

THE ZIBBY GARNETT TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP

Report by Kate Aughey



**Furniture Conservation
At Conservation Letterfrack, Ireland**

05 April – 19 April, 2014

Table of Contents

Introduction:	3
Study Trip.....	4
Financial Costs.....	5
Report:	
Destination.....	6
Surrounding Area.....	7
Conservation Letterfrack.....	10
The Project.....	10
Conclusions.....	14
 Appendix 1:	
Treatment report for conservation work undertaken during placement.	

Introduction

Name: Kate Joanne Aughey

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Nationality: British

I am a Postgraduate student currently in my second and final year at West Dean College, West Sussex, where I study the Conservation of Furniture and Related Objects. I am also working towards a Master's degree in Conservation Studies, which I hope to complete in the summer of 2015. At present, the scope of my study in the furniture department at West Dean is very general with all areas in the treatment of historic furniture undertaken. This includes working with metal ware such as locks and castors and decorative surfaces such as gilding.

Upon completion of the Postgraduate Diploma, in July 2014, I plan to seek work in a larger scale furniture conservation / restoration workshop in or around London. It is my hope that by working alongside established practitioners, dealing with a wide range of furniture, I can continue to build on the training I have received at West Dean. The treatment of decorative elements such as carving and marquetry are particular interests of mine and so I intend to pursue these areas and perhaps specialize in the future.

I recently completed work on one of a pair of 18th Century Italian gilt pier tables for The Wallace Collection, London. As a result of this project I will have the chance to undertake re-gilding work on the table during a short work placement at The Wallace Collection, and also to give a presentation about the piece. These are exciting opportunities, which I hope will allow me to make good contacts with other conservators in London and aid me in seeking my first job after college.

At some stage in my career I would like to work abroad and successful completion of the MA in Conservation Studies will help me in achieving this goal and perhaps allow me to pursue further academic research in the future.

I first heard about the Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship through an email from the academic office at West Dean College and sought out further information. I would not have been able to undertake this internship without the kind support of the Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship.

Study Trip



The Conservation Letterfrack workshop.

The study trip I proposed was a two-week work placement (5th -19th April 2014) at Conservation Letterfrack situated in Connemara National Park on the West coast of Ireland. It was my intention to experience how a larger scale commercial furniture workshop is run, the type and scope of projects undertaken and the range of skills expected of a qualified furniture conservator working in such an environment. Having met Sven Habermann, the workshop manager, during a visit to West Dean, I felt confident that his creative and enthusiastic approach to the treatment of furniture would enable me to learn a great deal during my stay. The appeal of Conservation Letterfrack as a suitable workplace for an internship, lay in the huge variety of work undertaken by the team who regularly work on site in a range of historic interiors all over Ireland as well carrying out more traditional restoration treatments in the workshop. Unusually, the workshop also takes on commissions to build wooden objects for a range of clients including museums, artists and most recently a casino.

Having never been to Ireland before, I was also keen to explore my surroundings and was able to do so during the weekends. Given the remote location of Letterfrack, I was glad of my decision to travel by car and made full use of it whilst driving North as far as Keel and South to The Cliffs of Moher.

Travelling by car entailed driving from my home town of Southampton to Liverpool where I caught the ferry to Dublin. From there a relatively straight forward route took me to the depths of Connemara and Letterfrack. The rugged beauty of Connemara and its surrounding coastline presented many sightseeing opportunities during my stay and the many places I visited included; Clifden, the Island of Inishbofin, Kylemore Abbey, Kinvarra, The Cliffs of Moher, the abandoned village of Slievemore Mountain, Keel, Diamond Hill and a host of other beaches and small villages strung out along the coast.

Financial Costs

The total cost of the trip was £671.09 with the majority of the budget allocated to transport costs. The Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship awarded £625 and additional funds were raised through a small contribution from my parents and earnings from a part time job as a luggage porter. The relatively high cost of living in Ireland was counteracted by self-catering all meals and bringing the majority of food needed by car from England.

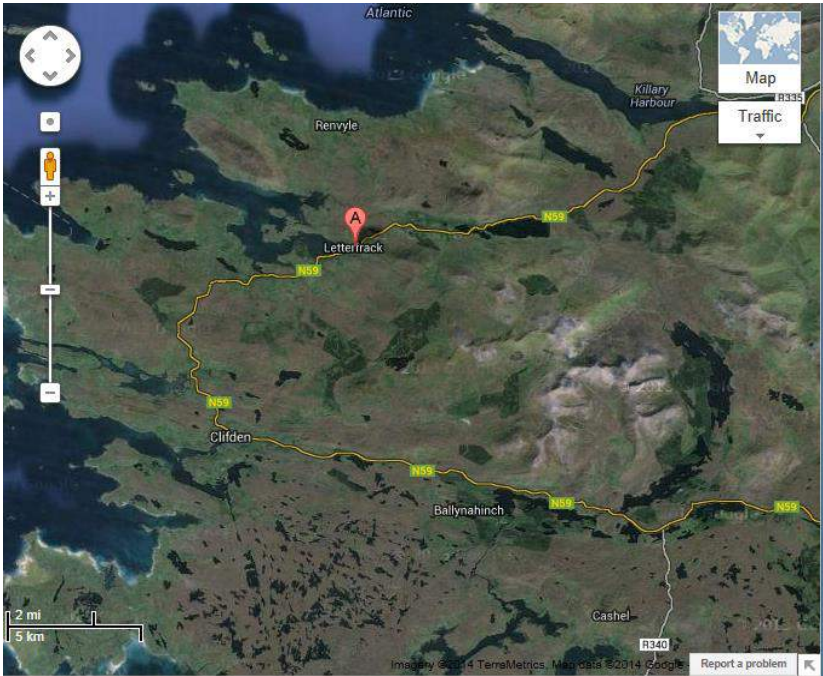
Report:

Destination



Lettertrack is situated North West of Galway on the West coast of Ireland.

<https://maps.google.co.uk/>



Satellite image demonstrating the remote landscape.

Ireland is a country with many rich cultural traditions that although familiar, have evolved as quite distinct from those of the UK. Craft based practices such as

furniture making are no exception and my own interest in vernacular furniture, and in particular Scottish and Irish pieces, provided an additional draw when considering possible internship locations.

Connemara, located in the centre of the West coast of Ireland, is an area of national park comprised largely of mountainous, heather clad peat lands and rugged coast. This remote and often inhospitable area of Ireland is well known for its natural beauty and retains a feeling of 'otherness' due to its sparse network of country roads, which dip and climb over large expanses of the county, connecting very few houses along the way.

Letterfrack itself is situated in the centre of the Connemara National Park, sitting on the coast, with the nearest town Clifden 15 kilometres away. Letterfrack has a population of around 192 with the Connemara West Technology College providing a large influx of 250 students during term time. Throughout Ireland, Letterfrack is still largely thought of in association with its dark past and the horrendous abuse suffered by boys attending the Letterfrack Industrial School for Boys from 1887 until its closure in 1974. Although a sinister time in the life of this unassuming village, the school cemetery memorial and annual events such as the sea and mussel festivals are enabling the community to rise above its upsetting past and celebrate all that Letterfrack has to offer today. It is this Industrial School that has become Connemara College with the site on which it stands housing the Conservation Letterfrack workshop.

Surrounding Area

With little time to spare outside of workshop hours, the majority of the sightseeing opportunities were restricted to two weekends. Having a car is vital in Connemara and the decision to travel via car ferry was immediately rewarded by the many incredible scenic sights witnessed on the first weekend. Driving north, along the coast, every twist in the road revealed beaches and coves quite distinct from each other in appearance and character. In particular, 'The Strand' just past Cleggan and the expansive sand flats of Omey Island provided great photo and beach combing opportunities.



'The Strand' at Cleggan.



Omev Island.

Other recreational highlights included a visit to Kylemore Abbey, the 19th century estate and former home of Mitchell Henry, which remains a working convent after many years as a boarding school for girls. As well as the Abbey's collection of relics and furniture, there are a miniature gothic church, mausoleum and impressive walled gardens to explore. Another fantastic day was spent on Inishbofin, a small island off the coast of Cleggan, which is home to a small population of islanders and a host of sheep and wildlife. My companion was Laura, my fellow intern at Conservation Letterfrack and it was a great opportunity to get to know her better and hear about her experiences as a conservation student in

Finland. The views alone were spectacular but the icing on the cake was the sighting of a wild dolphin from the ferry on the way back.

There were many more memorable moments throughout my stay in Ireland and keeping a daily diary will enable reflection many years from now. Everyone I encountered was extremely friendly and made me feel very welcome; the Irish charm and hospitality were evident everywhere. Every Thursday, a local fisherman comes to Letterfrack to sell fresh fish and seafood from the back of his van. After purchasing a haddock fillet for a euro the previous week, he gave me several pounds of prawns for just two Euros as that was all I had in change. I experienced this generosity throughout my stay and the seafood was the best I have tasted!



Kylemore Abbey, located 5 kilometres from Letterfrack



The east coast of Inishbofin Island.

Conservation Letterfrack

The Conservation Letterfrack workshop was formerly part of the Technology College where courses were run in the conservation of furniture. Dwindling interest from prospective students led to the closure of this course and Conservation Letterfrack was relocated to a purpose built workshop on the same site. Although now an entirely separate commercial venture, Conservation Letterfrack retains close links with the college utilising facilities such as the extensive library.

Sven Haberman, the workshop manager and former graduate of West Dean, employs a small staff of two restorer / conservators with an additional member of staff employed to undertake admin. There is also a self-employed textile conservator who rents a workspace on the mezzanine level and acts as a consultant for any textile elements present on the furniture, alongside her own practice. Conservation Letterfrack also runs an active internship scheme whereby interns from all over the world undertake placements of between three and eighteen months. Laura was completing a three-month internship during my stay, and other conservators are often called in for short-term contracts when a larger workforce is needed to complete a project.

Conservation Letterfrack is unusual in its capacity to undertake hugely diverse projects both in house and on sites all over Ireland. The enthusiastic and inventive approach of the team have earned them a reputation for being able to successfully complete large scale projects that other companies may shy away from. Other projects may include the restoration of objects for private clients, churches or museums and the making of bespoke furniture to commission. The diversity and high quality of work carried out by the Conservation Letterfrack team were the primary reason for its attraction as a potential internship location.

The Project

Prior to the internship at Conservation Letterfrack, I received an email from Sven Haberman, suggesting two possible objects for me to work on during my stay. The first, a wooden ark or chest from a church in Dublin, was in many pieces and

sounded too interventive to be completed in two weeks. The second was the skeleton of an extinct giant elk, native to Ireland and it was this project that excited me due to its unusual nature. I have a love of historic natural history collections and so this seemed the perfect opportunity to explore this interest.

Upon my arrival however, Sven informed me that he was awaiting advice from an expert on the correct positioning of the vertebrae and so the only treatment the elk could undergo would be cleaning with a cotton bud. Although disappointing, Sven was correct in his assertion that I could learn more through a different project altogether and so he laid down a challenge.

The project was to be the restoration of a 19th century rosewood x-frame stool, which was in a sorry state due to the inherent flaws in its original construction. Following the trend for classical forms in furniture, adopted in the late 18th and early 19th century, the design of these stools is reminiscent of Roman and ancient Egyptian examples. One pair of x-framed legs was detached entirely and the other had similarly undergone many unsuccessful restoration treatments in the past. The remnants of these treatments were visible in the form of various glues, fillers and brackets applied with screws. This presented an extremely daunting challenge as little woodworking skill prior to my acceptance onto the furniture course at West Dean meant that my experience of structural repairs is limited despite eighteen months of intensive training. Sven seemed to think this a reasonable undertaking within two weeks and gave me many tips and techniques for working at a pace acceptable in a commercial environment. As this was one of the areas I hoped to gain insight into, I threw myself into the project despite feeling under equipped in terms of skill!



The rosewood stool prior to restoration.

The proposed treatment of the stool brought up some interesting ethical dilemmas. In the purest sense of conservation, any treatment should be ideally reversible, without any lasting effects, or at the very least re-treatable without necessitating the removal of original material. The treatment brief required that the stool be structurally sound and safe for use after restoration and this meant that more extreme measures must be taken. In order to obtain good gluing surfaces, all interior faces of the halving joints had to be levelled and this was done with a router. In conservation, the use of epoxy-based glues is controversial due to its insoluble nature and enduring bond. This means that a barrier layer is usually applied to the wooden surfaces to allow the epoxy to be safely removed in the future. Since this would weaken the strength of the wood and epoxy bond, the decision was taken not to use a barrier layer in this case and in collaboration with Sven, I decided to embed laminated layers of thin aluminium sheet within the joint to further strengthen it.



A half assembled joint with the aluminium in situ.

The loss of material due to multiple breakages in the joints and former restoration attempts meant that there were many gaps, which required filling with new wood. As rosewood is endangered and therefore CITES listed, Indian padouk was chosen for the replacements due its similarity in grain and the ease with which it can be coloured to imitate rosewood. This is not something I had considered using before but will certainly bear padouk in mind if I encounter a similar situation. Once adhered, also with epoxy, these new sections could be carved to match the surrounding area.





At the end of the two week internship, the x-frame stool was almost complete with some small areas of carving still to tidy up and colouring work to blend in repairs. This could realistically have been completed if I had one more week at my disposal. For more detailed treatment information, please see appendix 1 for the treatment report in full.

Conclusions

Although I was not able to complete the project during my internship, I gained a great deal from the experience. In particular, I learnt to trust my judgement and have faith in my abilities as I was able to learn skills quickly, such as using the router, and also to research treatment options when I wasn't sure of the most effective approach. Taking on a project so far out of my comfort zone was a risk but by embracing the challenge and asking lots of questions, I was able to complete my work to the satisfaction of Sven, my mentor.

In a career such as furniture conservation, the learning curve is steep and constant and so it is very difficult to gauge your progress as a student, without experiencing conservation work in the 'real world'. It was this desire to gain experience of work in a commercial workshop that led me to apply for the internship initially and the trip was everything I could have hoped for a more. I saw that it is necessary to be flexible in your approach and weigh up ethical considerations on a case by case basis. I also witnessed the diverse nature of the work undertaken by the team at Conservation Letterfrack and was told that this is vital if the business is to survive.

The large scale contracts requiring unconventional approaches, bring in the majority of their revenue and maintain the profile of the company as one who will deliver high quality results. The techniques I learnt, including one for the speedy disassembling of animal glue joints, were extremely valuable and in many cases allowed me to quicken the pace of my work considerably without compromising on results.

Overall, the two week internship was both professionally and personally rewarding. The team I worked alongside were warm and generous with a collectively riotous sense of humour that made me feel very welcome. I found myself to be more capable than I had realised and will carry this new confidence with me when applying for jobs in the future. It is my hope that I will find work within an environment similar to that in Letterfrack and continue to learn and develop as a successful conservator.

Appendix 1:

Treatment report for conservation work undertaken during placement.