

Conservation in context: a Maori meeting house in Surrey

Dean Sully

Since the Institute of Archaeology was founded in the 1930s, conservation has been an integral part of its activities, but it is now being practised and taught in new, more culturally responsive ways.¹ An example of this approach is the involvement of staff and students in the conservation of a Maori meeting house at Clandon Park, Surrey, made possible by a partnership between the Institute and the National Trust.

The ways in which students are now trained in conservation at the Institute of Archaeology challenges traditional practice. It goes beyond sticking pots together and covering up the cracks. Conservation is now being viewed as a socially constructed activity, like other specialisms in archaeology. The old certainties of a profession based on a technical understanding of the material world are being replaced by an engagement with diverse cultural perspectives and a need to justify the conservation process to a wide range of interested groups – the public, the original producers and the current owners.² This trend is exemplified by a new partnership between the Institute and the National Trust, which provides opportunities for students and staff to undertake projects at National Trust properties and thus tackle the challenges of conserving objects in their own contexts, outside the laboratory (Fig. 1).



Figure 1 Institute of Archaeology students at Claydon House, Berkshire, monitoring and removing mould on collections in the Verney Museum.

Conservation at the National Trust
The National Trust acquired its first property in 1896 and now manages over two hundred, containing more than a million objects, which range from great works of art to humble items of domestic life.³ The large number of properties and the diversity of the objects they contain offer vast potential for student projects that build a bridge between the academic study of conservation at the Institute and the pragmatic action required to conserve objects in their own contexts. In recent years, students have undertaken projects with the Trust that range from conservation of mosaics, building fabric and archaeological artefacts at Chedworth Roman villa (Gloucestershire) to nineteenth-century collections of objects (Cabinets of Curiosity) at Hatchlands Park (Surrey), Calke Abbey (Derbyshire), Wallington (Northumberland) and Claydon House (Buckinghamshire).



Figure 2 The Maori meeting house Hinemihi in the gardens of Clandon Park, Surrey, 2002.

Hinemihi, the Maori meeting house at Clandon Park: a biography

A project that dramatically reflects the potential of our partnership with the Trust is the conservation of Hinemihi, the Maori meeting house at Clandon Park (Surrey) – a small wooden carved and painted building in the gardens of the park (Fig. 2).⁴ The building is one of only four meeting houses outside New Zealand, and the only one outside a museum. Hinemihi is a building of immense importance to the Maori who created her and to those for whom she is today a focus for cultural activities;⁵ “... she is someone who you should come and see when you are sick and unhappy and who will restore your sense of Maori identity”.⁶

Hinemihi's biography starts with her construction at Te Wairoa, North Island, New Zealand in 1880 (Fig. 3), where she was used as a cultural centre by the Ngati Hinemihi tribal group and for Maori cultural performances (tourists paid to view the carvings, attend dances and enjoy refreshments). On 10 June 1886 an eruption of the nearby Mount Tarawera destroyed Te Wairoa, killing 153 people and devastating the local area. A group of 30–50 were saved by sheltering inside Hinemihi during the eruption. In 1892 Hinemihi (Fig. 4) was bought by the Fourth Earl of Onslow as a souvenir of his time as governor of New Zealand and transported to Clandon Park, where she was reconstructed as a summerhouse.

By 1917, concerns about the condition of the carvings lead to Hinemihi being renovated. She was reconstructed by New Zealand soldiers, including members of the Maori Pioneer Battalion, who were convalescing after the First World War at



Figure 3 *Hinemihi during construction in Te Wairoa, New Zealand, in 1880.*

Clandon Park, which was being used as a military hospital. Hinemihi is said to have been a source of spiritual comfort for Maori soldiers during this time.⁷ Between the First and Second World Wars, Hinemihi was used as a summerhouse and garden store for the Clandon estate. At some time in the 1930s a major reconstruction took place which changed the original closed configuration of the meeting house into an open structure. After the Second World War, Hinemihi was used as a goat house and a children's playhouse. The seventh Earl of Onslow recalled: "Because there was sand instead of a floor, it was a lovely place to play. We stored our gumboots there. It was a long way to the top of the house . . . so we left them in the Maori House".⁸

In 1956 the National Trust took over the running of Clandon Park, and by then Hinemihi was in need of attention (Fig. 5). In 1960 a major refurbishment was carried out: the roof was replaced and the carvings were cleaned and repainted. Unfortunately, despite the provision of materials and advice from New Zealand, some of the carvings were incorrectly positioned, and, more importantly, the building was left without a front wall. By 1978, further restoration work was needed. Following consultation with New Zealand's Historic Places Trust and the British Museum, a major restoration was undertaken by a firm specializing in historic wooden buildings. This created the closed building underneath a thick thatch roof that is evident today (Fig. 6).

Since this last intervention there has been increasing contact with Ngati Hinemihi in New Zealand and also with Ngati Ranana (the London Maori Group). The latter have adopted Hinemihi as their own

meeting house and they organize an annual hangi (literally an earth oven, which is the focus of a cultural celebration) of London-based Kohanga reo (Maori language preschool) (Fig. 7). In 1995, 30 members of Ngati Hinemihi were present to dedicate a gift of new carvings to Hinemihi. Then, to maintain Maori involvement in the maintenance of Hinemihi, proposals were made by Ngati Hinemihi in 1998 to continue refurbishment, by adding missing carvings, replacing the thatch roof with a shingle roof made of totara bark, and installing photographs of members of Ngati Hinemihi in the interior to dwell among the ancestral spirits.⁹ The implementation of these proposals would allow Hinemihi to become increasingly a focus for Maori

cultural activities. The National Trust agreed to consider these proposals when the present thatch needs replacing, which would initiate the next phase of major intervention in the physical fabric of the building, and this has prompted a reconsideration of what Hinemihi means to the Trust.

The National Trust's Hinemihi

To the National Trust, Hinemihi is enigmatic. She is regarded as a reflection of the Onslow family's connection with New Zealand, and is presented at Clandon Park, together with other Maori objects, as a souvenir of that part of the colonial past. Hinemihi is not the type of building the Trust is used to conserving and managing; it is more accustomed to monumental buildings, presented in an historical perspective dependent on material evidence. This focus on materiality has led the Trust to view Hinemihi as a "a work of art in our care".¹⁰ This point of view has been questioned by Maori, who think that the Trust shows "little appreciation of the house as a cultural object with its own system of symbols, as distinct from a collection of carved posts and painted scroll designs to be restored".¹¹ Thus, there is potential for misunderstanding in a situation where divergent views of the meaning and value of the building coexist.

The Trust has now started to gather information about Hinemihi, first by obtaining a chronology of historical events, and next by arranging for a survey of the physical fabric, designed to connect the history of the building with the existing structure. The survey was conducted by students from the Institute of Archaeology in June 2003 and, before it began, a karakia whakatapua (blessing service) was led by Raheera Windsor, a kuia (elder) of Ngati Ranana, during the annual hangi on 8 June 2003. A protocol for carrying out the work



Figure 4 *Hinemihi at Te Wairoa after the eruption of Mount Tarawera in 1886.*



Figure 5 *Hinemihi at Clandon Park prior to restoration in 1960.*

was agreed with members of Ngati Ranana. It included approaching Hinemihi for the first time each day from the front rather than from the side, and refraining from eating, drinking or smoking on the marae (the gathering place in front of the building), as these activities are noa (profane) and would offend the ancestors.

The survey of the condition of the building and material analysis of paint samples has provided evidence of Hinemihi's various historical manifestations, as well as detailed information about changes in the physical fabric that will be used to assess the implications of any further interventions.¹² But this type of material-based conservation, to which the Trust is accustomed, is only one way of understanding Hinemihi, and it is not intended that it should exclude or subordinate other ways. The most important function of the information gathered so far is to provide a starting point for discussion with all groups interested in the long-term use and maintenance of Hinemihi.

Hinemihi's presence at Clandon Park now provides a cross-cultural link that is reflected in the current activities of the Maori community and in the positive response of the National Trust.¹³ The next stage of the process is for the Trust to increase its understanding of the cultural values that surround Hinemihi through consultation with the Maori community (Ngati Hinemihi and Ngati Ranana), New Zealand's Historic Places Trust and other interested groups. A formal outcome could then be an agreed conservation assessment and management plan.

The Maori Hinemihi

Despite Hinemihi now being far from her original home, to descendants of Ngati Hinemihi and UK-based Maori (Ngati Ranana) she remains a cultural expression who celebrates creation, history, whakapapa (genealogy), kinship and tribal identity. She is a physical embodiment of an honoured ancestor of Ngati Hinemihi and possesses wairua, the spirit or essence of being of their descendants and creators; mauri, a life force and the power of creation from the gods; and mana, ancestral power, prestige and status. To maintain the mana of meeting houses, the presence of tapu

(prohibition, sacredness) is required.¹⁴ These attributes require interaction with humans to maintain them or bring them to life. The reciting of whakapapa and the performance of korero (oratory), speech, and narratives associated with the ancestors, take place inside the meeting house or in front on the marae.

Meeting houses also serve as models for the Maori cosmos and perform a central function in Maori cultural and religious life. The marae is where ancestors are recalled and tribal history taught. It is the turangawaewae (place to stand), as it provides a genealogical connection to the land itself and the people, past and present. Thus, meeting houses outside New Zealand can be seen as removed from the cultural context that provides them with meaning and life. Some Maori feel that such houses should be returned to their land and people to regain their power, but others believe that overseas meeting houses can help teach people in other countries about Maori culture.¹⁵

Conclusion

Students and staff from the Institute of Archaeology have been working with the National Trust to develop an approach to the conservation of Hinemihi that challenges the Trust's traditional approach to the long-term conservation and management of buildings in its care. Hinemihi's physical fabric has undergone many transitions and the building should not be viewed as a static representation of any particular historical period, but rather as a structure in flux. Although the authority to manage the conservation process remains with the Trust, Hinemihi's role as a focus for Maori cultural activities must be regarded as a key element in any strategy of care for the building. The long-term main-



Figure 6 *Hinemihi at Clandon Park following restoration in 1980.*



Figure 7 Hinemihi at Clandon Park in June 2003 during the annual hangi of London-based Kohanga reo.

tenance of Hinemihi provides a unique opportunity for an open bi-cultural dialogue that can produce real benefits, beyond just ensuring the physical stability of the structure, for the Maori community in the UK and in New Zealand and for the National Trust and its members.

The example of Hinemihi illustrates how the widening responsibilities of modern conservation may fundamentally change the profession, from a passive technical service aimed at preserving the physical aspects of material objects to an active awareness of, and involvement in, the cultural contexts and values of the objects.

Notes

1. The Institute's approach to the conservation of objects has grown out of the way archaeology is understood, researched and taught there. For some comments on training in conservation at the Institute up to the late 1980s, see pp. 172–4 in N. J. Seeley, "Archaeological conservation: the development of a discipline", *Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology* 24, 161–75, 1987. In recent years the course in the conservation of objects has evolved from a three-year undergraduate BSc degree to a postgraduate course involving a one-year MA (Principles of Conservation), followed by a two-year MSc programme (Conservation for Archaeology and Museums).
2. This shift in function requires a re-interpretation of the skills required by a conservator; see A. Lister, "Indeterminate

- problems: exploring the potential of problem-based learning in conservation education", in *Tradition and innovation: advances in conservation*, A. Roy & P. Smith (eds), 114–18 (London: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 2000).
3. The National Trust is one of the largest registered charities in Britain; it manages its properties on behalf of the nation. Its policy paper "Historic Buildings: the conservation of their fixtures, fittings, decorations and contents" (1996) states that "It is the Trust's policy to show houses as far as possible in their natural state, as a guest might see them who had called on a summer afternoon . . . with a minimum of notices, ropes, and posts, which effectively destroy their atmosphere."
4. For the National Trust "The Maori house at Clandon Park is the single most important [ethnographic] item held . . . The house commemorates the governorship of New Zealand by the fourth Earl of Onslow", National Trust website, Historic Properties and Collections – Conservation, 15 July 2003, see www.nationaltrust.org.uk/historicproperties/index.cfm?page_id=48.
5. Maori refer to a meeting house as "he" or "she" and treat and respect the house as a living person. Hinemihi is the name of the tribal group, Ngati Hinemihi, which is a subgroup of Ngati Tuhourangi. The meeting house Hinemihi is named after a female ancestor of Ngati Hinemihi.
6. Rachel Windsor, quoted on p. 130 in E. Hooper-Greenhill, "Perspectives on

- Hinemihi: a Maori meeting house", *Colonialism and its objects: empire, material culture and the museum*, T. Barringer & T. Flynn (eds), 129–43 (London: Routledge, 1998).
7. See pp. 110–12 in A. Gallop, *The house with the golden eyes* (Sunbury-on-Thames: Running Horse Books, 1998).
8. The quotation is on p. 116 in Gallop (1998: n. 7 above).
9. See p. 159 in Gallop (1998: n. 7 above).
10. See pp. 49–75 in *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*, E. Hooper-Greenhill (London: Routledge 2000).
11. See p. 6 in B. Kernot, "Report of the Clandon Park, Surrey, meeting house, prepared for the Maori Buildings Committee, Historic Places Trust, 7-6-75", reproduced in *Tu Tangata: Maori news magazine*, 20, October/November 1984.
12. D. Sully, "Physical fabric survey of Hinemihi", unpublished National Trust internal report 2003.
13. The relationship between Ngati Ranana and the National Trust has been presented by the British government as an example of how social inclusion can function in the historic environment; see pp. 15–16 in *People and places: social inclusion policy for the built and historic environment*, G. Wheeldon (London: UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2002).
14. E. Lubcke, *The conservation of Whareniui outside New Zealand – living entities or dead objects?*, MA dissertation, Institute of Archaeology, UCL, 2003.
15. Lubcke (2003: see n. 14 above).