

**ST MARY'S CHURCH  
BECKLEY, OXON**



**Wall Painting Conservation Record**

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**Appendices**

- Appendix 1 CD with an electronic version of this report and all high resolution images taken during the survey (inside back cover of the report).

**Mark Perry  
June 2019**

## 1. Summary

St Mary's Church is a Grade 1 Listed Building in the Diocese of Oxford. The church dates largely from the C14<sup>th</sup> and C15<sup>th</sup> but retains significant elements from the original C12<sup>th</sup> /C13<sup>th</sup> building. There are a number of important wall paintings throughout, including a Virgin and Child C13<sup>th</sup> (?) and Weighing of Souls C15<sup>th</sup> in the south aisle; a C14<sup>th</sup> Doom on the nave east wall and C17<sup>th</sup> heraldic emblems and badges on the nave west wall.

At the request of the Church Warden, Georgina Robson, The Perry Lithgow Partnership were commissioned to carry out an inspection of the wall paintings, as damage had occurred to the Virgin and Child since the last treatment in 1993. The on-site condition survey was carried out from the ground by Mark Perry on 9 March 2018.

All the wall paintings were found to be in reasonable condition, considering the time lapse since the last inspection/treatment, with evidence of only local physical damage and minor paint losses to each. These required remedial conservation work to ensure their future stability. However, their appearance was severely compromised by heavy accretions of dirt, cobwebs and occasional bat droppings. The removal of these deposits has both significantly improved all the wall paintings' appearance and reduced the risk of the surface dirt becoming ingrained and harder to remove in future.

The following report describes the condition of each area, prior to conservation and the remedial treatments carried out. The work was undertaken in two short phases by Mark Perry and Richard Lithgow on 17<sup>th</sup> April and 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> June 2019. A digital copy of the report, including all photographs taken during work, is attached to the inside back cover. This document contains a selection of those images.

## 2. Description of the Wall Paintings

### 2.1. Location

The locations of the wall paintings treated in this intervention are identified on the following plan:

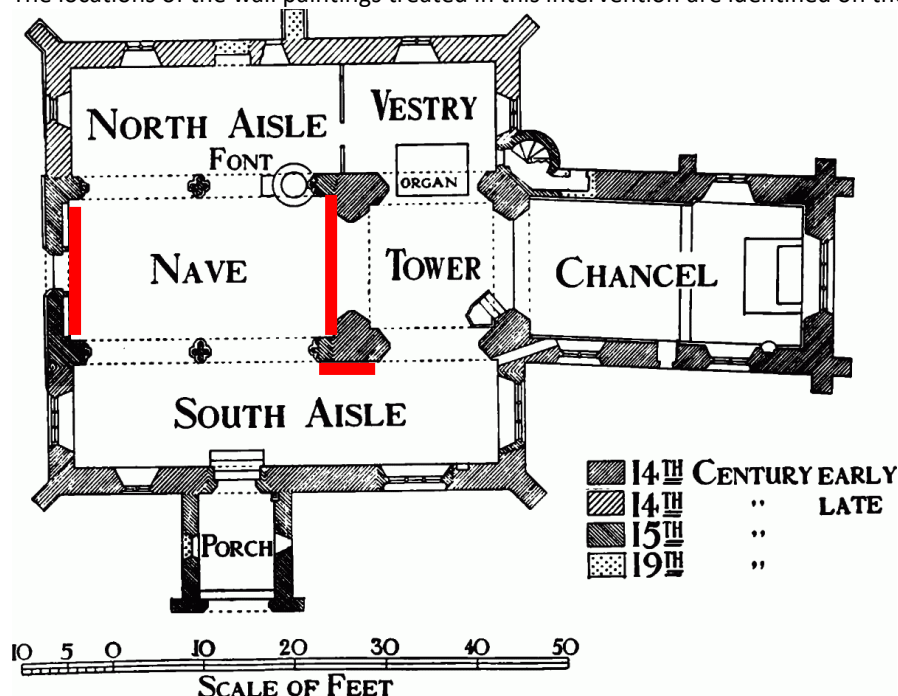


Fig 1. Church plan with wall painting locations in red. (Extracted from <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol5/pp56-76>)

### 2.2 The South Aisle Paintings

The south-west tower pier contains wall painting from two different periods. The earliest and most important painting in the building is the scene containing the Virgin and Child enthroned beneath a gabled canopy in the lower area, with a Weighing of Souls and Torments of the Damned immediately above. Remains of an unidentified text

scroll are evident at the top of the painting. The background is powdered with red rosettes. The remaining painting covers an area c. 3m H x 1.2m W and probably dates to the late C13<sup>th</sup> /early C14<sup>th</sup>. A white vertical 'shadow' to the left of the scene indicates the original position of a screen that created a Lady Chapel in this part of the aisle.



Fig 2. The South aisle, tower pier – overall view (after conservation)



Fig 3. The South aisle, tower pier –detail of the Virgin and Child (after conservation)

The rendition of the Virgin's veiled head is particularly beautiful and is of very high quality. There are several intriguing and very unusual smaller scenes within the overall panel, making this wall painting of great significance within the canon of medieval church decoration.



Fig 4. Details of the C14th Weighing of Souls and Torments of the Damned (before surface cleaning)

To the west of the Virgin scene is the remains of a later (C15<sup>th</sup> ?) illustration of the Weighing of Souls. This would have been superimposed on the earlier wall painting, completely covering it over. It was partly removed in the major restoration works of 1845 to expose the Virgin and Child painting.



Fig 5 Remains of the overlying C15th Weighing of Souls (right, after surface cleaning). The vertical white 'shadow' marking the location of the Lady Chapel screen is visible to the right of the painting

### Previous Treatment

Although it was first revealed in 1845 it was not treated again until 1933 when further uncovering may have been undertaken by Professor E W Tristram. Tristram was responsible for the application of a wax coating to the Doom painting on the nave east wall (see below), but it is not clear that a similar coating was applied to the Virgin scene. The Eve Baker Trust carried out remedial conservation works in the 1980's; however I am unaware of any surviving treatment report and therefore what processes were undertaken, beyond extensive repairs with lime mortar and tinted limewashes.

In 1993 The Perry Lithgow Partnership removed/reduced dirty drip marks from the surface caused by water infiltration from a roof leak above the painting. This was achieved using Wishab sponges, although the drips had become ingrained on the lime mortar repairs, necessitating the replacement of all previous limewash grounds to improve the appearance.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.3. The Nave East Wall – Last Judgement

The east wall measures 8.9m H to timber frame and 4.9mW

Extract from E W Tristram *'English Medieval Wall Paintings: The Fourteenth Century'* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1955 p.139.

'Over the tower arch at the east end, a Last Judgement, with the dead rising from their graves, the just ascending into Heaven, and the lost cast by demons into the jaws of the Leviathan, grouped towards the base of the composition on the south side; immediately above the arch, remains of an indecipherable Latin inscription. Below the inscription, on the north side of the arch, St Peter bearing the keys, and on the south side, St Paul, clad in a scarlet cope lined with vair, holding a book in his left hand and a sword, pointed upwards, in his right.'

<sup>1</sup> R Lithgow *'The C17th Paintings on the West Wall of the Nave - Conservation Record'* Nov 1993



Fig 6. The nave, east wall – the Last Judgement (left) and detail of small figure on the lower north side (above). Both before treatment.

There is the fragmentary remains of a small figure beneath a gabled canopy on the lower north side of the arch. Tristram does not mention this painting and it is presently unclear whether it is connected to the Last Judgement painting above, or a separate and possibly earlier painting. A section of an originally much larger C18<sup>th</sup> royal arms is painted on a blocked-in door/window in the tower wall above the arch.

#### Previous Treatment

In 1933 Tristram applied his trademark wax coating to the entire scene. It is presumed that this was removed/reduced by the Eve Baker Trust during their conservation work in the 1970's, although I have not seen the treatment record.

During work to the nave west wall paintings in 1993 The Perry Lithgow Partnership repaired damage caused by decorators fixing battens for plastic sheeting to the painted walls, intended as protection works during re-decoration works. Using the existing scaffolding we also carried out a surface clean to remove extensive dust and bat droppings that had accumulated since the 1970's and applied local repairs and limewash grounds to several areas in the lower half of the scheme, including to the lower north side figure.

## 2.4 The Nave West Wall

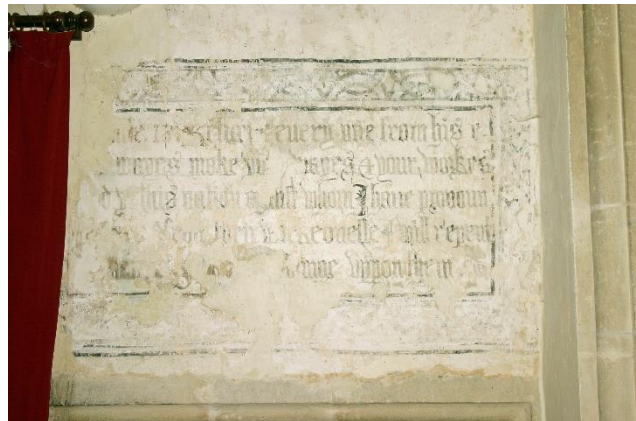
The west wall measures 8.9m H to timber frame and 4.9mW

The west wall is painted with an extensive series of royal emblems and badges of several different periods. The earliest painting is the sacred heart emblem on the lower south side. It pre-dates the royal heraldic scheme of 1607 above and is likely to be post-Reformation.

The most extensive scheme is that of the three sets of Prince of Wales feathers, with associated scrolls and texts, arranged on both sides and above the west window. These are dated to 1607 and refer to Henry, eldest son of James 1. On the same layer of limewash, but on the lower north side of the door, is a panel painted with a text from Jeremiah Chapter 18 verse 11. A similar text on the south side was destroyed previously to reveal the sacred heart emblem. The feathers and scrolls have been repainted at least once, one area of which was replaced by a portcullis – also a royal badge – introduced by Henry VII.



Fig 7. The nave, west wall, overall (left); detail of the Sacred Heart Emblem (above) & the Jeremiah text panel (below). All images before treatment.



### Previous Treatment

The paintings on the west wall were probably revealed during the extensive restoration works of 1845. Our work in 1993 showed no previous treatment to these wall paintings beyond uncovering, apart from the remedial works carried out by the Eve Baker Trust in the 1970's.

The extensive conservation undertaken by PLP is fully documented in our treatment record of November 1993.

### 3. Condition & Treatment

#### 3.1 South Aisle

A small loss of the painted limewash layers measuring 35mm x 25mm had occurred to the chest of the Virgin. The edges of the loss were lifting and fragile. This is in a very accessible area and was therefore extremely vulnerable to further loss. There is nothing to indicate any underlying deterioration factors and the nature of the damage suggests it was due to accidental abrasion/impact. All other areas of this and the adjacent later painting of the Weighing of Souls (C15<sup>th</sup>) to the west are stable.

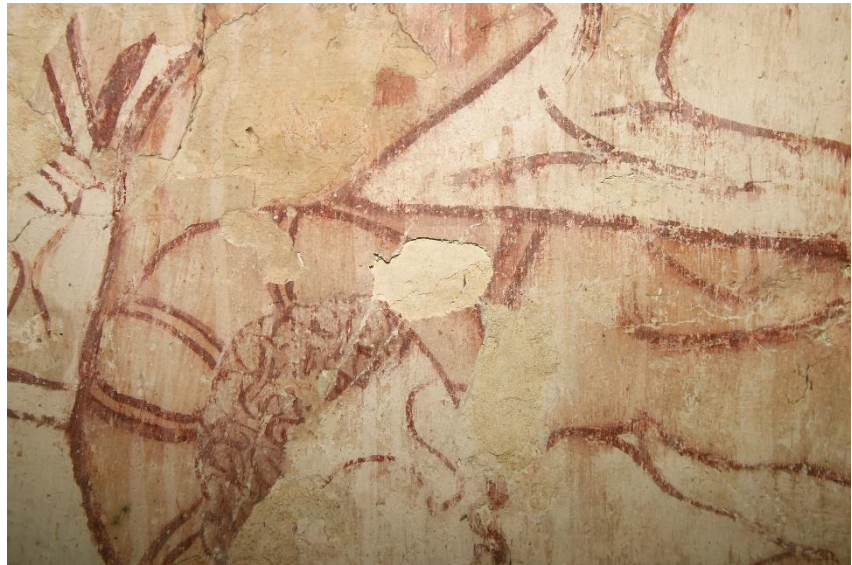


Fig 8. Detail of 'recent' loss to the Virgin



There was extensive surface dirt (dust, cobwebs and bat droppings) that compromised the visual impact of this very important painting. If these deposits were left in situ they can become ingrained over time and more difficult to remove.

Fig 9. Detail of thick surface dirt on St Michael

##### 3.1.1 Treatment:

All areas of remaining painted plaster on the pier were treated.

- Removal of surface accretions using soft brushes to direct the dirt into a vacuum nozzle.
- Further localised and light cleaning using Wishab sponges (granular rubber cakes).
- Reattachment of the damaged area was carried out using a thin lime slurry, injected under the lifting edges.
- The loss was filled with a fine lime mortar and reintegrated with a suitably toned limewash and watercolour washes.



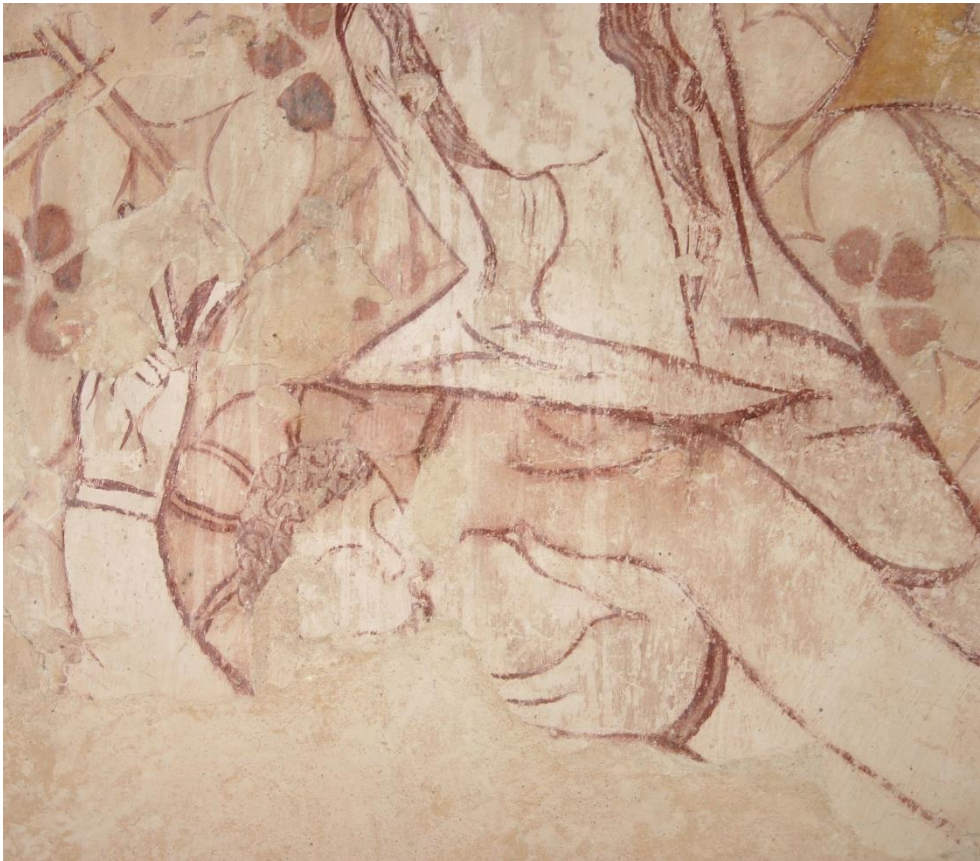


Fig 10. Detail of 'damaged area after conservation

Fig 11. Detail during removal of extensive surface dirt and cobwebs



### 3.2 Nave, East Wall

In general, the wall paintings on the east wall are in reasonable condition and required only minimal remedial work. There was extensive dirt overall, with 'ropes' of thick, dirty cobwebs clearly visible at the top, and this was causing a significant diminution in the overall appearance of the painted decoration.

There were several post 1993 losses of paint and ground apparent on the south side of the scheme. These were visible as white losses in the Mouth of Hell and the background to St Paul. Additional and numerous smaller losses were identified from the improved access available during work.

The lack of previous conservation records mean it is difficult to ascertain the precise cause of these losses, although the location would seem to preclude impact damage. It is likely that Tristram applied a wax coating in the 1930's and any residue of this remaining after the 1970's treatment may have caused a contraction and associated loss of the paint layer. However, there was no clear evidence of residual wax in these areas during treatment, and the cause of this damage in a very specific area remains unknown.

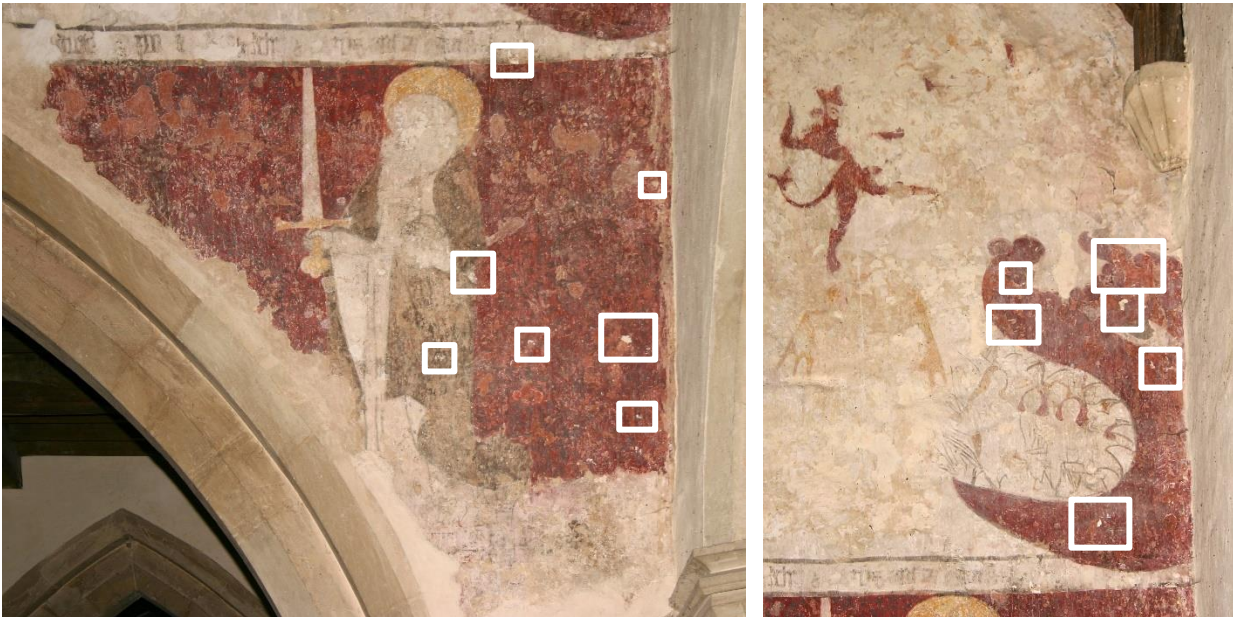


Fig 12. Locations of the most obvious paint losses on the north side of the east wall

A series of very small losses of paint was also visible in the red background to the small figure on the lower north side of the arch. Again the precise cause is presently unknown but could be the result of accidental abrasion as the painting is in a very accessible and therefore vulnerable area.

### 3.2.1 Treatment:

- Removal of surface accretions using soft brushes to direct the dirt into a vacuum nozzle.
- Further localised and light cleaning using Wishab sponges (granular rubber cakes).
- Reattachment of the damaged areas was carried out using a thin lime slurry, injected under the lifting edges.
- The paint losses were reintegrated to reduce visual impact using watercolour washes. This will also act as a means of monitoring for future paint losses.



Fig 13. Upper east wall, before and after treatment

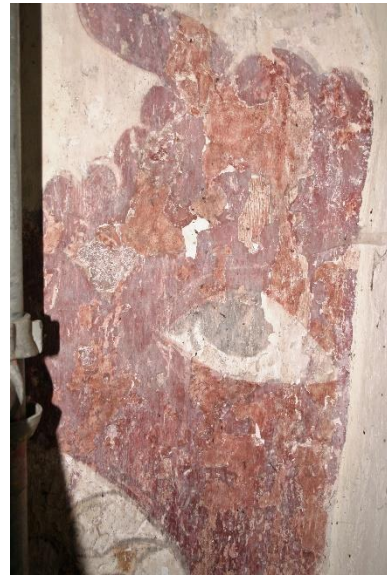


Fig 14. East wall, above, after conservation. Details of damage to the Mouth of Hell before (top right) and after (below right) conservation

### 3.3 Nave, West Wall

Generally, all the wall paintings on this wall are stable, although there were minor losses evident: e.g. on the right-hand feather on the south side, adjacent to a previous larger loss, and to the crown above. Other smaller losses became evident with the improved scaffold access.

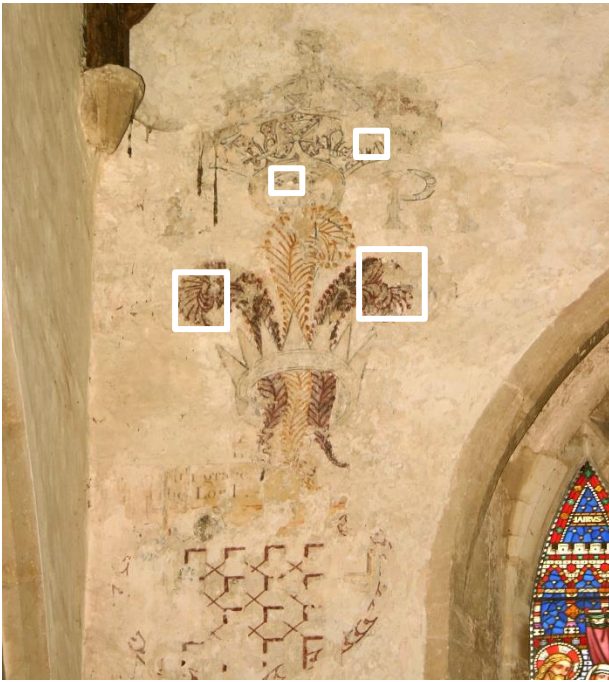


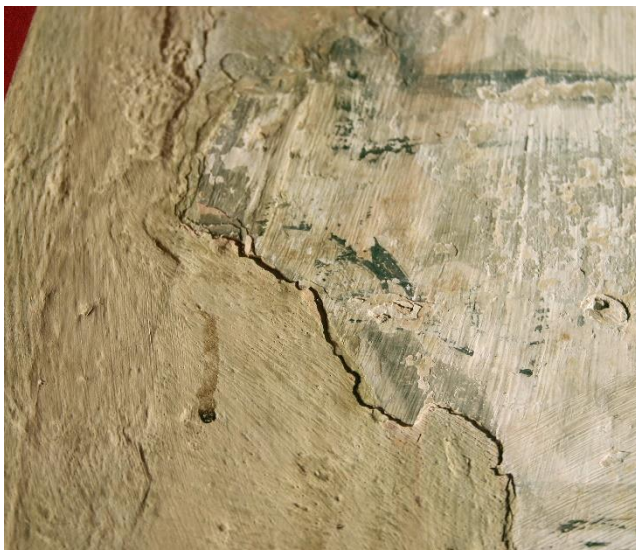
Fig 15. Location of a paint loss to the feathers on the south side (left) and detail below.



Unfortunately, an area of impact damage occurred to the central north side during erection of the access scaffold. This caused an indent, local delamination and loss of the paint and ground layers. The damaged paint and limewash ground were 'floating' and barely attached, some areas had become completely detached and were caught in cobwebs nearby.



Fig 16. Location of a paint loss on the north side, before treatment



There was an area of local paint and ground delamination in the lower left-hand corner of the painted text on the north side. There has been no actual recent loss, but the area was very vulnerable to abrasion from the curtain and is in an accessible position and therefore required stabilisation to avoid further deterioration.

Fig 17. Location of delaminating paint and ground to the text panel on the lower north side, before treatment

The entire west wall had extensive accumulations of dirt, cobwebs and bat droppings that significantly compromised the appearance.



Fig 18. Examples of extensive surface accumulations of dirt, cobwebs and bat droppings, before surface cleaning

### 3.3.1 Treatment:

- Removal of surface accretions using soft brushes to direct the dirt into a vacuum nozzle.
- Further localised and light cleaning using Wishab sponges (granular rubber cakes).
- Reattachment of the damaged areas was carried out using a thin lime slurry, injected under the lifting edges.
- The paint losses were reintegrated to reduce visual impact using watercolour washes. This will also act as a means of monitoring for future paint losses.

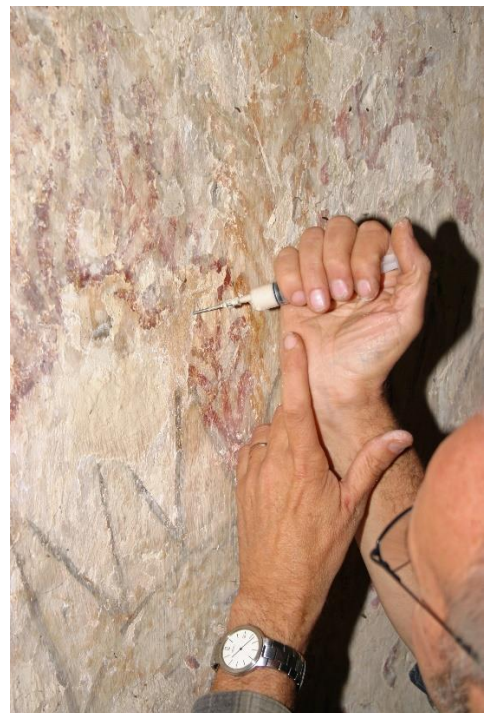


Fig 19. The damaged area after conservation (above) and during reattachment (right)