

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



Wall Painting Condition Survey

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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
April 2018**

1. Introduction & Summary

St Mary's Church is a Grade 1 Listed Building in the Diocese of Oxford. The church dates largely from the C14th and C15th but retains significant elements from the original C12/13th building. There are a number of important wall paintings throughout, including a Virgin and Child C13th(?) and Weighing of Souls C15th in the south aisle; a C14th Doom on the nave east wall and C17th 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. Ladders were provided but the height of the nave paintings meant that an inspection using binoculars was more efficient.

All the wall paintings are in reasonable condition with evidence of only local physical damage and minor paint losses to each. These will require remedial conservation work to ensure their future stability. However, their appearance is severely compromised by heavy accretions of dirt, cobwebs and occasional bat droppings. The removal of these deposits would both significantly improve all the wall paintings' appearance and reduce the risk of the surface dirt becoming ingrained and harder to remove in future.

The following report describes the current condition of each area and their recommended remedial treatments. Costs for these works are provided at the end of the report and are based on all works being carried out in a single phase. 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 & Conservation History

2.1 The Building

The following information is extracted from <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol5/pp56-76>

The church of *THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MAR* consists of a nave, chancel, north and south aisles, south porch, and central embattled tower. It dates from the 14th and 15th centuries, and is unusual in retaining almost all its original stonework, including the tracery in the windows.

There was an earlier church on the site, of which only part of the north wall of the chancel and the font (c. 1200) remain. During the early 14th century the chancel and south aisle were rebuilt, and the central tower was probably added at the same time. The north aisle was rebuilt towards the end of the century, and in the 15th century the present nave arches were inserted, with a clerestory above, and the west wall rebuilt. The south porch was added later in the century, and new windows and a doorway were inserted in the south aisle.

Minor repairs to the fabric, especially the porch, were made about 1758, and in 1788 a gallery was erected by subscription from Horton and Whitecross Green, 'for the use of the singers'. In 1844 the churchyard was newly fenced, and a thorough restoration of the church was made in 1845. A plaster ceiling was removed to reveal the original timber roof, the squint on the south side was opened, the gallery taken down, the pews replaced by open seats, the Jacobean pulpit cleaned of its paint and 'let down to reasonable proportions', and a stone altar substituted for the old wooden altar.

2.2 The Wall Paintings

Although there are fragments of other painted decoration throughout the building, this survey is focused on three main areas of wall painting: the south aisle and the east and west walls of the nave. The locations of these wall paintings are identified on the following plan:

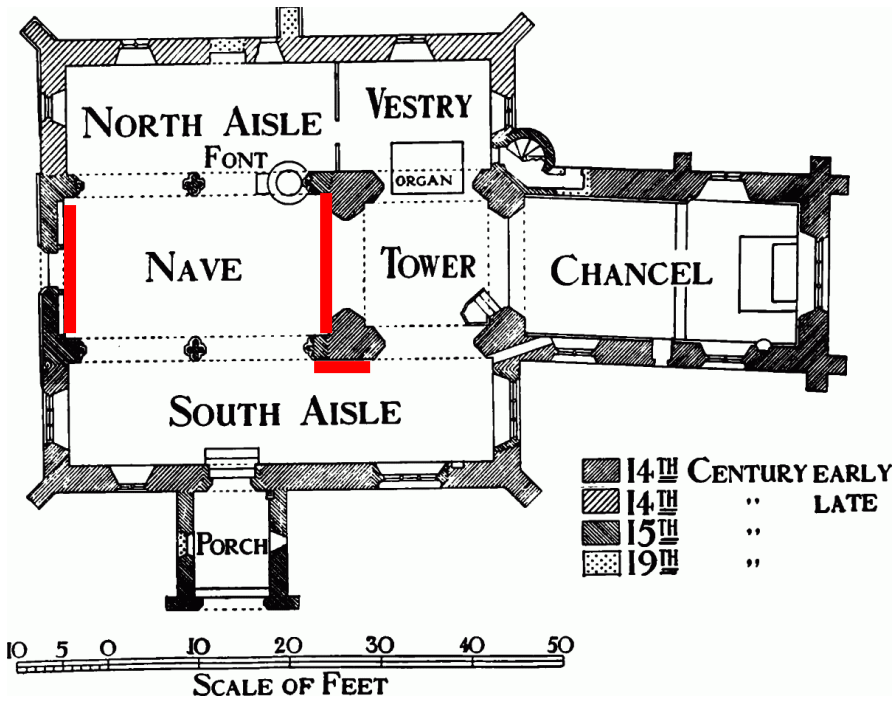


Fig 1. Church plan with wall painting locations in red. (Extracted from <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol5/pp56-76>)

2.2.1 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 C13th/early C14th. 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 (left) and detail of the Virgin and Child (above)

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 3. Details of the C14th Weighing of Souls and Torments of the Damned (above left) and remains of the overlying C15th Weighing of Souls (above right). The vertical white 'shadow' is visible to the right of the later painting

To the west of the Virgin scene is the remains of a later (C15th?) 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.

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.¹

¹ R Lithgow 'The C17th Paintings on the West Wall of the Nave - Conservation Record' Nov 1993

2.2.2 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.'



Fig 4. The nave, east wall – the Last Judgement (left) and detail of small figure on the lower north side (above)

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 C18th 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.

2.2.3 The Nave West Wall²

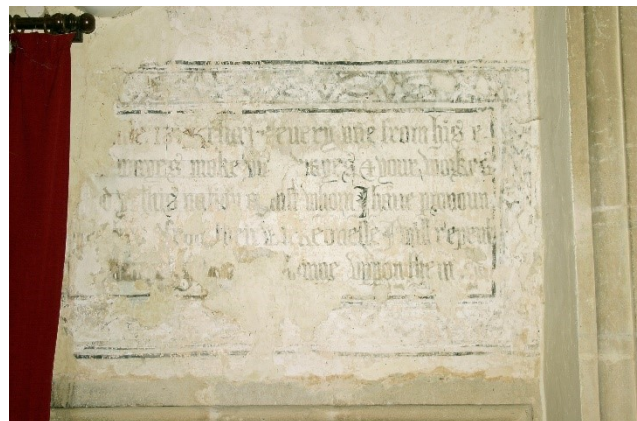
The west wall measures 8.9m H to timber frame and 4.9mW

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 5. The nave, west wall, overall (left); detail of the Sacred Heart Emblem (above) & the Jeremiah text panel (below)



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.

² The various schemes on the west wall are described in extensive detail in our 1993 Conservation Record.

3. Condition & Treatment Recommendations

3.1 South Aisle

A small loss of the painted limewash layers measuring 35mm x 25mm has occurred to the chest of the Virgin. The edges of the loss are lifting and fragile. This is in a very accessible area and is therefore extremely vulnerable to further loss. There is nothing to indicate any underlying deterioration factors and the nature of the damage suggests it is due to accidental abrasion/impact. All other areas of this and the adjacent later painting of the Weighing of Souls (C15th) to the west are stable.



Fig 6. Detail of 'recent' loss to the Virgin



There is extensive surface dirt (dust, cobwebs and bat droppings) that currently reduce the visual impact of this very important painting. In addition, if these deposits are left in situ they can become ingrained over time and more difficult to remove. Surface cleaning would also allow the opportunity to treat any other potentially fragile areas.

Fig 7. Detail of thick surface dirt on St Michael

3.1.1 Treatment recommendations:

Removal of surface accretions using soft brushes to direct the dirt into a vacuum nozzle. Further light cleaning using Wishab sponges (granular rubber cakes) may also be required. Spot cleaning of any residual staining from bat faeces would be carried out using de-ionised water swabs.

Cleaning would include all areas of painted decoration on the pier.

Reattachment of the damaged area(s) would be carried out using a thin lime slurry. The loss would be filled with a fine lime mortar and a suitably toned limewash. The missing detail would not be recreated.

3.2 Nave, East Wall

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

There several post 1993 losses of paint and ground apparent on the south side of the scheme. These are visible as white losses in the Mouth of Hell and the background to St Paul. 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. However, 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 be causing a contraction and associated loss of the paint layer.

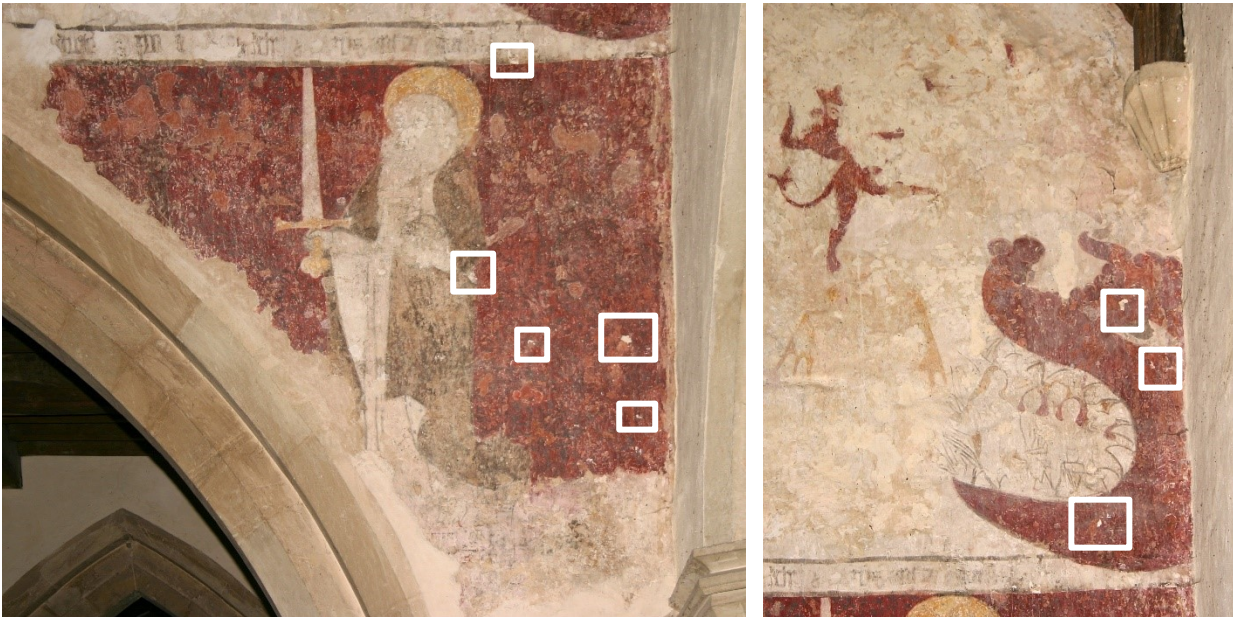


Fig 8. Locations of the most obvious paint losses on the north side of the east wall

A series of very small losses of paint are also visible in the red background to the small figure on the lower north side of the arch. Again the 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 recommendations:

Removal of surface accretions using soft brushes to direct the dirt into a vacuum nozzle. Further light cleaning using Wishab sponges (granular rubber cakes) may also be required. Spot cleaning of any residual staining from bat faeces would be carried out using de-ionised water swabs.

Reattachment of the damaged area(s) would be carried out using a thin lime slurry and/or an acrylic dispersion such as Primal B60A, depending on the thickness of the delamination. The losses would be filled with a fine lime mortar or thick and suitably tinted limewash. The missing detail would not be recreated. Some localised wax removal may also be necessary if this is deemed to be the cause of the damage. This would be achieved using a solvent mix of Xylene, Acetone and Iso-propanol, applied on swabs.

A fixed scaffold would be required for treatment.

3.3 Nave, West Wall

Generally all the wall paintings on this wall are stable, although the upper areas were only inspected using binoculars. By comparing the present condition with photos taken post-treatment in 1993, there appears to have been a small paint loss on the right hand feather on the south side, adjacent to a previous larger loss.

There is an area of local paint and ground delamination in the lower left hand corner of the painted text. There has been no apparent loss but the area is very vulnerable to abrasion from the curtain and is in an accessible position. There are also two small areas of slightly lifting painted ground in the centre of the text painting that require stabilisation to avoid further deterioration.

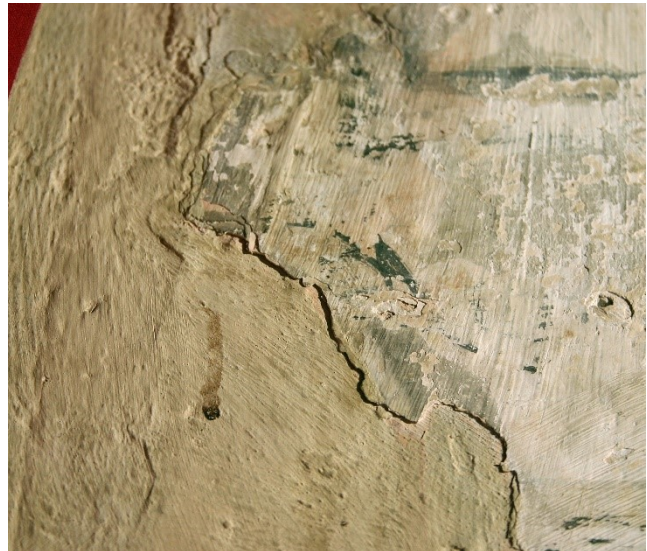


Fig 9. Location of a paint loss to the feathers on the south side (left) and delaminating paint and limewash ground to the Jeremiah text panel (above)

The entire west wall has extensive accumulations of dirt, cobwebs and bat droppings that compromise the appearance. This is likely to account for the comment from a member of the parish that the wall paintings have 'faded'.

3.3.1 Treatment recommendations:

Removal of surface accretions using soft brushes to direct the dirt into a vacuum nozzle. Further light cleaning using Wishab sponges (granular rubber cakes) may also be required. Spot cleaning of any residual staining from bat faeces would be carried out using de-ionised water swabs.

Reattachment of the damaged areas identified in Fig 9 would be carried out using a thin lime slurry and/or an acrylic dispersion such as Primal B60A, depending on the thickness of the delamination. The losses would be filled with a fine lime mortar or thick and suitably tinted limewash. The missing detail would not be recreated.

A fixed scaffold would be required for treatment.

4. Remedial Treatment Costs

The conservation works described above for all three areas would take 4 man days on site to complete. A further 1 man day off site would be required to complete the treatment record. The total cost for this work would be **£2,162.80 + VAT** if carried out in a single phase.

This price is valid for 2018 and includes all expenses. It excludes the cost of the necessary scaffold access to the nave east and west walls which we would ask the client to provide.

NB

The damage to the Virgin and Child wall painting in the south aisle is the most vulnerable to further loss and is therefore of higher priority for treatment. The proposed remedial works could be undertaken as a standalone phase, although it is recommended that the work includes both the reattachment treatment and the surface cleaning. No scaffold access would be required for this work which could be completed from a suitable step ladder.

If treated as single phase the work would take 1 man day to complete, including the treatment record, at a cost of £450.00 + VAT.