

CONSERVATION OF THE WALL PAINTINGS AT ST MARY'S CHURCH, ASTLEY

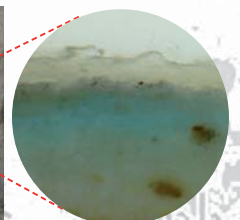
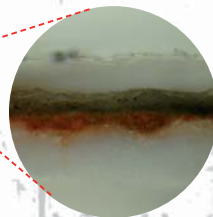
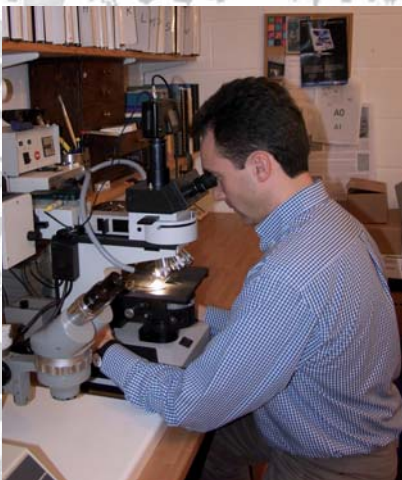
THE CHURCH AND THE WALL PAINTINGS

Although there was a church on this site before the 14th century, the present building was founded in 1343 by Sir Thomas Astley, as a collegiate establishment. The original building was a much larger cruciform plan with a central tower and tall spire. However, the college was dissolved in the mid 16th century and most of the church was destroyed at the beginning of the 17th century. Of the original structure, only the chancel remains, which forms the tall nave of the present church. The new chancel and tower were added in 1607-1608 and the church was extensively restored in the 19th century.



In its original 14th century incarnation, the church would have been decorated throughout with figurative wall paintings. Following the Reformation and, subsequently, the Civil War, figurative religious paintings were banned and what took their place were Biblical and religious texts, often supported in elaborate decorative frames. Although it is likely that further painted texts would have been present, these have now been painted over or destroyed.

The texts which remain on the church walls are among the finest and most complete in the country and are of national importance. They include Biblical tracts, as well as the ten commandments (on the east wall of the chancel), the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. On stylistic and archaeological grounds it is likely that the texts in the nave date to the late 16th or early 17th centuries. The two texts in the chancel, on either side of the altar, are later repaintings, probably dating to the late 18th or early 19th century.



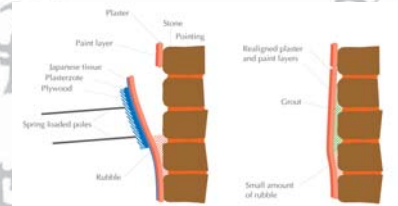
Analysis of the pigments showed that they used a palette ranging from simple earth pigments for many of the reds and yellows to lead pigments, synthetic copper greens and vermilion, all of which would have been applied in an organic medium, such as oil or glue.

At some point in their history it appears that some or all of the texts would have been painted over and knowledge of their presence would have been lost. Over the subsequent centuries, the fabric of the church deteriorated and water leaked into the walls causing severe damage to the plaster. Some areas were removed and replastered with cement, probably without any awareness that the paintings were hidden below the limewash. As a result, some areas of the paintings suffered serious damage and some may have been entirely lost. It is not clear precisely when the paintings were uncovered, but typically this occurred in the 19th century when the great phase of church restoration took place. Subsequently, the paintings were restored on at least two



occasions, at which time wax and resin coatings and even sections of fine fish net, were applied, which were intended to give support to the damaged plaster.

The continuing failure of the building envelope and drains meant that by the early 2000s, the paintings were in an extremely unstable and vulnerable condition with both the plaster substrate and the paint layer itself powdering and flaking away from the wall. In some areas, the condition was so serious that complete failure and collapse of the paintings was imminent.

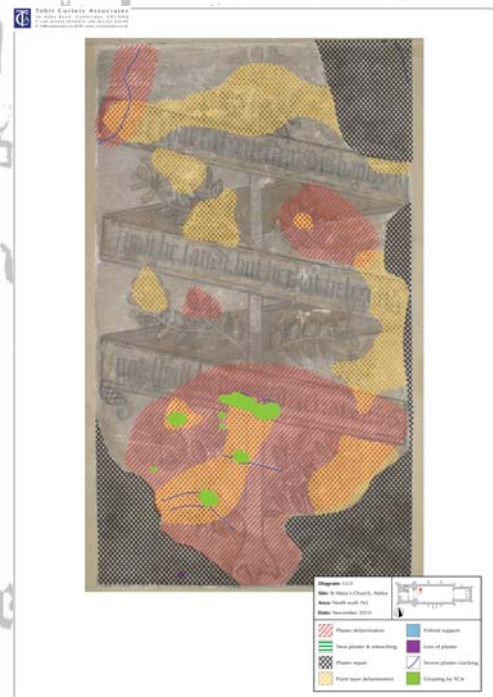


THE CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

In 2008, a major programme of building work was undertaken, including the repair of the walls and the removal of 19th century cement render. In conjunction with the repair of the rainwater goods and the drains, this allowed the building to dry and the internal plaster and paintings to stabilise. Emergency treatment was carried out on the paintings at the same time, in order to prevent immediate loss, while the building repairs were taking place. A period of almost two years was allowed for the building to dry and stabilise and between September and November 2010, a major programme of conservation treatment was undertaken.



The principal aim of the treatment was to stabilise the wall paintings, in order to prevent further loss. The treatment involved the repair and stabilisation of the plaster substrate using a lightweight hydraulic grout and traditional lime mortar repairs. During treatment the most unstable sections of painting were faced with fine long fibered tissue and supported in place with spring loaded presses. The flaking paint layer was readhered, the wax layers reduced and limited reintegration was carried out to disguise the losses and show the paintings to their best effect.



The conservation work on the wall paintings was carried out by Tobit Curteis Associates, a Cambridge based practice specialising in the conservation of wall paintings, in collaboration with an international team of conservators: Bianca Madden, James White, Marta Sledz, Claudia Fiocchetti and Elizabeth Wooley.

The work has been generously supported by English Heritage, The Churches Building Council, The Warwickshire Historic Churches Trust, The William Cadbury Charitable Trust, The Leche Trust, The Alan Evans Memorial Trust, The Manifold Charitable Trust, The St Andrew's Conservation Trust, The Francis Coales Charitable Foundation, Mrs Iris Morris, The Diocese of Coventry and Lord Daventry, as well as the PCC and congregation of St Mary's Church.



The work has been generously supported by English Heritage, The Churches Building Council, The Warwickshire Historic Churches Trust, The William Cadbury Charitable Trust, The Leche Trust, The Alan Evans Memorial Trust, The Manifold Charitable Trust, The St Andrew's Conservation Trust, The Francis Coales Charitable Foundation, Mrs Iris Morris, The Diocese of Coventry and Lord Daventry, as well as the PCC and congregation of St Mary's Church.



The Manifold Charitable Trust, The St Andrew's Conservation Trust, The Francis Coales Charitable Foundation, Mrs Iris Morris, The Diocese of Coventry and Lord Daventry, as well as the PCC and congregation of St Mary's Church.

