



LUDOVIC POTTS  
RESTORATIONS

**Conservation treatment report for two Benefaction Boards, St Bene't's Church, Cambridge**

**Two large Benefaction boards dated 1735**

Condition reports

For the purposes of the report the boards will be referred to as panel 1 and panel 2 - panel 1 has text extending the length of the board; panel 2 has text half way down the painted surface. Both boards are similar in materials and construction and will be discussed together. The paintings are executed on wooden panels made from boards in a vertical orientation with an arched top measuring 191 x 86 cm. On the reverse of the boards are tool marks from the original construction. Both boards have three horizontal battens on the reverse which protrude, creating an air gap behind the paintings which is important for air flow and circulation, preventing mould growth. The boards are well made and stable with little evidence of warp. There is a thick layer of dust and debris on the reverse of the panels.

The paint layers appear to have been applied directly onto the smoothed surface of the panel with no evidence of a preparation or ground layer. The grain of the wood is evident through the paint layer. There are numerous dents and chips on both boards. The black paint layers are likely to have been applied in more than one layer, there is no evidence of brush marks or texture. In localised areas there are raised lines of paint following the grain of the wood. The text has been applied in gold paint - close examination revealed that this has been painted on rather than applied as gold leaf. There are minor differences in the handling of the text on both boards - panel 2 appears to have a thicker glaze or toning layer applied on top of the lettering which has developed a slight craquelure pattern. The toning layer was probably applied to give the gold paint a warmer tone. It is unclear if there is also a toning layer on the panel 1. Both paintings have thick layers of varnish which have yellowed with age and are no longer adequately saturating the paint layers below. On top of the varnish is a thick layer of dust.

The paintings are framed in ornately carved and decorated frames. Different paint layers and effects have been created. Flat areas of the wood have been painted brown with a pale yellow painted effect across the surface. Other areas have been painted black with a textured finish, possibly created by the addition of sand to the paint layer. The sight edge has been painted gold. At the bottom of both frames are flat sections which

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have been painted a light green colour with gold painted lettering reading 'Done in 1735'. It is assumed that this is the date of construction of the entire objects, although the painted sections record gifts to the church dating back to 1625. The green paint has suffered from degradation with large blisters and areas of loss. The cause of this deterioration is unclear, it has the appearance of damage which can be caused by heat, however, it is very localised to this section of the painting and frame. It seems probable that the paint layer itself is inherently unstable. Either side of the painted section are carved elements and scrolls which have suffered from damage and loss to the wooden structure. The frames also have varnish coatings although these are not as thick as the layers on the painted panels. The panels are supported in the frame with wooden buttons which can be turned around the central nail. There is evidence of wood worm damage to the frame, although this is not extensive and does not appear to be active. The frames measure 279 x 125 cm at their maximum dimensions.

### Treatment report

Loose dust and debris was removed from the front and reverse of the panels with a stiff brush and vacuum. Small sections of raised paint in the black background were consolidated by brushed a warm solution of 5% sturgeon glue through tissue paper and massaging back into plane with a heat controlled spatula. The blistered section of paint on the bottom of the frames were consolidated with Lascaux 4176 adhesive. The paintings were surface cleaned with a solution of dilute ammonia at pH 10.5 and 11. The solution was applied with cotton swabs and removed a thick layer of dirt on both the paintings and frame.

Solvent tests were undertaken to find a method of removing the varnish layers. It was decided not to remove all of the layers of varnish from the surface. The toning layers have the same solubility as the varnish layers and the black paint was also found to be sensitive to solvent cleaning. It was decided to partially remove the varnish layers removing as much of the yellowed surface coating as safely possible and improving the appearance and legibility of text. A mixture of 1:3 industrial methylated spirits in white spirit was used to remove the varnish layers. The same mixture was used to partially remove the varnish layers on the frame.

A consequence of partial cleaning was that cotton wool fibres got caught in the resolubilised varnish. As much of the cotton wool was removed as possible using microfibre cloths and tweezers.

A new coat of conservation grade varnish was brushed onto both the paintings and frames (Paraloid B72 15% in Shellsol A). The varnish saturated the painted surfaces and provides an even overall gloss to the paintings. Retouching to losses in the black backgrounds was undertaken with dry pigments ground in Laropal A81 (25% in Shellsol A and white spirits). Replacements to the carved section of frame were toned with watercolour and black casein paint before glazing with Laropal A81.

With regard to areas of moulding which need to be stabilized structurally, these have had nails inserted which has been reversed to allow the mouldings to sit firmly with stability, which has stabilized the whole

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structure as a result. Concerning the areas where the steel work was adjusted to house the boards in re-seating, the mouldings have been knocked off previously and has been reinstated using reclaimed timber from a matching period. These in turn have been re-coloured, matched and blended with the surrounding surface areas. These have been sealed with Casein paint prior to glazing. These also have been sealed with Paraloid to match the surrounding surface areas, in additional touching-in was carried out in conjunction with the adjustments to the steel work.

Re-hung, using the original fixings.

The existing steel work fixed in situ within the church has been adjusted to house the boards. Conservation foam has been placed between the boards and the brackets discretely, then trimmed accordingly (these are not visible when viewed).

The work was completed on Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> August.

