

TOBIT CURTEIS ASSOCIATES LLP

THE CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST, ROYSTON

CONSERVATION TREATMENT OF THE WALL PAINTINGS

JULY 2021

33 Cavendish Avenue Cambridge CB1 7UR Tel 01223 501958 Fax 01223 790225
E-mail tc@tcassociates.co.uk Web www.tcassociates.co.uk

Partners: Tobit Curteis B.A.(Hons.) Dip. Conservation (Courtauld Institute) ACR FRC & Victoria Curteis M.A. (Oxon)

Tobit Curteis Associates is a Limited Liability Partnership Reg. No. OC338996 VAT Reg. No. 636 9463 04

CONTENTS

| | | |
|------|--|----|
| 1.0 | Introduction | 4 |
| 2.0 | The Church | 4 |
| 2.1 | Location | 4 |
| 2.2 | Structure and Development | 4 |
| 3.0 | Wall Paintings | 6 |
| 3.1 | Description | 6 |
| 4.0 | Remedial Conservation Treatment..... | 8 |
| 4.1 | Stabilisation and Readhesion of the Paint Layer..... | 8 |
| 4.2 | Facing | 9 |
| 4.3 | Limewash | 10 |
| 5.0 | Photographic Record of the Paintings..... | 11 |
| 5.1 | Location of the Fragments | 11 |
| 5.2 | Painting Fragment 1A | 12 |
| 5.3 | Painting Fragment 1B | 14 |
| 5.4 | Painting Fragment 2A | 16 |
| 5.5 | Painting Fragment 2B | 18 |
| 5.6 | Painting Fragment 2C | 21 |
| 5.7 | Painting Fragment 2D | 24 |
| 5.8 | Painting Fragment 2E | 26 |
| 5.9 | Painting Fragment 3A | 28 |
| 5.10 | Painting Fragment 3B | 31 |
| 5.11 | Painting Fragment 3C | 34 |
| 5.12 | Painting Fragment 3D | 36 |
| 5.13 | Painting Fragment 4A | 39 |
| 5.14 | Painting Fragment 4B | 40 |
| 6.0 | Appendix I: Location of the Paintings | 43 |

Report No: RTJB01.2 **Date:** 20th July 2021

Author: Tobit Curteis Associates LLP, 33 Cavendish Avenue, Cambridge, CB1 7UR
T: 01223 501958 E: office@tcassociates.co.uk

Notice: This report is submitted subject strictly to our terms and conditions. You are reminded that:

1. This report is a “Deliverable” provided subject to our terms and conditions and is prepared solely for the benefit of the Client, for the purpose of the Project and may only be relied upon by the Client. This report may not be disclosed to or relied upon by any other person or used for any other purpose without TCA’s prior written consent.
2. The survey is based on information or data available to the author at the time of writing it is possible that, if further information or data becomes available, conclusions may need to be refined.
3. The examination is limited to those areas which, in our opinion, were safely accessible during the survey. It is possible that conditions might vary in areas which could not be examined.
4. No opening up was carried out and no materials analysis, environmental monitoring or other technical investigations have been undertaken other than that specified in the report.
5. Information in this report does not address structural integrity, microbiology, environmental health or any other health and safety matters which should be referred to the appropriate specialist.
6. Comments on the condition of the building fabric and artefacts are in general terms only and recommendations do not constitute a formal specification for conservation treatment, building repairs or other work outside the scope of the Available Services the Client must seek the advice of the appropriate professional adviser.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Church of St John the Baptist at Royston is currently undergoing a major programme of repair and reordering following a hugely damaging fire in December 2020. During the course of the work, which is being undertaken by Bakers of Danbury, plaster was removed from the south wall of the north aisle revealing areas of historic painted decoration in the spaces between arcades. At the request of the project surveyor, James Wilson of Barker Associates, Tobit Curteis of Tobit Curteis Associates (TCA) undertook an initial inspection of the painted decoration on 21st June 2021.

The inspection established that, while the fragments are finely painted and of significance, they are limited to specific blocks of clunch, indicating that these had been reused from a larger painted scheme from the church or elsewhere. The report outlined two possible treatment options: either stabilising the fragments of painting and leaving them exposed, or stabilising the painted fragments, recording them photographically and facing them with a protective layer in order to allow them to be re-covered.

The Parochial Church Council (PCC) has considered the options and has agreed to instruct TCA to record, conserve and re-cover the painted fragments. The faculty authorising the works was granted on 30th June 2021 and the works were carried out by Denise Innamoto of TCA between the 12th and 14th July 2021.

2.0 THE CHURCH

2.1 Location

The Church of St John the Baptist is situated in Royston, Hertfordshire, some 24km to the south of Cambridge. The church sits within a large churchyard upon elevated ground and is located in the Diocese of St Albans.



Figures 1 & 2. OS Map and satellite photo of the church.

2.2 Structure and Development

The church, which is a Grade I listed building, was originally built in the second half of the 12th century and the listing includes carved stone and wood works of significance.¹ The nave and aisles date from C13, the west tower from C16, the chancel and east end of south aisle from C19.

¹ Historic England Building Listing Entry Number 1295575.



Figures 3 & 4. External views of the church.

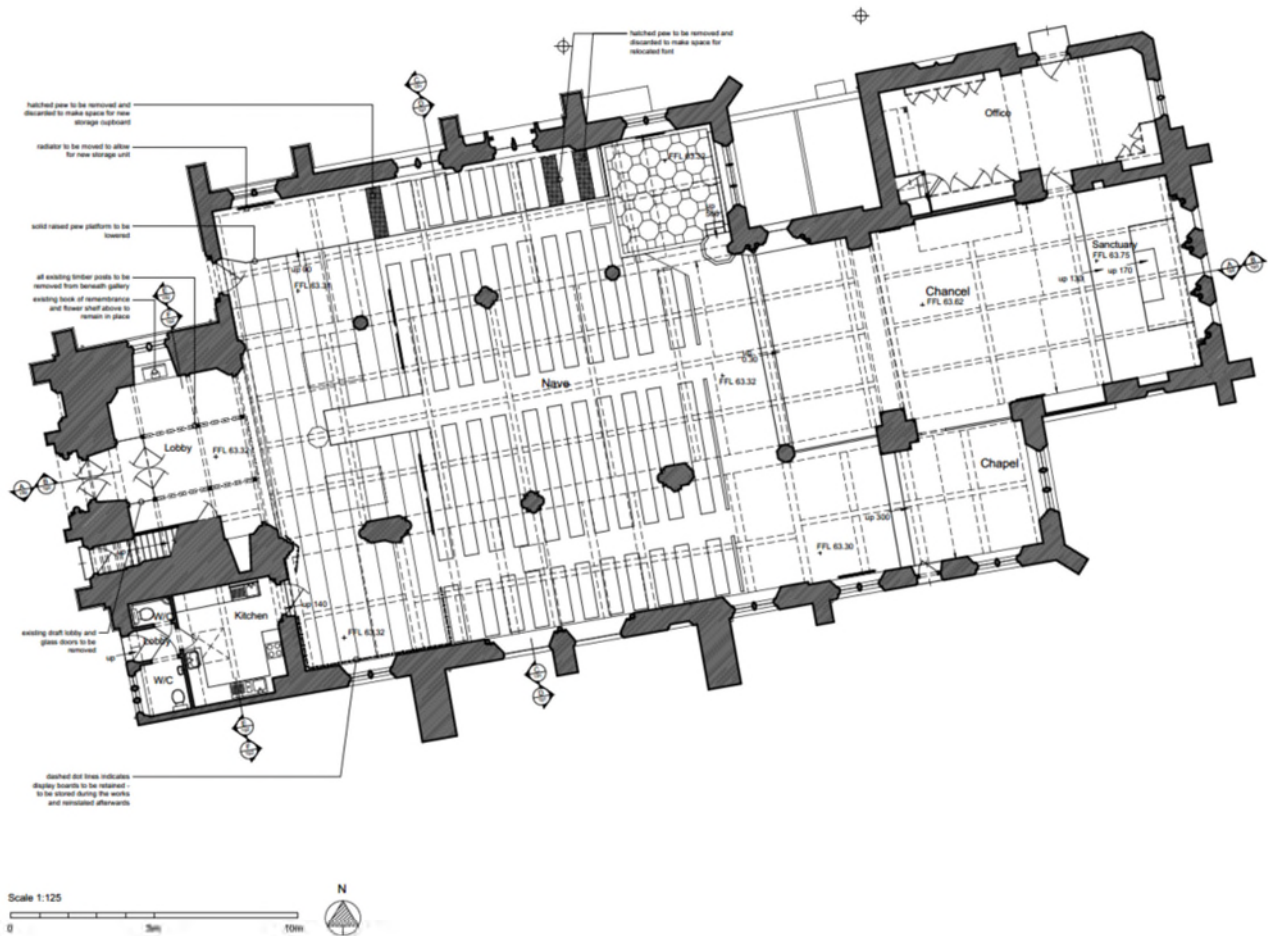


Figure 5. Existing floor plan.

3.0 WALL PAINTINGS

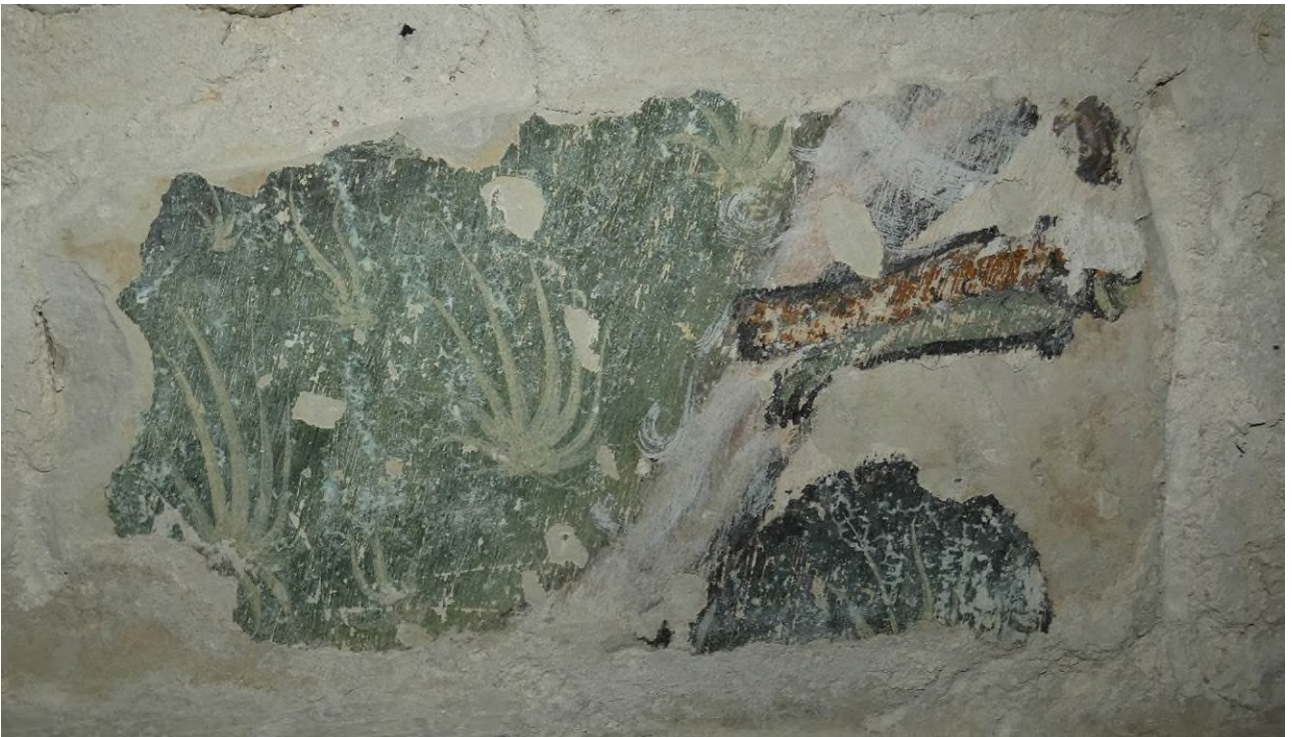
3.1 Description

Prior to the fire, the south wall of the north aisle, which is constructed of clunch rubble, was rendered in a lime, hair and sand plaster, and was painted with multiple layers of limewash, approximately 5mm to 15mm in thickness. The plaster appears to be post medieval and may date to as late as the 19th century. It is understood that, following the fire, it was found that much of the plaster had delaminated from the wall beneath it and it was therefore recommended by the project architect that it should be removed. During the course of this removal, fragments of painted decoration were identified. Removal of the plaster then continued until all of the rubble masonry of the wall had been exposed.



Figure 6. View facing east along the upper part of the wall showing the exposed stonework of the arcade with the render removed.

Small fragments of painted decoration were observed in 13 locations across the wall. In all cases, the painting was applied directly onto finally prepared limestone blocks. The main area of decoration is in the centre of the wall between arcades 2 and 3, where six of the painted blocks remain. There is a white ground, which may well be white lead, covered with multiple layers of dense pigment in an organic medium, possibly oil. No materials analysis has been undertaken, but on the basis of the nature of the paint layer and colour scheme, the pigments are likely to include red and yellow ochre, lime white, lead white, red lead, vermillion, synthetic copper greens, including Verdigris and copper resinate, carbon black and gold leaf.



Figures 7 & 8. Details of two of the sections of painting between arcades 2 and 3 showing the foliate background and the elaborate decoration, which is thought to be part of either architectural or fabric detail from a larger painting.

The painting is clearly limited to specific blocks of clunch, indicating that these had been reused from an area once covered by a large scale scheme of decoration. In general, the cohesion of the clunch is relatively sound, with most damage associated with historic and recent impact. The paint layer is medium rich and also retains a good level of cohesion. However, there is considerable delamination between the painted ground and substrate, resulting in delamination and flaking. Some of this appears to be old (i.e. before the render was removed), while some is more recent and is likely to have taken place during the recent uncovering. Some detail of the painting is obscured by limewash residues remaining on the surface of the paint layer.

The style of the painting indicates that it is late 15th or early 16th century, and the detail and materials indicate that it is finely painted and of significance. Of the details that are visible, there is clearly a background of foliage, including grass

and a section of a painted timber with a knot. The ornate decorative details may be either elaborate architectural decoration or details of fine cloth and clothing. The subject of the painting is unclear, but the details are all ones which are commonly found in Crucifixion and Doom paintings of the period. Art historical analysis has yet to be undertaken, but comparative examples may include the *The Crucifixion* in the Guild Chapel in Stratford-upon-Avon, and *The Last Judgement* at Holy Trinity Church, Coventry.

It is unsurprising that a church of the quality of St John's would have been painted with rich and elaborate decoration prior to the Reformation, and that this is likely to have survived. In this case it is unusual that the painting is on sections of reused blocks, but there are precedents for this.

4.0 REMEDIAL CONSERVATION TREATMENT

It was agreed with the client and the DAC that, because of the fragmentary nature of the painting, there was little justification for its remained exposure, and that the best option for its long term conservation was to stabilise the paint layers and apply protection so that it could be plastered over. Based on the treatment techniques outlined by the TCA inspection report, the conservation treatment has been carried out as described below.



Figure 9. View of the south wall towards west side, with the painted fragments following treatment, ready for the final plaster layer.

4.1 Stabilisation and Readhesion of the Paint Layer

The readhesion of the paint layer was carried out with the conservation adhesive Plextol B500² in a concentration of 10%, after pre-wetting with IMS and water to reduce surface tension.

Areas where the thick limewash ground was found to form vulnerable edges and edge repairs for the stabilisation of the support were undertaken with fine lime plaster comprised of 1:3 lime putty and fine silver sand.

² Plextol B500 is an acrylic dispersion produced by Röhm.



Figures 10 & 11. Details of two of the painting fragments which have been consolidated with Plextol B500 and had edge repairs securing the vulnerable edges.

4.2 Facing

A protective layer of Japanese tissue was applied with an adhesive of 5% Tylose. The tissue was cut in order to conform as closely as possible to the topography and limits of the clunch blocks. Areas of rougher surface texture resulting from the residual plaster layer required an additional application of a weak solution of the acrylic resin Paraloid B72.



Figures 12 & 13. Details of two of the painting fragments during and after the application of lens tissue.

4.3 Limewash

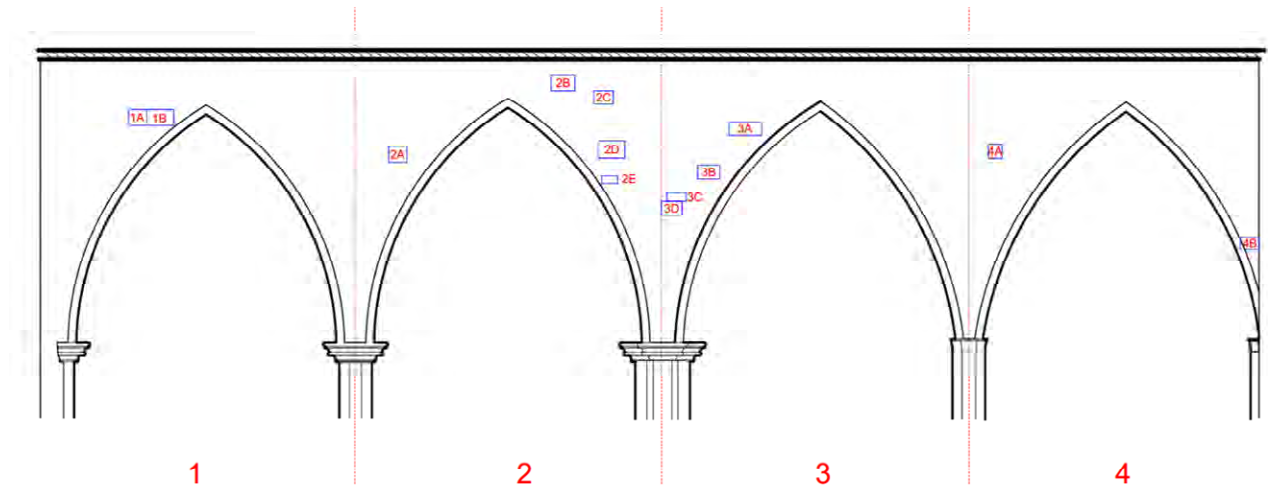
Finally, a layer of limewash composed of 1:6 lime putty and Fordacal 40 (marble dust) was applied to prepare the surface for the final plaster layer, which is to be undertaken by the main contractor.



Figures 14 & 15. Painting fragment before and after application of limewash over lens tissue.

5.0 PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD OF THE PAINTINGS

5.1 Location of the Fragments



Figures 16 & 17. Arcades 1 and 2 before treatment.



Figures 18 & 19. Arcades 3 and 4 before treatment.

5.2 Painting Fragment 1A

Width: 26cm Height: 23cm Distance from west wall:³ 1.68m Distance from ceiling: 72cm

5.2.1 Before treatment



³ Measurements were taken from the top left corner of the blocks.

5.2.2 After treatment



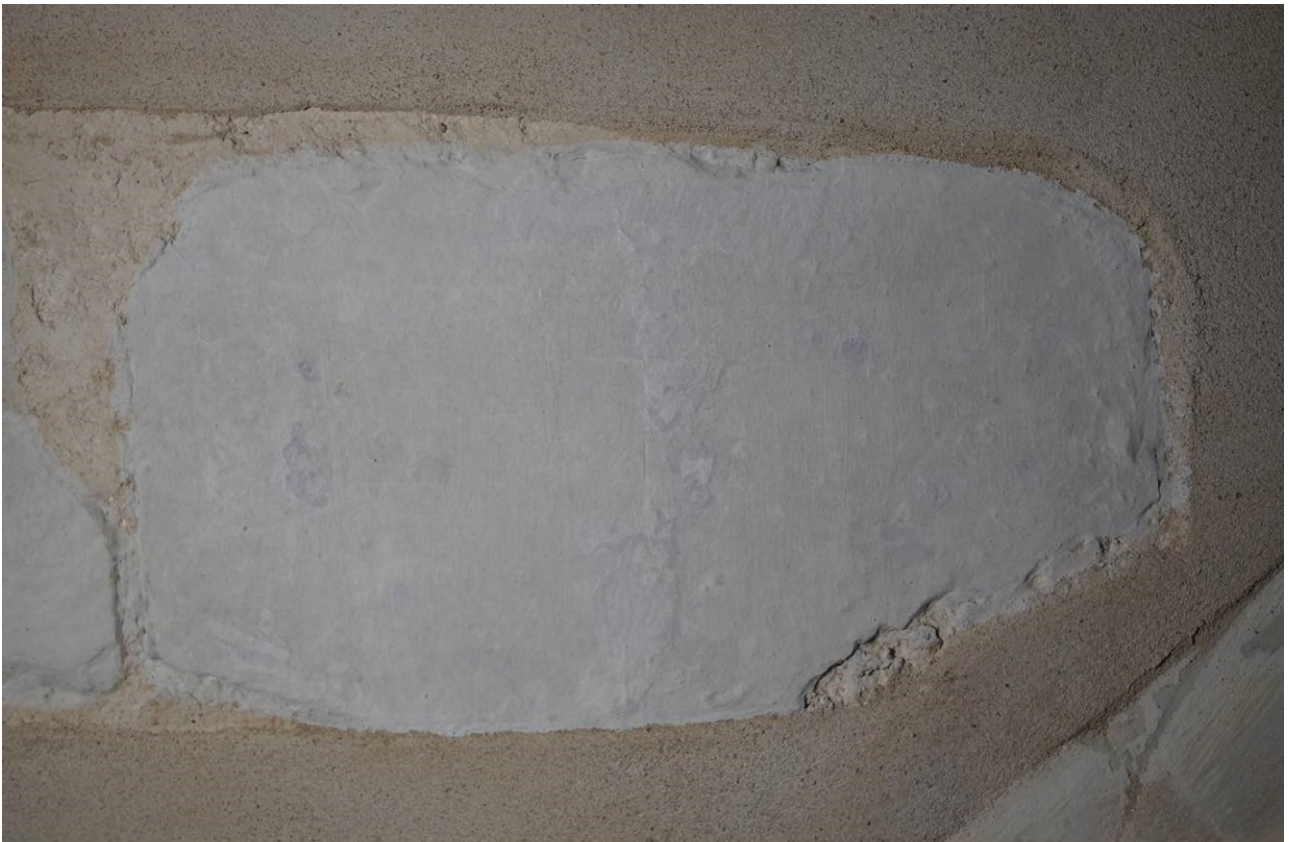
5.3 Painting Fragment 1B

Width: 39cm Height: 23cm Distance from west wall: 1.94m Distance from ceiling: 72cm

5.3.1 Before treatment



5.3.2 After treatment



5.4 Painting Fragment 2A

Width: 26cm Height: 23cm Distance from west wall: 5.02m Distance from ceiling: 1.25m

5.4.1 Before treatment



5.4.2 After treatment



5.5 Painting Fragment 2B

Width: 34cm Height: 23cm Distance from west wall: 7.35m Distance from ceiling: 22cm

5.5.1 Before treatment





5.5.2 After treatment



5.6 Painting Fragment 2C

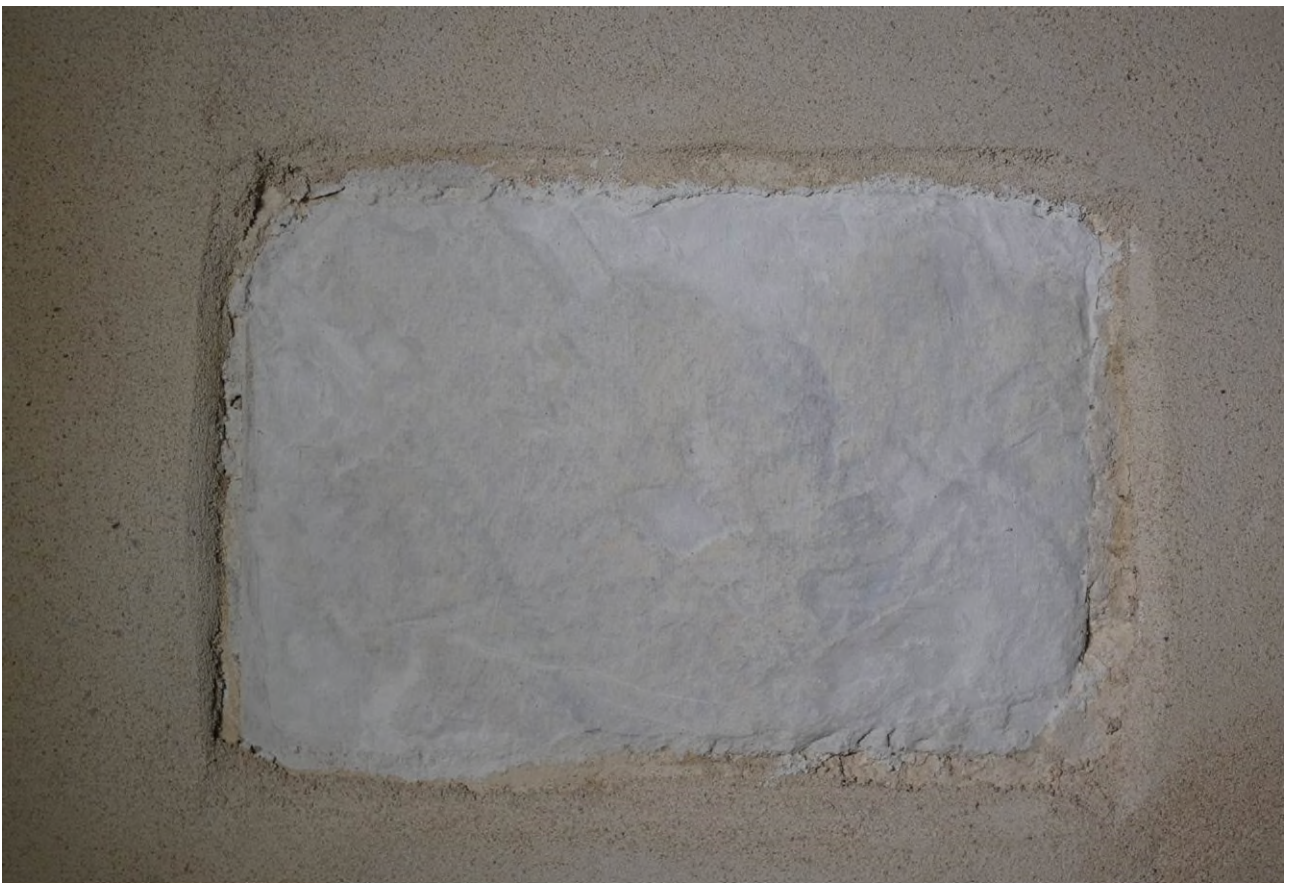
Width: 28cm Height: 19cm Distance from west wall: 7.96m Distance from ceiling: 45cm

5.6.1 Before treatment





5.6.2 After treatment



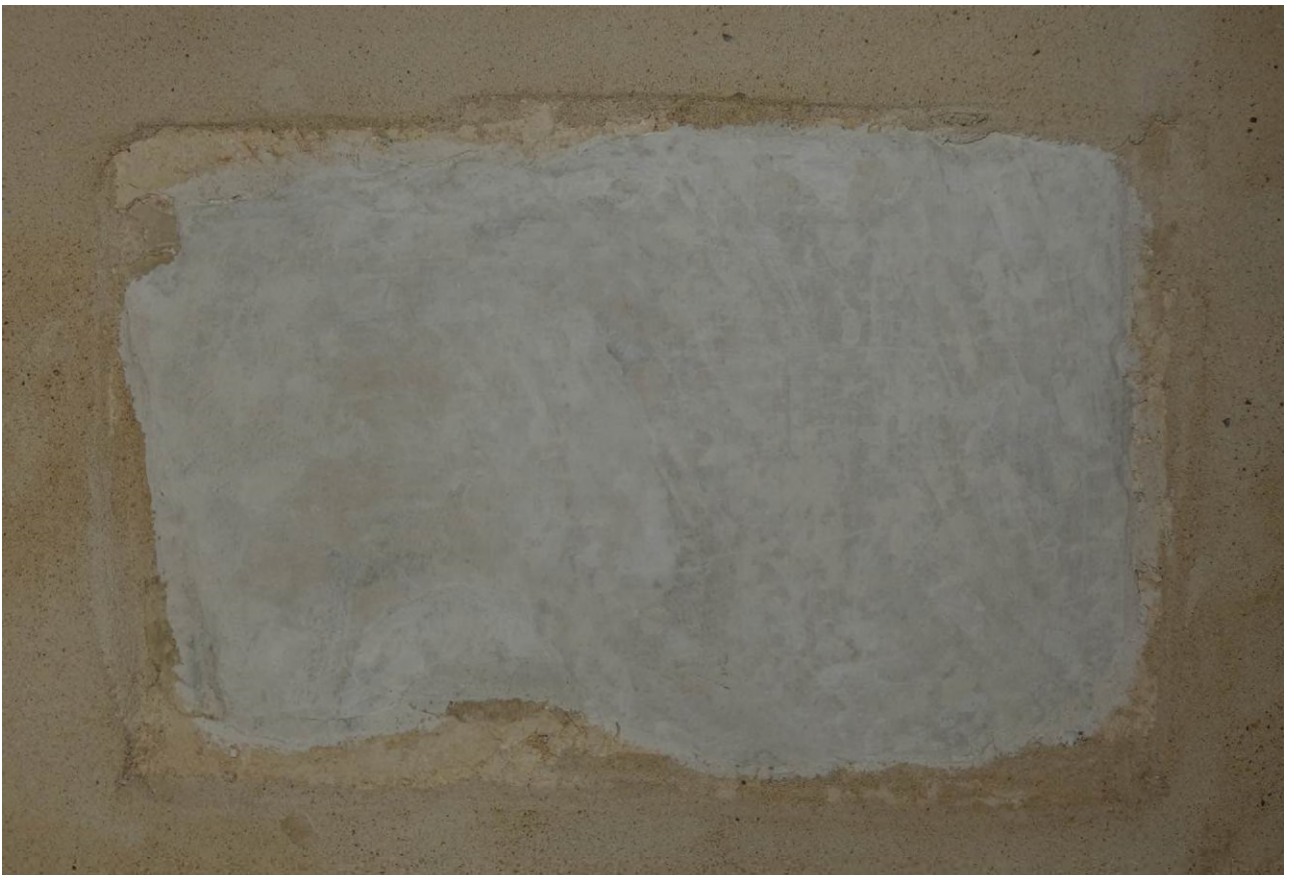
5.7 Painting Fragment 2D

Width: 38cm Height: 25cm Distance from west wall: 8.03m Distance from ceiling: 1.17m

5.7.1 Before treatment



5.7.2 After treatment



5.8 Painting Fragment 2E

Width: 23cm Height: 11cm Distance from west wall: 8.04m Distance from ceiling: 1.94m

5.8.1 Before treatment



5.8.2 After treatment



5.9 Painting Fragment 3A

Width: 47cm Height: 19cm Distance from west wall: 9.90m Distance from ceiling: 90cm

5.9.1 Before treatment





5.9.2 After treatment



5.10 Painting Fragment 3B

Width: 32cm Height: 20cm Distance from west wall: 9.45m Distance from ceiling: 1.52m

5.10.1 Before treatment





5.10.2 After treatment



5.11 Painting Fragment 3C

Width: 28cm Height: 12cm Distance from west wall: 8.86m Distance from ceiling: 1.92m

5.11.1 Before treatment



5.11.2 After treatment



5.12 Painting Fragment 3D

Width: 38cm Height: 20cm Distance from west wall: 8.71m Distance from ceiling: 2.10m

5.12.1 Before treatment





5.12.2 After treatment



5.13 Painting Fragment 4A

Width: 20cm Height: 20cm Distance from west wall: 13.62m Distance from ceiling: 1.22m

5.13.1 Before treatment



5.14 Painting Fragment 4B

Width: 27cm Height: 17cm Distance from west wall: 17.25m Distance from ceiling: 2.56m

5.14.1 Before treatment





5.14.2 After treatment



SITE: The Church of St John the Baptist, Royston

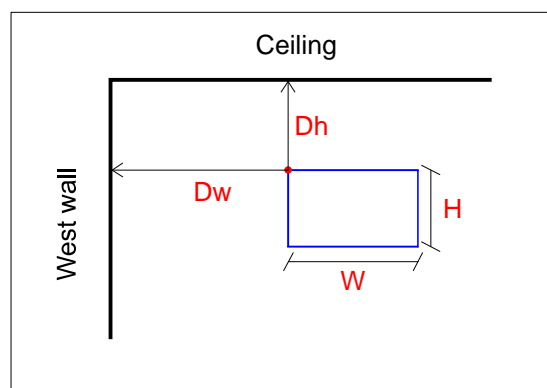
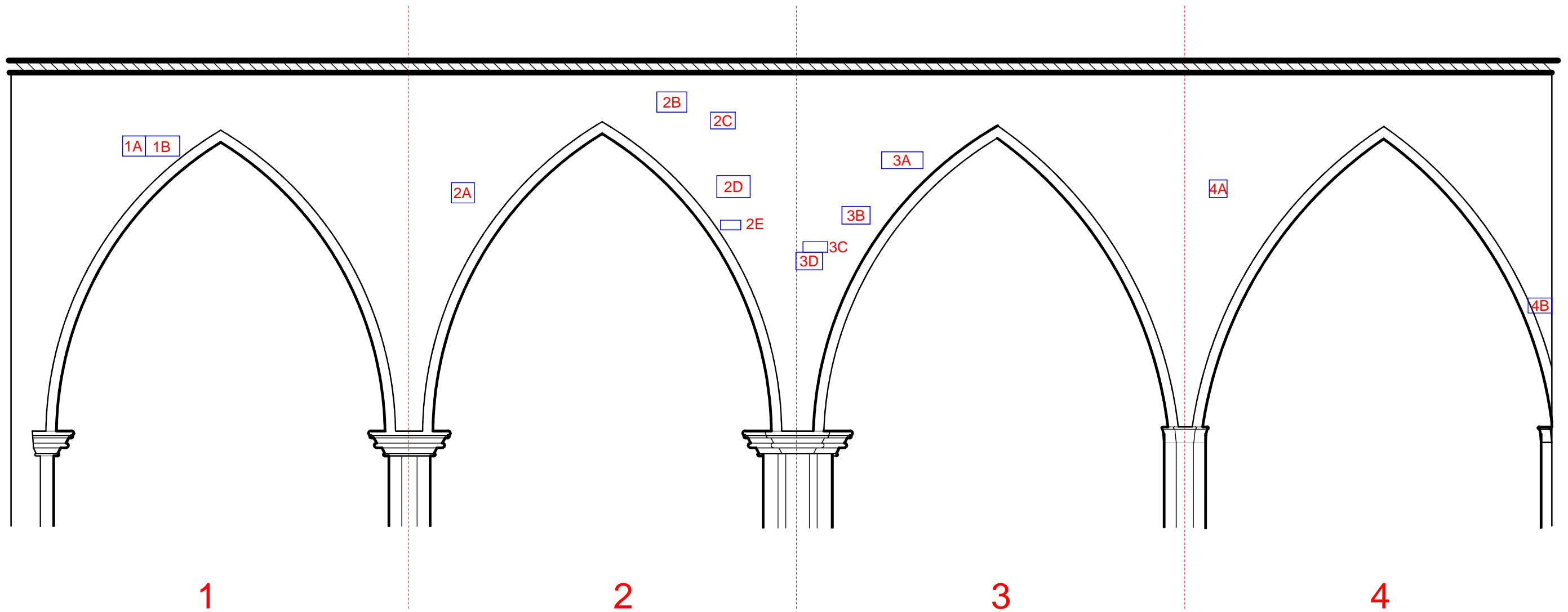
TYPE: Painting fragment locations

LOCATION: N aisle, south wall

SCALE: not to scale

DATE: July 2021

Diagram based on those supplied by JBKS Architects



| Location | W (cm) | H (cm) | Dw (m) | Dh (m) |
|----------|--------|--------|---|--------------------------------------|
| | Width | Height | Top left corner dist. from West Wall | Top left corner dist from ceiling |
| 1A | 26 | 23 | 1.68 | 0.72 |
| 1B | 39 | 23 | 1.94 | 0.72 |
| 2A | 26 | 23 | 5.02 | 1.25 |
| 2B | 34 | 23 | 7.35 | 0.22 |
| 2C | 28 | 19 | 7.96 | 0.45 |
| 2D | 38 | 25 | 8.03 | 1.17 |
| 2E | 23 | 11 | 8.04 | 1.94 |
| 3A | 47 | 19 | 9.90 | 0.90 |
| 3B | 32 | 20 | 9.45 | 1.52 |
| 3C | 28 | 12 | 8.86 | 1.92 |
| 3D | 38 | 20 | 8.71 | 2.10 |
| 4A | 20 | 20 | 13.62 | 1.22 |
| 4B | 27 | 17 | 17.25 | 2.56 |

