

A story in 72 metres

Heritage | As the restoration of 13 tapestries owned by the Elizabethan Bess of Hardwick comes to an end after 24 years, *Kate Youde* meets the tireless conservators

(Clockwise from main) One of the Hardwick tapestries, 'Gideon Attacking the Midianites', being worked on in the Long Gallery; Bess of Hardwick by Hans Ewouts ('or student'); Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire

Elaine Owers is proudly holding up two freezer bags containing nearly a kilogramme of dust emptied from a vacuum cleaner. "Disgusting," says the textile conservator.

She and colleagues at the National Trust's Textile Conservation Studio have kept the mix of dirt and fibres to document their work on the last tapestry in a 16th-century set bought by the Elizabethan noblewoman Bess of Hardwick.

The rehanging of this tapestry at the Grade I-listed Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire, in July will mark the end of the longest textile conservation project in the trust's 128-year history.

Born into a family of minor gentry in about 1527 on the site of Hardwick Old Hall, Elizabeth Hardwick (Bess) accumulated wealth and status to rise to the top of Elizabethan society. By the time she married her fourth and final husband, George Talbot, 6th Earl of Shrewsbury, in 1567, her property portfolio included the Chatsworth estate, which she had acquired with her second husband, Sir William Cavendish.



They're not on the same tapestry." Changes to the crests were made directly on to the tapestries too, with Hatton's doe turned into Bess's stag with painted antlers and blue eggline (sweet briar) collars.

Bess hung the tapestries in the completed hall's Long Gallery, an 8-metre-

Being custodians of the captive Mary, Queen of Scots put pressure on their finances and their marriage

Elizabeth I appointed the Earl and Countess custodians of the captive Mary, Queen of Scots in 1569. "It put pressure not only on their finances but also on their marriage," says Liz Waring, property curator for Hardwick Hall, with Bess retreating to her family home when the relationship soured. She began rebuilding the manor house in which she grew up into Hardwick Old Hall, the ruins of which are now cared for by English Heritage.

However, following Talbot's death in 1590, Bess commissioned architect Robert Smythson to build a new Hardwick Hall, an English interpretation of Italian Renaissance style, in 1590-97. It was during construction of this country house that Bess purchased 13 tapestries portraying the biblical story of Gideon, from the Old Testament Book of Judges, on a shopping spree in London in 1592.

The last of them to be conserved, "Gideon Entering

the Midianite Camp as a Spy", is the 11th in the sequence. The 7.5m-wide tapestry's three parts — a lower border, upper border and main field — were on separate tapestry frames when I visited the textile conservation studio, a converted barn on the Blickling Estate in Norfolk, in March.

Bess bought the tapestries from the heir of Sir Christopher Hatton, lord chancellor of England, who had died in

1591 leaving considerable debts. They were made in 1578, when Hatton was building his own grand home at Holdenhay, Northamptonshire.

She paid £326 15s 9d (equivalent to more than £100,000 today), and received a 45 discount because she would need to change the Hatton coat of arms, woven into each tapestry in four places. The "shrewd businesswoman" came up with a "pragmatic solution", says Rachel Langley, senior textile conservator. She had her shield painted on to linsy-woolsey (a linen and wool fabric) and appliquéd over the top.

The approach was not consistent, however. "There's four shields across the whole set where Bess's oil paint has been painted directly over the Hatton shield actually on to the [tapestry] weave," says Owers. "There's no rhyme or reason to it because there are two on a top border and two on a side border.

high room spanning the second floor on the house's east side. Each tapestry is 6 metres tall but varies in width. Together they total 71.6 metres.

"We believe that Bess must have designed the Long Gallery to accommodate the tapestries, they seem to fit really nicely either side of the fireplace and reach up to the cornice with the painted frieze above," says Waring.

After Bess died in 1608, Hardwick Hall passed down the Cavendish family (she had eight children with Sir William), until the National Trust took it over in 1959. The first Gideon tapestry was removed for conservation in 1999. An external conservation studio restored five in the set before the trust took on the remaining eight, at a cost of up to £278,000 per tapestry. "They were incredibly blackened with soot and dirt, and structurally failing," says Owers, who has worked on five.

When I visit she and two other conservators are working on the stitch treatment of the final tapestry, originally woven sideways on a high-warp loom with the warps (the plain wool that runs horizontally across this



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tapestry) tensioned around a barrel at the top and bottom. They stitch through the supportive linen scrim fabric they have attached to the back of the tapestry, replacing broken warps before using brick couching for the vertical weft.

"It's a spaced stitch so that, close to [it], you can tell it's our conservation work as opposed to the original reads," says Owens.

They strengthen the original linen stitches used to sew up woven slits (small openings caused by a change of yarn colour) by sewing over them with polyester thread. They stitch through weakened silk, which are stronger and a better colour match than new shiny silk. Brown outlines of figures need particular attention because iron in the mordant, used to fix the original dye colour, has degraded the wool.

Vegetable and mineral dyes produced vivid colours, with the tapestry's night sky comprising pinks and purples. However, Owens says, the "inferior" dye

The restoration of the 16th-century tapestries is the longest textile conservation project in the National Trust's 128-year history

Photographed for the FT by Callum Palmer



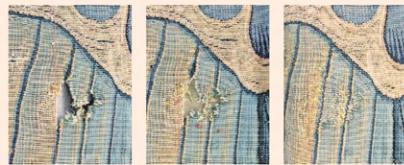
"hasn't stood the test of time"; the sky is now "reduced to beige".

The conservators used scaffolding to take down the tapestry in March 2021. After cutting the whipstitches that had attached the lower border to the main field, the smaller piece was removed to make the tapestry, which weighs about 1.25kg per square metre,

The inferior dye didn't stand the test of time; the night sky, once pink and purple, was reduced to beige

easier to handle. The remaining part, pinned with Velcro at the sides, was carefully rolled off the wall on to a drainpipe covered in Velcro.

The tapestry was laid out in the Long Gallery to remove its lining before being transported to Norfolk. Here, the team removed the surface dirt (now in those freezer bags) using a special vacuum fitted with a soft goat's hair brush. They then separated the top border



from the main field and sent the three parts to tapestry conservation specialist De Wit in Mechelen, Belgium, to be washed and dried.

It had been thought the Gideon tapestries were all woven in Oudenaarde, Belgium. However, conservators found a mark on another tapestry for Grammont, the French name for the Belgian city of Geraardsbergen, about 25km away, suggesting the commission was shared across workshops.

On the tapestry's return to Norfolk, the conservators started working on 20cm-wide sections, marked out with pink cotton, a system Langley says breaks it into "manageable chunks". While she hasn't had the "life sentence" of working on all the Gideon tapestries conserved by the trust, she has been there for the project's duration. "It'll be amazing to see them all up in the Long Gallery together," she says.

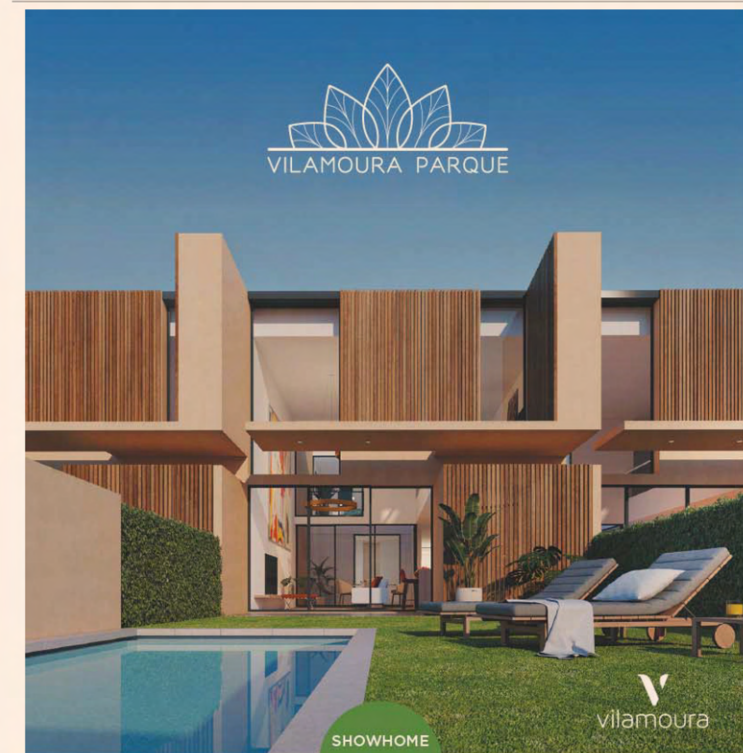
When the stitch treatment is complete, the conservators whipstitch the top border to the main field, and line the tapestry with a protective cotton cambric fabric. They stitch soft Velcro sewn on to cotton tape over the cambric,

which is attached to hard Velcro on battens on the Long Gallery wall.

They attach the lower border to the main field with Velcro initially, returning to whipstitch it about a month after the tapestry is rehung. This gives the tapestry time to drop. "The fibres have been stretched on the frame horizontally and contracted," says Owens. "Once you hang them, they relax."

To show the impact of the 24-year conservation, Waring says as many of the Gideon tapestries as possible will be uncovered in 2024 so visitors to Hardwick Hall can experience them as Bess did. They are currently partially hidden by more than 40 portraits, originally hung in front from a picture rail by the 5th and 6th Dukes of Devonshire.

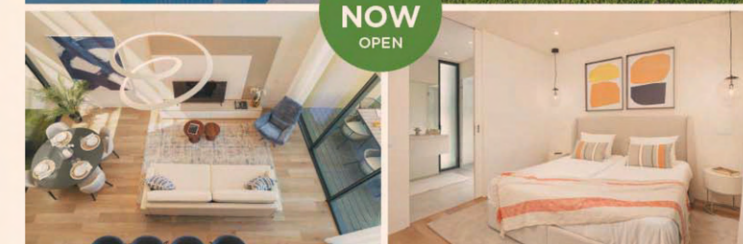
A display about the conservation is also planned, including that dirt. "People have become more interested in what goes on behind the scenes," says textile conservator Yoko Hanegreaves. "You can say [the tapestry] is really filthy but when they see it back in the property it looks clean. If you could say, 'Look, this came off it,' it tells that story."



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