

Conservation project

18th century wool sample books

The records of Bull versus Jesser (C 104/3) contain letters and documents about the dyeing and clothier business of the Whitchurch family of Frome, Somerset, dating from 1724 to 1736. The documents include six dye recipe books with colour samples.



A rare resource

Besides being fascinating visual documents, the wool sample books are a source of extraordinary value for textile, social and industrial historians.

Recipe books like these were a day-to-day working tool in a dyeing factory. Once out of use, they hardly ever survived. The wool sample books are thus a rare source of original dye recipes and matching samples.

They are also exceptional in the reliability of the sample colour, as they have not been exposed to light for over 250 years. Dye and fibre analysis will provide linked databases of both recipes and spectra.

The books and their associated documents will provide historians with detailed information about the wool industry in Somerset and related topics such as sheep farming and the production and import of dyeing ingredients. They are a potentially valuable resource in understanding the social history of Somerset, a noted centre of the wool industry at the time.

True-colour digitisation and transcription of the text will provide essential research tools for historians and scientists.

Conservation challenges and treatments

Access to these books has been limited due to their poor physical condition. Although hardly ever touched during the last 280 years, their condition has greatly deteriorated following heavy usage in the dyeing factories and subsequent poor housing.

A degree of iron gall ink degradation and serious damage has resulted from the unwieldy structure of the books themselves. The weight and bulk of the wool samples

has led to distortion of the leaves, preventing the books from closing properly. The volumes are consequently wedge-shaped and thus vulnerable to dust.

The marked distortion of the volumes made it difficult to use common methods of flattening while introducing moisture. However, in-situ treatments have led to a satisfactory result. Treatments include mechanical surface cleaning, dry flattening, gelatine-based mending of tears and appropriate re-attaching and housing of the wool samples in consultation with textile experts at the Textile Conservation Centre, University of Southampton.

Monitoring and re-housing

To ensure the long-term chemical stability of the wool sample books, we will put in place a monitoring system to document the state of the iron gall ink and the wool samples, and any changes over time. Specially designed boxes will keep the books in their new conformation.