

Work Placement with Cliveden Conservation, 1st – 12th July 2019

Tracey Cartledge, Mosaic Artist & Restorer

Background

My journey into the fascinating world of mosaic was, as career paths tend to be, determined principally by chance. Within two months of graduating with a Fine Art degree, I was delighted to be offered employment with a Manchester based environmental art organisation that specialised in designing and installing works of art for public sites. Whilst there, I met artist Peter Hatton and we teamed up to engage with a community in Salford to produce and install a robust outdoor pavement mosaic in a local park. I loved every aspect of the work and learned the skills involved very quickly. More opportunities followed and within five years I had installed numerous mosaic features in various towns throughout the north west, accepting commissions in my own name as a self-employed professional artist as well as working for West Yorkshire public art organisation, Chrysalis Arts.

It naturally followed that I should increase my knowledge about mosaic making, past and present, and develop my skill base. To this end, I trained with experts across the UK and abroad, learning to work with glass, ceramics, stone, marble and slate, embracing a variety of techniques and approaches to mosaic. In 2014, I won a contract to repair the mosaic floors at Victoria Rail Station in Manchester as part of its heritage restoration and since then I have gradually transitioned into working in mosaic conservation.



Placement Idea

To further consolidate my knowledge and skills in mosaic conservation, I approached Cliveden Conservation in Taplow, Berkshire, to ask about a potential work placement with them and then applied to the York Foundation for Conservation and Craftsmanship for a bursary to help me with the associated costs. Cliveden Conservation was established in 1982, originally “for the preservation of the National Trust buildings and Statuary”. Since then it has grown into a bigger operation with three workshops, specialising

in the conservation of both external and internal architectural features, historic objects, monuments and statuary. At the time of my application, a significant mosaic floor conservation project for a royal property in London was already underway.

I was successful in my approach to Cliveden and delighted to be awarded a bursary from the YFCC, which enabled me to spend two weeks at the Taplow workshop with the mosaic conservation team in July 2019.

The Mosaic Floor Conservation Project at Cliveden – Lifting the floor from site

Prior to my arrival, the mosaic floor had been painstakingly lifted from its site in clearly referenced sections, carefully transported and was now being stored on purpose built storage racks within the mosaic conservation workspace. The stage of work in progress involved the removal of the cambric and foam-board facing materials, the cleaning and fixing of missing and displaced tesserae and then grouting, on a section by section basis.



During my two weeks with Cliveden, the project manager, Ben Roberts, provided a slideshow presentation to explain the stages of the project that had been carried out before I joined the team. The mosaic had been discovered during structural investigations to explore the source of water ingress from the portecochère of the building in question in 2017.

The mosaic floor was hidden between upper layers of modern resin asphalt and concrete and the screed beneath. Another company - DBR Conservation - carried out a series of trials, surveys and investigations to inform a report that summarised their findings and put forward recommendations. A schedule of works was drawn up for pricing. Based on their proposed methodology, schedule and quotation, Cliveden was the successful recipient of the contract out of between five and seven companies invited to tender.

The first stage of the project was in August 2018 when the team arrived on site with spades to begin popping off the asphalt top layer. Pneumatic hammer drills were required to break out the thick course of concrete below the asphalt and this was very tough work, by all accounts. Finally, the cement residue was chipped off to reveal a most stunning marble mosaic.

The square central panel, made up of black and white marble tesserae, depicts Neptune holding a trident in his right hand and a baby dolphin in the left, surrounded by four larger dolphins, positioned diagonally across each corner. A large field of Bianco Carrara tesserae, interspersed with short wavy lines of Nero Assoluto surrounds the central panel, framed by a geometric border incorporating a guilloche composed of Giallo Siena Intenso and Nero Assoluto strands. Outside the border is a wide band of random mix Giallo

Siena Intenso and a veined and varied grey marble. Finally, in a couple of places along the perimeter, there are door threshold panels featuring a red marble – possibly Rosso Alicante.

Removing the mosaic from site was a formidable operation carried out under the supervision of Historic England. First, two separate reference grids were made: a grid of wavy lines to indicate the cut lines for lifting and a grid of straight lines for the photo documentation. Each section was photographed from above. Then Dremel tools were used to cut out all the tesserae along the wavy seamlines of the cutting grid, creating panels approximately 600mm x 600mm. The loose tesserae were labelled (using Tippex) and stored carefully for later. All the outer panels, having been faced with cambric and foam board, were then lifted using slate rippers, one by one, until only the central dolphin panel remained.

There was harder mortar and brick rubble beneath the centre section of mosaic floor. Following discussions with a structural engineer, it was decided that this should all be lifted in one piece and the team improvised an elaborate plan to achieve this. A specialist drilling company was brought in to drill laterally beneath the central mosaic area with core drills. Fourteen cores were left in place to form a rig to support the floor as it was subsequently lifted using a block and tackle at each corner. It must have been an amazing moment when the whole of this mosaic floor was successfully raised up and then fitted into its purpose-built crate for transportation.

The Mosaic Floor Conservation Project at Cliveden – Workshop Process



In the workshop, I met the team of conservators that were working on the sections of mosaic floor, starting with Adrian. Adrian was tasked with the removal of the foam-board and cambric facing from the mosaic, one panel at a time. The cambric had been bonded onto the surface of the mosaic with PVA and the foam-board secured on top of this with a thixotropic contact adhesive to ensure its security during the removal process on site. Back in the workshop, it proved difficult to remove these facing layers. Adrian called upon a team member to assist each time a panel needed to be lifted from the “to do” rack onto his work bench. I did not witness the stage of the workshop process that took place before this one, which was the removal of old mortar and detritus from beneath the mosaic and setting each panel into a fresh lime mortar bed.

All the panels had been carefully referenced and the first job was to transfer the reference information onto the edges of the panel with marker pen. Next, Adrian scored the foam-board and then used a hammer and scraper to ping it off. In theory, the cambric should then have sponged off but in fact it resisted being dissolved with water. We discussed this and surmised that the thixotropic adhesive had leached into the

cambric – we could see yellow staining to the fabric that supported this conclusion. Once Adrian succeeded in removing the cambric, it was then necessary to gently abrade away deposits of adhesive from the surface of some of the marble tesserae.



Adrian returned each panel, together with any loose tesserae from that panel bagged and referenced to the appropriate rack for the next stage of work to be carried out. Before doing so, he photographed the panel and made a note in the ledger of the time spent on the facing removal stage for it.

I was involved in the next part of the process, guided by Amelia. The first panel that I was presented with had a series of spaces where tesserae were missing. The preparation involved chiselling out the lime mortar in these spaces to a suitable depth right up to the adjacent mosaic pieces followed by fastidious cleaning and sorting of the salvaged tesserae. The mortar bed had to be kept damp all the time so that freshly mixed mortar would make a good bond with it.



Unsurprisingly, the chiselling of the mortar prompted further tesserae to loosen, so that the spaces to be filled kept growing. When the preparation work was finally complete, I began recreating the missing areas of mosaic using a combination of salvaged tesserae as far as possible and newly cut stone when required. All this work was documented and the time spent carefully recorded.



We used a hammer and hardie for cutting lengths of sawn new stone down to size. The hardie was a bench top version, unlike to hardies I have used previously. Following Amelia's advice, I had taken a good selection of small hand tools with me, which included side-biters for further trimming the tesserae and painter's palette knives that were perfect for mixing and applying small quantities of mortar. We used a specialist mortar "Adhere Cal" by SecilTek, formulated exclusively from natural hydraulic lime for the restoration sector. I had a set of wax modelling tools with me that proved useful as 'nudging sticks'. On-the-spot improvisations, such as making paper templates and creating curved mini retainer walls out of foam-board, held temporarily in position with clay, created helpful solutions within the process.



In total, I repaired three mosaic panels during my two-week placement. The days were blissful in the summer light, beginning at 7.30am and usually finishing around 5.00pm. During the two weeks, different people worked alongside me and on some days, I was working alone, due to the variety of other commitments the conservators on the mosaic team were involved with. There was ample free time outside our hours in the mosaic conservation workspace to find out about other interesting projects going on at Cliveden's Taplow workshop.



Ongoing work included the remodelling of some of the Greek 'Nine Muses' series of sculptures in plaster of Paris, the restoration of a Michael Rysbrack carved stone Pegasus relief sculpture and the restoration of huge heavy doors from a prestigious London property. In the background, other members of the team were surveying sites, writing reports and bidding for new work. The founder of Cliveden Conservation, Trevor Proudfoot, was celebrating a special birthday whilst I was there and a barbecue party was organised in the garden of an adjoining property owned by Cliveden, which I was invited along to. As many of them mentioned, at Cliveden they are one big, happy family and it was a great honour for me to be welcomed so warmly into it for the duration of my work placement.

Benefits of the Placement

The most significant benefit of this placement was to see at first hand the approach taken in a mosaic floor conservation project of this scale and type from the beginning almost through to completion. I gained a clear insight into the techniques that the Cliveden team employed for lifting a large mosaic floor and transporting it to their workshop and I learned how they problem solved to arrive at an innovative method of doing this within the constraints involved.

The hands-on work that I assisted with in the workshop brought new experiences such as working with hydraulic lime mortar and keeping a constant record of time spent on every task. This is important for evaluation purposes, monitoring costs and providing useful information when quoting for future projects and a good habit for me to adopt in my own work. The actual work carried out cutting stone, laying out the design and fixing tesserae into place was not new to me because of my existing experience of mosaic work. Whilst I was learning from experienced conservators about the conservation aspects of the work, it was great to discover that they benefitted from some of my mosaic knowledge.

It was informative to see conservators working across different disciplines: stone carving, mosaic work, clay or plaster modelling, mould-making and casting etc. This is especially interesting to me as I have a fine art sculpture background and would enjoy working for a conservation studio like Cliveden where all my skills in these various areas could be useful. The workshop set up at Cliveden allows for a combination of both team work and independent work to take place, depending on what is most relevant to the jobs in hand and this is also something that appeals to me. I have discovered that I would be very happy working for an organisation like Cliveden in the future and I hope that they will contact me when a suitable opportunity arises.