

The Royal Institution of Great Britain, Grand Staircase Restoration

By Scott Bowran a BAFRA Accredited Member



The Royal Institution of Great Britain, a building which has been home to the science establishment for more than 200 years, re-opened during the autumn of 2008, having undergone a refurbishment costing in excess of £20m.

Various historical aspects of the building were preserved with major conservation work being carried out to the original entrance hall containing the Grand Staircase, the famous lecture theatre and Faraday laboratory.

Scott Bowran and David Evans of Warring & Lansdall were invited to research and then undertake the conservation work required to restore the handrail to the Grand Staircase. A project, which in conjunction with *Rupert Harris Conservation* who were responsible for work to the metal balusters, was to be undertaken during 2007/2008.

There is strong evidence that work carried out at numbers 20 and 21 Albermarle Street, was that of John Carr, a leading architect in the

North of England during the latter part of the eighteenth century, and who was closely associated with the then owners of the property.

Design evidence for the Grand Staircase of the Royal Institution comes from a comparison of its design and detailing with that of Carr's Imperial Staircase at Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire. Furthermore, the steps of the Grand Staircase are identical in profile to those of one of the staircases at Basildon Park in Berkshire, built to Carr's design in 1776. The "Carr-like" qualities of the metal balusters on the lower flight of the staircase of number 20, the steps of which are made of stone, prompt the thought that these two are both by Carr and of the same mid 1770s date, undertaken before the house was sold.

The Conservation Works

The mahogany handrail was removed in several sections and was taken off site to be further dismantled and the initial work to be started. This involved removing all of the mahogany inserts that



were loose/lifting or in some cases missing as can be seen in some of the photographs. The main 7 sections of handrail then had

many layers of applied finishes carefully removed, sometimes by



painfully dry scraping these layers off by hand to reveal the original underlying patination.



Necessary repairs to the handrail were then undertaken including having to re-build all of the corner sections, which were badly damaged and to replace two sections of handrail (previously badly repaired).

The next stage was to re-lay most of the mahogany inserts on the handrail leaving the ends “open”, as these all needed to be mitred, then adjusted and re-carved on site.



With the entire handrail in position, terminals in place, end sections carved and any remaining inserts put back into place, the remaining original patination was preserved, and sections of inserts, and any newly created areas, patinated to blend in.

The success of this project is down not only to the works carried out by the individual conservators involved, but also to those behind the scenes who often do not get the appreciation they deserve, in particular Katharine St Paul, Curator of Collections at the RI, without whose enthusiasm, dedication and hard work this project would not have been possible.

*Warring & Lansdall, 33 Nightingale Road, Carshalton, Surrey SM5 2DH
Rupert Harris Conservation, Studio 5C, Fawe Street, London E14 6PD*

Katharine St Paul, Curator of Collections, The Royal Institution of Great Britain, 21 Albemarle Street, London W1S 4BS