Jonathan Ashley-Smith: mentor, role model, and inspiration.

David Howell ACR

Jonathan Ashley-Smith has been such a prominent player in the field of conservation that he has had an impact on many people's careers. He has certainly been an inspiration for this author who presents a personal overview of the many ways in which Ashley-Smith helped steer my path.

My first meeting with Jonathan was terrifying; a tall man with long hair, an earring and wearing motorcycle leathers, but at the same time holding one of the most senior posts in the UK conservation profession. Almost exactly ten years my senior, Jonathan was appointed as Head of Conservation at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) at a relatively young age of 31, and on my first meeting him he had already been in post for seven years. As a very junior conservator, just beginning in textile conservation at Hampton Court Palace, I felt it was a bit like meeting an almost godlike figure although he certainly wasn't the besuited managerial-type I expected. In fact, throughout his entire career Jonathan has broken the mould both in his thoughts and actions and it is this free-thinking approach that has made him so influential in conservation, both in the UK and beyond. Dedicated to the profession and its people, Jonathan was Head of Conservation at the V&A for 27 years (1977 to 2004) and has subsequently taken on many varied educational and advisory roles in the profession.

Despite appearances both Jonathan and I are quite introverted so it took us a while to get to know each other. Eventually we found that we had a number of shared interests: beer, skepticism of accepted wisdom, humour and a sense of the absurd! I would regularly travel into London and meet up with him usually in a pub near the V&A, and catch up on what was going on in our different fields. Jonathan is a scientist by training and his PhD is in Chemistry and as I was developing a conservation laboratory at Hampton Court Palace his advice and support back then were invaluable. Jonathan was a specialist in metallurgy and took an interest in my early attempts to evaluate cleaning methods for metal threads using scanning electron microscopy. Actually, his main support was in encouraging the art of 'doing science' in geneal and enabling collaboration with the V&A's science group and helping with the work of the V&A's textile conservators. And with the Hampton Court Palace laboratory having someone of Jonathans stature encouraging me to develop my repertoire of analytical techniques certainly helped in putting the case for more investment and funding, so much so that the laboratory was eventually equipped to offer High Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC), size exclusion chromatography (SEC), tensile strength testing, polarised light microscopy, and infrared spectroscopy.

By 1983 the conservation world had seen publication of a series of three books, *Science for Conservators*, edited by Jonathan. The volumes, *1. Materials for Conservation, 2. Cleaning,* and *3. Adhesives and Coatings*, gave an excellent introduction to the science required by practising conservators. As the Scientific Editor it was Jonathan who pulled together an excellent team of authors and advisors to produce the volumes, and this also indicated the direction that he was heading in, towards implementing the better-education of conservators. As such, Jonathan was one of the instigators of the Royal College of Art (RCA) and V&A conservation course for which I had the honour of teaching on for many years, from when it began in 1989. With hindsight, I believe that that RCA/V&A course was one of the finest conservation courses in the UK and students benefitted from having so much teaching time with so many talented conservators - the teacher/student ratio was quite unique in that there were very many conservation professionals active on the course in relation to comparatively few students. This, in combination with students being able to practice treatments on 'real' objects from the fantastic collections at the V&A, produced, in my opinion, a

perfect balance between theory and practice of conservation in a work environment. That the many talented students who came through the course initially as MA's, but latterly some as PhD's, have gone on to take on senior positions in the conservation profession is testament to the vision of Jonathan. Incidentally, I have subsequently employed ex-RCA/V&A students, including Kathryn Hallett ACR while at Historic Royal Palaces and Richard Mulholland while at The Bodleian Libraries.

Jonathan has impressed upon me the challenges of staff management and methods for meeting them, lessons that helped me as I moved into more senior roles. For example, I have witnessed the reaction of various members of V&A staff who were unsuccessful when in front of promotion boards chaired by Jonathan and always admired the way he could argue through the decision without emotion. In other words, I learnt that giving an honest decision is better than bending to popular opinion or personal persuasion.

That said, Jonathan has always questioned rules, standards and the concept of there being only one correct way of doing things. The 1994 article, *Let's be honest — realistic environmental parameters for loaned objects*, 1 which Jonathan wrote with Nick Umney and David Ford, had a profound effect on my understanding of conservation 'politics'. The early 1990's was a time when there was a great deal of research into environmental standards, especially around producing temperature and relative humidity guidelines and, in brief, the premise of their article was that institutions who lend objects to other institutions demand environmental conditions that are better than those in their own collections from where the objects came. This chimed with similar research that, amongst other things, suggested that often very strict humidity control wasn't really necessary.2 Sadly, over some twenty years later, although things are a little better, the same ultra-strict and expensive-to-achieve criteria continue to be required by some institutions.

When Jonathan was on an interview panel for a job I applied for at the University College of London's Institute of Archaeology it was he who asked a killer question for which I was too sluggish to come up with a worthwhile answer. As I remember, Jonathan asked me to compare risks in making conservation decisions with the risks of using inaccurate language. It was not an unfair question, rather an intellectual one that really probed my way of thinking and I was simply unprepared for it. Of course, on the way home I thought of several 'perfect' answers. Oh how would my life have panned out if I had been successful then? A few years later Jonathan was on a promotion panel where I must have been better prepared and more experienced, as thankfully I was upgraded. Since then I have been on the same side of the table with Jonathan on a selection panel and witnessed how insightful, honest and fair he is in such matters.

Looking back at my association with Jonathan, other ways in which I gained a lot from him were only because of his conference presentations, but also from his critical assessment of other people's papers. Jonathan does not suffer fools gladly and can often be heard asking questions that are so clear and to the point that they demonstrate not only how he has been completely attentive about what was being said but simultaneously analysing and picking up on areas that he felt needed clarification or on 'facts' that needed contesting.

Up until its publication in 1999, Jonathan and I met a few times to talk about aspects of what became his seminal book on risk, *Risk Assessment for Object Conservation*. Mainly we talked about sigmoidal graphs and hysteresis, but I remember one meeting as clear as if it were yesterday: he had been travelling extensively and talking with nearly everyone with expertise in risk, museums, environments, light, humidity, pollution and collection care, and as he was telling me this he was shaking his head and saying 'I thought I was going to find out a great deal about science but instead I learnt a great deal about people'! The resultant book is both epic and very elegantly and succinctly

written, and is one of the best books on conservation issues I possess - I occasionally re-read parts of it to see if it still applies and yes, much of it does.

In the autumn of 2001 I was given a 'Sharing Museum Skills' award, part of a Millennium scheme organised by the Millennium Commission and supported by the UK's National Lottery, and designed to provide both professional development to individuals and to improve the quality of museums, archives and library special collections for their users. The scheme provided grants to enable staff and volunteers working within these organisations to share, learn and apply new skills through paid secondments, and some 246 grants were awarded. I was the only conservation scientist who chose secondment to the Conservation Department at the V&A and my award allowed me to spend six weeks working with Jonathan to review the current understanding of risks to textiles on display and to identify any gaps in our knowledge. The idea was to consolidate Jonathan's knowledge and experience in risk analysis with my practical and experimental expertise with historic textiles. By a strange coincidence my first full day dealing with risk was 11th September 2001.

One aim of my fellowship was to develop a research strategy that could be carried out in a reasonable timeframe at Hampton Court Palace to facilitate structured and co-ordinated investigation into its textile holdings. The first stage was to describe the state of the art knowledge regarding risks to textiles and much of this was done at Hampton Court with regard to humidity and light. A feature on previous research into the lighting at Kensington Palace had been published in *New Scientist* in 1995 and my secondment with Jonathan built on that work. 3 Coincidentally, one curious result came from a survey on the number of people visiting the V&A tapestry galleries and where the lighting levels were then very low. Visitor numbers at some times of the day were extremely low. However, a quick comparison with visitor numbers at Hampton Court Palace showed that although the light levels were unavoidably higher in the Palace, the high volume of visitors meant that the lux per person was actually lower. Of course one cannot say that the value of the experience of seeing a tapestry for a visitor to the two locations will be the same, but it became an interesting discussion point for us both.

Research got underway on the effects of dust on textile objects and some work was also done on pollution levels and acidity. As a result of the fellowship, several gaps in knowledge were identified and the first area of interest was determining a baseline rate at which textiles will degrade no matter what 'ideal' conditions they are in. The second area that was then under-researched was the comparison of the risks to objects when putting up and taking down a display and what gains were to be had from rotating display objects in terms of light dosage and so on.

The third area of interest was an assessment of the risks associated with environmental pollutants, especially low levels of organic acids, as it was not really known how low concentrations of these substances needed to be to affect textiles in museum or historic house environments. The final factor that was felt to be relatively unexplored were the risks associated with cleaning objects rather than just leaving them dirty. As a result several research proposals were designed and implemented over subsequent years.

As part of the project visits were made to other UK historic houses displaying textiles, including Brodsworth Hall, Chatsworth, and Hardwick Hall, all chosen because of their geographical proximity, that they are run by different organisations, and that they had different ways of displaying their textiles.

One of the most interesting aspects of the visit to Hardwick Hall was Jonathan's perception of the condition of some of the tapestries which he had last seen over twenty years before and which he remembered as 'nearly falling off the walls' because they were in such poor condition. However, after two decades and with no conservation treatment, they appeared, in his opinion, to be in much better condition! It goes without saying that objects can only be in the same or a poorer condition, and that it was, in this case, Jonathan's experience and knowledge that had done the changing. All-in-all, we concluded that evaluating condition is a very subjective concept and that comprehensive

condition reports, preferably backed up with the scientific assessments of materials and damage, are essential if we are to make any real observations on changes to objects.

Instilled with a new confidence and supported by Jonathan, such a conclusion, the need for proper science-based assessments of change, sowed the seed for what was to become the EU funded project 'Monitoring of damage in historic tapestries' (MODHT),4 for which I was Principal Investigator. This three year project involving an interdisciplinary consortium of conservation scientists, curators, and scientists, was convened to characterize historic tapestries so as to provide markers of physico-chemical change and hence damage assessment. Curators from major European repositories of historic tapestries were also involved, reflecting a mutual concern for the optimising the preservation of what are increasingly fragile materials. Through the modelling and artificial aging of tapestries made from different mixes of wool, silk, metal thread, dyes, combined with mordants and made according to traditional practices a new understanding of degradation processes was obtained with changes in fibre strength and colour described in terms of chemistry for the first time. As such, the project built on the use of size exclusion chromatography (SEC) for the analysis of historic silk textiles that was pioneered at Historic Royal Palaces in the 1990s.5

Another research project that Jonathan had some interest in was provoked by observations of dust. The project's output, an automated dust slide analysis process, 6 received 'The Anna Plowden Award for Research and Innovation in Conservation' as it provided a cost effective technique for assessing dust levels in historic houses, museums and libraries. This culminated a period for work, from 2001 to 2004, that was the most intense and exciting time I have spent with Jonathan - it was amazing to have the opportunity to think about single issues and discuss them with perhaps the most qualified person on the planet. I am indebted to him as I learnt so much.

The last time I saw Jonathan talk was at the 2016 Icon conference in Birmingham where he was 'awesome'. His concern is with the creeping over-reliance on preventive conservation and the consequent loss of practical skills which, in my opinion, is absolutely pertinent and critical. With both his experience and the time to think through ideas, he explains the situation with such clarity that it is difficult to contest.

Of course his opinions may always be disregarded by some but, in conclusion, we should all as a profession be enormously grateful that Jonathan has the courage to put forward controversial ideas and has the intelligence and wit to argue around often difficult issues.

Biography

David Howell ACR was appointed Head of Heritage Science at the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, in March 2012, having joined in November 2004, first as Head of Preventive Conservation, and from 2006 Head of Conservation and Collection Care. He has been in the conservation profession for nearly thirty years and prior to his work at the Bodleian he worked on a number of conservation research projects for Historic Royal Palaces (Hampton Court Palace, Tower of London, Kensington Palace) while at the same time co-establishing Hanwell Monitors, the heritage environmental monitoring system. David has served as a trustee to both the Institute of Coinservation and the UK's National Heritage Science Forum.

Contact address

David Howell
Head of Heritage Science
Weston Library
Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford
Broad Street
Oxford

OX1 3BG

Notes:

1. Jonathan Ashley-Smith, Nick Umney and David Ford, 'Let's be honest — realistic environmental parameters for loaned objects', *Studies in Conservation* 39, (1994), Issue sup2: 'Preprints of the Contributions to the Ottawa Congress, 12-16 September 1994. Preventive Conservation: Practice, Theory and Research', 28-31. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/sic.1994.39.Supplement-2.28?journalCode=ysic20 (accessed 1 November 2017).

2. cf Dave Erhardt and Marion Mecklenburg, 'Relative Humidity Re-examined' *Studies in Conservation* 39, (1994), Issue sup2: 'Preprints of the Contributions to the Ottawa Congress, 12-16 September 1994. Preventive Conservation: Practice, Theory and Research', 32-38. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/sic.1994.39.Supplement-2.32?journalCode=ysic20 (accessed 1 November 2017); Stefan Michalski , 'Relative Humidity: A Discussion of Correct/Incorrect Values', *ICOM-CC 10th Triennial Meeting, Washington, DC, USA, Preprints*, vol. 2, ed. Janet Bridgeland, (London: James & James/ICOM-CC, 1993), 624-629; and especially 'Table 1' in Stefan Michalski 1994 *Relative Humidity and Temperature Guidelines: What's Happening*, CCI Newsletter 14, 6 (1994) http://www.musecc.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Relative-Humidity-and-Temperature-Guidelines.pdf (accessed 1 November 2017).

3. Marcus Chown, 'Fabulous fabrics come out of the shadows', *New Scientist* https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg14619771-400-fabulous-fabrics-come-out-of-the-shadows/ (accessed 4 December 2017).

4. The project 'Monitoring of damage in historic tapestries' ran from 2002 until 2005: http://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/61585_en.html (accessed 1 November 2017).

5. See, for example, Kathryn Hallett and David Howell, 'Size exclusion chromatography as a tool for monitoring silk degradation in historic textiles',*Scientific Analysis of Ancient and Historic* Textiles, eds. Paul Wyeth and Rob Janaway (London: Archetype Publications, 2005), 143-150; Kathryn Hallett and David Howell, 'Size exclusion chromatography of silk: inferring the tensile strength and assessing the condition of historic tapestries', *14th triennial meeting, The Hague, 12-16 September 2005: preprints (ICOM Committee for Conservation)*, ed. Isabelle Verger (London: James & James,2005), 911-919.

6. Cf. David Howell, Peter Brimblecombe, Helen Lloyd and Barry Knight, 'Monitoring dust in historic houses', in *Conservation Science 2002: Papers from the Conference Held in Edinburgh, Scotland, 22-24 May 2002*, eds. Joyce H. Townsend, Katherine Eremin, and Annemie Adriaens (London: Archetype, London, 2003), 8-10.