

# News in Conservation



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## The exile of a library – what happened to the Timbuktu manuscripts?



**TIMBUKTU** - In 2012, threatened by fundamentalist rebels advancing on the city of Timbuktu, a team of brave archivists, librarians, couriers evacuated an irreplaceable trove of manuscripts from the city's library, at great personal risk ([News in Conservation, issue 34, February 2013](#)).

The collection of books was held at the Ahmed Baba Institute of Higher Studies and Islamic Research, until last year a haven for scholars drawn by the city's unparalleled collection of medieval manuscripts.

Historically, the city of Timbuktu occupied an important place at the centre of a vibrant trans-Saharan trading network, where traded goods included manuscripts covering subjects as diverse as science, religion and art. These manuscripts, often written in striking calligraphy, were passed down through generations of

### **IIC Student & Emerging Conservator Conference announced -**

See details and location in the IIC News section on page 16

### **CSI: South East Museums –**

Ruth Stevens on setting up a team of project conservators in the UK  
Read the feature on page 7

### **Genetic-based approach to achieve higher durability for stone repairs –**

Aurélie Isebaert and Laurent Van Parys talk about their research on stone repairs. Full feature on page 10

### **IIC Reviews –**

The first installment on French conservation periodicals and journals  
Read it on page 20

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# CSI: South East Museums – a new team of regional conservators

by Ruth Stevens

*'...It is apparent that conservation of collections, particularly remedial conservation, is one of the areas of greatest needs.'* This was the finding of the Museums Groups Committees and Development Officers in the South East, UK, that prompted the Sussex Museums Group (SMG) to apply for Arts Council England (ACE) funding in 2012.



**Left Image:**  
Ruth Stevens working on a book



**Right Image:**  
Frederic Carver of the Battle Museum and Mariluz Beltran de Guevara with the Will in an archival box and mount

ACE is the lead body charged with developing museums and libraries that took over responsibilities from the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) in October 2011 with the remit of '...championing, developing and investing in museums and libraries so that people's lives can be shaped and enriched by artistic and cultural experiences and knowledge.'

With a long-term vision in mind, ACE funded a pilot project to assess the exact conservation needs of museums in Surrey, Sussex, Kent and Medway, a region with over 170 museums, galleries and private collections. The aim being to deliver precisely what the region needs for conservation in the long term. The practical part of the scheme began with a call for a consortium of conservators to deliver the project.

The collaboration was a necessity, considering the large regional area and the diversity of the collections within it. Five conservators including myself were engaged under the umbrella *CSI: South East Museums*; between us we covered a wide range of conservation disciplines from ceramics, stone, glass, archaeology, metals, ethnography and social history to preservation, books and archives. The conservators were split into two regional teams and worked both independently and collaboratively, with the added flexibility of calling-in outside conservation expertise where it was required.

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As timescale is always a consideration, the project was given 6 months from start to completion and was required to start immediately. It was therefore imperative that we worked quickly, efficiently and with an eagle-like focus.

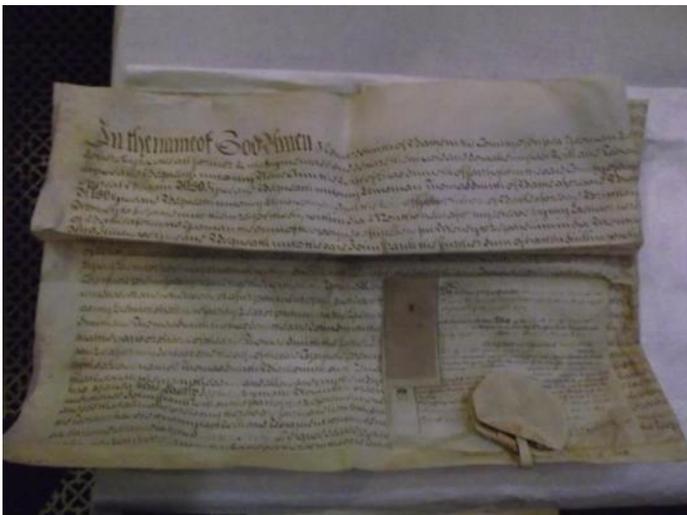
Logistically the task was complicated and we were helped by the SMG steering group who gave us the right focus at the right time but were gracious enough to let us get on with the job at hand. The project fell into three phases:

**Phase 1** – to engage with museums (road shows, phone calls, visits, surveys etc.),

**Phase 2** – to assess needs and deliver conservation and advice where appropriate (assessment visits, case studies, engage conservators, training events),

**Phase 3** – to analyse surveys, set up legacy resources and deliver the final report.

Working in the museum heritage sector is challenging on a number of levels. The sheer quantity of different materials and media stored and displayed together is in itself a difficult situation to manage; storage space is an issue, and so is the lack of available museum resources in terms of staff (paid and volunteer) and expertise. Many smaller museums are all volunteer-run, have a restricted budget (if any) for conservation work and find it difficult to prioritise work, which is understandable considering the challenging collections they hold and their variety.



**Parchment Will, unfolded after some gentle humidification**

The accreditation scheme for museums, administered by ACE, provides, among other things, a framework for Collection Care policies and plans. However, maintaining the accreditation status for a museum requires time and energy even considering the support of a committed team of ACE Museum Development Officers. All in all, museum staff and volunteers, spend a lot of their time managing the day-to-day activities required to run their museums, regardless of size and complexity, so it is no wonder that conservation can be regarded as a luxury. Indeed, their workload (especially over Christmas – a busy time for some museums) precluded many from even participating in the project, as they could not find time to fill in the initial survey we needed to assess their needs. Those that did, however, had the opportunity to have free conservation work done as part of the project. This was enthusiastically embraced as even small conservation projects could be beyond the means of some museums.

Despite practical conservation not being the main focus of the project, we were keen to engage with museums on this level, to show what can be done. We also wanted to dispel myths and pre-conceptions about conservators being difficult to approach, which had been suggested in the project brief.

In the Surrey and Sussex region alone we were able to conserve 18 items (including some small collections of objects), visited and produced 12 condition assessments of collections, made three preservation assessment visits and provided one multi-disciplinary training day for museum staff and volunteers.

One intervention, which would not have been attempted without project funding, referred to an object brought to the Hastings road show in a box by Battle Museum volunteer Frederic Carver. The folded document within the box was a parchment Will written in iron gall ink with a pendant seal, laminated between paper sheets and a smaller document attached. This smaller document has an embossed seal on paper that is adhered to the top left corner and a small metal plate going through the paper seal and the parchment. Frederic brought the Will to the road show for advice. It was folded and the folds very stiff, so it was not possible to read, or interpret it properly.



Details of the seal before and after conservation

A specialist parchment conservator was asked to devise a treatment for the will, so it could be displayed and stored flat. She also undertook some conservation and consolidation of the pendant seal, which had begun to degrade in the box due to the lack of support.

A display box was made out of archival grey card, using Plastazote® as a support frame. The will can now be stored flat in its box and displayed in its frame without putting any of its elements under any undue strain.

The project was completed in April 2013 and will provide the evidence for further funding applications to ACE.

A successful framework and model for working has now been established to support museums in the South East as and when more funding becomes available. The legacies of the project include the setting up of a conservation material bank for museums to use for conservation work and resource lists of conservation expertise in the region.

The final report calls for a more 'collaborative approach to Collection Care' in the region, with infrastructure put into place for its maintenance.

This project will hopefully mark a renewal of a much closer relationship between museums and the conservation profession. The new raised awareness of conservation provided by this project is an ideal starting point to make a real difference to our regional collections.

The final report will be posted in due course on the CSI: South East museums' blog site: <http://csisoutheastmuseums.wordpress.com/>

### Acknowledgements

The CSI: South East Museums team are: Dana Goodburn-Brown ACR (team leader for Kent & Medway, archaeology, ethnography and metals), Ruth Stevens ACR (team leader for Surrey & Sussex, book and paper), Alice Blears (stone, ceramic and glass), Ian Watson (book and paper, preservation) and Jihyun Kwon (HLF intern with CSI: Sittingbourne, ethnography and social history).

Thanks to Mariluz Beltran de Guevara ACR and Frederic Carver of Battle Museum.



**Ruth Stevens** is an accredited book and paper conservator working in the UK as co-director of the Sussex Conservation Consortium with fellow conservator Ian Watson. She worked at the British Library for 6 years and trained at West Dean College, UK.

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