

Scottish Textile Heritage Online final report
Appendix G: Collections Knowledge and Strategic Collecting

Verdant Works, Dundee, 16th June 2004.
Seminar report by Rachel Hunter, Museum Consultant

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1. Welcome by the Chair

Jane Robinson, Assistant Director - Stewardship, Scottish Museums Council

STHOL is one of 13 projects supported by the Scottish Executive's Strategic Change Fund. It is the first of these projects to have reached the end of its delivery stage. All these projects are intended to be high impact, high quality exemplars, and demonstrating collaborative partnership across and beyond the sector.

The seminar has two main themes: sharing information about collections and examining how the collecting process can become more collaborative

2. Scottish Textile Heritage Online: project outline and website demonstration

Ann Jones, Catriona Baird, Wilma Bouwmeester, Project Team

STHOL has received £128,000 since May 2003 from the Strategic Change Fund and is a pilot project mapping Scotland's textile heritage. The key objectives of the Strategic Change Fund are:

- increase access
- collaboration
- promote sustainability within the sector

STHOL puts these objectives into practice.

The project partners recognise that textile collections are widely distributed, diverse and relatively unknown, posing challenges for access and conservation. They are also aware that with an industry in decline there is a need to create a safety net but this leads to pressures on space and resources. The partners agreed the following aims for the project:

- Map Scotland's textile heritage
- Identify who owns what, where, gaps, duplication
- Increase access
- Collaborate in collecting and collections management. (It is by 'historical accident' that an item ends in an archive or a museum) Share professional expertise, explore cross-sector documentation
- Evaluation is a vital part of the process for a pilot project: what went well, what would be done differently, is database scalable, does the project act as a model?

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Method:

Project team:

David Powell, (an archivist), Project Co-ordinator based at Glasgow School of Art
Wilma Bouwmeester (a textile conservator), Documentation and Survey Officer
based at Heriot-Watt University, Scottish Borders campus.

Catriona Baird (a curator), Documentation and Survey Officer, based at Paisley
Museum

The team used information from the National Audit and National Register of Archives and ARCHON web based databases of UK archives and repositories to provide collection level descriptions as the starting point for the project database. The team would have preferred to create a bespoke database but constraints on time meant that the off-the-peg database, DS CALM, was chosen. The team met the challenge of producing collection level records for museum objects, usually recorded individually by adopting a generic schema using the RSLP standard. The database was then tested with three users groups: Costume Society of Scotland, Embroiders' Guild and textile historians, students, researchers and lecturers.

Outcomes:

- The website includes 3000 records representing 100 collections and displays 400 images plus online resources such as maps and essays.
- The website will remain online for five years after the project ends and will be preserved on the VADS archive of databases.
- The final step is to commission evaluation: can relationships be sustained; can the database be enhanced to provide a more comprehensive resource; what are the potential collections management uses?

Demonstration of website: [www.scottishtextileheritage.org.uk]

There are links to the project partners' websites with contact details. Documentation standards employed by the team are explained and links to the websites for each of these standards is provided.

295 Scottish museums and archives were surveyed plus specific English collections known to hold Scottish material.

A questionnaire was designed by the team. National Audit data was sent out to museums for addition or correction. The acquisition and disposal policies of museums were gathered.

The online resources provided on the website include:

- Essays - eighteen 300-500 word essays from textile experts, partner staff and the project team with reading lists, links and images.
- Gazetteer - a map showing the location of collections surveyed for the project
- Industry map – showing the location of 14 industries e.g. tartan, tweed, cotton
- Glossary – due to immensity of the subject the glossary has been limited to basic terms for people new to subject
- Moving images – desirable but due to time and funding constraints this has not yet proved possible
- Research advice – the database can be used when preparing for a visit to museums and archives
- Links – to other related projects

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3. Project related talks by:

Miles Oglethorpe, Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments, Scotland

RCAHMS has been recording built heritage and preserving archives since 1908. With the use of a wide range of slides Miles Oglethorpe demonstrated the importance of industrial heritage in Scotland's history and the importance of textiles on Scotland, e.g. Coates and Clark industry started in Paisley. He outlined the contribution of industrial heritage in contemporary urban regeneration; mill buildings, for example, having been built to such a high standard that they are now suitable for recycling as offices and flats.

Miles Oglethorpe sees STHOL as a wonderful resource adding context to the resources of the RCAHMS: plans, drawings, photographs and archives of the built heritage will be enhanced by the addition of the human content, the machinery and the products of the industry made visible by STHOL.

Liz Arthur, freelance curator, researcher and writer

Liz Arthur demonstrated the importance of access to resources by outlining some examples of textile projects she has curated. For The Thistle and the Rose, a temporary exhibition of English and Scottish embroidered soft furnishings displayed at the Burrell Museum she looked at material held in Register House, Edinburgh and in the Special Collections at Glasgow University. For an exhibition of South Asian textiles she consulted the Glasgow University Business Archive. Teaching adult education courses on the history of dress at Glasgow University and the history of Scottish embroidery at Strathclyde University Liz had students looking at sources of design, related design and costume paintings.

Access is a problem for researchers as there are so few specialist staff and they have constraints on their time. Very few items are actually on display. STHOL is therefore an important initiative. Researchers can identify items and make much more specific requests to make better use of research visits.

Liz finished by making the point that she feels there is a dearth of research of Scottish textile collections in spite of museums holding such rich resources. Students could, and should, do more research. Research is crucial to higher education funding therefore the resources available via STHOL are of great importance.

Valerie Reilly, Keeper of Textiles, Paisley Museum and Art Galleries

Paisley has one of the larger local authority museums and has a very important textile history. The museum contains internationally important Paisley shawl collection including related pattern books and machinery as well as actual shawls. The museum has no computerised documentation – making it a particularly interesting project partner. Now, thanks to STHOL the museum has the beginnings of computerised records. Creation of digitised images has also been very useful – transparencies being now virtually redundant technologically. Valerie has been working on a redisplay of the shawl collection and has been able to include computer access to the database thanks to the STHOL project.

Valerie expressed warm thanks to the Project Team and to Project Manager, Ann Jones.

Chris Berry, Chairman, the Embroiders' Guild of the United Kingdom

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As a teacher – Chris has taught the advanced City and Guilds course in Cardonald College Glasgow for 20 years, including research into textile history, foreign textiles and textile artists. STHOL will be an additional reference – especially for history of dyes and dying, Ayrshire Embroidery, the influence of the Glasgow School of Art and the Needlework Development Scheme.

As an administrator – As Chair of the Embroiders' Guild, which has a collection of 11,000 embroideries from all over the world from 16th C onwards, Chris can see that the STHOL database will be an aid in the research of collections, enabling researchers to find exactly what they want, saving frustration for both researcher and curator. Chris emphasised the importance of images in this respect.

As a researcher and writer –For example, before the internet, seeking extant embroideries from which to make replicas in order to learn how stitches are made had to be done by looking at book illustrations and then tracking down owners if possible. Putting collection catalogues online is therefore a great improvement. Chris believes the website also has the potential to attract visitors to Scotland. Whilst congratulating the partners on what has been achieved Chris sees this as only a start, scratching the surface of the richness and diversity of Scotland's (and the world's) textile heritage.

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4. Panel question and answer session

Panel: Project Team and guest speakers

Q. Is there any reference on the site on where to access expertise when, for example, visiting collections without in-house expertise?

A. Documentation records have details on how to contact individual repositories and links to websites of collections, but there is no specific invitation to contact individual experts.

Comment - Drawing attention to a gap: private and public collections in Shetland and vernacular textiles are not represented.

A. Shetland museums were invited to respond to questionnaire but did not do so. The team did not have time to follow up unreturned questionnaires. Identifying such gaps shows how the project could be developed. The launch of the database is also likely to bring out the existence of other collections.

Q. Where do things go from here?

A. The more work the team does, the more mapping that takes place, the more it reveals gaps. The ideal would be to populate the database to make it a far more comprehensive resource for collections managers and researchers, e.g. providing authoritative information for making collecting decisions, showing the patchwork of the 'distributed national collection'.

Q. What potential is there for working with businesses and for them to have input to future development?

A. This is an area with potential. Partners already have links with businesses which have deposited or donated. Textile companies are understandably protective of design archives. We need to establish more formal links with colleagues in industry.

Comment - An example of collaboration in the business archive community: when a Stoddart workshop closed recently RCAHMS took photographs and Glasgow University Archive Services took last of records.

Q. Could volunteers be useful to this project?

A. Yes, this is an important point. Much collections care, management and documentation is already happening through the dedication of volunteers. Hope for consensus between all parties for collaboration over the use of volunteers. Notably, textile collections are of great interest to volunteers in the museum sector.

Comment – from the weaver to the end product there is a client list which should be included on the database.

A. This is an example of how we can learn from researchers. We cannot underestimate the importance of, for example, textile sample books, design records and business archives which document the production process.

Q. Members of specialist interest groups have private collections. They are likely to use STHOL for research. In turn, how will the project partners find out how to make contact with us?

A. This depends on how the project moves forward. The focus so far has been on forming the resource. Next we need to publicise what we do, make connections with volunteers, scholarly interest groups and exploit the vast network of researchers and users. This can be built on if the project continues.

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5. Workshop: towards a distributed national textile collection?

During this workshop participants broke into four groups to discuss and report back on the following questions:

1. Is there scope for agreement of complementary collecting policies and rationalisation of textile collections:
 - at a local level
 - regional level
 - national level?
2. How would this work in practice?
3. What are the advantages?
4. What are the disadvantages?

The table below is a record of the main points of discussion, collated from all four workshop groups and are not presented in any particular order or hierarchy of importance:

| | |
|---|--|
| 1 | To think in terms of 'distributed national collection' we need an overview. Documentation and lack of resources are barriers to the overview needed |
| 2 | Collecting policies need to take account of museums, archives, libraries Museum collecting policies may not mention archives and vice versa Sometimes collections can be split between a museum and an archive – need a definition of what an 'archive' is |
| 3 | There should already be local agreements under the museum registration scheme Agreements already exist through some forums Agreements tend to be local Informal understandings exist – often geographical |
| 4 | Collecting inevitably has a strong geographical element People are very protective of their 'own' collections Feelings of local ownership |
| 5 | Access to digital resources may make physical location less relevant STHOL project raises awareness of location of dispersed collections Physical location could be dispersed to reflect expertise or specialism but would need strong intellectual links to make sense of collecting as a whole Is it more about national access to collections than where items are actually located? |
| 6 | Important to have network of contacts to pass on offers Guidelines of who to consult when offered different types of collection would be helpful – even in the same local authority Museums/archives need to know what each other's policies are – there is a fear that items might fall between collecting areas Need to facilitate lending policies between institutions Need to know who to contact if we cannot take an item ourselves – perhaps a forum on the website to facilitate the placing of offered items Will the database be useful in deciding whether to accept donations? It needs to be more comprehensive Framework of agreements – process of refusals and acceptances Lack of means and procedures for talking to other collections Reliance on communication Advice for unidentified objects/records – knowing the 'value' of something Exchange of knowledge/expertise More scope for sharing access to collections expertise |
| 7 | Storage constraints often dictate collecting policy not significance |

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| | Lack of space for storage is preventing the collections being kept up-to-date |
| 8 | Vital to collect contemporary material e.g. costume from mid 20 th C – scope for a national agreement? Need a national strategy for rationalisation of collections |
| 9 | Are collections documented enough to support strategic collecting? More information is needed. Documentation backlogs are a barrier to communication and collaboration Volunteers may have important potential role in helping documentation, but need training and supervision. There is a resource issue attached to volunteers. More information about who holds what may make it easier to source and borrow collections for display Need to know what we have in our collections before we can decide what to collect in future – need more electronic cataloguing Lack of resources to standardise databases Do we know what we have nationally? Backlog of material means it is not always possible to know what is where |
| 10 | Cross-sectoral communication needs to be strengthened Is there cross-sectoral working? Yes, at the coal face but needs to be extended up to management level Communication between sectors Cross-sectoral guidelines |
| 11 | Need more contact with NMS and other national bodies |
| 12 | Collections are at risk of falling through the net – collections managers have to make snap decisions Collecting outside of collecting policy might sometimes be the only way to save an item Safety net – who would co-ordinate? Need to do more active collecting |
| 13 | Competition between collecting bodies for same collections can be an issue, most obviously at auction – more consultation needed between interested parties May be more practical to work at local level – local authority and independent museums in the same area May be difficult to reconcile conflicting interests – how to reach a concordat. Who arbitrates? Independent museums are often ‘suspicious’ of the local authority museum – political consideration Conflict between museums with national remit and local museums Specialist museums versus general local museums Conflict between national and local Decentralisation of collections to local and regional |
| 14 | Collections have local and national significance Criteria for national importance? |
| 15 | Centres of excellence important in securing best value but need to reconcile with the value of collections to communities Researchers find centralised collections handy |
| 16 | Where items are first offered is important as that is often where they end up Scenario of acquisition Textiles sometimes end up in the wrong place |
| 17 | Duplication sometimes beneficial – enables comparison Balancing act between overall need to avoid over duplication and expectation of local stakeholders Sometimes duplication prevents expense and hassle of loans |
| 18 | Collecting guidelines would be beneficial but to work all the big stakeholders |

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| | would have to sign up – would require support at senior management level. Should policies be online, e.g. MA website? National strategies – guidelines rather than policy |
| 19 | Information that establishes context is key Need to establish what collections will be used for Appropriate context for objects |
| 20 | Concern that treatment of collection depends on interests of custodian |
| 21 | Important to stress international importance of Scottish textiles – international exports and client lists Need to make international links |

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6. Plenary session:

Issues

Documentation/gaps
Role of nationals
National guidelines
Cross-sectoral collaboration
Scenario of acquisition, i.e. regional/national/local politics
Collecting determined by pragmatics (e.g. accommodation, storage)
Unlocking NMS/NLS/NAS expertise

Barriers

Lack of big picture
Knowledge base

Mechanisms

Joint national contemporary collecting policy which individual museums can participate in i.e. list of areas which need to be collected
Guidelines should be fluid to reflect change, i.e. regular review
Neutral forum for decision making
Pool storage to avoid policy of default
Principle of access (over location)
Independent development worker for the sector e.g. to broker proactive collecting and to educate potential donors
Communication network
Relevance ('pressing the right buttons') for funding
Skills exchange/research interests (on website)
Decision making for collecting and disposing needs access to expertise

Next steps:

Disseminate outcomes – including report of seminar to all attendees
Collate questionnaire responses from seminar
Conference evaluation
Project Management Group meeting – to round up strategic impact of project

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7. Organisations/sectors represented

Freelance curator, researcher and writer
Scottish Textile Heritage Online
Chairman, Embroiderer's Guild of the UK
Scottish Textile Heritage Online
Edinburgh City Museums
Scottish Borders Council Museums & Galleries Service
Paisley Museum and Art Galleries
Dundee City Archives
Costume Society of Edinburgh
Business Archives Council of Scotland
Scottish Fisheries Museum
Scottish Region Embroiderers Guild
Glasgow School of Art
Glasgow School of Art
Distributed National Burns Collections Project
Glasgow University Archive Services
Museum Consultant – seminar reporter
Scottish Museums Council
University of Dundee Archive and Museum Services
Scottish Textile Heritage Online/ Heriot-Watt University
Paisley Museum and Art Galleries
Edinburgh City Museums
South Lanarkshire Council, Museums
Dundee City Council Museums
Historian
Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments, Scotland
South Lanarkshire Council, Museums
Dundee Heritage Trust, Verdant Works
Scottish Textile Heritage Online
Glasgow Caledonian University
Quilters Guild of the British Isles
Paisley Museum and Art Galleries
Glasgow School of Art
Scottish Museums Council
Dundee City Council
Scottish Borders Council Museums & Galleries Service
Scottish Mining Museum
Heriot-Watt University
MacDougall Collection
Argyle & Bute Council
Angus Council
Glasgow School of Art
Scottish Borders Council Museums & Galleries Service
Falkirk Museums
Scottish Tartans Authority