

A Brief Personal History of a Conservator of Art on Paper in the United Kingdom: 1959–2003

ABSTRACT

The author's background in the conservation of art on paper is, in today's terms unorthodox. She describes her training over a period of ten years as an apprentice in London and afterwards working in her private practice in London and latterly in Suffolk.

The changes to the practice of the work through this period are noted by the emphasis of important landmarks, particularly the new training schools in the 1970s and the founding of the Institute of Paper Conservation, with subsequent international conferences and the cross fertilization that has sprung from these. A Churchill Fellowship to North America in 1977 and meeting fellow conservators is recorded. Also recorded are the growth and changes of important areas of conservation, the marketing of materials and equipment for the conservator and preservation of artifacts.

HIGHBURY, LONDON, 1959

In England in the late 1950s there were extremely limited possibilities for training to be a conservator of fine art on paper. There were no training courses, and even little chance of training in a museum. The conservators in the British Museum had been trained by various combinations of bookbinders and photographic retouchers. That museum did have a scientific department, but most processes were highly experimental. Other major museums had similar personnel, smaller ones had none.

There were various private restorers and conservators working in London at that time; particularly well known were the Dreschers, father and son. The former had been trained in Berlin under Carl Schweidler, and they were

practitioners of the German school of restoration, performing miracles in invisible mending. They did not take in pupils. Many restorers of prints and drawings either were framers or worked for them.

Other areas of paper conservation—archives and books—were a little more established. The Public Record Office and regional record offices were carrying out treatment on archives while there had always been a tradition of bookbinding, the British Library leading the way.

At nineteen I was fortunate to be employed by Mordo Barnard of Messrs. Craddock & Barnard of Museum Street, London (fig. 1). Mordo ran a high-quality print shop selling only original prints, including Dürer engravings and woodcuts and Rembrandt etchings, with his brother Osbert (fig. 2). These two lived in a large house in Highbury, North London. This is where the lab had been set up. I was Mordo's first pupil—and an apprentice, to be paid £7.00 per week.

Mordo had been a chemist but had given this up to run the print shop with his brother. He worked on the chemistry of paper conservation, morning, noon, and night, coming up with some good, not-so-good, and dubious solutions to problems. One has to remember that everything everywhere (maybe apart from the Dreschers' establishment) was experimental. We only worked on prints that were owned by Craddock & Barnard, never for the general public.

As I did not own a camera in those days, this scene in Mordo's old lab was taken by a

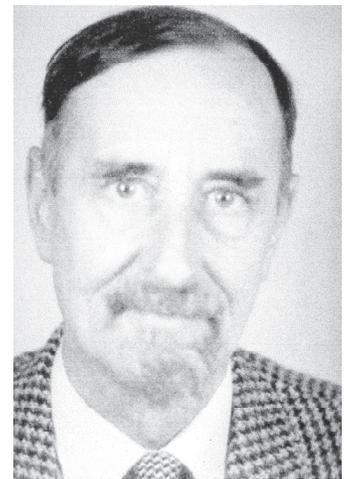


Fig. 1. Mordo Barnard

Presented at the Book & Paper Group Session, AIC 31st Annual Meeting, June 5–10, 2003, Arlington, Virginia. Received for publication Fall 2003. Another version of this paper appeared in *The Paper Conservator*, vol. 25, 2001.

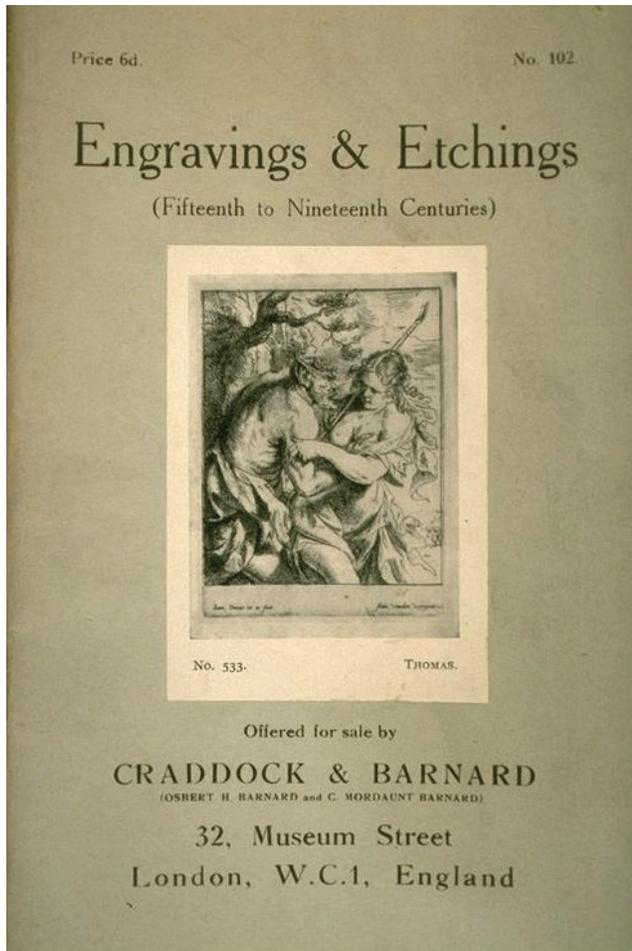


Fig. 2. A Craddock & Barnard print catalogue

colleague, Roy Farrow, at the end of its days, in the 1970s (fig. 3).

I will not dwell on the bad “inventions,” except for mentioning his use of hypochlorous acid which he took great lengths to make and is now known to be a really damaging agent for bleaching paper (Hey 1977). Mordo also used sunlight bleaching to clean the prints, not always so useful an agent in England. He rigged up suction points, made from old vacuum cleaners, and following the German tradition used matching antique papers for paper repairs. I was sent on quests to suppliers for better, sharper knives, erasers, inks, and general working equipment. For me the atmosphere was exciting, especially as I found the work suited me. Old Master prints became very familiar and also by observation I filled in great chunks of art history. I learnt to admire the techniques and art of the old masters greatly and am still in love with “fine impressions.”

PRIVATE PRACTICE

At the end of 1969 I left Craddock & Barnard in order to set up my own studio in the King’s Road in London. A

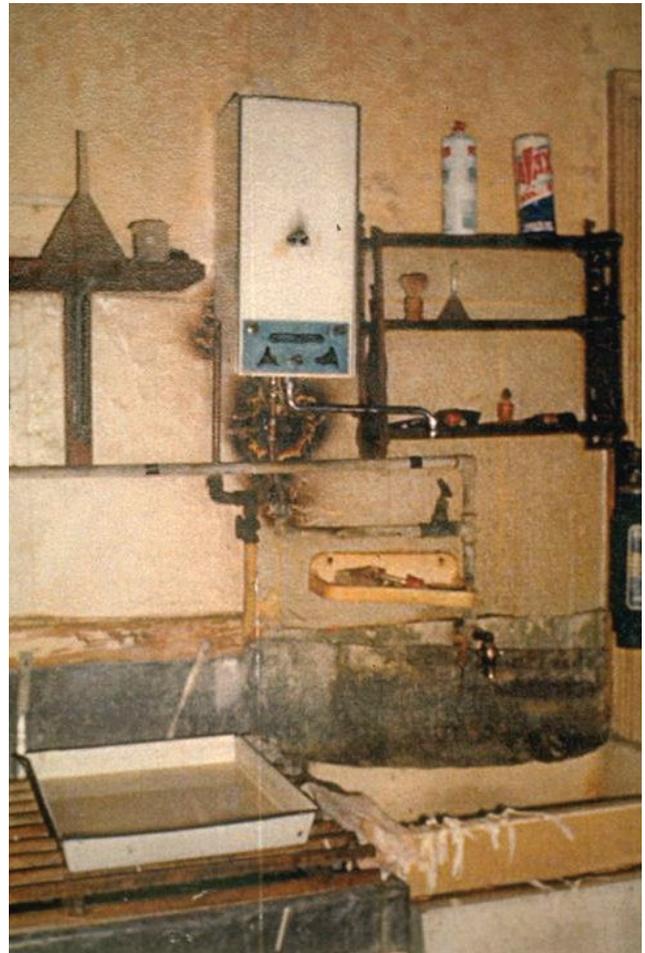


Fig. 3. Mordo’s “lab” in the 1970s. Photo by Roy Farrow.

small space was lent to me by Alfred Hecht, a framer, for one year, at no cost—however I managed to fit in a sink and a table with a light box. The large gilt frames for Francis Bacon’s paintings were being gilded in a room beneath me. Immediately I had a great deal of work as I had, by then, many connections, after living for eleven years in London. The learning curve was a steep one as I also had to cope for the first time with running my own business. By 1972 I had my own house in Battersea, and more—but not enough—space: two converted double bedrooms, about 300 square feet. I determined then that a fully practicing conservator needed a minimum of 1,000 square feet of space separate from any domestic environment, with large, flat, versatile surfaces, sinks, ample storage space, and areas for extraction and humidification cabinets, suction tables, a photograph stand, and microscopes, with dedicated positions for everything, including at least three work stations. Such a space could accommodate students; my two converted rooms could not.

By this time I was handling watercolors and was able to do this with the help and advice from Michael Warnes who was at the British Museum. Later on I was to work with



Fig. 4. Keiko Keyes in 1977

him in the Royal Library, Windsor Castle, for a couple of years, part time on the Holbein drawings. Keiko Keyes (fig. 4) had been in my life during the 1960s as she had been working for another print dealer, Ray Lewis in California. She and her husband Roger came to London regularly and spent some time in the city. We exchanged our individual knowledge and ideas, and I started to work on Japanese prints.

TRAINING COURSES

Florence in 1966 had seen a major flood when the river Arno burst its banks causing widespread damage to museum artifacts, libraries, and archives. Good things come out of bad and this catastrophic event pushed forward the need to cope with the damage done to so very many paper artifacts. The volunteers went back to England, one being John Corderoy who founded a course in paper conservation at Camberwell School of Art and Crafts (now Camberwell College of Arts). This course covered books, archives, and art on paper. At last paper conservation was on the map, as people from all over the world had been helping in Florence, and internationally the need for research, development, and teaching was considered a priority. The course at Gateshead Technical College (now the University of Northumbria) followed a few years later. Students began to emerge from these courses and find employment in the museums and private sector.

FOUNDING OF THE INSTITUTE OF PAPER CONSERVATION

As, through the courses, the numbers of paper conservators were increasing, there was a developing need for some kind of group or body, and so a few practicing paper conservators from both the institutional and private sectors formed, in 1976, the Institute of Paper Conservation. This was a landmark in the field and shortly *Paper Conservation News* was published along with *The Paper Conservator*. We, for it did include me, decided that it should be an international group; this was necessary as it was essential to build up a network for exchange of information in a fast-developing area of conservation with so many artifacts relating to paper needing help and attention.

In 1977 I was fortunate enough to be awarded a Churchill Fellowship and chose to go to North America to further my knowledge and meet fellow conservators. At this stage, to the chagrin of my clients, I broke up my practice and went for three months visiting labs and training institutions on the East and West Coasts of the U.S. and in Canada. The tour was immensely stimulating; I met very many kindred souls on the same similar quest and some have remained good friends ever since. It was a time of so many new developments both in treatments and equipment. Marilyn Weidner and her new suction table was an inspiration (fig. 5). On the West Coast Victoria Blyth-Hill (fig. 6) and Keiko Keyes and Bob Futernick (fig. 7) showed me their studios (or *labs*), and the latter his innovative pneumatic press. Caroline Keck (fig. 8) was busy training new conservators at Cooperstown, and Marjorie Cohen was still a practicing conservator at the Fogg and demonstrated her mount-cutting facilities and technique to me (fig. 9). Antoinette King was at MOMA, and I was able to



Fig. 5. Marilyn Weidner and her suction table, 1977



Fig. 6. Victoria Blyth-Hill at the Los Angeles County Museum, 1977

have long discussions with her over the variety of problems we both faced when conserving art on paper objects.

The first conference the IPC organized with the Society of Archivists was Cambridge 1980. This conference was of enormous importance, not only to me, but to my colleagues back home in the U.K. I had while on my Churchill Fellowship asked my new American and Canadian friends whether a paper conservation conference would be popular; everyone answered YES. On my return I put this possibility to the IPC committee, thinking it a good way to return all the kindness, exchange of knowledge, and hospitality I had received in North America, and to encourage further exchanges. Everyone agreed to this with enthusiasm, and so the IPC, with the Society of Archivists, organized Cambridge 1980, a conference on "The Conservation of Library and Archive Materials and the Graphic Arts," our first successful and well-attended conference. Speakers mainly came from Europe and North America. Since 1980 the IPC has had three more major conferences, in Oxford, Manchester, and London, as well as many other smaller, one- and two-day events. All have attracted foreign participants.

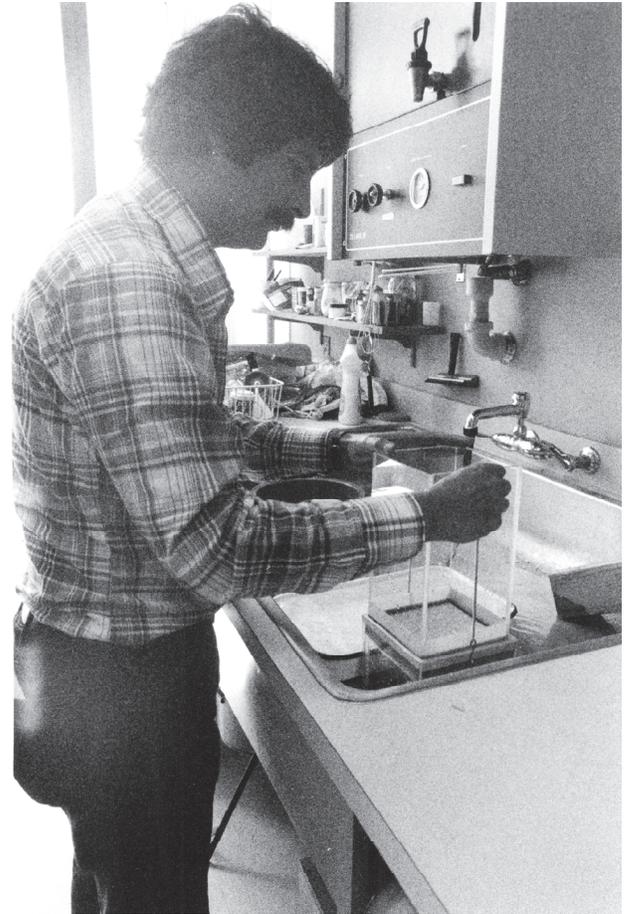


Fig. 7. Bob Futernick at the Legion of Honor in 1977

With the expansion and development of the number of trained conservators came the demand for materials and equipment, including conservation boards and papers, suction tables, steamers, humidification chambers, and many other items now familiar to the practicing conservator. Companies were formed—John Money, Falkiner Fine Papers, Atlantis, Archival Aids, Conservation Resources, Conservation by Design, and Preservation Equipment, to name but a few. Some have folded, but the new companies and ones that have survived are of invaluable use to the conservator. Trade fairs are now always part of our conferences.

NETHER HALL BARN

In the same year as the first conference, 1980, deciding that indeed I badly needed that 1,000 square feet of studio space, I moved house and studio. Property and space are expensive in London but cheaper outside so I moved to the middle of East Anglia, Suffolk, about forty-five minutes to the east of Cambridge. The property I found was modest but had all the right ingredients—an acre of old farmyard with a barn already converted to live in, within fairly easy



Fig. 8. Caroline Keck at Cooperstown in 1977

reach by train or road from London. After a little time, I built a “state of the art” studio out of two existing buildings and incorporating a new additional space (figs. 10–11). Within this space I was able to fit in the entire desiderata list plus good lighting, both natural and artificial. This building has been a pleasure to work in ever since. As my work comes mostly from London I have kept a small flat in the centre of the West End. These two combine well for my practice—peace (except for the birds) and tranquility for the work, while London is where most of my clients in all sectors work or have their collections. One day a week is my London consultancy day, and thereby clients are kept at bay and do not interrupt work progress. The contrast of town and country is attractive and stimulating for such sedentary work. Weekend walks are a necessity while London art exhibitions are similarly important.

The space allows for three work stations, so at last I had space for students. The office is separate and is in the house. Since building this studio, I realize one just cannot have

enough space, so have built a multipurpose garage/store with a loft for boards, papers, and the inevitable overflow of items such as frames and packing materials, items relating to the studio. To have this space in the centre of London would have been exorbitantly expensive. Suffolk is beautiful and I feel privileged to be able to work on wonderful works of art in such lovely surroundings. Finances apart, it was being in Japan in the early 1970s that inspired me to organize my work and life in this manner. Visiting all the beautifully arranged studios of Japan’s painting conservators gave me a different view on the need for beautiful surroundings when working.

The Tate Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and Museums and Galleries on Merseyside now have new up-to-date laboratories, as do many others. The British Museum does need more space, but I am sure this will be forthcoming in due course. They all employ young people trained on the courses. It is all a very different scene from my early experience in 1959.

The new studio space gave me the opportunity to employ students and Kate Newton (fig. 12) joined me, followed by others, including Deborah Willis who patiently put up with the studio extension project. All students were taken from the two courses, and numbers were increased from time to time with foreign interns from the USA, Switzerland, Russia, and Holland. The studio was quite full at times, and I found this difficult to manage and control—I really needed a “non-hands on” manager to deal with the bureaucratic work involved; however, financially this would have put too much stress on the studio. I have now “trimmed my sails” as far as interns are concerned, realizing that everything runs more smoothly with two or three of us involved, plus a secretary.

With all the published international research and development huge changes have taken place in the practice of



Fig. 9. Marjorie Cohen at the Fogg, 1977



Fig. 10. Studio at Nether Hall Barn, 1990s, Dr. Judith Gowland in the foreground

conserving art on paper since 1959—mostly for the better. Each treatment is finely tailored to the work concerned: light bleaching of paper with banks of lights is a big step forward; new steamers, suction tables, humidification chambers have all helped to streamline the processes. Most and best of all there is a network of practitioners to interact with. The work is no longer shrouded in mystery as it was when I first became involved.

The intense climate of interest—esthetic, historical, and financial—in art generally has made for much more demand from the institutions and the public for conservation of fine prints and drawings. Conservators now as a matter of practice do condition reports for clients prior to purchase or lending for exhibitions. The conservator now has a status not previously experienced.

The privilege, and responsibility, of working at such close quarters on many wonderful works of art by masters as varied as Holbein to Kandinsky is an on-going pleasure and inspiration, as well as at times a challenge. The chance to travel to work on collections in Turkey, India, Australia,



Fig. 11. Jane McAusland in her studio, 1980s

and the USA as well as Europe has been interesting and rewarding. At present my involvement with the project in the library in St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai in Egypt, where the relative humidity is in the region of 19%, has been a technical challenge.

Not only fine works of art have illuminated the work, but to meet and work with so many interesting and talented people—curators and custodians, historians, scientists, other conservators, and students with all the exchanges of information—have given depth to further, and really endless, understanding of the subject. One just goes on learning.

ACCREDITATION

All areas of conservation in the U.K. had been discussing the need for accreditation for some time and so, in 1999, finally a system for accrediting conservators came about within the IPC. Of course there are flaws



Fig. 12. Kate Newton in 1982

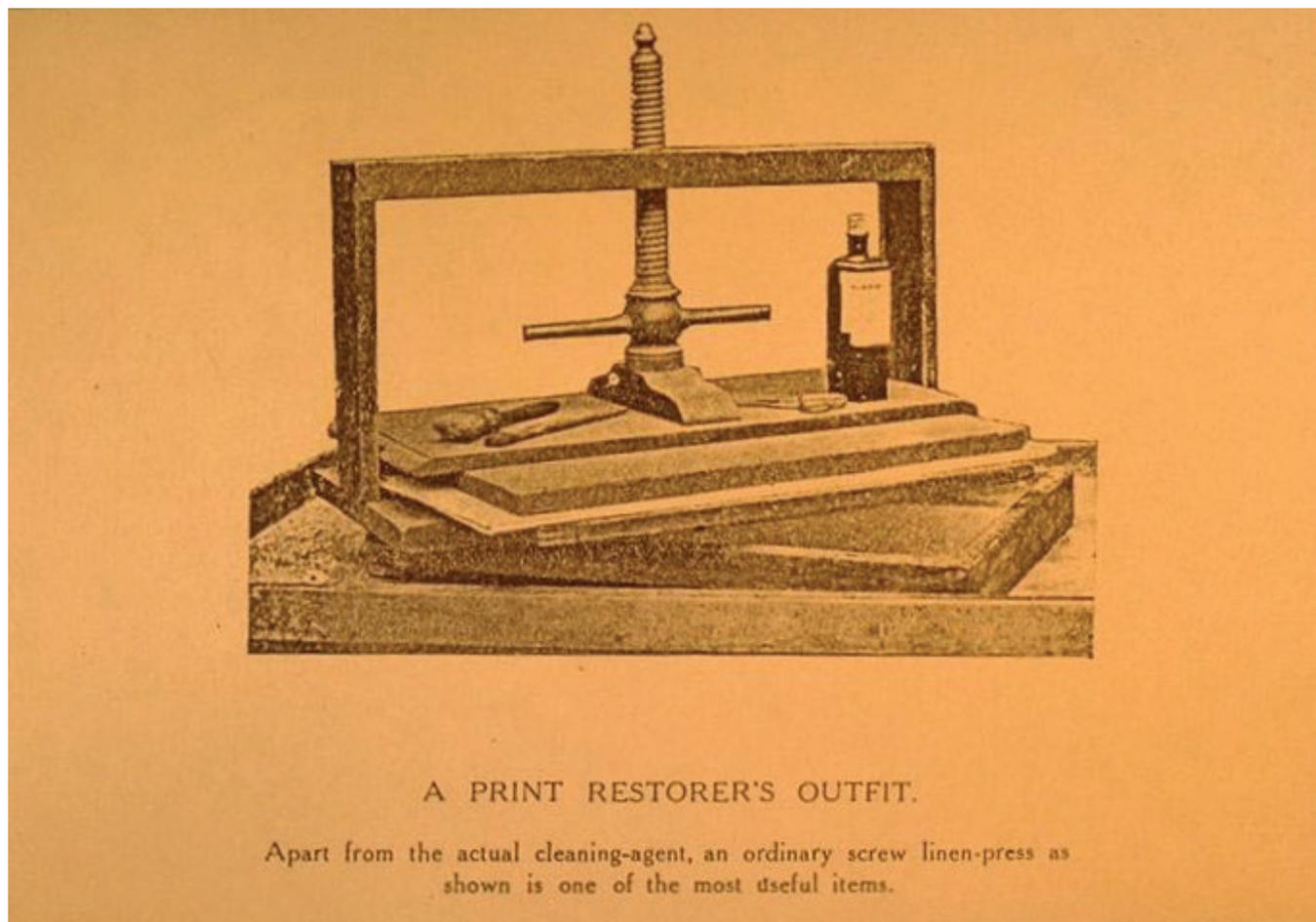


Fig. 13. A Print Restorer's Outfit. Maurice James Gunn, *Print Restoration and Picture Cleaning*, London, 1911.

in anything new, but the Fast Track system initially put into operation has got it going and accredited fully practicing conservators with more than seven years experience, including training.

There is now a move to combine all the conservation bodies in the U.K. into one large organization; this will engulf the IPC. Personally I feel that "small is beautiful."

Well, we paper conservators have moved on and many who were pioneers have gone before us. I would like to dedicate this paper to this latter group, which included my master, Mordo Barnard. We must be grateful for their inspiration and enthusiasms. I have learnt not to be critical of early techniques, now dispensed with. We have all learnt from them. In fact I have been there myself after over thirty years in private practice, having discarded soluble nylon and the hypochlorites, and am fully aware now of the harsh climates works of art on paper have to suffer in different parts of the globe, particularly high and low humidity levels. Not everywhere enjoys the equable climate of our *green and pleasant land*. It was a surprise to find how hard it was, given the low RH level, to press paper on the East Coast of America when I first attempted it. I also experience the joy of American conservators over here

with the ease that pressing can be carried out. New inventions and new developments, along with different philosophies, have, I think, elevated what we might now call an emergent profession (fig. 13).

I would like to thank the Book and Paper Group of the AIC and Elmer Eusman for inviting me to give this paper at the conference in Arlington, Virginia, in June 2003. It was a pleasure, as always, to be in the USA amongst my fellow conservators and enthusiasts.

REFERENCE

Hey, Margaret. 1977. Paper bleaching: Its simple chemistry and working procedures. *The Paper Conservator* 2: 10-23.

JANE MCAUSLAND, FIIC, ACR MIPC
Nether Hall Barn
Old Newton
Stowmarket
Suffolk, IP14 4PP
U.K.
janemca@globalnet.co.uk