

CONSERVATION AWARD WINNER



The Stonewest Group has already won a clutch of awards for its meticulous conservation work at the Tudor Cowdray House ruin in Midhurst, West Sussex, and there may be more to come. The group, specialists in the restoration and conservation of the nation's built heritage, drew on the skills of two of its operating companies, Stonewest Ltd and St Blaise, to preserve the ruins of what was once one of the country's finest Tudor mansions.

Having won the Restoration & Conservation category in the Museums & Heritage Show's prestigious Awards for Excellence 2008, Stonewest entered the project for the RICS Awards 2008. Success was immediate: the project won the Building Conservation category in the RICS South East Region and went on to become the region's Overall Winner, placing it on the shortlist for the Grand Final being hosted by Kevin McCloud at London's Mayfair Hotel on 17 October 2008. And competition will be fierce: another finalist is Birmingham Town Hall, another Stonewest Group project and overall winner in the RICS West Midlands Region.

Cowdray's ruins stand close to the banks of the River Rother where it meanders peacefully

Cowdray House (looking north east). The Gatehouse and the south-west corner with the chapel and Kitchen Tower in the East Range in the background.

between Midhurst and Easebourne in West Sussex. It's a remarkable place with a long, rich and eventful history that can be traced back to 1284 when Sir John Bohun moved from his fortified manor house on St Ann's Hill to a new home, 'Codreye' (the old Norman word meaning 'hazel thicket'), just across the river. In 1496 Sir David Owen inherited the estate and in 1520 began to demolish the house, gradually replacing it with the one now known simply as 'Cowdray'. Sir William Fitzwilliam purchased the house for £2,000 in 1529 and in 1532 received a licence from Henry VIII to 'empark and crenellate the manor of Cowdray'. Sir William, now the Earl of Southampton and one of the most powerful men in the kingdom, completed Cowdray and went on to make many additions and alterations before his death in 1542 when the estate passed to his half-brother. Cowdray, which bore many points of similarity to Hampton Court Palace, entered its heyday – considered one of the most magnificent houses in England, it received and hosted visits from Henry VIII, Edward VI and Elizabeth I.

But 250 years later, on the evening of 24 September 1793, disaster struck. The house was devastated by a fire caused by



Going, going, gone! Plugging the Cintec anchor bores with a disc cut from the end of the core removed.



builders refurbishing the house in preparation for the young owner's forthcoming marriage. Worse was to follow. As the ruins smouldered, the owner, the 8th Viscount Montague, drowned in a boating accident. The remains of one of England's finest Tudor houses were left to rot.

In 1908 Cowdray's fortune changed. Sir Weetman Dickinson Pearson (later 1st Viscount Cowdray) purchased the estate and ordered a restoration project that saved the ruin from total collapse. In 1996, Midhurst Town Council and the 4th Viscount Cowdray developed a rescue plan: an independent charity, the Cowdray Heritage Trust, was formed, given a 99-year lease and responsibility to preserve the ruin, manage the site and turn it into a successful visitor attraction. But by now, the ruin, a Scheduled Ancient Monument and Grade I-listed building set in grounds designed by 'Capability' Brown, was on the English Heritage 'At Risk' Register – it was literally falling apart.

The trust submitted a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund to finance an ambitious conservation project. Apart from preserving the ruin, the project also encompassed restoring the Tudor kitchen; creating a display area in a vaulted cellar; converting an adjacent stable block into a visitor centre; landscaping to provide better access for visitors and refurbishing the Conduit House, a nearby building of similar age, for accommodation. The Heritage Lottery Fund granted £2.6 million, 70% of the £3.8 million needed for the project, and significant grants and gifts from English Heritage, the Cowdray Estate, local councils and many others made up the remaining £1.2 million. After a decade of planning and fund-raising, work to save Cowdray could finally begin.

The Stonewest Group, renowned for its knowledge of traditional building materials and expertise in restoring and conserving period buildings, was engaged as principal contractor and started work in November 2005. The project's conservation philosophy was definite and straightforward: 'conserve as found' – protect the ruins from further decay and preserve them for future generations to enjoy. This guiding principle covered the original ruins, the conservation attempts in the early 1900s and

the lichen and algae that had grown over the years to provide an irreplaceable patina of time.

Extensive research identified the source of the materials that had been used during Cowdray's long history and this allowed any new material needed to be drawn from the same source. (A notable exception was to 'plunder' further material from the first owner's long-since ruined home on nearby St Ann's Hill, the apparent source of some of Cowdray's stonework!)

To stabilise the structure, Stonewest carefully bored holes through the remaining masonry into which they threaded and secured 540 metres of Cintec stainless-steel anchors. Then, to ensure an 'invisible repair', the lichen-encrusted end of each masonry core removed was sliced off, the surface patina lined up and the 2cm-thick disc used to plug the hole. Elsewhere, around 5,000 micro-pins were used to retain individual stones and bricks.

In keeping with the conservation philosophy, stone was only replaced if it was no longer physically capable of fulfilling its structural purpose: in the event, only a single cubic metre of Midhurst stone, quarried just half-a-mile from the site, was needed along with a similar amount of Chilmark and Caen stone. Handmade, clamp-fired bricks were made at Pitsham Brickworks, just over a mile away, individually selected to match the brickwork being repaired and then hand-distressed to replicate the passing of time. About 70 tonnes of sand from the Pendean Sand Quarry at West Lavington, also about a mile away, were used to provide the mortar and pointing needed to repair and conserve the masonry. Extensive tests on the ruin's remaining pointing resulted in a basic palette of seven mortar mixes which were then blended at their point of use with charcoal, chalk, crushed slag and coloured sand to exactly match the colour of the pointing being repaired. Wherever possible the few original timber lintels have been preserved and protected but most of those installed during the conservation work in the early 1900s had failed and were consequently replaced. Finally, over 10,000 creasing tiles were especially fired and used to cap the walls to protect them from further damage.

The delicate remains of the plasterwork, once a fine example of 18th-century Italian craftsmanship, have been

conserved by a dedicated team of skilled plaster conservators from St Blaise. A sheeted-scaffold covered the remains of the plaster detailing in the chapel for nine months, protecting it while the lime putty was thoroughly set.

The Tudor kitchen, the domain of Robert May during the 1630s and one of the few places unaffected by the fire, has been re-roofed, restored and re-equipped using details from his book, one of the earliest English-language cookery books. Any remaining ironwork, from the massive pintails of the main gate to the remains of the window frames and the hands of the gatehouse clock, was carefully cleaned and treated with black wax oil. The roof of the Conduit House, rotting and riddled with death-watch beetle, has been replaced with local oak and its interior refurbished. The 400-metre-long raised causeway running from North Street in Midhurst to the stone bridge over the River Rother has been resurfaced, the bridges repaired and landscaping now provides a

carpet of lawns and hard-surface paths.

Cowdray is now open to the public and has been removed from the English Heritage 'At Risk' Register. In the words of the RICS judges, "The buildings, which were previously a dangerous ruin, are now fully accessible to the public as an 'open air' museum. All the important architectural features have been retained and the ruins have clarity to the spaces and structures. Conservation should be restrained in its application and this project has been meticulous and elegant in its approach. The result is a worthwhile monument which distinctly illustrates its previous use and historical contribution to the area."

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