accreditation Framework is being developed to subsume all the schemes. Its implementation will make it much easier for the public and commissioning bodies to define what a competent conservator-restorer is. The acceptance of a professional status in conservation is one of the major changes in recent years.

Looking outwards

There is a common theme across all the papers. There is a real tension between the need to make any organisation operate cost-effectively internally and the increasing external demands on the organisation to be responsive.

If Resource or the Scottish Assembly or the BBC or the owner of a broken teapot wants to find a conservator for a fast response, where do they look? At the moment, there is no authoritative source of information. How should the heritage sector respond to government initiatives? The clever bit of lobbying is to ensure that conservation is sufficiently trusted for its suggestions are used as a basis for initiatives. We have seen that trend in education in museums. Reports from museums have inspired the museum community and government to make a significant shift in emphasis on the role of museums towards education and access.

At the moment the conservation organisations in the UK respond to their members reasonably well. But relations with the outside world are dysfunctional. No one can get a coherent answer.

The Conservation Forum, now NCCR, was created in 1994 to tackle these problems. But the world has changed faster than the conservation community. So now we have to play catch-up again.

A year ago, NCCR decided to look at methods to form a new single unified body to represent conservation interests. NCCR is now made up of 12 bodies with a common purpose to move towards a unified body.

After much discussion, it has been agreed to merge a number of organisations to form a new one with the following aims. What follows is work in progress. The strategy is clear but the details of implementation are still being worked out.

New single unified body for conservation-restoration

- ! To promote the care, understanding and enjoyment of the heritage.
- ! To set the standards required for conservation-restoration.
- ! To provide a unified voice for the conservation-restoration profession.
- ! To respond to the needs of the public, clients and other stakeholders.
- ! To respond to the needs of our members and related professionals

It intends to be recognised as the leader in the sector, independent in promoting all aspects of conservation-restoration of the moveable heritage. In the longer term, it hopes to receive chartered status.

In order to remove layers of bureaucracy, the new body will be a membership body composed of the current members of existing NCCR organisations. It will continue to provide comparable services to its members such as conferences, publications, special interest groups etc. There are many economies of scale. Discussions are underway to merge the peer review publications of UKIC and IPC in the coming months, perhaps leading to a joint journal issue from next year. There will be more effective membership services available such as subscriptions and accreditation and office backup will be much more efficient. Coordinated fund-raising and marketing will also start.

All this efficiency will free up resources to look outwards, to lobby effectively, to take (not just respond to) initiatives. We have seen how much more effective the Museums Association has become by concentrating on its core activities and putting effort into the public debate.

When - How will this happen?

With a following wind, the new organisation will be created in September 2004. It takes time to get the Charity Commissioners, AGMs, EGMs etc lined up. The process of convergence is costly in time of the leaders of the organisation. It has been estimated that their contribution to date is equivalent to £150,000. In addition, the financial costs of changing membership structures, such as getting lawyers to rejig the constitutions, have to be borne. The pace of convergence is determined in part by the limited resources available.

During the transition period, subscriptions will be at a level to achieve the same level of income from each member on average for the organisation as in the previous bodies. Membership services will continue at a similar level.

Different bodies are at different stages of convergence, which will not happen all at once. At present, four bodies are in a position to commit themselves to merging. Some bodies are slowly coming round to the idea. Some have particular difficulties - such as the Irish bodies that will need special solutions.

The hybrid bodies such as the Society of Archivists and NatSCA are currently constituent bodies of NCCR and their role in the new organisation is under discussion. A model that seems to work well is the Museums Association. The MA manages the professional services and umbrella lobbying for the museums field, while bodies such as Gem and NatSCA deal with special interest activities and act as expert witnesses to the MA. It is usual to have two memberships, one of the specialist group covering the area of particular interest, and one of the MA, which provides the professional and external services.

About half the members of NCCR bodies are in the private sector. An important but difficult to get at sector is the private clients. A larger organisation will be able to target and have clout with these clients.

The future

UK conservation practitioners are widely respected in Europe and the rest of the world, but for years, our lack of a coherent professional structure prevented us from taking part in the European initiatives such as ECCO. Now Ylva Player-Dansjo of the SSCR is President of ECCO. We look forward to shifting the emphasis away from the Napoleonic model. This is all part of looking outwards and engaging in wider issues.

When all the conservators have joined the new organisation, there will be ca 4,000 members. Although a considerable achievement, this is still small beer as a lobbying group. The need to build partnerships and alliances will grow because other bodies in society are also getting better at influencing the public and politicians. There will have to be greater integration between the organisations representing conservation and rest of the heritage world.

The purpose of the new organisation is to make conservation count. We need your support in making this happen.