



# Upton Magna, Shropshire Church of St Lucia

## Conservation and Recovery of the Wall Painting Scheme:

### Phase 2

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April 2020

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the Parish for supporting the conservation and partial recovery of the wall painting scheme at Upton Magna. Particular thanks go to Sue and Phillip Woods for their tireless efforts and assistance. For the stabilisation component of the treatment programme, generous funding is provided by **ChurchCare** (supported by **The Pilgrim Trust**). Other funding for the rehabilitation of the scheme has been kindly provided by the **Churches Conservation Trust**, by the **William and Jane Morris Fund** (sponsored by the **Society of Antiquaries**, London), and by the **William A. Cadbury Charitable Trust**.



*Above: detail of the newly exposed decoration on the north wall of the chancel.*

## OVERVIEW

The imposing medieval Church of St Lucia, Upton Magna, was substantially rebuilt and restored by the famous Gothic Revival architect, G. E. Street, in 1856. A sophisticated scheme of internal decoration and painting originally covered the entire interior. This primarily comprises architectural decoration, including ‘masonry pattern’ adorned with rosettes and flowers, and geometrical and foliate borders. In the chancel, however, there is also figurative painting. This comprehensive scheme was implemented as part of a wider programme of ecclesiastical embellishment, which included meticulously designed church fixtures and fittings, such as the reredos and the chancel rail. Taken as a whole, the church’s interior reflected Street’s architectural ideals and their associations of religious renewal that informed the earliest phase of the Gothic Revival movement.

Unfortunately, the entire scheme of painting and decoration was whitewashed over in the C20. Although its uncovering and rehabilitation would be desirable, investigations carried out by **Rickerby and Shekede** in 2017 demonstrated that this cannot be done safely on a wide-scale basis. A long history of deterioration and damage has left the internal walls in poor condition in many places, meaning that the concealed scheme survives in an imperfect and discontinuous condition. In many places, it is also impossible to remove the covering layers without causing excessive damage, or even complete loss.

Despite its concealed and compromised condition, the wall painting scheme at Upton Magna has considerable historical and artistic importance. Major repairs to the structure and roofing have recently been completed, and planned internal decoration has also now been implemented. An aspect of the investigations carried out by **Rickerby and Shekede** in 2017 was to determine how best to preserve and present the concealed painting alongside these then proposed developments. A survey was carried out to determine the extent and condition of the wall painting scheme, based on making small uncovering ‘windows’ through the covering whitewash. Small samples

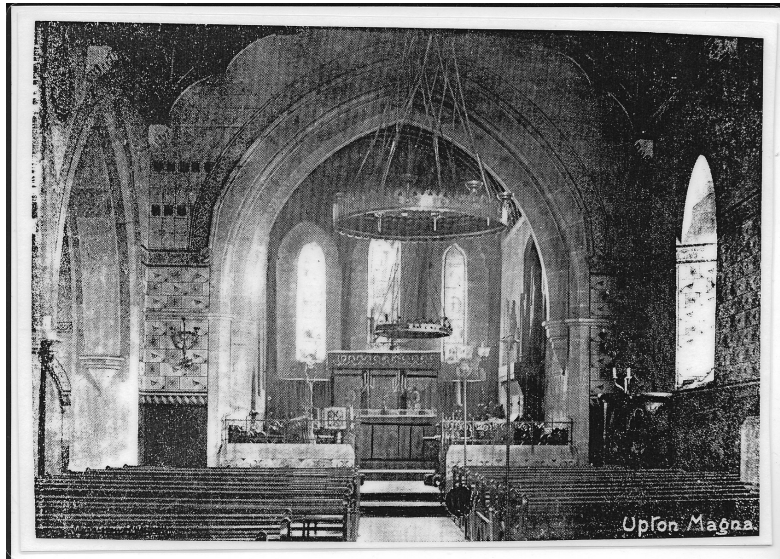
were also taken for microscopic analysis, to determine the number of overlying layers present and their basic composition.

**Based on findings of the investigations, the following recommendations were made:**

- the best way of ensuring the preservation of the painting scheme is to **leave most of it intact and undisturbed beneath the existing covering layers**. Where covering layers are in good condition, which is the case in most areas, redecoration can be done without causing physical disturbance. **This course of action was recommended, both as a means of protecting the painting scheme and for improving the appearance of the interior;**
- in areas where vulnerable painting is already exposed, **specialist stabilisation and protection were required before general redecoration can proceed;**
- since redecoration will conceal evidence of the scheme’s presence, **selected areas should be uncovered** in locations where results of the wall painting survey indicate safe conditions. **This would serve an important function in maintaining awareness of the presence, variety and significance of the original painting and decoration in different parts of the church interior.**

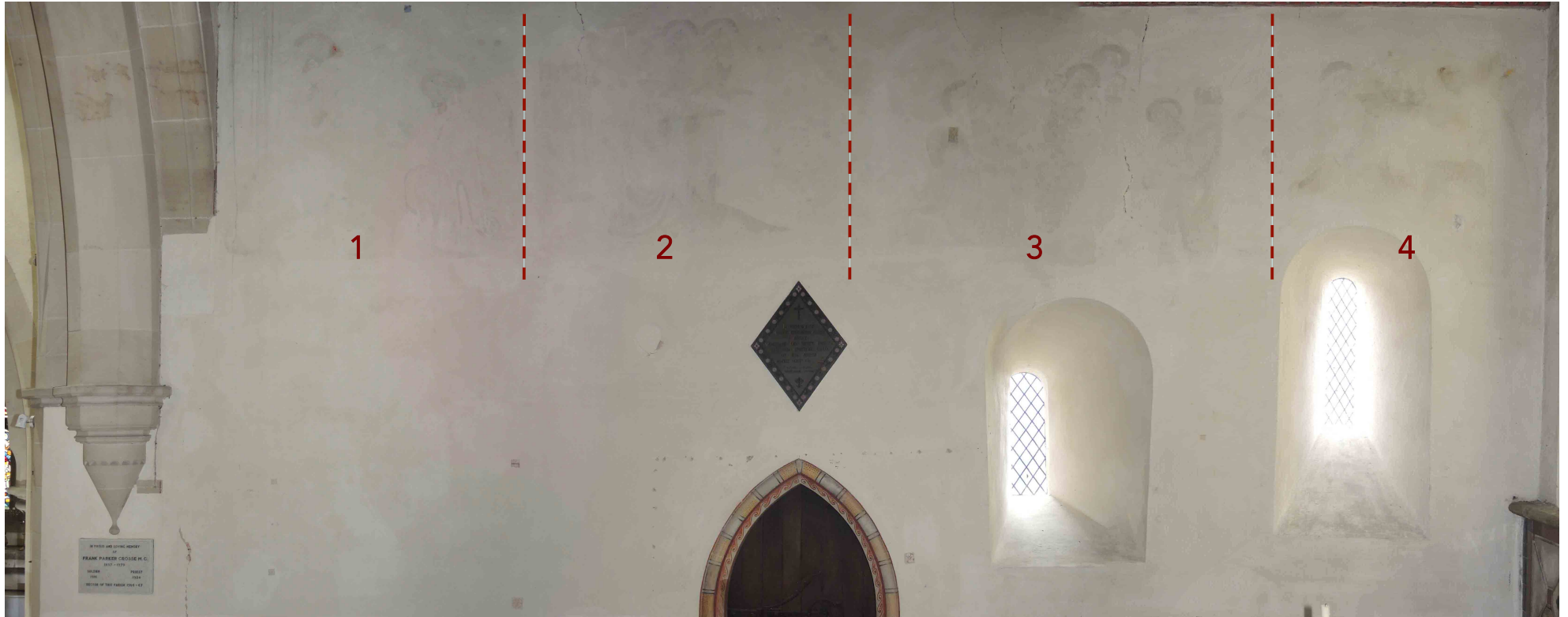
In November 2019, **Rickerby and Shekede** carried out **Phase 1** of the wall painting recommendations in the nave and north aisle, and in a small area in the chancel. Outcomes were described in a brief report [S. Rickerby and L. Shekede, ‘Upton Magna, Shropshire: Church of St Lucia: Conservation and Recovery of the Wall Painting Scheme, Phase 1’, December 2019]. In February to April 2020, **Rickerby and Shekede** returned to Upton Magna to carry out Phase 2 of the treatment programme, which this time was entirely in the chancel. Outcomes of this 5-week programme are reported herein.





## CONTEXT: the decoration and its concealment

**Plates 1-3:** archival photograph of the nave taken before the interior of the church was whitewashed shows the appearance and comprehensive extent of the wall painting scheme (**top left and bottom left**). Today, the scheme is concealed from view, although indications of its presence remain apparent beneath the covering whitewash (**right**). Unfortunately, no archival images are known that show the appearance of the decoration and figurative painting in the chancel before their concealment.



## CONTEXT: the chancel north wall before treatment

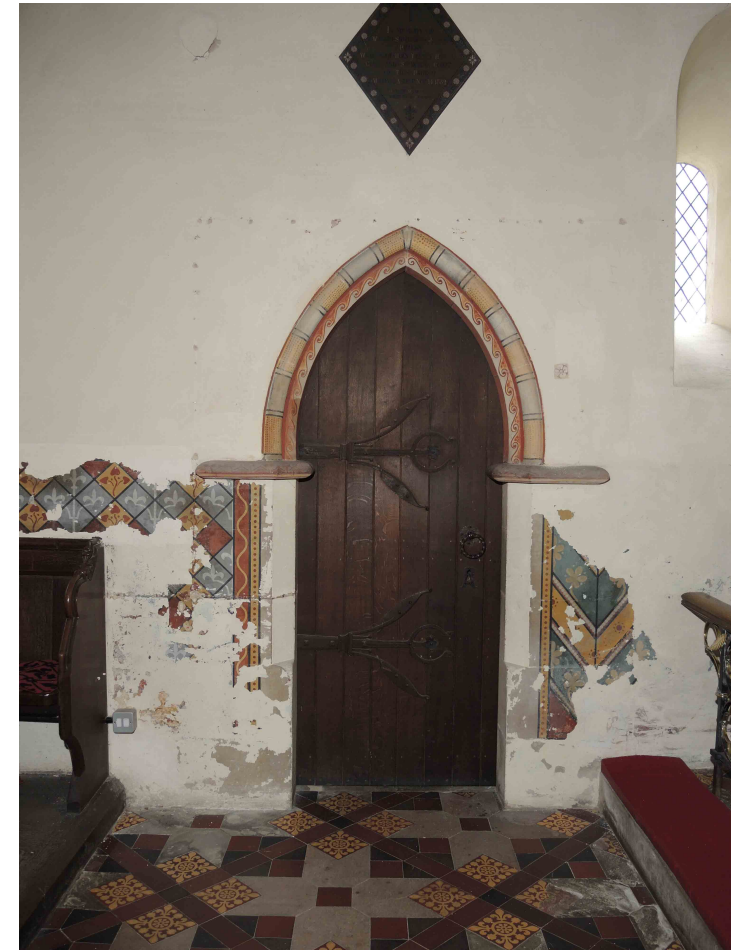
**Plate 4:** despite the lack of archival evidence to show the former appearance of the chancel, impressions of the figurative scheme along the top of the north and south walls remain visible through the covering layers. In the image above of the north wall, four distinct figure-groups can be discerned. Close inspection during the recent conservation programme enabled these to be more or less identified. They are scenes associated with Christ's Nativity, from left to right: (1) the *Annunciation*; (2) the *Visitation*; (3) the *Nativity*; and (4) the *Adoration of the Shepherds/Kings*.





## CONTEXT: the chancel north wall before treatment

**Plates 5-6:** a brightly coloured lozenge design and other decorative painting survives along the bottom of the north wall, and around the doorway to the vestry, parts of which were visible where overlying paint had flaked away. Painted in a more durable technique than other areas of painting in the church, uncovering this decoration was one of the main aims of Phase 2.



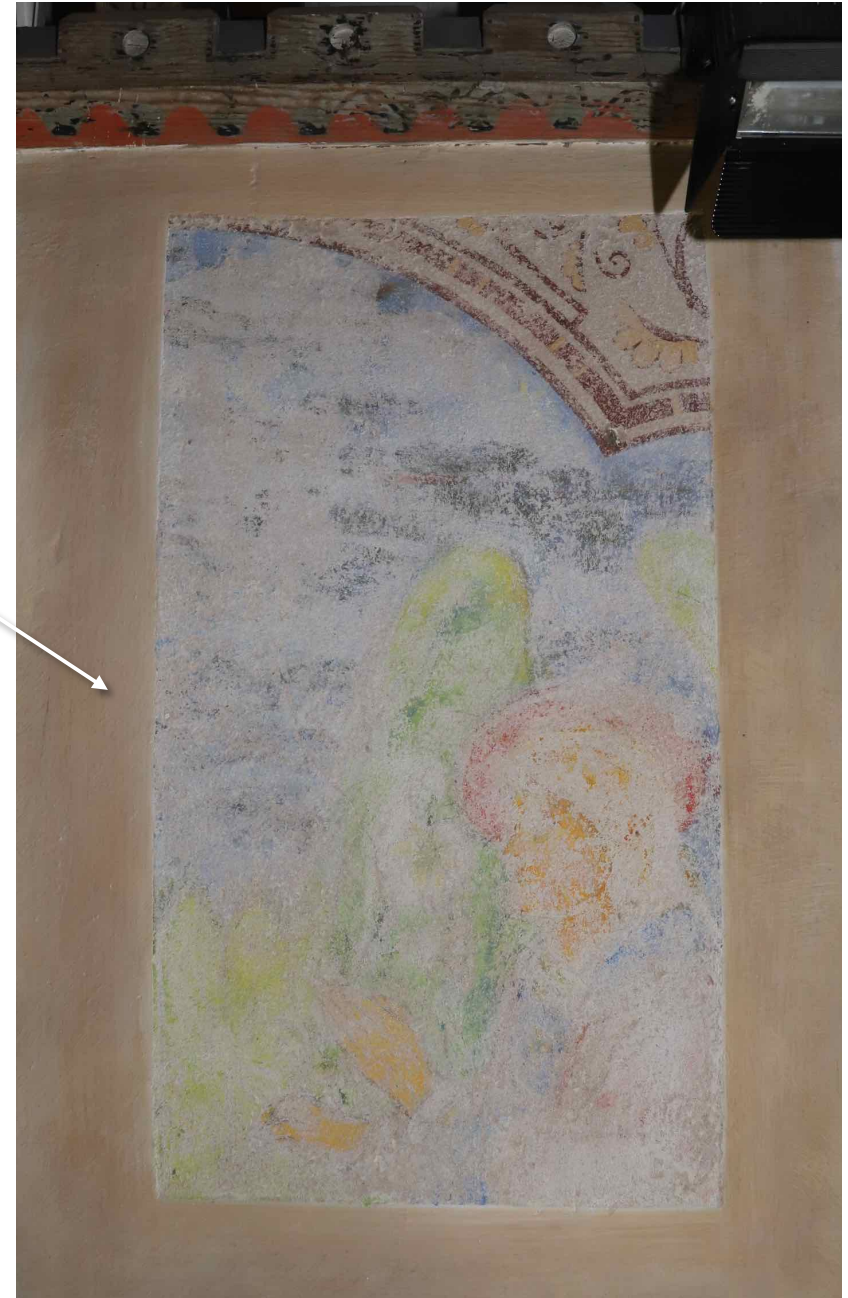




### CONTEXT: the chancel south wall before treatment

**Plates 7-8:** the lozenge design is repeated along the bottom of the south wall, while figurative painting survives in the upper part. The condition of the decorative painting here is more damaged and abraded. It is not known what the figurative paintings depicted, but presumably they were scenes from the Life of Christ.





### TREATMENT: chancel north wall, upper part

**Plates 9-10:** while it was hoped that there was considerable scope for uncovering the figurative painting, this did not unfortunately prove to be the case. A number of large uncovering 'windows' were opened up to demonstrate the presence of painting, but wide-scale uncovering was not carried out. It seems likely that the tops of the walls suffered considerable deterioration in the past, probably from rainwater infiltration. In this area, from the *Annunciation*, the Angel Gabriel can be seen. Most of the upper paint layers have already been lost.



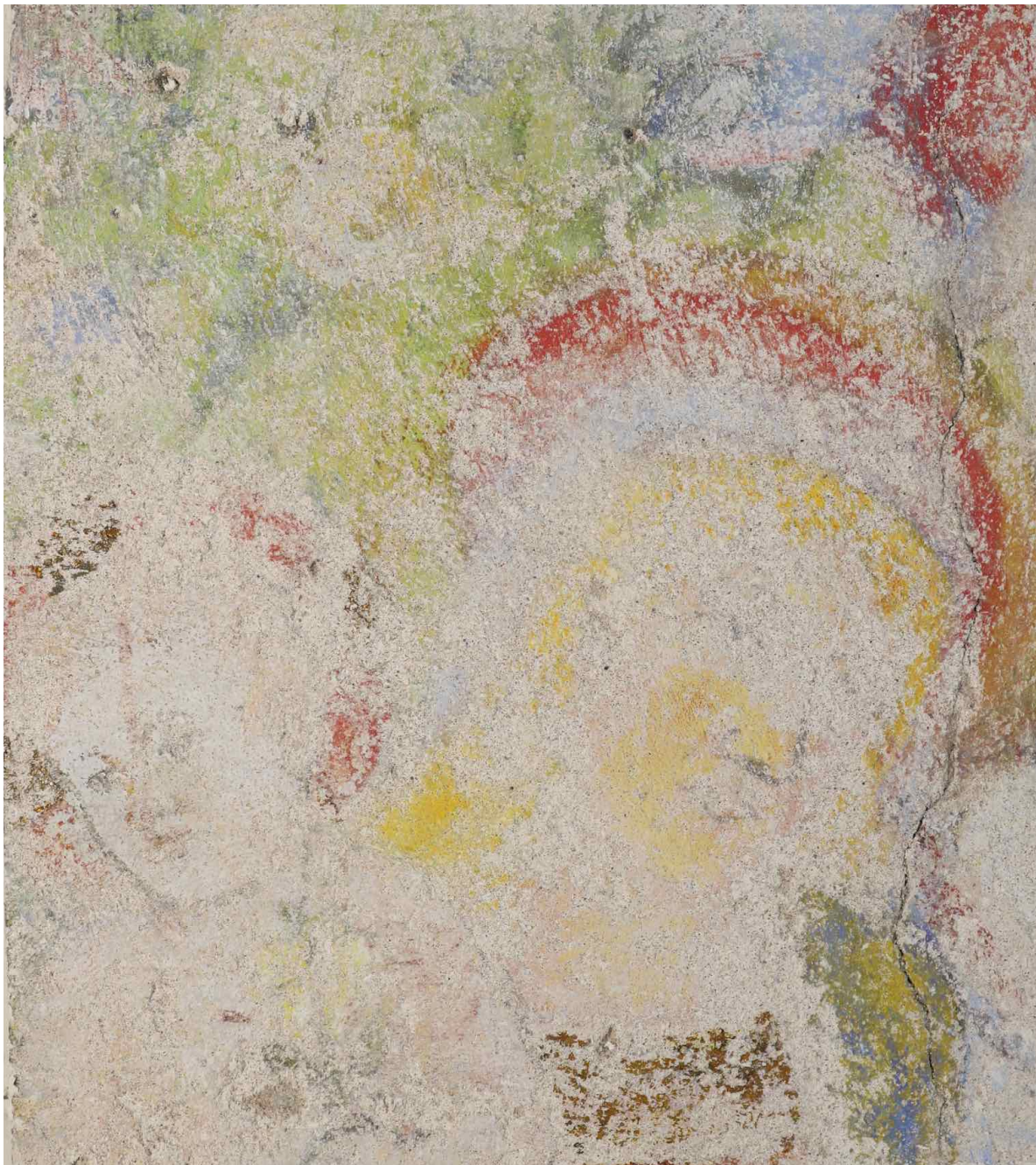


**TREATMENT:** chancel north wall, upper part

**Plate 11:** three more uncovering 'windows' were made on the *Nativity* scene.

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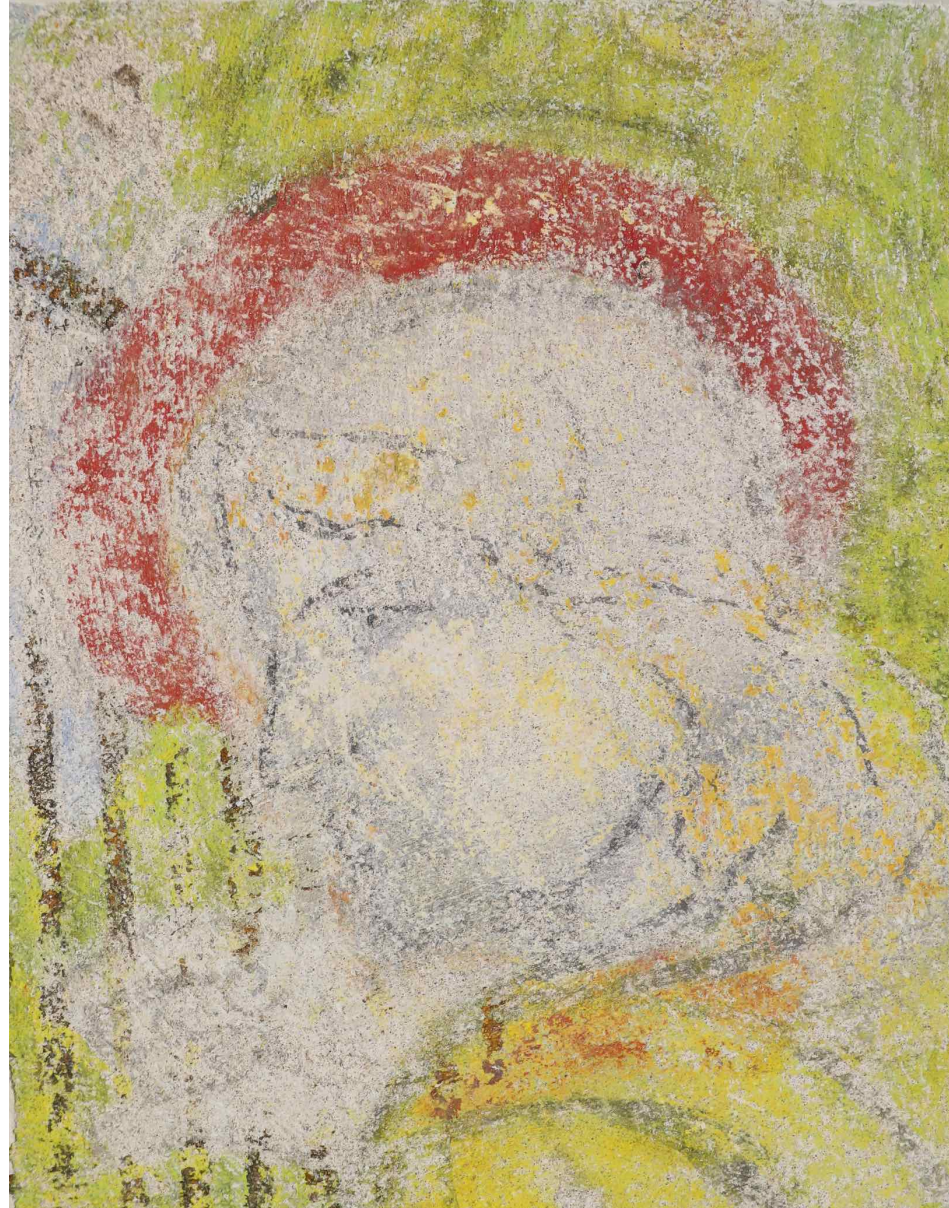
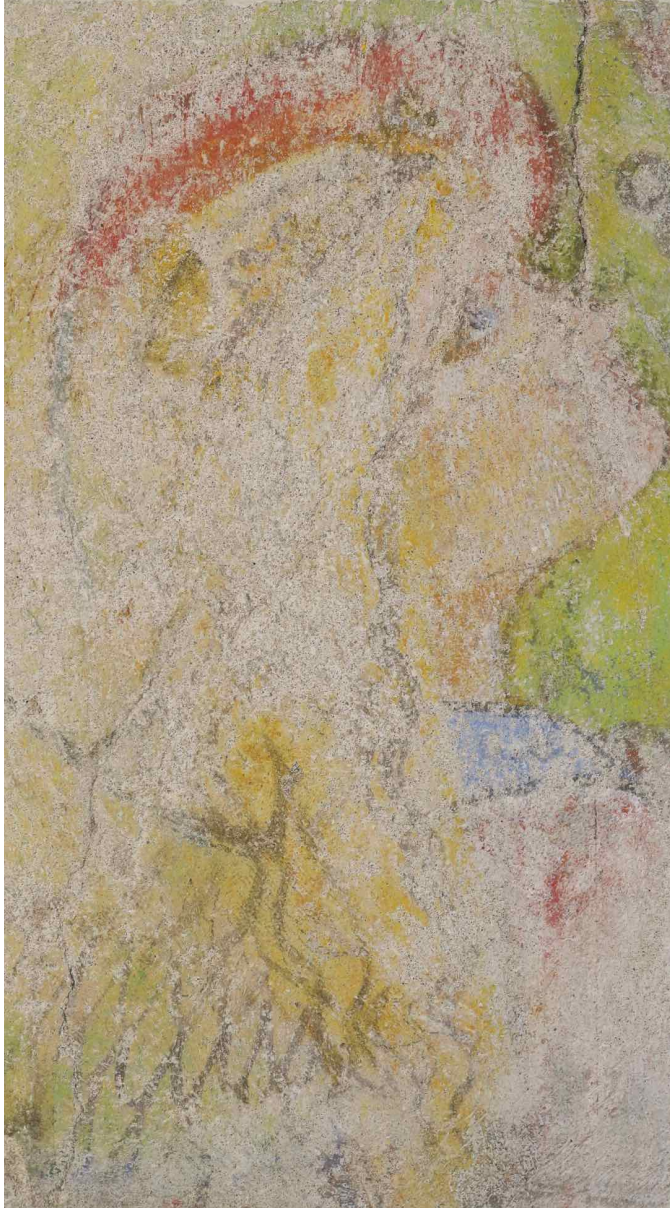




**TREATMENT:**  
chancel north wall, upper part

Plate 12: close-up view of the Virgin and Christ-Child.

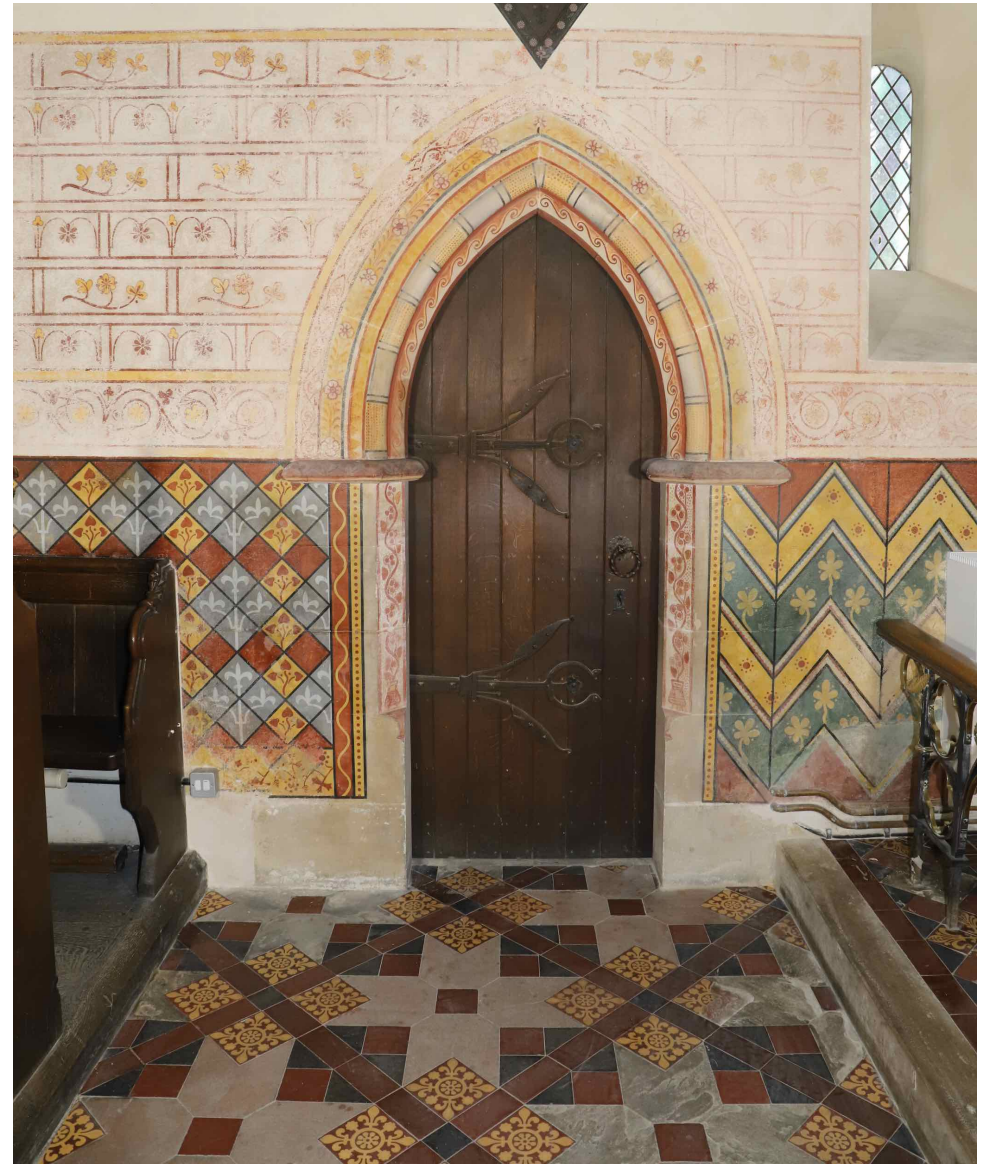




**TREATMENT:** chancel north wall, upper part

**Plates 13-14:** close-up views of the flaking angels.





### TREATMENT: chancel north wall, lower part

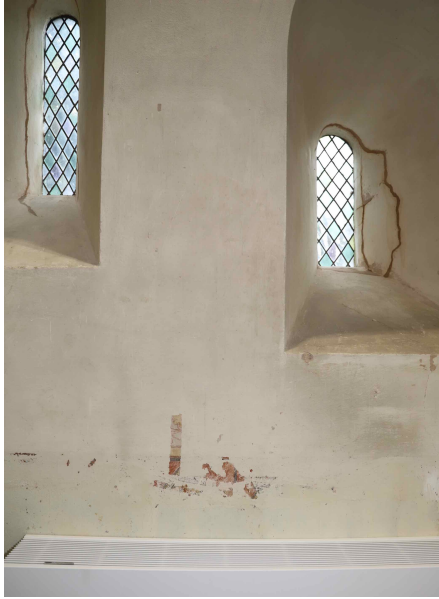
Plates 15-16: having decided not to uncover the upper north wall, efforts were concentrated on the decorative painting lower down. Here the results were rewarding, as a comparison of images before (above left) and after (above right) treatment show.



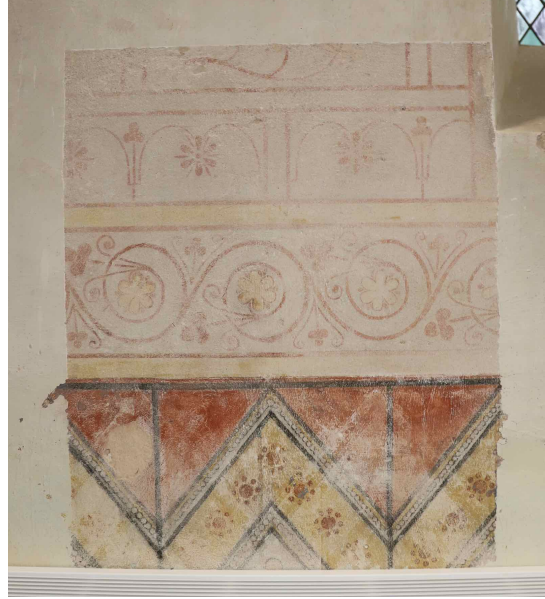


**TREATMENT:** chancel south wall, lower part

**Plate 17:** the lozenge decoration on the west side of the south wall was also fully revealed (cf, **plates 7-8** for its appearance before treatment).



before uncovering



after uncovering (November 2019)

### TREATMENT: chancel south wall, lower part

**Plates 18-19:** some selective uncovering was carried out at the east end of the south wall in November 2019. This was extended in Phase 2, as shown in the images on this page.



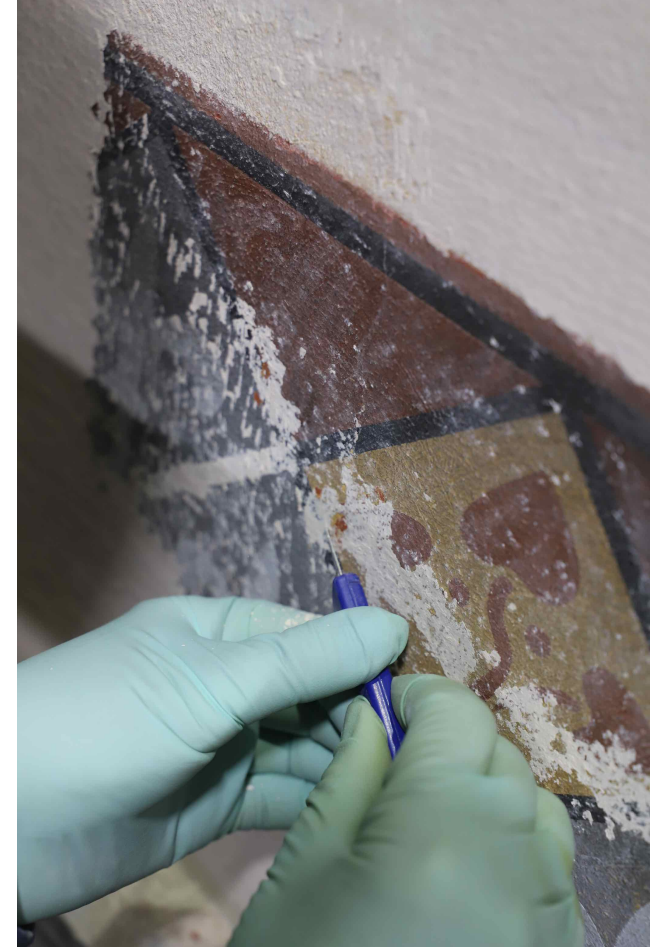
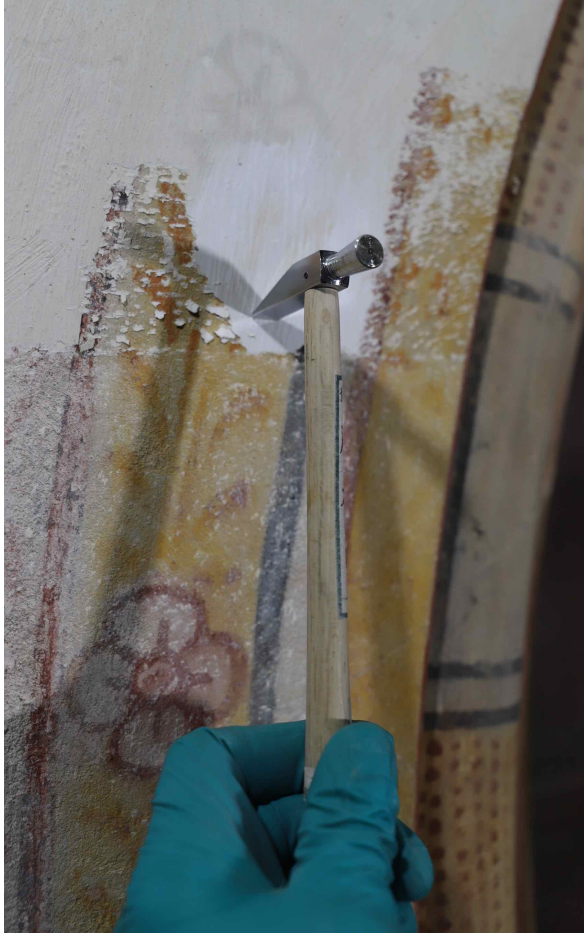
after completion of uncovering and conservation in 2020



## TREATMENT COMPONENTS: stabilisation and protection

**Plates 20-21:** although a major objective of the treatment programme was to reveal representative areas of painting (where safe to do so), it was also necessary to stabilise and protect vulnerable painting that had already been partly exposed as result of damage and deterioration, in preparation for the general redecoration of the chancel. Areas of exposed and powdering original painting were first consolidated with the conservation-grade adhesive, AcrilME® (5-10% in water), delivered by pipette (**above left**). The next stage was to provide an appropriate inert covering layer. A suspension of chalk powder in industrial methylated spirit (IMS) was prepared to a smooth consistency. The IMS reduces the surface tension of both the chalk particles and the wall surface, allowing a smooth and even application. Its fast evaporation rate also allows for speedier application of successive layers. The mixture was spayed evenly over exposed painting and allowed to dry (**above right**). This was repeated several times to produce a thick chalk covering. Over this, limewash was then applied, initially by spray, then by brush. In this way, contact of the lime with the underlying painting is avoided.





## TREATMENT COMPONENTS: uncovering methods

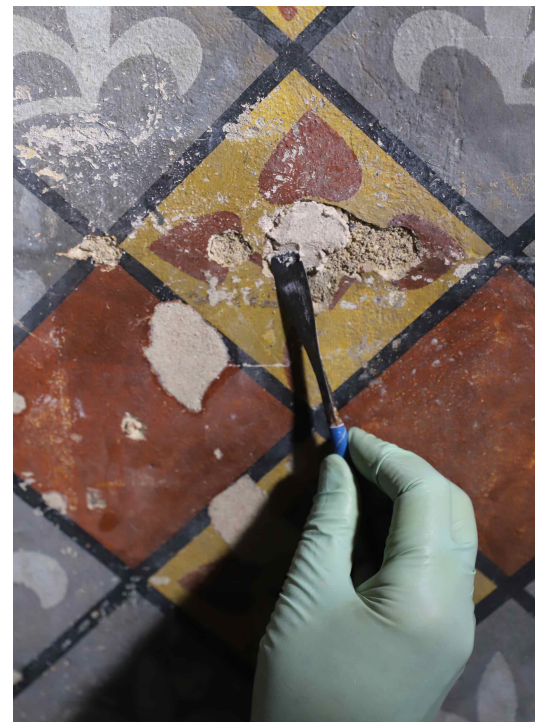
Plates 22-24: uncovering was carried out manually, using small hammers and scalpels, as shown in the images above.



## TREATMENT COMPONENTS: consolidation

**Plates 25-26:** consolidation was required for different purposes and was carried out at different stages of the treatment programme. During uncovering, some areas of concealed painted plaster required pre-consolidation, to enable covering layers to be removed without causing damage. For this, the conservation-grade adhesive, AcrilME® (5-10% in water) was applied through an intervention layer of lens tissue (**above left**). After uncovering, areas of powdery pigment were consolidated with the acrylic resin, Paraloid B72®, [10% solution in methyl proxitol : acetone (60: 30 parts v/v)] (**above right**).





## TREATMENT COMPONENTS: repairs

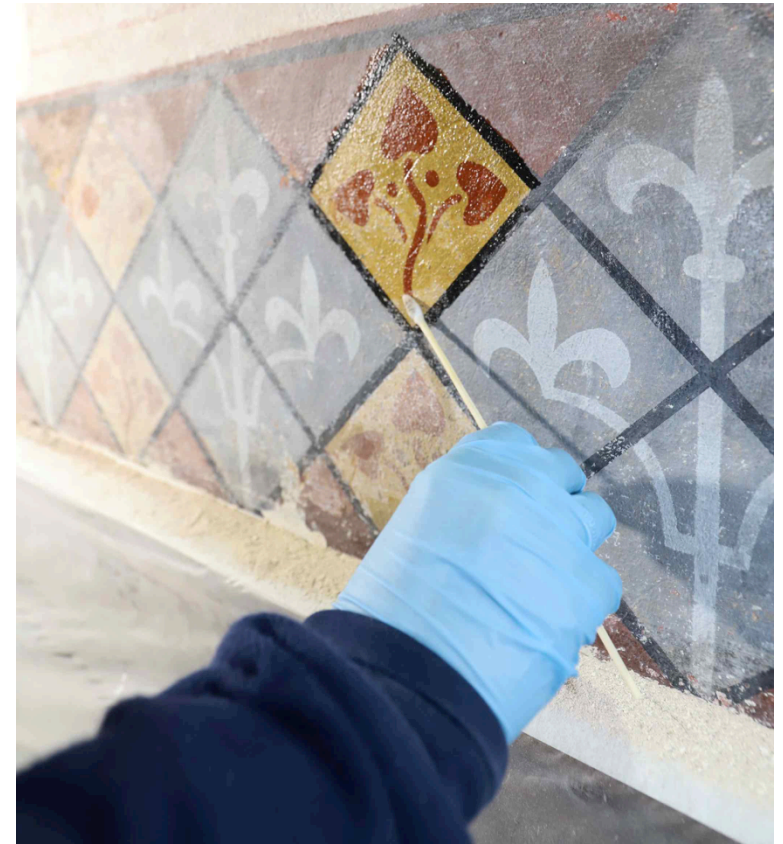
**Plates 27-29:** losses and damages in the painting were repaired with lime plaster. For deep losses, a coarse base-layer was first applied (1 part lime: 4 parts lime v/v). When this had set, a finer upper layer was next applied (1 lime : 2 parts fine sand : 1 part marble powder v/v). For shallow losses, only the fine plaster was used.



## TREATMENT COMPONENTS: repairs

**Plate 30:** uncovering revealed damages associated with fixtures for a now lost wall monument. This image shows the damages after their repair with lime plaster.

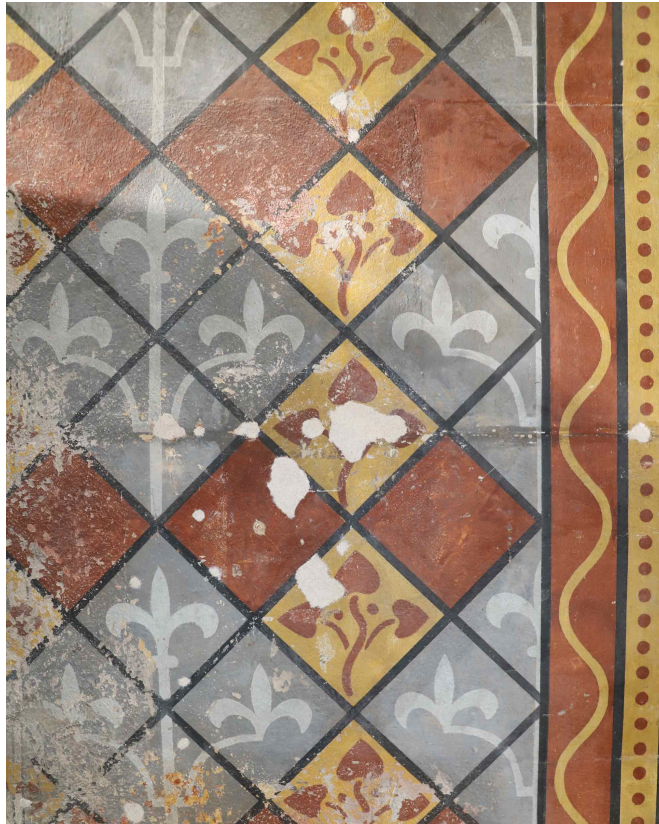




## TREATMENT COMPONENTS: cleaning

**Plates 31-32:** there is evidence from other 19C ecclesiastical wall painting schemes that hard-wearing oil paints were used at dado level, and distemper paint was employed on the less accessible upper walls. This appears to have been the case in the chancel at Upton Magna. The lozenge decoration on the lower part of the wall has a shiny compact appearance, and generally survives in better condition than the simpler decorative painting higher up. It had also imbibed a lot of dirt. Synperonic A7® was selected to clean the painting. Synperonic A7® is a 100% active water-soluble alcohol ethoxylate, used as a non-ionic detergent, wetting agent, surfactant, emulsifying and dispersing agent. It is readily biodegradable, and effective at higher dilutions than earlier formulations, making it an extremely environment-friendly cleaning agent. To address the particular conditions of the chancel paintings, a dilution of 0.5% Synperonic A7® in H<sub>2</sub>O was employed.

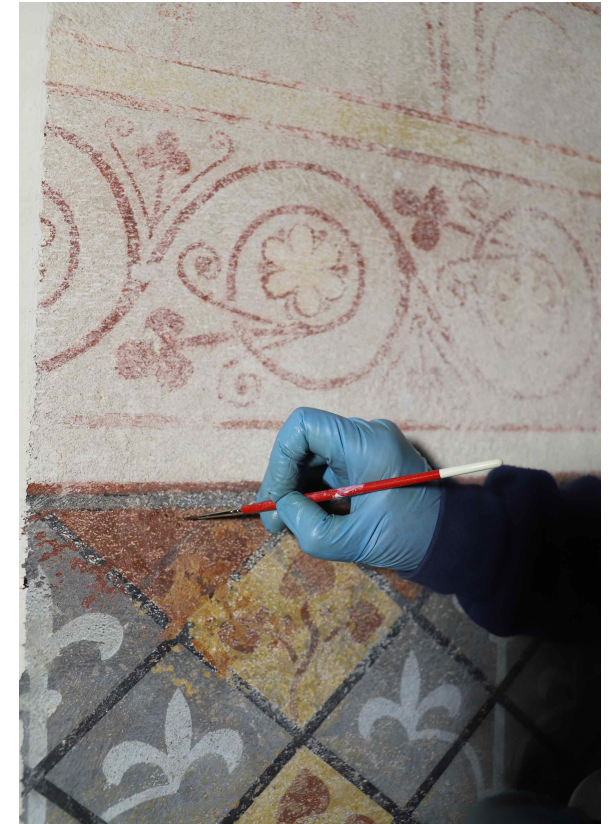




before reintegration



after reintegration



## TREATMENT COMPONENTS: reintegration

**Plates 33-35:** distracting losses and damages in the painting were reintegrated with reversible water-colour paints, applied either on new plaster repairs or over the original exposed plaster. New colours were matched to the original paint, but on close inspection original and added paints remain distinguishable. Where necessary and appropriate, limited reconstruction was done to enhance interpretation and appreciation of the painting.





## DISCOVERIES: fragments of medieval or post-Reformation painting

**Plates 36-37:** other than in the tower, the nave south wall is the only part of the church where the medieval stone fabric is preserved and exposed. At the east end of the south wall, a few stones retain traces of painting. The main paint remains are on one large stone (**above**). At least two phases of painting are present: on the lowest level are traces of painting in black and white; above this, there is a separate period of painting in red and yellow. Both phases must pre-date the Victorian restoration of the church, and could be of medieval date or belong to the post-Reformation period when the walls of church interiors were typically painted with framed biblical texts. Unfortunately the surviving painting preserves hardly any distinguishing features. However, post-Reformation text paintings were usually executed quite simply, typically on limewash layers rather than on plaster. These characteristics accord with these paint traces, which have been recognised here for the first time.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

**Plate 38:** although the newly revealed areas of painting in the chancel are only a partial reflection of the original appearance of the decorated interior, they serve an important function in maintaining awareness of the presence, variety and significance of the original painting and decoration in different parts of the church interior. The painting uncovered and conserved on the lower part of the chancel south wall is the largest expanse treated in the conservation programme, and provides vivid testimony to G. E. Street's original decorative scheme.