



## THE ARTIFACT, ITS CONTEXT AND THEIR NARRATIVE: MULTIDISCIPLINARY CONSERVATION IN HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUMS

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### Abstract

JW Evans is the most complete and untouched example of a Victorian silverware manufactory in the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter, England. This paper describes the process of developing a conservation philosophy of minimal intervention and the challenges of implementing such a policy whilst still protecting the 'spirit of the place'.

### Keywords

Conservation philosophy, minimum intervention, Victorian, Industrial, Silverware, Factory, English Heritage, Spirit of Place

## Glitter and Gunge. Preserving the Future of JW Evans

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### Introduction

A survey of the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter undertaken by English Heritage describes JW Evans as 'probably the best-preserved example of a manufactory based in what were initially domestic premises in the internationally important Jewellery Quarter' [Cattel et al, 2002]. A secretive business relying on anonymity, the full significance only became apparent when the owner took pity on one of those undertaking the survey, 'the poor lady standing outside in the rain', and invited her inside for a cup of tea. The buildings in themselves were not unusual, but behind the four modest Victorian terraced houses, lay a treasure trove of over 120 years of machinery, handmade tooling, photos, business records and the minutiae of a family run business (Figure 1). The 'spirit of place' was overwhelming with haphazard piles of pressings, and benches covered in layers of dust and detritus with tools lying undisturbed, as if the occupants might return at any moment to finish their task.

The history of the site is well documented, with numbers 54-57 Albion Street built in 1836 as residential terraced houses with open yards or gardens behind. By the 1870's the gardens had been built over to provide workshops for manufacturing (a pattern typical of much of the Jewellery Quarter) [Demidowicz, 2010]. In 1881 Jenkin Evans began trading in 54 Albion Street and by 1901 he had demonstrated his talents as a business man; purchasing all four buildings and buying out his partners. The business passed to his son and finally grandson, Tony Evans, who was involved from 1955 until its sale in 2008. The continuous family association and a self-confessed hoarding mentality

prevented ‘cherry picking’ of useful items and the dispersal of tools and archives over the years (Figure 2).



Fig. 1. Main Stamp Shop, c.1910. © English Heritage



Fig. 2. Exterior JW Evans, c.1890. © English Heritage



English Heritage became involved in earnest in 2008, when Tony Evans decided it was not feasible to continue operating the business. Several conservation bodies considered taking on JW Evans, but in the prevailing climate none committed to such an intensive project and the property was put on the market. At this point as a ‘buyer of last resort’ English Heritage acquired the four buildings, collections, archives and silverware. Although JW Evans had a Grade II\* listing [1] this only protected the building fabric and fixed machinery. None of the moveable historic contents, including the c. 25,000 dies and cutting tools, hand tools, pressings and extensive archives were included in the listing and were in danger of being lost. The buildings and contents were in extremely poor condition with water ingress, pests and condemned electrics. Although part of the charm of the property was the untouched atmosphere, it was also clear that without carrying out certain works, a future for JW Evans would not be sustainable and public access would be impossible.

The purchase was completed in March 2008 but works did not begin immediately. There was an awareness of the delicate balance required to preserve the atmosphere of the property without losing significant information due to a lack of understanding of the processes. The rooms often showed evidence of their original use as residential spaces, before being subsumed for industry and the subsequent slide into neglect and disuse when they were no longer required during the later years of the less prosperous business. The amount of ‘dirt’ or dust on the tools often indicated their purpose and the frequency of their usage and the contents were significant because they were complete and in context (and in some cases had been so for over 50 years). It was these associations and wealth of inter-related information that could so easily have been lost by a simple inventory and ‘tidying up’ without a full understanding of the property (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Main Stamp Shop, 2008. © English Heritage

## Conservation Strategy

To formulate a conservation strategy, cross discipline representatives were invited to share perspectives, which formed the basis of the ‘Conservation Philosophy’. The strong argument supporting the retention of the collection in situ led by Amber Xavier-Rowe encouraged the conclusion that minimal intervention or ‘conserve as found’ was both ethically and practically achievable. To take this to its ultimate conclusion would be to do nothing and allow the stately slide into deterioration to accelerate – already a recent theft of lead from the roof was causing widespread water ingress through the glazed roof of the Main Stamp Shop, causing damage to the benches and machinery below. However it was acknowledged ‘there is no point in preserving it precisely as it was on 31 March 2008: the buckets catching the water will no longer be necessary’ [Molyneux, 2008]. In conserving JW Evans & Sons, we must ask: ‘Will it last if nothing is done?’; not ‘Do we like it?’; or ‘Is it attractive?’ [Molyneux, 2008]. So the questions would be where to stop and how to achieve a compromise between preservation and ‘spirit of place’?

Rouse Hill House on the outskirts of Sydney, Australia was cited as taking a minimal intervention approach by principally leaving the collections in situ [2] but nothing on the scale of JW Evans could be found in the UK or elsewhere. Typically, a project of this scale would start with intensive inventory recording, before packing and decanting the contents. In this instance, almost uniquely, the majority of the c. 52,000 objects were protected in situ and, as on an archaeological site, fully recorded only if the surrounding works required their displacement. The objects were accessioned only in rare instances; such as the showroom silverware which had already been relocated from its location in number 52 Albion Street (this property was sold by Tony Evans in 2005). Undertaking a meaningful recording of the objects would, in many cases have necessitated disturbing objects and cleaning them to be able to identify them or differentiate between them, the reverse of minimal intervention.

The first step in assessing the scope of such an undertaking was to assess the building works to ensure that the property could be made water tight and secure. This information would be used to plan the amount of interventive works required to the exterior and interior of the houses [Hill, 2012]. A ‘Collections Condition and Risk Assessment’ of the contents was also carried out [Xavier-Rowe and Fry, 2011]. Quantifying the number of objects on site and gaining an overview of the main risk factors for the different types of collections was essential as it had already been acknowledged that neither the condition of the objects nor the environment they were housed in was ideal. The principle aim of the Assessment was to quantify the risks actually causing damage; the metal items were dusty, dirty and often corroded, but was this corrosion active? Unsurprisingly the highest risk to the collection was the display and storage conditions, from the leaking roof, unstable shelving or poorly packed and stored archives (Table 1). As well as influencing initial project and building works, the audit has been used to justify and cost continuing works required to the collection.

	Risk	Solutions	Est. Cost	Lead.	Urgency
1	Display, Storage Conditions	Stabilise building structure to prevent deposition onto objects	Ph I project	Project Director	Done or ongoing
		Sample and/or stabilise wallpaper	Ph I	Conservator	Done or ongoing
		Remove hazardous Asbestos/ Chemicals	Ph I project	H&S	Done

		Investigate clearing areas for accessing collections	£1,000	Conservator	Ongoing
		Investigate raising ferrous objects off floor	£1,000	Conservator	Urgent
		Reinforce unstable shelves	£1,000	Estates	Phase II
		Repack stored items for long term, particularly archives	£10,000	Conservator	Ongoing
		Investigate coatings to slow corrosion ferrous items	£1,000	Conservator	Ongoing
2	Humidity	Make building envelope water tight	Ph I	Project Director	Done
		Install environmental monitoring	£7,500	Senior Collections Scientist	Ongoing – extend Phase II
		Consider moving vulnerable items (archives etc)	£100	Conservator/curator	Done – archives moved
		Investigate improving ventilation	£1,000	Senior Conservation Scientist	Phase II
3	Documentation	Record location of objects in areas where items are to be moved	£10,000	Curator	Done
		Implement system for removing items from site		Curator	Done
		Consider more in depth documentation of certain collections (e.g. Archives)	£1,000	Contents Team	Short term
4	Disasters & Security	Write disaster plan for site		Conservator	Done
		Supply basic salvage kit	£1,000	Conservator	Done
		Consider wireless fire system	£3,000	Project Director	Phase II
		Establish emergency salvage area		Region	Short term
		Write salvage plan		Conservator	Ongoing
		Liaise with fire brigade and other institutions		Conservator	Phase II once protection down
5	Dust, Dirt, Handling	Continue programme chimney sweeping	£300	Phase II	Ongoing

		Provide basic housekeeping equipment	£750	Conservator	Done
		Institute system record new damage		Conservator	Short term
		Write housekeeping schedule / plan works once philosophy established		Conservator	Ongoing
6	Light	Install monitoring to assess light levels	£400	Conservator	Phase II
		Investigate fitting UV film/ other light control methods	£5,000	Conservator	Phase II
7	Pests	Prevent bird ingress to all areas	Ph I	Estates	Done
		Remove bird guano from all objects	£1,500	Conservator	Ongoing
		Begin IPM once areas cleaned and works completed	£50	Conservator	Short term
8	Inherent Deterioration	Carry out condition survey of vulnerable objects	£1,000	Conservator	Short term
		Implement annual % check of objects	£200	Conservator	Short term
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>£44,800</b>		

Table 1: Collections Condition Risks Assessment Audit

## Phase 1: Building Works

In order to keep the majority of the collections in situ during building works, senior management at English Heritage were convinced that a conservator must be at the heart of the project working full-time onsite with the design and construction team. The conservator would be based on site to oversee the works and prevent damage to the historic fabric and collections. The early and continuous involvement of a conservator meant that it was possible to trouble shoot issues early by allocating sufficient time and resources.

The scope of works and resulting budget required made the project more practical to split over two years. The external works were extensive; repairs to the roof structure and replacement Welsh slates for all four houses and workshops as well as new roof lights and repaired chimneys. Guttering was renewed (and widened) and all windows and external doors repaired. There was also the added complication of needing to strengthen brick boundary walls in the workshops as they were only a single skin thick and therefore leaning outwards at perilous angles. Asbestos had been used extensively within the spaces and there were also a multitude of chemicals (many in unlabelled bottles) all of which would have to be dealt with.

Although the major works were to achieve a weatherproof building, they had the potential for widespread damage to the interior collections. Much consideration was given to protecting the interiors of the rooms and



their contents. There was a concern that the more common method of protection by ‘boxing in’ all the ferrous items and wooden shelving might cause an adverse microclimate in what was a very damp space, accelerating mould and corrosion damage. If the items were concealed, monitoring their presence (for security) or further deterioration would present problems. It was also acknowledged that it would be very hard to allow public access and engagement if everything was hidden for over a year. After much discussion and with the knowledge there would be an English Heritage conservator seconded to the project and on site throughout, an alternative strategy was developed for each room by the conservator and architect.

A system of protection criteria was specified and this key was then applied to different areas, for instance protection for stairs and hand rails would be Type G (Table 2). An unusual part of this strategy was to install scaffolding platforms throughout each of the single storey workshops (where the roofs were to be renewed) without first protecting individual items. These access platforms would also be used as false ceilings, protecting the contents underneath from dust, debris or possible Asbestos contamination (as well as contractors!). The scaffold planks were then lined with several thicknesses of polythene and sealed around the edges with pipe lagging. Any items projecting above this level were individually covered over and also tightly sealed. Some individual items underneath the platforms also had further protection, such as soft wrapping with Tyvek® or rigid boxes (some with viewing and ventilation panels) which were built to be sturdy enough to be stood upon (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. In situ protection. © English Heritage

EVANS PROJECT – KEY TO SCHEDULE OF PROTECTION

	<b>Codes of Protection</b>	
<b>A</b>	<b>FLOORS AND WINDOW CILLS</b>	These are to be protected with hardboard or thin ply bedded on Tyvek. Where surfaces below are friable or very uneven include foam packing or additional layers of hardboard/ply to make up levels. Where scaffold is also to be erected, floors are to be protected beforehand. <i>Note: Localised removals may be necessary in these areas before works begin and will need to be co-ordinated with project conservator as items are only to be handled by EH staff. In certain areas the entire windowsill may not be cleared so care will be needed whilst working in these areas and only necessary hand tools are to be brought into these spaces.</i>
<b>B</b>	<b>LOOSE DUST SHEETING</b>	This will apply for example to some die racks, wall surfaces, etc. Supply and install softwood batten screw fixed as a fixing point for the top of a sheet of Tyvek. The loose sheets of Tyvek are to be cut from the roll before hanging to ensure objects are not knocked off shelves. Tyvek will then be hang down over the object to be protected and lap over other protection such as to a floor or a platform. Sheets of Tyvek to be joined with tape.
<b>C</b>	<b>SOLID BOXING</b>	This would apply for example to machinery or other objects which need to be protected from impact damage and dust but also need work to take place above, in which case they are to be sufficiently robust to be walked upon. A softwood framework with soft padding are irregularly spaced points of support due to the irregular sub-strate would be clad in sterling board or plywood. Ventilation openings should be included at low level and a vision panel at a position to be agreed with a screw fixed Perspex cover. Ensure that the box is well ventilated. The client team would remove existing contents where points of support are required subject to agreement. A Tyvek sheet would then be tacked over the whole box. Where an edge needs to be sealed against a wall, Plastazote of suitable grade is to be used to form a good dust seal. Pipe lagging may be an acceptable alternative to Plastazote against building fabric but not against fittings. Where Correx or Antinox is stated, the boxing is to be not rigid, i.e. not suitable for walking on.
<b>D</b>	<b>PLATFORMS</b>	Where works to ceilings are required, a solid layer of protection may be necessary for the full area of the floor. This could either be constructed of softwood framework (i.e. as 'C' above) or from birdcage scaffolding with a hatch in the platform for access. This platform would have to edge protection to provide a dust seal around its perimeter and then a layer of Tyvek over the top tacked in place to prevent dust migrating through. This Tyvek would need to be lapped around the hatch. Where asbestos is present to ceilings then further protection will be required on top of this platform to form airtight enclosures. The pockets for vents at wall head level could be used to provide support to the platform. The exact height of each platform is to be agreed room by room.
<b>E</b>	<b>WRAPPING</b>	This would be suitable for protection against dust for the bearings of machinery. Tyvek is to be used wrapped around and secured with tape against itself but not to the machinery. Alternatively localised bags of Tyvek could be considered. Either method needs to ensure that the wrapping is completely sealed to prevent dust/debris in the working parts.
<b>F</b>	<b>DOOR FRAMES</b>	Where door frames are vulnerable to impact damage they are to be protected with a soft boarding with cup and screw fixings forming a "C" in plan to protect all faces of the frame including the head and architrave. In some cases Antinox or Correx could be used in place of soft board.
<b>G</b>	<b>STAIRCASES</b>	Only the staircases to No.55 and 56 to be allowed for general access The other areas are clearly marked as no access zones. Where protection is required, hardboard or thin ply is to be used stapled to treads and risers with foam soft packing where treads are uneven or worn. Balustrades are to be protected with a solid boxing with soft padding at abutments. Where handrails are fixed to walls, solid boxing is to be hooked over so as to protect both the handrail and the wall finish below. The lower part of this boxing can be formed from a batten screw fixed to the plaster at as widely spaced intervals as possible. The lower part of the walls are to be protected with plywood and screw fixed battens.
<b>H</b>	<b>DUST SHEETS</b>	Where only light work is to take place such as decoration, use of conventional decorators dustsheets is required. Paint is to be transported around the building in sealed cans. Similarly paintbrushes are to be clean when transported. This type of protection will be required through the project and is not allocated to rooms as has to be practiced everywhere.
<b>I</b>	<b>BOARDING</b>	Plywood or Sterling board sheeting, screw fixed, is to be used to protect areas of glazing (or similar) from impact damage. In some areas Correx or Antinox could be used.

CONTRACTOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES

- The contractor is responsible for the maintenance of this protection throughout the course of works, which is to be implemented by means of regular inspections.
- Close liaison with the project conservator is required throughout the contract. Assess and inform the project conservators and their team about possible risks and solutions in good time, should there be any complications during the job.

Rev. A. 16.12.08 Client's Comments

NOTE

1. This drawing is copyright.
2. All dimensions must be checked on site before proceeding.
3. Dimensions of new work are to be adjusted to suit the existing building where necessary. Do not assume that the existing structure or details are plumb, square or level.
4. The contractor must report any discrepancies to the architect before proceeding.

RMP Drawings/Drawings/Evans Project/ Steven's Pending/ 6077WindowSchedule.Sep08.



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Key to Internal Protection Schedule

Scale	NA	Job No	6077
Date	Dec 2008	Drwg No	500
Drawn	LS	Rev	A

Table 2. Codes of Protection for building works



The scaffolding strategy proved to be justified. As the roofs began to be stripped and worked upon, it became clear that the plaster and lathe ceilings were in worse condition than the survey had indicated. Large parts of the ceilings were loose and some fell down as works began, but the scaffolding stood up well to these surprises and kept the spaces below clean and accessible. A great deal of supervision was required during installation due to the spaces being very narrow, difficult to negotiate with long poles and crowded with objects (not to mention dealing with the machismo attitude of the scaffolders). However, once in place, the platforms allowed the contractors to work freely above the rooms without being in contact with any contents (Figure 5).



*Fig. 5. External works over protected rooms © English Heritage*

Certain contents had to be dealt with by external contractors, particularly any deteriorated Asbestos and chemicals, all of which were dealt with in the first phase of works. Examples of two cases in which the importance of supervision are given; firstly, when the collections of all chemical bottles and containers were co-ordinated by the conservator and glass bottles were emptied and cleaned by a chemical hazard company. As requested all were then returned complete with dust still adhering to the outside. In contrast, later in the project, different third-party contractors were less sympathetic during the removal of an Asbestos panel in one of the workshops. A process to clean and remove them had already been discussed and agreed but within the first ten minutes they had removed half the bench and slung the contents into boxes. It took nearly a week to recover from the chaos (as for all removals there were numerous images) and needless to say these contractors were not asked to return!

## Phase 2: Collections Care

With the completion of Phase I, attention turned to the internal works. The most pressing need was to renew the electrical system, install a fire system and extend the security system. As the site was not being ‘tidied up’ all existing defunct systems and wiring were left in place (in some cases there were several). A very conscientious electrician rewired through the existing old metal conduits and reused old switches, again minimising disruption to the ambiance of the site. The electric motor in the Main Stamp Shop was overhauled but the external casing was left dirty and greasy to the bemusement of the engineers.

Research was carried out regarding possible protective treatments for the ferrous metal tools, dies and machinery. Trials were carried out on selected items and left in situ for the year of the building works to assess their effectiveness; there were difficult criteria: needing to be effective in high humidity levels; not be shiny or alter appearance; be easily applied in situ; reversible; be easily available and to have no health and safety concerns. The dies and tools were not treated during the project but working machinery showing deterioration during the project was given very careful surface cleaning and treatment so its appearance resembled its original condition. In contrast, areas where machinery had clearly not been used recently were left even if heavily corroded.

Consolidation (but no redecoration) of the most deteriorated surfaces was carried out, both to slow deterioration and to make maintenance of the building and machinery practical. Vulnerable plaster edges were reinforced with a new plaster edging applied to prevent further crumbling filleted, flaking paint and plaster surfaces consolidated and peeling wallpaper was re-adhered to give greater strength (Figure 6). However a pragmatic approach had to be adopted due to the number and scale of the deteriorated surfaces. In very friable areas the loosest areas were gently brushed down, before the remaining area was consolidated. There was a programme of dust removal in certain areas, for instance in corners where the dust sealing failed and white plaster dust had fallen onto a cluster of objects. As ever this was not as straight forward as it might have been, with comic discussions of what was new and what was ‘historic’ dust, before a light hand with a pony hair brush and vacuum cleaner was employed.



Fig. 6. Consolidation of interior surfaces. © English Heritage



Alongside building works, attention was given to the two disassociated collections of silverware and archival business and family records. The silverware was removed from storage and its newspaper wrappings, cleaned and installed in a custom built showroom with modern cases that replicated the originals (but with improved security and internal environments) (Figure 7). The archive was removed to a new archive room, which had been replastered and painted and installed with dehumidifiers and archival racking. The process of cleaning and repacking the archive is still underway, although it has been documented and the most significant items digitised. To help us understand the significance of different rooms and equipment, research was undertaken to give a better understanding of the complex processes and how the factory had developed during different phases of the building. English Heritage was able to consult the former owner Tony Evans, and both he and other former employees were extensively interviewed and filmed. This footage has now become part of the JW Evans archive.



Fig.7. Silver Showroom c. 2000. © English Heritage

## Public Access

As an evocative industrial property, there was a strong sense of public ownership and widespread support, especially by local communities. Often during open days or tours, we would have visitors recounting stories of family members who had worked in the Birmingham Jewellery Quarter. However, the strategy of how to enable safe and successful public access was not straightforward. At the inception of the project, there had been a strong feeling from some quarters that it would not be possible or desirable to preserve JW Evans, suspecting that once we began to interfere we would lose the very thing we wished to retain. This argument



concluded that the logical solution must be to record the site (and possibly even the processes and machinery working) and accept its inevitable destruction, much like an emergency archaeological excavation [3]. Although given consideration, this view ultimately did not prevail.

The continued public support became the start of a valuable relationship. The desire to share the ‘Evans experience’ was a priority from the beginning of the project, with visits even during building works requiring the visitors to be dressed in hard hats and high-visibility vests (Figure 8). Allowing public access at this stage, as part of a strictly supervised tour, also helped us to formulate the longer term public strategy; it became clear the only practical way to allow access would be via guided tours [Carver, et al., 2010]. We were already seeing the overwhelming urge to touch and move items (and there was a definite risk of theft and souvenir hunting) and this would only get worse once all areas were accessible.

Once the need for guided tours had been established it influenced other strategies which would affect the site appearance, for instance the fire strategy allowed us to have far fewer modern signs as visitors are always accompanied by a guide. Similarly there would be no interpretation within the historic spaces (which would have been very difficult to articulate due to the complex nature of many of the processes). It also allowed us to assess whether visitors coped successfully with lower light levels, uneven floors and steep stairs; all of which Evans had in plentiful supply. We invited visitor feedback regarding which rooms were most interesting or important to them, whether the tours covered what they were interested in and many other issues. This information was considered when planning the eventual visitor route and visitor requirements. At the same time the team member leading the tour was able to illustrate the conservation works being undertaken and explain why certain things were impractical which helped visitors appreciate the spaces. In some cases, visitors returned



Fig. 8. Tours during building works. © English Heritage

each year from 2008-2011 to see progress during the annual ‘Heritage Open Day’ event.

The evidence provided by the collections risk and condition survey has informed ongoing care of the collection. The audit, combined with monitoring during the building works programme, informed the decision to leave the majority of the site unheated. The building is now water tight with good ventilation, which has mitigated the greatest risk to the collections. Relative humidity and temperature are monitored and recorded using a radio telemetric system to provide evidence for considering future environmental control. Targeted condition surveys will be undertaken to check on the rate of deterioration of the metalwork. At this stage no further action is required.

## Conclusion

So finally the building works are completed and the contents are in-situ, often dirty and dusty and still piled in their haphazard piles. JW Evans is now at the end of its first full season being open to the public, led by our volunteer guides. The drop stamps continue to run and curious visitors are asked politely but firmly not to touch anything. When asked if the project was a success, we think the project team would agree it was incredibly challenging but the frequent discussions and overarching ethos of minimal intervention have made what we believe to be a huge success. Perhaps more important is what our stakeholders think and we are always thankful to hear the same comments from our visitors during guided tours given in 2012 as we did in 2008; ‘this looks exactly like where my dad used to work’, ‘it still smells right’ and ‘thank goodness you didn’t tidy it all up’. Although we explain the conservation works carried out during each tour, it is gratifying that most visitors do not notice the work unless we tell them. Ultimately, the atmosphere which first caught our imagination still speaks to our visitors.

## Acknowledgments:

Although a large and diverse team have been involved, in writing this paper special thanks must go to Nick Hill, Dr Sara Lunt and Nick Molyneux of English Heritage and Samantha Hepburn of Birmingham Archaeology.

## Endnotes

[1] All buildings in the UK which are considered of special historic interest are placed on a protection list and have statutory protection; Grade I (most significant), Grade II\* or Grade II. Grade II\* buildings are particularly important buildings of more than special interest and compose of only 5.5% of all listed buildings.

[2, 3] Data given at a Consultation Seminar on JW Evans 27th July 2008.

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## Materials List

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