



Upton Magna, Shropshire Church of St Lucia

Conservation and Recovery of the Wall Painting Scheme:

Phase 1

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Above: detail of the newly exposed decoration in the north aisle.

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 a figurative scheme. This painting and decoration were 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 an ensemble, the church’s interior reflected Street’s religious-architectural ideals during a formative 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 new internal decoration is now planned. 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 in light of these 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:

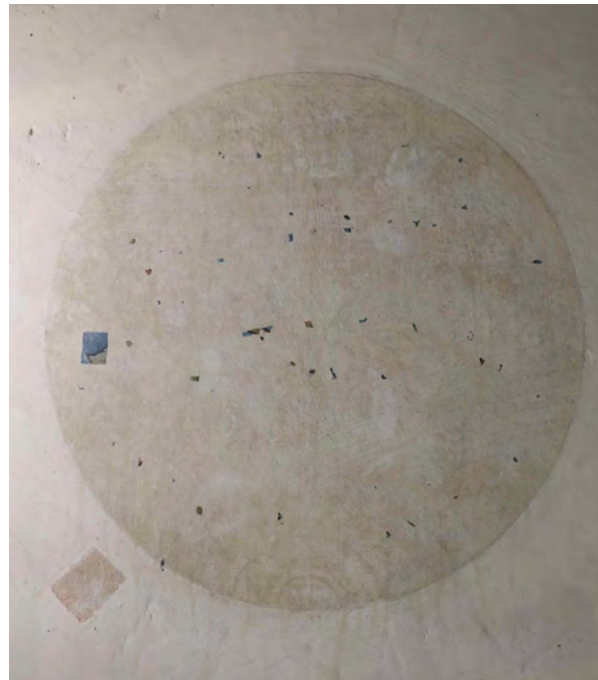
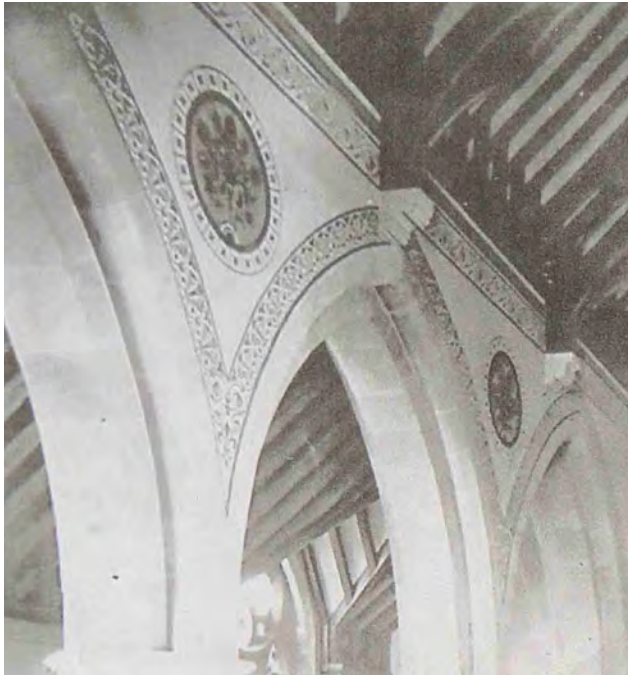
- the best way of ensuring the preservation of the painting scheme is to **leave most of it intact and undisturbed beneath the existing covering layers**. Where covering layers are in good condition, which is the case in most areas, redecoration can be done without causing physical disturbance. ***This course of action is 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 are 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** returned to Upton Magna to implement the wall painting recommendations in the nave and north aisle, and in a small area in the chancel. These measures are reported and illustrated herein. Additional conservation and recovery work is planned in the chancel in 2020.



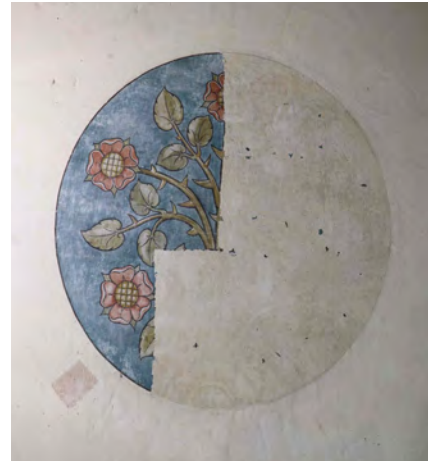
CONTEXT: the decoration and its concealment

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).



NAVE ROUNDELS: selective uncovering

Plates 4-6: some painting at Upton Magna was done on canvases that were adhered to the walls. At the west end of the nave is a fine **Baptism of Christ**, which is still visible. However, two canvas roundels that decorate the nave arcade had been whitewashed over (**middle and right images**). Their foliate designs are known from archival images (**top left**). Tests carried out in 2017 demonstrated that the roundels could be safely uncovered.



NAVE ROUNDELS: results of selective uncovering

Plates 7-13: stages in the uncovering of the westernmost roundel. Uncovering was carried out by mechanical methods, using scalpels and small spatulas.



NAVE ROUNDELS: results of selective uncovering

Plates 14-16: the roundels enclose arrangements of red roses and white irises. Given G. E. Street's preoccupations with religious symbolism, these were probably not meant to be simply decorative in intent, but also to convey meaning. They probably refer to the purity of the Virgin Mary.





NORTH AISLE: pre-treatment conditions

Plates 17-22: as elsewhere on the interior of the church, concealed painting in the north aisle is extensive, and much of it is still preserved beneath the whitewash (**top images**). However, damage and deterioration also mean that some areas of painting have either been lost or are too fragile to be safely uncovered (**bottom images**).



NORTH AISLE: stabilisation

Plates 23-24: 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 vulnerable painting that had already been partly exposed as result of damage and deterioration throughout the aisle (**above left**), in order to make these safe for the planned general redecoration of the interior. Areas of exposed and powdering original painting were first consolidated with the conservation-grade adhesive, AcrilME® (5-10% in water), delivered by pipette (**above right**).



NORTH AISLE: protection

Plates 25-26: following the consolidation of areas of vulnerable exposed painting, 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 left**). This was repeated several times to produce a thick chalk covering (**above right**). Over this, limewash was then applied. A suspension of slaked lime putty and water was passed through a 100-mesh sieve to produce a mixture that also could be easily sprayed, so that the chalk layer would not be disturbed. In this way, contact of the lime with the underlying painting is avoided. Several layers of limewash were spayed, allowing drying in between in each layer. Final layers were applied by brush.



NORTH AISLE: scope of uncovering

Plates 27-28: since uncovering was not safe or feasible in all areas of the north aisle, a representative area was carefully selected, indicated by the red box in the **top image**. Previous investigations had shown that the concealed painting survived in reasonably good condition here. Results of the uncovering are shown in the **bottom image**. The architectural decoration revealed here is consistent for the entire north aisle.



NORTH AISLE: results of uncovering

Plates 29-31: the architectural decoration includes a border of tumbling block cubes, their three-dimensionality rendered by the use of four colours, cream, grey, red and yellow. For the most part, the yellow paint has preferentially deteriorated. It is only present on a few of the cubes, as illustrated above.



NORTH AISLE: results of uncovering

Plates 32-33: the scope of uncovering exceeded expectations. Initially it was thought that only relatively small uncovering 'windows' could be made, but being able to reveal a large area fully demonstrates the nature and quality of the original decoration.

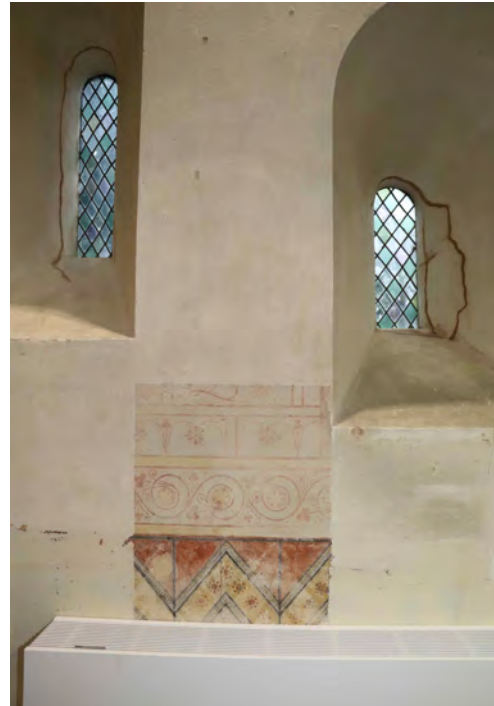


NORTH AISLE: results of uncovering: *aspects of original technique*

Plates 34-35: some evidence for how the painting designs were transferred to the wall are preserved. They were traced from large cartoons, which were fixed in place by small nails. Tacking holes – and in some places the small nails (circled in the **images above**) – can still be found at regularly placed intervals.



before uncovering



after uncovering



CHANCEL, SOUTH WALL: results of uncovering

Plates 36-38: some selective uncovering was also carried out in the chancel, on the south wall, as shown in the **images above**. As in the nave and north aisle, the condition of the chancel walls is not uniform, and there are substantial areas where uncovering is not safely possible. Nevertheless, this area demonstrates again the sophistication of the decorative painting, and its subtly varied nature, and it is hoped that in the next phase of treatment, more such painting can be recovered here. Substantial stabilisation of the painting scheme is also required in the chancel.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

Plate 36: although the newly revealed areas of painting in the nave and north aisle (**left**), and 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.