



SAMSON

MUSEUM OF NORWICH AT THE BRIDEWELL

PLOWDEN & SMITH

S A M S O N

MUSEUM OF NORWICH AT THE BRIDEWELL

PLOWDEN & SMITH





At approximately 361 years old, the carved wooden *telamones* (male figures used as pillars providing architectural support) depicting Samson and Hercules are two of Norwich's most famous landmarks. The two carvings were installed in 1657 to support the portico on the façade of the house of Christopher Jay, Mayor of Norwich.

By 1890 Hercules had degraded beyond repair and was replaced with a new copy. The original Samson however remained *in situ* throughout the 20th century until both figures were removed in 1993 due to concern for their condition.

The effect of decades of seasonal flux in relative humidity causing movement and cellular degradation in the wood had led to the detachment of one of Samson's arms.

This damage exposed a cross-section of the painted figure, confirming Samson's authenticity and also revealing just how much paint had been applied over 361 years - 61 separate layers, as analysis later revealed.

Inches thick in places, this protective shell had for centuries hidden Samson's fine details. It meant that in spite of having one of the most recognizable faces in Norwich, no one alive actually knew what Samson really looked like!



WED-THURS-FRI-SAT
PERSONS WEARING
JEANS, DENIMS, TOWERS
WILL NOT BE ADMITTED

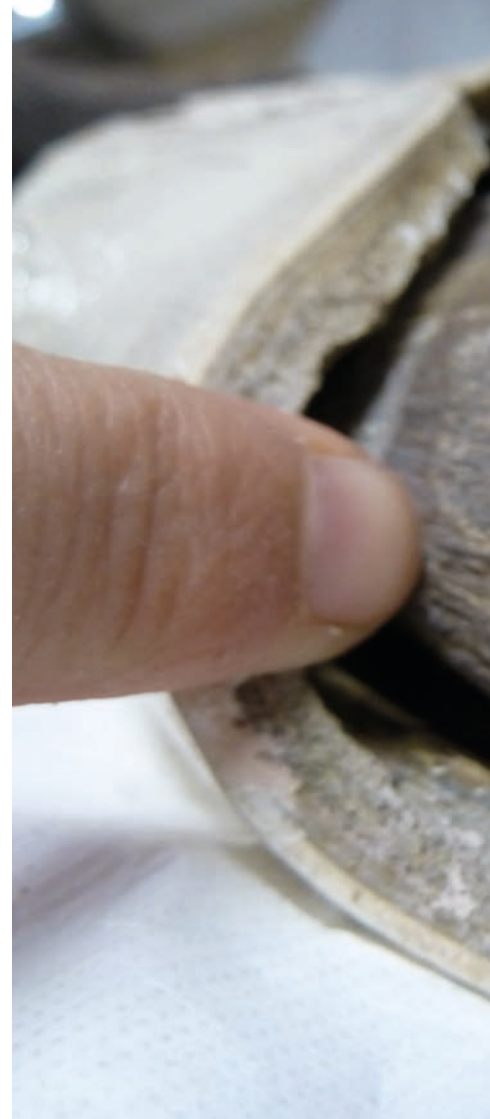


WED-THURS-FRI-SAT
PERSONS WEARING
JEANS, DENIMS, TOWERS
WILL NOT BE ADMITTED

SAMSON & HERBIE
DANCING AND
MONDAY THROUGH
SATURDAY
THE HOWARD PLACE
WEDNESDAY
COOL & FRESH
THURSDAY
WHITE



WED-THURS-FRI-SAT
PERSONS WEARING
JEANS, DENIMS, TOWERS
WILL NOT BE ADMITTED





In 2013, Plowden & Smith was approached by the Museum of Norwich at the Bridewell to reveal the original appearance of Samson by safely removing the thick coat of lead paint, and to conserve the oak carcass to make it structurally sound for public display.

Samson would go on to spend four years in the Plowden & Smith conservation studio, during which time he was worked on by a number of specialists, including wood and decorative arts conservators.

Though their own historical value was not dismissed, concern for the condition of the wooden substrate and desire to reveal the original carved surface necessitated the removal of lead paint additions.

The lead paint was painstakingly taken away by hand using mechanical methods for optimum control. The dense outer layers were carefully reduced using a hammer and sharp chisel. Older paint nearer to the wood, including residue left in the deeper crevasses, was removed with delicate scalpel work. Health and safety was of paramount concern and masks with special filters were worn at all times.

The removal of the paint from Samson's surface aided our understanding of the construction method, including the fact that Samson was carved from a single piece of oak.









Interventive treatment was carried out to prevent further degradation of the wood and to ensure Samson's long-term survival. Consolidating the interior wood beneath the surface was achieved by creating small holes in the sculpture about 15cm deep. Long, bespoke syringes made especially for Samson were then inserted to feed a conservation grade consolidation material into the core.

Once Samson's core had been stabilized, our attention turned to the substantial losses. After much debate concerning both ethics and feasibility, it was decided that fills would further strengthen the structure and improve aesthetic understanding of the finely carved sculpture.

The selection of appropriate materials was a long and painstaking process. Our choice of fills would have to be lightweight and move with the remaining wood in response to future environmental stresses. Re-treatability, as well as the final visual effect, was also a key concern.

Tests were conducted on pieces of aged wood representative of the condition and nature of Samson. In depth discussions with the Museum of Norwich took place, working closely with their curatorial team to agree what the best level of filling should be.

Once a suitable material had been selected and the area filled, it was toned in to match the surrounding oak, achieving a structurally sound, yet sympathetic and subtle visual result.

The outcome of Samson's conservation is that this important object is now fit for public display and can once again be enjoyed by the people of Norwich and visitors alike.







Throughout the conservation process, Plowden & Smith has supported access demands by providing regular updates on Samson's treatment via our own social media platforms as well as writing for the museum conservation blog. We also worked with the museum and the BBC Civilisations team to create a 3D scan of Samson that has been transformed into an informative interactive model, which can be accessed via the BBC Civilisations app.

The Samson project perfectly illustrates the immense benefits of public and private sector collaboration in conservation, and how heritage professionals from diverse backgrounds can work together to achieve optimum results and outputs.

Plowden
& SMITH
LONDON 1966

THE SCIENCE AND ART OF CONSERVATION

Bespoke conservation and collections care solutions for diverse materials

FINE ART

SCULPTURE

FURNITURE

CONTEMPORARY ART

DECORATIVE ART

SOCIAL HISTORY OBJECTS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC

NATURAL HISTORY

HERITAGE ARCHITECTURE

INTERVENTIVE TREATMENTS

PREVENTIVE CONSULTANCY

EXHIBITION SUPPORT

MOUNT MOUNTING

CONDITION SURVEYS

RESEARCH & ANALYSIS

MAJOR AND INTERNATIONAL OPERATIONS

INFO@PLOWDEN-SMITH.COM | +44 (0)20 8874 4005

