

The National Archives C 104/3 “The Wool Sample Books”— Conservation-Digitisation-Historical and Scientific Research-Public Access

ABSTRACT

The National Archives C 104/3 (Bull versus Jesser) contains letters and documents, dating from 1724 to 1736, which relate to the dyeing and clothier business of the Whitchurch family of Frome, Somerset, England. These include six dye recipe books that give the dye recipe with a colour sample alongside.

The Wool Sample Books themselves, besides being fascinating visual documents, are a source of incredible value for textile, social and industrial historians. They are also a source for interdisciplinary cooperation initiated by our conservation team.

Recipe books, like these early eighteenth-century Wool Sample Books, were a day-to-day working tool in a dyeing factory. Once out of use, they hardly ever survived. Therefore, these Wool Sample Books are a rare source of original dye recipes and matching samples. They are also exceptional in the reliability of the sample colour to be achieved, as they have not been exposed to light for about 280 years and have kept their original appearance. Dye and fibre analysis will provide strongly connected databases of both recipes and spectra.

The books will provide historians with detailed information about the wool industry in Frome, Somerset, and its related branches such as sheep farming and the production and import of dyeing ingredients. Since Somerset has been strongly connected to the wool industry, these books and their related documents may prove to be a valuable resource in understanding its social history.

True colour digitisation and transcription of the text will provide necessary research tools for both historians and scientists. Finally an online exhibition, created by education and conservation teams from The National Archives, could provide detailed information about the conservation of the books, research outcomes, and visually appealing images.

However, to date, access to these books has been limited due to their poor physical condition. Although hardly ever touched during the last 280 years, heavy usage at their date of origin, subsequent poor housing, and the structure of the books themselves have caused severe damage to all of them.

The main problem has been the distortion of the leaves caused by the weight and bulk of the wool samples and a certain degree of iron gall ink degradation. This did not allow a) the books to close properly and means the volumes were wedge-shaped and therefore very vulnerable to dust, and b) for common methods of flattening while introducing moisture. In-situ treatments have led to a very satisfactory result. These include: mechanical surface cleaning, dry flattening, gelatine-based mending of tears, and appropriate reattaching and housing of the wool samples in consultation with textile experts at the Textile Conservation Centre/ University of Southampton. To ensure the long-term chemical stability of the Wool Sample Books, a monitoring system will be implemented to document the state of the iron gall ink and the wool samples and their changes over a period of time. Specially designed boxes will keep the books in their newly achieved conformation.

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