The Herbert Read Collection (Church Architecture)

The Herbert Read Collection:
The obituary in The Times to Herbert Read, who died in 1950, told of his skill and care in looking after ancient woodwork and his ability to design beautiful new work for churches, not only in the West Country but throughout the Kingdom. The styles of brocade painted on walls in the 1590’s in Prague and the eccentricities of the designs of Cram and Goodhue in New York were as familiar to the Company as the styles of carving on a Devon rood screen. It was Herbert Read’s father, also Herbert, who started the business after leaving the famous Exeter carver Harry Hems in 1888 to set up his own business, St. Sidwell’s Artworks.

The founder’s grandson, Dick showed the same talent as a designer and ensured the Company’s survival after the Second World War by working for many American churches. His greatest task was to design and make all the important woodwork in Washington Cathedral. During this period the Company worked almost continuously on this one great building. In 1972 Dick Read died in a boating accident.

Hugh Harrison had joined the firm eighteen months earlier. He inherited the difficult task of adapting a tradition of the finest woodwork and carving to the increasing importance and demands of conservation. The early 70’s brought a new approach to the preservation of ancient objects and buildings. Many conservation techniques developed in national museums were becoming recognised as the relevant standard. Herbert Read then employed almost as many conservators as carvers and joiners, with the same support and interaction between the disciplines as existed between the traditional trades in the past. Examples of their work can be seen all over Devon as well as Hampton Court Palace, The House of Lords, a colonnade from the Taj Mahal and churches in three continents.

The company specialized in ecclesiastical woodcarving, although they also accepted commissions for private houses and other buildings. The St. Sidwell’s Artworks workshop was in Sidwell Street, Exeter, and was destroyed in the Exeter Blitz in May 1942. Although a large quantity of correspondence and other records was lost, the drawings were kept elsewhere and were later discovered and moved to safety. Their survival preserves an important link in the record of ecclesiastical building and furnishing in Devon, encompassing both late Victorian church construction and restoration and twentieth century re-ordering and conservation projects.

An opportunity to purchase the drawings presented itself in 2006, and the Record Office was assisted in doing this by the Friends of Devon’s Archives, the Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund, the Friends of the National Libraries and descendants of the Read family.

Target Audience
* The whole community of Devon and interested national and international groups.
* All those interested in church architecture and craftsmanship including designers, craftsmen – (stonemasons, woodcarvers, workers in metal and glass), architects.
* Historians and local interest groups i.e. congregations, ‘friends’ groups.
* Those who appreciate 19th/20th century design locally, nationally and internationally.
**Aim**

To Save the Collection: The collection of drawings (numbering some 3500), photographic prints & negatives and administrative documents were saved after the business closed and were kept in a makeshift plan chest (feeding trough) in a garage/barn. The documents arrived at the Devon Record Office in a collection of rough boxes and bundles, dirty and damaged, not in a fit state either for cataloguing or presentation to the public, hence the urgent need for preservation and packaging treatments soon after arrival.

The ‘Herbert Read’ Family and Staff: The business had not been completely out of public eye since closure and a group of people consisting of the family, the guardian/saviour of the collection and others who had worked for the company or knew of it, all had a strong interest in the recovery and promotion of the collection. The Devon Record Office accepting this collection seemed to be the best solution to answer this dilemma, and would offer security, preservation and access in the county for local research and provide ease of access to the catalogue further afield.

John Draisey, the county archivist, was able to acquire the collection, which secured the collection and enabled the project to go ahead.

NADFAS Involvement: Around the arrival time of the collection, the Devon Record Office conservation staff were to start a major project to clean and conserve the county’s tithe maps in readiness for digitisation; therefore their time was limited for this incoming collection. Fortuitously, just at this time the volunteer officer of Sidmouth NADFAS (SIDFAS) contacted Deborah Phillips, the conservator, to offer the services of a small team of Heritage Volunteers, members of SIDFAS with a particular interest in having a “hands on” role in the preservation of decorative arts. The Herbert Read collection seemed ideal as the work required would be well within the abilities of committed people with some training and overseen by professional conservators. NADFAS as an organisation is particularly interested in decorative arts relating to churches and their volunteers were knowledgeable and very keen to help and take part by committing regular time in preserving and making accessible this local collection.

NADFAS: the aim “The Association shall have as its objects the promotion and advancement of the aesthetic education of the public, the cultivation, appreciation and study of the decorative and fine arts, and the giving of aid to the preservation of our national artistic heritage for the benefit of the public”.

**Process**

Consultation & Evaluation: As soon as the collection arrived informal meetings of Devon Record Office staff took place to evaluate and decide on the short and medium term future of the collection. As with all new accessions it was inspected for damp/mould and insects and isolated until it was deemed stable enough to be temporarily stored on box shelving in one of our strongrooms. The timely involvement of NADFAS and a grant from Devon County Council Culture to “back fill” a post to allow a member of Devon Record Office staff to dedicate three months to cataloguing the Devon drawings meant the project could begin almost immediately.

Shortly after the arrival of the collection, the Read family (Mrs Joan Michelmore) and past employees of the company were invited to see the archive and comment on their survival and provide us with an insight into the context of the documents and life of the business. The depositor, Mr Hugh Harrison had been an employee and had rescued and stored the collection after the business closed.
Resources: The collection was considered important enough to arrange for the cataloguing process to begin using an experienced member of Devon Record Office staff (Eliza Newton, archivist) by back filling her post with a short contract. NADFAS contacted us to offer the services of the Sidmouth Branch Heritage Volunteers (know as SIDFAS) who wish to contribute to Arts & Heritage in a variety of ways and as a result of recent talks to them, from Devon Record Office staff, they knew there was a willingness to collaborate on a project. Knowing NADFAS like to work on projects with a recognisable personality/owner of a collection and a strong local focus rather than a general theme, this collection seemed ideal.

Materials for the preservation work were taken out of general stock. Later, money was set aside specifically for the needs of this project for the purchase of specific qualities and sizes.

Significantly for these drawings the office had recently installed purpose built flat storage, enabling these documents to be stored to the British Standard, once they are complete.

Processes: We corresponded with NADFAS officials from the Sidmouth branch and a meeting and inspection of the workroom took place. They were very satisfied with what we had to offer and a letter of confirmation from their officers allowed us to begin. A timetable of volunteer days (10am to 4.30pm) was negotiated with two teams of two volunteers per month, an arrangement which suited them, this timetable developed as time went on as more people showed a desire to join in. We asked them to fall in with our regime for volunteers to only work on a Tuesday, which allows the regular staff the rest of the week to concentrate on core work. We have a volunteer policy and induction form that we ask volunteers to sign up to. We record general progress and reasons for leaving projects, such as going on to further education. Each new volunteer has an induction process pointing out office Health and Safety practices, emergency evacuation and the use of personal safety equipment such as, lab. coats, masks and gloves. Record Office staff, conservation and archive staff were available to train, and help in practical ways the smooth running of the day to day work on the drawings and comfort of our guest volunteers.

Reflection: I would like to think that this project was charmed. The collection was rescued, bought, housed in a secure publicly accessible institution (DRO), attracted existing and new dedicated local people, the resources were found and applied with all the cooperation and good heart you could wish for in a remarkably short space of time. This collection is something of an oddity, in that the bulk of the material might be described as works of art on paper, but despite this, it would not have been appropriate for it to be kept in either a museum or art gallery. A good third of the collection is administrative papers and quantities of photographic material that back up the drawings and put them into their business, purpose and artistic context. If anything makes this project different or unique perhaps this does. It is occasionally a dilemma for cultural institutions to be certain that the collections they accept are appropriate to their remit. Many collections are not clearly defined and although not strictly manuscript documents, this collection has found its true home.

Number of participants
* As listed above, staff and volunteers number 16.
* Visitors have included members of the Read family: Mrs Joan Michelmore, sister of Dick (Herbert) Read the last family owner. Her sister Anne and her nephew Peter Michelmore who contributed financially towards the purchase.
* Research requests number 6 to date, although the collection is not launched or publicised to the public yet, we believe the requests have arisen from a mention in our regular newsletter. Interested researchers have heard on the grapevine that they may be able to request some of the drawings. These early requests have come from academics, those with a previous knowledge of the collection and a French student, among others. A strong hint at how popular these drawings are likely to be.

* Numerous visitors and groups touring the record office have had this collection pointed out to them and explained, to great interest.

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Impact: This project will have a continuing impact on the community and those involved in the restoration of church architecture as it will be a resource for study and I am sure, as yet undiscovered areas, where church fabric design is an interest. Although many of our churches have reduced congregations of worshippers, some of these buildings are being reinvented as places for wider social gathering or being preserved in their own right as important historic sites by groups unrelated to the church authorities. I believe this collection, once it has been officially launched, will have a continuing and developing importance.

Impact and outcome

* To those who have worked on this collection I think there will be an enduring affection and interest, not least, research into their own local churches, which will itself spread the word.

* The collection will be fully listed and accessible to the public who visit the Devon Record Office and there will be outreach events and publicity to broadcast and encourage awareness of the glories of this collection.

* I am certain that the partner organisations will feel their support and financial help has been wisely invested and will offer similar help to new projects should they arise.

Evaluation

* "Is there anything that didn't go as expected, or that you could have avoided?"

I don’t think there was anything that happened unexpectedly.

Experience from other projects, where we have had to work within our means and do our best with the resources available, showed us that if you ensure that momentum and good humour is maintained, the ultimate goal of finishing a project efficiently and thoroughly is very achievable. Archives are very much in the ‘tortoise’ rather than ‘hare’ model, but can frequently win where time constrained projects can be hurried and unsatisfactory. There were occasions where materials ran out for short periods or machinery needed servicing, but there were a variety of tasks where, if the volunteers couldn’t work on one process they went on to another. All the volunteers showed great flexibility and understanding.

* "Is there anything that helped you achieve your goal?"

The generous cooperation of everyone involved.

Three of our volunteers have offered thoughts on the project and a NADFAS newsletter article:

SIDFAS (Sidmouth, Devon)/NADFAS Volunteer, Madeleine Pickthorne: “Working as a volunteer on the Herbert Read Collection has had many benefits for me, some obvious, some unexpected.

Primarily, I have the satisfaction of knowing that, because of our efforts, a drawing collection, important at international, national and local level, has been conserved for the future and is now in a state that can be made accessible to the public.

In order to work on the collection, I had to learn from scratch the appropriate conservation techniques. These new skills turned out to be a form of CPD for my professional work as a
Landscape Designer in that I am now able to properly conserve my own drawing archive. Coincidentally I was asked in a voluntary capacity to provide material for Parks and Gardens Data Services website (www.parksandgardens.ac.uk) on the „Restoration of Hestercombe Gardens between 1973 and 1980“. The skills and support of the conservation studio enabled me to fulfil this request, a case of one form of voluntary work empowering another. Working in the supportive office environment of the conservation studio has had the unexpected benefit for me of healing wounds inflicted in more hostile office environments. At a personal level, the friendship of my fellow NADFAS volunteers and the staff of the conservation studio, plus the opportunity to interact with other volunteers (with a wide range of ages and backgrounds) has been a bonus I value highly. None of the above would have happened had it not been for the Herbert Read Project. “

NADFAS (SIDFAS) Volunteer, Lynn Hooper: “The project has furthered my interest in Art and Local History. I have much appreciated the chance to handle and study at close quarters the work of Herbert Read and his family. A major Devon craftsman whose work is to be found in so many unexpected places throughout Devon and overseas. “

“The Devon Record Office has provided friendly, enabling support. We have been shown simple cleaning & preservation techniques and have appreciated being made to feel part of a team. It has been a great privilege to see behind the scenes and learn of the skilful and painstaking work necessary to preserve our historical records and thereafter facilitate greater public access. The coffee & biscuits are good too!” “I have found it enriching to meet younger people at the beginning of their own careers, an opportunity often denied to one in retirement.” “As a keen amateur local historian, I am pleased to think that I have contributed towards the possibility of scholars and the general public being able to study Herbert Read”’s work in greater depth.”

NADFAS (SIDFAS) Volunteer, Diana Nason: “I really enjoy volunteering and find it rewarding to work on the Herbert Read Archive. It is a pleasure to work alongside professional conservators and learn some of their skills. The conservation studio is a calm and friendly environment to be in and I enjoy the company of those working there. Volunteering is of mutual benefit to all involved; the Record Office gains by having our assistance once we are trained; leaving them more time to concentrate on other conservation work: I benefit by being enabled to extend and widen my knowledge and skills, adding to all that I learnt doing my degree.”

“Volunteering in the Conservation studio is so rewarding, especially when recently a party of school children visited; the children were delighted to see a Herbert Read drawing of the pulpit in their local church, from which some of them were reading recently. That is something they can really identify with. We can see that when the work on this archive is complete how useful and interesting it will be to the local community and also to visitors, nationally and internationally.”

“It is really great to have the opportunity to volunteer in the Conservation room in the Devon Record Office. It is a great privilege to come into close contact to such important archives, to learn some of the skills involved and also see the work that the professional conservators carry out; they are always very willing to show us their work, and explain the problems encountered and how they are dealt with. It is so interesting and you learn a lot by just being there. I really enjoy being involved as a volunteer!”

A short article written early on in the project by Diana Nason for the Sidmouth NADFAS Newsletter No. 35 October 2007:

“These are designs mainly for church artefacts in stone and wood: notably crucifixes, crosses, candlesticks and screens. Read”’s work has featured in the records our Church Recorders have recently..."
Compiled and much of his work is in the west of England. Other projects were for churches in the USA and Australia. His designs were exquisitely drawn and are a pleasure to see. Future work will entail research into the correspondence of this long established family firm and the conservation of correspondence and other documents. Working in teams of two at present, and with the support of the professional staff, we visit on either the first or third Tuesday of each month. Our surroundings are very congenial and the work is enjoyable. Perhaps you would like to join us? You would be very welcome and new volunteers would allow us more flexibility in our timetable. Eric Hollingsworth will be pleased to hear from you if you are interested in joining our group and you would not be committed if you would like to give it a try first! Diana Nason.

**Tips**

The project has progressed very smoothly. It has taken three years, but although it may have been desirable to complete the project faster, the time has allowed all of us to complete the work thoroughly while other projects were being carried out in the office and to allow the financial budget to cover the costs in manageable sums rather than one large spend on materials. There have been times when I have had to halt volunteer visits for events or pressure from other work at DRO, but this has not dented the enthusiasm or commitment from our volunteers to resume their duties. The senior age of most of our volunteers meant that they could easily take part once a month which fits in with their busy retired lives. The interaction among the age groups benefited us all and tea breaks are lively and generate interest in other work related to Devon heritage such as Lucilla Phelps’ experience with her work as principal photographer at Sotheby's Auctioneers http://www.lucillaphelpsphotographer.com and Diana Nason’s interest in the 'Roses from the Heart' project http://www_rosesfromtheheart.com.au/ to remember women deportees with art installations involving embroidered bonnets.

So far it has been a thoroughly pleasant and productive experience enjoyed by everyone involved. I put this down to a shared aim and probably a rare lack of pressure from a financial or timetable point of view. Progress has been steady and the project will soon be finished.

We will be holding a thank you party for the Herbert Read volunteers which will include all our volunteers and supporters.

**Future development**

Once the preservation and cataloguing is complete, the collection will be fully available for research and it is expected that Devon Record Office will mount an exhibition that will tour the county at Record Offices, Museums and other public buildings. There will be local and national press releases and articles published in professional and community publications. Groups or individuals may wish to publish the material for special groups. The collection lends itself to academic and practical fields of interest.

**Project website:**

http://www.nationalcathedral.org/visit/onlineTours.shtml
http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1946&dat=19470621&id=PMkiAAAAIBAJ&sjid=n5gfAAAAIAIAJ&pg=5133,3811496
http://www.paigntonparishchurch.co.uk/the-church/short-history/

**Case study record created on:**
MLA funded: No

Institution: Devon Record Office

Key partners: Devon Record Office, Devon County Council, NADFAS (National Association of Decorative & Fine Arts Societies), Mr Hugh Harrison – Depositor, Friends of Devon’s Archives, The Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund, The Friends of the National Libraries, The descendents of the Read family.

Team members: NADFAS Volunteers: Lynn Hooper, Diana Nason, Madeleine Pickthorne, Brian Stephenson, Joyce Waterhouse, Lucilla Phelps, Shirley Rossiter, Devon Record Office Volunteers: Lauren Palmer, Lydia Stirling, Ann Draisey, Devon Record Office Staff: John Draisey (Development), Eliza Newton (Cataloguing), Deborah Phillips (Conservation), John Brunton (Storage), Katherine Weston (Outreach, Visitors & Publicity), Ian Ponsford and Rebecca Saunders (Volunteer training).

Start date: April 2007

End date: September 2010

Contact: Deborah Phillips, Senior Archive Conservator, Devon Record Office, 01392 384317

Alternative contact: John Draisey, County Archivist, Devon Record Office, 01392 384250

Domains: Archives
Sector developing role:
Liaison

Social outcomes:
Tourism
Raising participation
Local infrastructure & regeneration
Community empowerment & active citizenship
Learning & skills
Celebrating local identity
Community cohesion & inclusion

Geographical Coverage:
South West