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The Conservation Treatment of a Plan of Newcastle upon Tyne by James Corbridge

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T*his note is a summary of the methodology and results of the recent conservation of the Plan of Newcastle 1723 by James Corbridge, which is owned by the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne. The paper focuses on issues related to the art history and conservation treatment of the Plan.*

pieces, which were individually lined on canvas and then collectively lined again on an overall canvas. The artwork was in a decayed condition, owing principally to past fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity as well as to severe handling.

BACKGROUND

James Corbridge's Plan of Newcastle is one of the earliest maps depicting the town and includes, along its margins, 26 images of important buildings. As well as depicting the layout of the town, the artwork hints at aspects of its economic and social life, providing a record at an important stage of Newcastle's development. Although the Plan is not explicitly dated, there seems little doubt that it was produced in 1723 by James Corbridge.¹ The print belonging to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne (fig. 1) is part of a study collection and its artwork carries evidence of its being printed and then subsequently further enhanced by hand-drawn additives. It also appears to have undergone a number of transformations over time including the application of paper repairs and retouching, an overall coating,² a lining and a revised format.³

The Society's Plan was produced using black ink⁴ on laid paper⁵ and measures approximately 1100 x 700mm. Prior to its arrival in the paper-conservation studio it was folded into a book shape and the sheet had been cut into 15

ENGRAVED PRINT OR HAND-DRAWN ORIGINAL?

From an art-historical perspective it was important, early in the conservation process, to establish whether this Plan was a printed or a hand-drawn original. Unlike the other known surviving versions⁶ there was no conclusive evidence for this particular Plan being a printed production; neither the name of an engraver or publisher appears on it nor does it have the characteristic crisp lines of an engraved print. On first inspection indeed the Plan appeared to be hand-drawn. It does, however, contain a number of graphic irregularities, which suggest that it is probably a printed version, which subsequently has been heavily re-drawn. The evidence for this conclusion can be seen in fig. 3 which shows a detail of a paper infill. Note the line characteristics on the town walls: the vertical parallel lines seem printed whereas the lines of the wall profile seem hand-drawn. This possibly indicates that faded or weak printed lines were redrawn by hand during previous restoration/retouching.

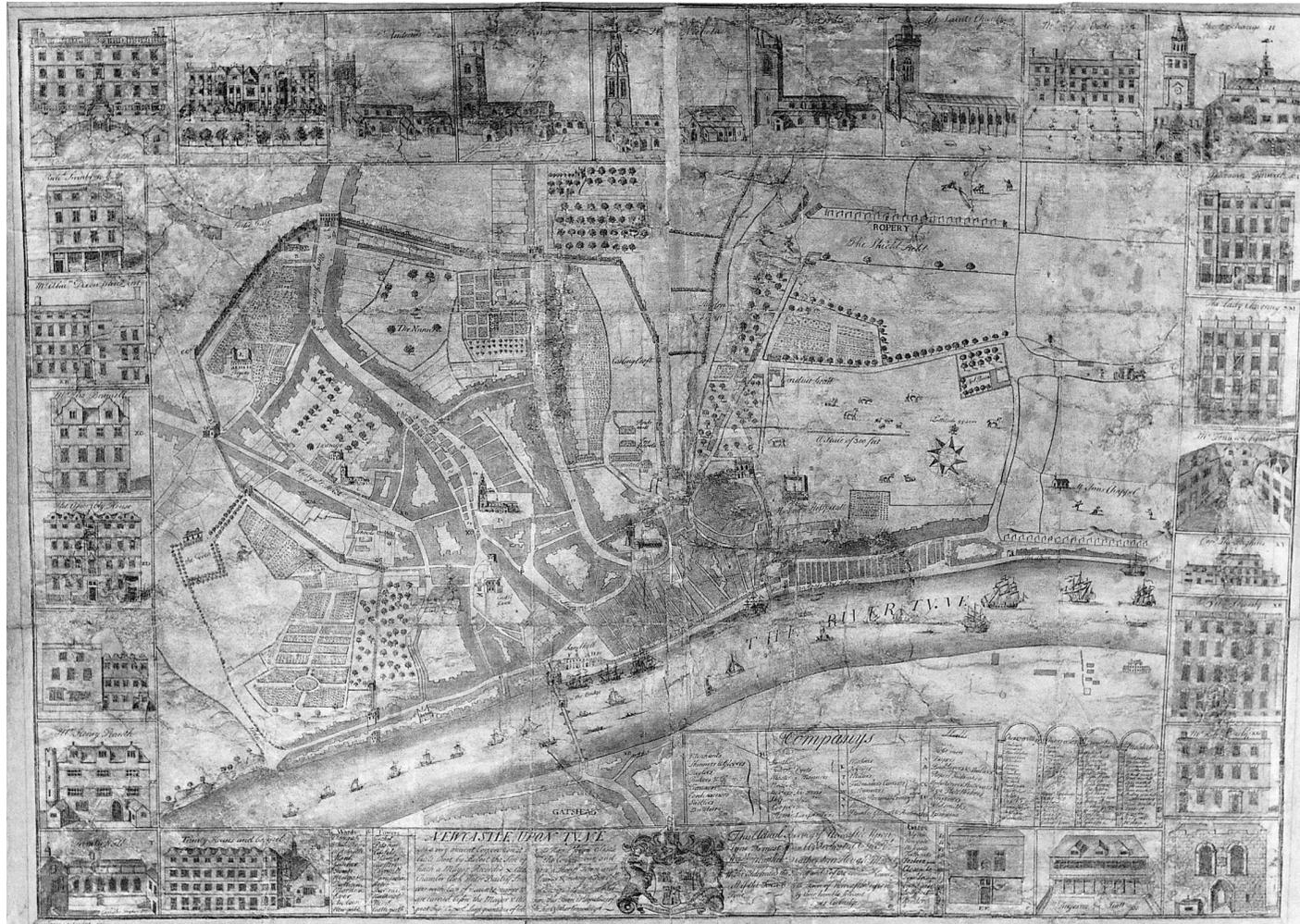


Fig. 1 Corbridge's Plan of Newcastle, 1723, after conservation, photographed in normal light.

CONSERVATION REPORT

Analysis and identification of the artist's materials

Prior to the conservation work the Plan was subjected to various analytical techniques in order to clarify the identity of the materials used as well as mapping some of the visible damage; this was a necessary preliminary to ensure a more effective conservation treatment.

As a result of these investigations, the primary support was identified as European hand-made laid paper composed of cotton and linen fibres, the first secondary support as cotton and the second secondary support as linen; the media was carbon black ink and the adhesive was wheat starch.

Condition

The condition of the components of the Plan, including textile, paper, media and coating, was investigated and fig. 2 shows a cross-section view of its five components. Before conservation the Plan was in poor condition. In particular, the overall recto exhibited signs of discoloration,⁷ surface dirt, planar distortion, abrasion, brittleness and degradation of the materials used for the construction of the spine. Moreover, at a localised level, the paper was lost or thin, stained and with blistering/flaking which were especially extensive around the repaired areas where the adhesive was degraded. In addition, the Plan exhibited many signs of previous conservation work, particularly infills and retouching. The ink, media, however, showed no apparent damage. The secondary support showed signs of extensive dirt and loss of strength and consequently it was losing its original function of providing strength to the primary support. The damage appeared to be the result of extensive handling, combined with exposure to light, air pollutants, fluctuations in relative humidity and temperature, and acid migration from the covers.

Treatment

In conserving the map, treatment needed to consider its role as, potentially, both a work of

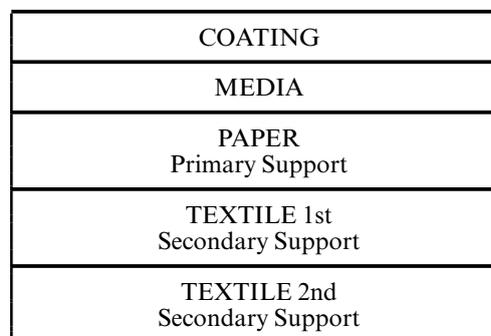


Fig. 2 Diagram showing a cross-section view of the five layers that composed the Plan before conservation.

art on paper and as a detailed archival record. The Plan resembled a jigsaw, with many interesting restorations in the form of paper infills and retouching, undertaken to a high quality; fig. 4 shows a detail under transmitted light which emphasises its fragmented nature. It was important therefore to recognise that excessive cleaning could have changed the entire appearance of the artwork and could have made the old restored areas more visible and dominant. Considerations of historical integrity were stronger than the aesthetics of the artwork and consequently one of the aims of the conservation project was to improve the chemical and physical state of the Plan while causing minimum changes to its overall appearance.

Treatment report

The Plan was subjected to ten different paper conservation treatments. The aim of these was firstly to reduce immediate damage by removing the surface dirt and soluble discoloration, by consolidating cracks and reducing the planar distortion. Secondly, treatment was designed to improve the longevity of the object by increasing the alkali reserve in the cellulose and by providing a new format that would minimise handling and excessive stress on the support and media.

The fragmented nature of the Plan and its restoration history made the conservation treatment a rather delicate operation. This

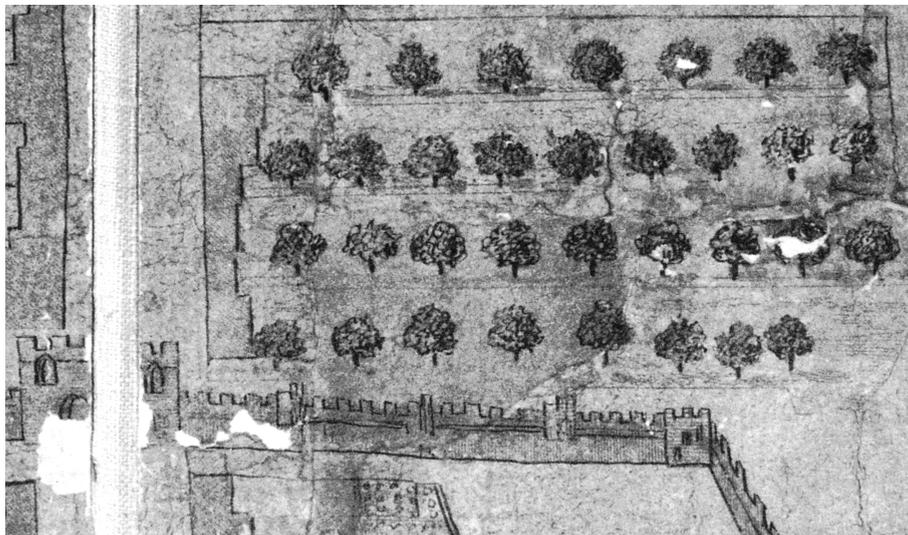


Fig. 3 Detail of the Plan before conservation, photographed in normal light. This shows a paper infill, which partly includes the Town Wall. The different line characteristics of the Town Wall seem to indicate manual retouching: the vertical parallel lines seem to be printed, whereas the line of the wall profile seems to be hand-drawn.

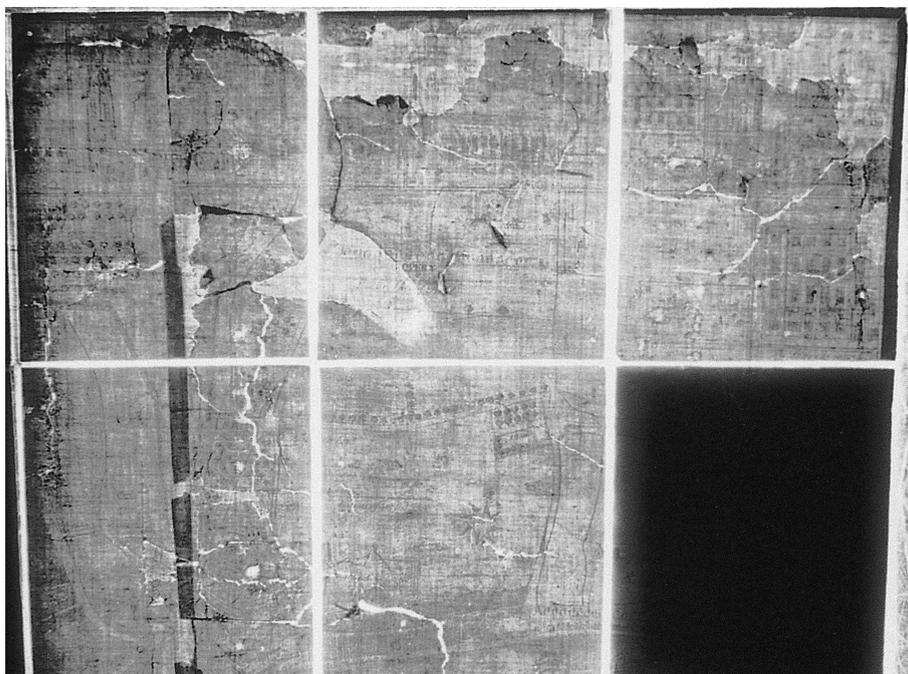


Fig. 4 The top right-hand corner of the Plan before conservation, photographed in transmitted light. Note the fragmented nature of the Plan.

included the removal of the two linings (textiles), washing and re-lining with Japanese paper. As noted above the Plan carried many paper repairs secured by the first textile lining; removing this lining without securing the recto could have led to the total detachment, and possible loss, of information on those paper repairs. Following a series of experiments, this problem was solved by applying a temporary facing to the object prior to the treatment. Fig. 1 shows the Plan after completion of this conservation work.

CONCLUSION

Following the conservation treatment of this Plan, great improvements to the condition of the artwork and to its long-term stability were achieved, prolonging its life expectancy. The work will ensure that it continues to be enjoyed and appreciated by researchers and the public for many years to come.

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NOTES

¹ J. R. Boyle, *Notes on Corbridge's Actual Survey Newcastle-upon-Tyne*, Newcastle (1889), 3: "... published in 1723 or 1724 . . .". See also F. Graham, *Maps of Newcastle*.

² Application of varnish of coatings to maps was often done during the nineteenth century to preserve the surface of the map; see Filter S., "Historic intent: Ludovico Ughi's Topographical Map of Venice 1729", *American Institute of Conservation, B&PG* (1994), 24, n. 1.

³ The map was cut into fifteen sheets, lined on canvas and folded.

⁴ Ultraviolet and infrared visual examinations revealed that the ink was carbon based, thereby ruling out iron-gall ink.

⁵ The Plan was heavily restored in the past with the addition of numerous wove paper repairs and extra margins.

⁶ Copies can be seen at the British Library, Bodleian Library and the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle.

⁷ For more information see pp. 44–64 of the Research Project (copy deposited in the Library of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle).

⁸ Bibliography can be obtained at the University of Northumbria (MA Conservation Fine Art).