

Icon NEWS

THE MAGAZINE OF THE INSTITUTE OF CONSERVATION • MAY 2015 • ISSUE 58

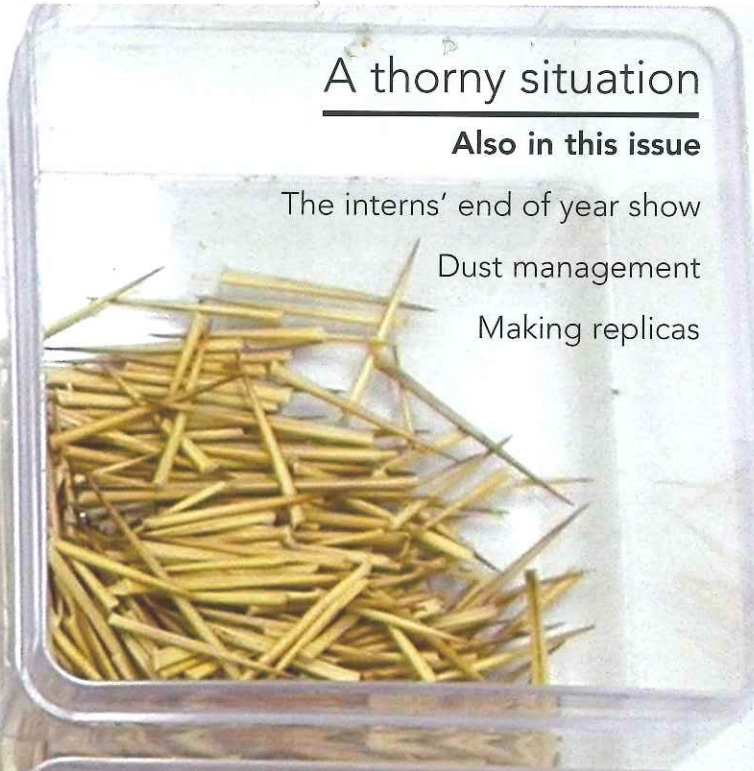
A thorny situation

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The interns' end of year show

Dust management

Making replicas



A new conservation tool

The Staffordshire Hoard Conservation Team at Birmingham Museums Trust on using thorns to conserve the Staffordshire Hoard

The conservators at Birmingham Museums Trust have been using thorns to clean decorative metalwork, such as vesta cases, coins, buttons and in particular the Staffordshire Hoard, for the past few years.

WHY THORNS?

The idea of using thorns for the Staffordshire Hoard objects was first considered as gramophone records were historically played with thorns, suggesting that it may be a suitable material to trial.

Steel implements such as scalpels, picks and pins are commonly seen in a conservator's toolkit, but these tools are

Visitors around the new conservation and research tables at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery



much harder than the hoard gold and silver alloy objects and are therefore not suitable due to the risk of scratching and possibly marking the gold. Many hoard objects already have a number of surface scratches, but the majority of these are the result of manufacture construction marks or from the subsequent removal of their component parts from the original objects in the 7th century. Thorns have become the perfect solution for the conservation of the 4000 fragments and objects that make up the Staffordshire Hoard.

THE BENEFIT OF THORNS

Thorns have the advantage of having very fine, naturally sharp but flexible points that can get into very small areas. Many hoard objects have very fine cloisonné or filigree decoration, and a tiny implement is required to remove soil around these decorative features.

Thorns from several species of plant were trialled, but the thorns that had the properties we were looking for – softness, flexibility, and thin/small size – were berberis, pyrocanthus, hawthorn and blackthorn. These thorns vary in size and flexibility, which enables us to select the thorn that is most appropriate for a particular object.

OTHER VIRTUES

In addition to being softer than steel and safer to use on hoard objects, using thorns in conservation has other indirect benefits:

- Thorns are a natural product that is completely biodegradable, so they can be disposed of along with regular rubbish
- They are a sustainable and renewable product
- They are free of charge and in abundant supply in the back gardens and allotments of Britain, so they do not affect our budget
- Unlike cocktail sticks, they do not tend to splinter; instead, the point grows dull or the entire thorn snaps in half, at which point it is simply thrown away

POSSIBLE DRAWBACKS

A few potential risks to using thorns have been identified, the first one being that insects might hitch a ride into the studio on the thorns and their associated branches and leaves. To minimise this risk, bags of thorns are inspected prior to being brought into the museum, at which point they are held in the conservation offices instead of the studio until they are ready to be clipped. The second risk is that some natural substance such as plant juice/sap might be transferred from the thorns to the objects. To minimise this risk thorns are inspected and only dry, clean thorns are used.



The results of careful cleaning with thorns

THORNS IN ACTION

The use of thorns has been very successful in conserving these important objects and the conservation process can now be seen featuring in the New Staffordshire Hoard Gallery which opened last October at Birmingham Museum and Art

Gallery. Visitors can see the tools, learn about how the hoard has been conserved since its discovery and even look down a microscope to see the cleaning in action.

For more information about the hoard and regular updates you can visit www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk

Cleaning with a thorn

