

Front of Groote Schuur, official residence of the South Africa's president

Some barn, some leather

Some people get all the luck. The phone rings and someone says: "You remember the gilt leather frieze in the Drawing Room? Well, we've just come to the end of a large restoration project and there is some money left..."

To Roy Thomson, the head of the UK's Leather Conservation Centre in Northampton, the call from the curator of one of South Africa's most prestigious buildings was the perfect antidote to a grey winter's day in February this year. In quick time he and two colleagues found themselves flying down to Cape Town to advise on the leathers used in Groote Schuur—the big barn, in Dutch—and to rehang leather panels in the magnificent rooms of the official residence of the president of South Africa.

For those with a penchant for quiz games, Groote Schuur would probably be remembered as the giant teaching hospital in Cape Town where the world's first heart transplant took place. In this instance, however, it is also the name of a magnificent, landmark home in typical Dutch architectural style, part of the estate dating back to 1657 when the Cape's first governor Jan van Riebeeck established a



Plaque above the front door and set into the Dutch gable depicting Jan van Riebeeck landing at the Cape in 1652

granary to store the grain of the Dutch East India Company.

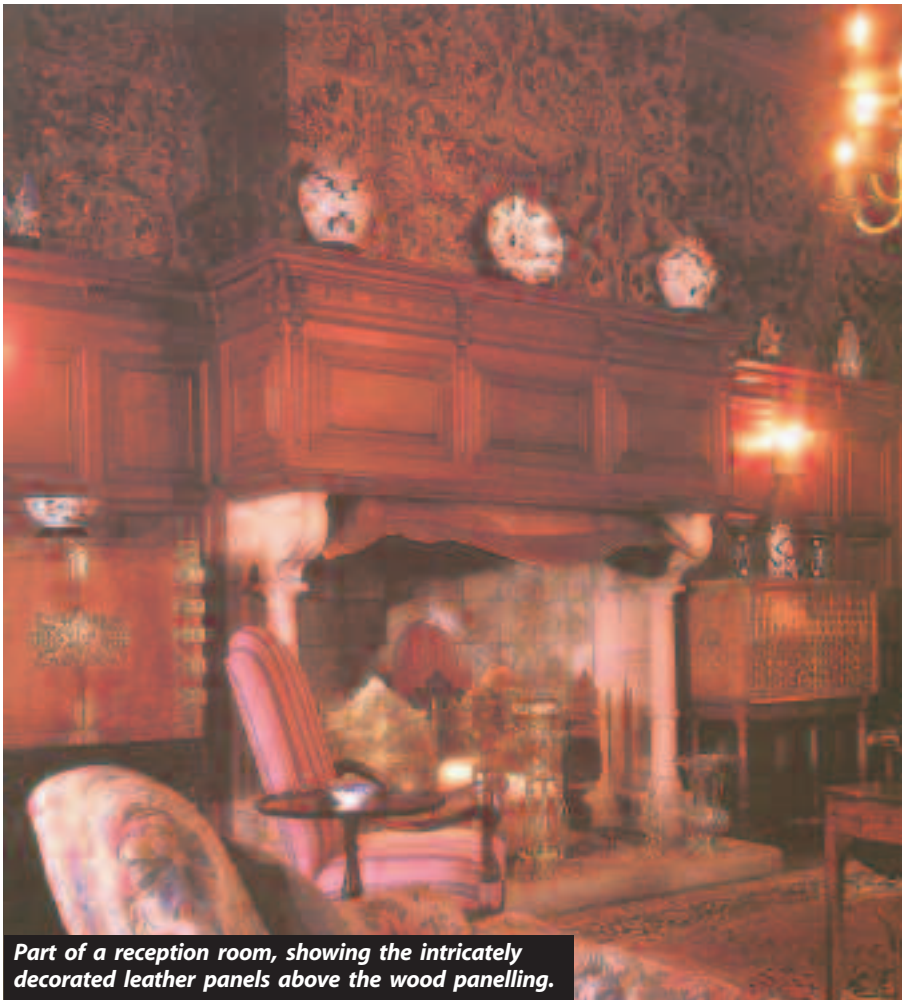
In 1890, Cecil Rhodes was appointed prime minister of the Cape Colony and Groote Schuur became his residence. Six years later it was gutted by fire. Fortunately for the South Africa of today, he had it rebuilt in its original Dutch style—and as part of that refurbishing a gilt leather frieze was fitted above the teak panelling in the drawing room.

110 years later and the Conservation Team was on its way to ensure that it would last for another century.

155 panels

The frieze is made up of two types of panel, both with a late 17th century Dutch design. Eighty-one were manufactured in the Low Countries, of veg-tanned calf skins, the other 74 panels were of late 19th century manufacture using a similar technique on panels of veg-tanned cattle hides. The panels were traditionally sewn together and stretched on to battens on the walls.

"Our initial examination showed that eight full panels and three smaller ones of the 17th century and one full panel from the 19th had been removed from the walls," explains Mr Thomson. "The backs of the 17th century leather had large quantities of paint and plaster attached and underneath there were patches of leather, paper and textile. Some of these appeared to have been applied to holes and cuts in the skin when the gilt leather was first manufactured. The 19th century panel showed none of the patches but there were signs of red rot, a form of deterioration resulting from acidic ➤



Part of a reception room, showing the intricately decorated leather panels above the wood panelling.

attack on vegetable tanned leathers.”

The acidic deterioration had resulted in the leather tearing along the stitch holes and pulling away from the nails fixing the bottom of the panels to the wall. It was also weakening the threads. The structure of the grain surface of the leather had also resulted in areas of the decorative surface flaking off.

Tender loving care

Conserving the 19th century leather required a strip of archival grade semi

alum tanned calfskin to be attached to the bottom edge of the panel, using a reversible PVA adhesive and giving a five-centimetre overlap of new leather. A similar strip was attached to the back of one of the adjacent panels still on the wall. The other edge and the top of the panel that had been removed were then sewn into position using a waxed linen thread through the original stitch holes. The first edge was then fixed into position using the reversible PVA adhesive.

The 17th century panels had the plaster and paint mechanically scraped away from the backs and the original adhesive was carefully treated with solvent and rubbed away.

The cleaned panels were then humidified using semi permeable membranes, allowing water vapour to transfer into the fibre structure of the leather, softening it without permitting potentially damaging water to come in contact with the leather. Archival grade leather was again used to repair any holes, splits or damaged edges. The repaired areas were then infilled using a pigmented BEVA thermoplastic wax/resin melted into place.

The patches were inpainted with acrylic paints to match the continuity of design. “Where there had been shrinkage, there were still 3-5mm vertical strips of archival leather visible between the pairs of panels,” details

◀ Thomson, “but rather than continue the overall design, the curator asked us to inpaint to match the grey blue background colour. In this way clear evidence would be left that conservation work had been carried out while at the same time the gaps would not be too visually intrusive. Finally a very light coat of microcrystalline wax was applied to the decorative surface. This acts as a protective layer as well as saturating the colours and blending them with the surrounding leather.”

Roy Thomson is a leather expert who enjoys seeing the results of his labours. In this instance he is especially delighted that The Leather Conservation Centre has been associated with such an important and historic part of South Africa’s multi cultural heritage. ●



Restoration work in progress