

Recommendations for the improved storage of the Cattewater Wreck Textiles

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Introduction

The textile and cordage fragments were examined at Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery on Monday 6 December 2010. They form part of the group of finds excavated from the Cattewater Wreck and published in 1984¹. The collection will be accessioned to the museum with the following accession number for the site: AR.1985.24. Currently each object has a finds number, e.g. 77 CW 168 or 78 CW 272. The objects will be stored in the museum's archaeological store which has a fairly stable environment within acceptable parameters². Three of the textiles are currently on display in the recently opened 'Uncovered' archaeology gallery.

The brief is to improve the long term storage conditions of the objects to reduce the risk of further deterioration. Consideration was also made for the potential need for both sides of the objects to be viewed by researchers, as well as the possible need to display some of the textiles. Many of the individual textile fragments together make up parts of a larger garment³ and it may be desirable that the potential remains for them to be visually integrated for display.

Condition

The textiles and cordage were treated and analysed between excavation and publication and have since been stored in a small rigid card box with no padding. While some are in a reasonable condition, they have suffered creasing, distortion and some fragmentation since recorded. This appears to be largely due to inadequate support in storage. The textiles and cordage pieces can be divided into two groups according to their storage needs: larger textiles and small fragments of textile and cordage.

The larger fragments have been tacked onto nylon net, by Elizabeth Crowfoot⁴, to allow for safer handling by herself and colleagues during the analysis of the textiles. This has clearly protected the textiles during this process but does not offer adequate stabilisation for long term protection. In some instances the temporary treatment is putting strain on the weakest parts of textile, when combined with the lack of support in the storage box.

The smaller fragments are stored in sealed sample bags that do not have holes punched in them. Some of the fragments are stitched onto the cards that have their

¹ M Redknap (ed.). 1984. *The Cattewater Wreck: The investigation of an armed vessel of the early sixteenth century*. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, Archaeological Series No. 8. BAR British Series 131.

² Conversation with Fiona Pitt, Curator of Human History, Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery, 6/12/10.

³ Crowfoot E. 1984. In M Redknap(ed.). 1984. *The Cattewater Wreck: The investigation of an armed vessel of the early sixteenth century*. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, Archaeological Series No. 8. BAR British Series 131, 76-77.

⁴ Recorded in correspondence from Elizabeth Crowfoot and the archaeological team.

finds number written on them. The woollen textiles appear to be largely in a fairly stable condition, in terms of chemical deterioration. The textile and cordage made from vegetable fibres are in much poorer condition, clearly having deteriorated significantly since they were packaged. The structural elements have fragmented and the embrittled fibres are powdering. Many of the cordage samples that were stitched to card have broken up and become loose.

Recommendations for improved storage

The condition and storage recommendations for each textile fragment are given in appendix 1, table 1. Most of the larger textiles require conservation treatment to reduce sharp folds, creases and distortions. A range of storage methods were considered, taking into account the need to fully support the textiles, access to the reverse, the potential need to display some fragments and possibly to be able to visually integrate adjoining fragments of the same garment; and their integration into the museum's archaeological collections and store. It was decided that where possible the textiles should not be stitched onto a support. Instead it is recommended that they are supported in purpose made mounts with individual niches to support the textile within an acid-free card mount or box. The materials required and their estimated cost are given in appendix 2.

It is recommended that the re-storage project for the larger fragments should involve the following stages:

- Recording including photography
- Localised humidification and realignment of creased and distorted areas where necessary.
- Draw the outline of the aligned textile, including fragments.
- Make a padded board from unbuffered Museum board with at least 2 layers of scoured unbleached brushed cotton covered in unbleached scoured cotton calico. The upper layers of the brushed cotton should have the shape of the textile cut out from them and then the calico stitched through all the padding layers around the inside edge of the cut out. This will create a niche for the textile fragments to sit in.
- Window mounts should be cut from unbuffered Museum board to fit each mount.
- Fine nylon net should be conservation dyed, using Ciba Geigy Lanaset dyes to colour match the fragments.
- The colour-matched fine nylon net should be stretched over the inside of the window mount and fixed.
- The window mount should then be hinged to the padded board using calico strips which can be adhered to the window mount and stitched to the back of the padded board.
- The textile fragment(s) are then positioned in the recess and the nylon net covered window mount is then lowered over the textile.
- The mounted textiles can then be boxed in a standard textile box. They can be arranged on trays, with cotton tape handles, that are separated by blocks of Plastazote foam. The standard box will easily fit within the storage furniture.
- Provide handling guidelines for viewing both sides.

The smaller individual fragments of textile and the fragments of rope or cord can be stored using the following steps:

- Recording including photography
- Select an appropriate sized crystal box and cut two layers of thin Plastazote (of appropriate depth for the object) to the size of the box.
- Trace around the outline of the fragments.
- In the upper layer of Plastazote (same depth as object) cut out correct shaped and sized niches using tracings.
- Place both layers of Plastazote in box and cover with spider tissue or soft acid-free, unbuffered tissue.
- Place objects into lined niches.
- Very small fragments of fibre can be stored in labelled sample bags.
- Place packed fragments on a tray in side one of the large textile boxes.
- Provide handling guidelines for viewing both sides.

Estimated cost of the re-storage project.

The time and materials required for the project are given in appendices 1 and 2. In total it is estimated that the project will require 57.67 hours and £216 worth of materials giving a total estimated cost of £1946 to include the conservation of the larger textiles and the re-packing of all the textiles and cordage samples. This proposed storage improvement should significantly enhance the long-term preservation of the collection and enable its integration into the museum's archaeological collection. It will also improve conditions for study access and possible display.