

# MCNEILAGE CONSERVATION

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ST. MARY'S CHURCH, THORNBURY, GLOS.

CONSERVATION TREATMENT REPORT OF THE WALL PAINTING  
FRAGMENT

ON THE SOUTH WALL OF THE NAVE.



JANUARY 2023

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2021, a fragment of wall painting was uncovered at the east end of the nave south aisle in St. Mary's Church, Thornbury. Following this discovery, Ruth McNeilage (wall painting specialist for McNeilage Conservation) undertook a condition survey of the wall painting and put forward proposals for treatment in a condition survey report.<sup>1</sup>

This report concerns the treatment of the wall painting fragment as put forward in the condition survey report.

## 2. DESCRIPTION

### 2.1. LOCATION AND HE LISTING

THORNBURY CHURCH ROAD 4/23 ST 6390 (north side) 30.3.60 Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin (formerly listed as Church of St Mary) GV I C12 origins, altered in C14, C15 and C16. Restored 1848 by Francis Niblett West tower circa 1540 (restored 1889 by F W Waller). Nave, north and south aisles, 2 storey south porch (all late C15). Chancel circa 1340 and south (Stafford) chapel, late C14. Coursed rubble with ashlar blocks (particularly in the tower). Ashlar south chapel. Cotswold stone slate roof. Interior: Clerestoried Nave of 6 typical Perpendicular bays. North aisle has square headed windows. South aisle has 4-centred arch headed windows with 'bisected drop' tracery. 1848 roof. Chancel arch and east window are C19. South wall has decorated piscina and triple sedilia, all under cinquefoil arch.



There is some discussion in Verey and Brooks<sup>2</sup> (Pevsner) as to the date of the windows in the south aisle; these have unusual drop arches vertically bisected by mullions. It has been said (Pevsner) the south aisle was built by Hugh, Lord Stafford (d.1386). However, several hoodmoulds display the Stafford Knot more commonly associated with Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham (Thornbury Castle) who received a license to found a college in Thornbury in 1514.

<sup>1</sup> *St. Mary the Virgin Church, Thornbury, Condition Survey of the wall painting fragment on the south wall.* McNeilage Conservation. November 2021

<sup>2</sup> *The Buildings of England. Gloucestershire 2: The Vale and the forest of Dean.* David Verey and Alan Brooks 2002

## 2.2 WALL PAINTINGS

The design that has been conserved appears to be part of a border decoration to the window. A black line marks the edge adjacent to the reveal. This clearly extended to the east, with further ornament to form a wider border.

Two layers of black and white decorative schemes are applied over earlier limewash layers. The most visible upper layer consists of a repeating and alternating half-floral “ray” motif within reticulated white lines on a black background forming half diapers.



*Fig. 1*

*View showing the fragment of wall painting adjacent to the window reveal.*

Diaper designs containing floral motifs have been used in decoration since the early medieval period but these tend to be painted in colour with thin lines - such as those at Chalgrove Church, Oxon (see *Fig. 2*). Examples of black and white borders can be seen in the 15<sup>th</sup> century passion cycle wall paintings in the church of St. Peter ad Vincula in South Newington, Oxon, although these are incorporated into a coloured scheme.

The use of a large-scale bold black and white design as found here would tend to indicate a post-Reformation date. Although this style of diaper border containing half a floral ray was commonly found in domestic dwellings, it is unusual to find it in a church, where one would expect to find text panels with elaborate borders either based on strapwork designs or Renaissance-style arabesques.

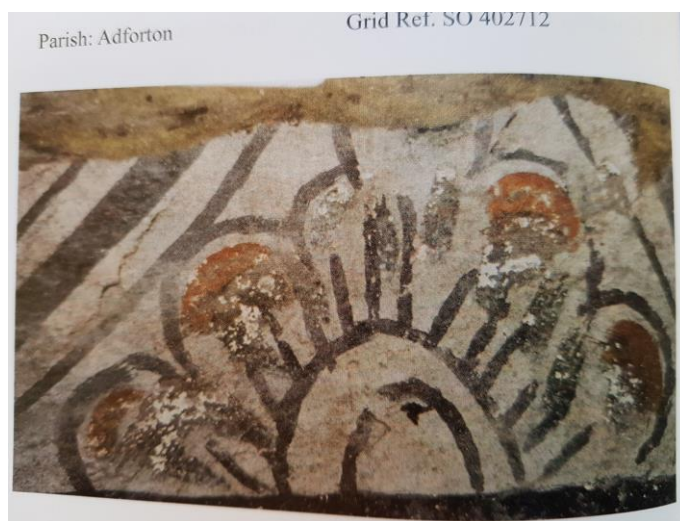


**Fig. 2**

*Chalgrove Church*

*Detail from wall painting of the burial of the virgin showing an elaborately patterned pall with diaper designs*

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**Fig. 3.**

*Bank Farm, Adforton.*

*Typical 16<sup>th</sup> century half floral ray set within a diaper design<sup>3</sup>.*

*Footnote 3*

### 3. TECHNIQUE OF EXECUTION

The wall supporting the painting consists of rough rubble with ashlar blocks on the exterior face.

A thin coat of sandy coloured plaster has been applied to the interior face in some areas, although the upper area still has a relatively uneven surface.

The painting has been applied onto the limewash using pigments bound in limewater. No analysis was considered necessary as only a black pigment (most probably carbon black) has been used.

### 4. TREATMENT

The conservation work largely involved stabilising the limewash layers that support the painting and removal of later overlying paint layers.

<sup>3</sup> Kathryn Davies, *Artisan Art Vernacular Wall paintings in the Welsh Marches 1550-1650*. Logaston Press. 2008. P140.

Superficial dirt and cobwebs were removed from the surface using a soft brush and vacuum cleaner, taking care to avoid areas with delaminating paint layers.

Prior to undertaking consolidation of the paint layers, areas to be treated were protected with a layer of Japanese tissue applied with a 2% solution of Tylose MH300.

Delaminating fragments were pre-wetted with denatured alcohol. A fine grout of sieved dispersed lime was injected behind lifting paint layers. In some areas grout was applied from a fine brush and encouraged to flow behind the flakes.

A fine lime mortar made up of lime putty, fine sand and stone dust was applied to vulnerable edges of the wall painting and small lacunae in the surface of the painting to add support.

Once the wall painting had been stabilised the grey later limewash layer was removed using a scalpel with the aid of a magnifying head lens, to reveal the remaining area of painting.

The surface of the painting was gently cleaned with deionised water on cotton wool swabs to remove more ingrained layers of dirt on the white areas of the design.

A very limited amount of re-touching was undertaken using watercolour to tone in small losses within the black design.

## 5. ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

The building envelope is generally in a stable condition and well maintained. The roof and rainwater goods all appeared to be in good working order. The most recent QI report (August 2021) states that the church is in exceptionally good condition, with few matters of overall concern.

## 6. MAINTENANCE

Care should be taken when the walls above and adjacent to the wall painting are redecorated to ensure that the limewash is applied only to new plaster and does not encroach into the area of the wall painting.



***Fig. 1***

*View showing the area before the monument was taken down*





**Fig. 2**

*View showing the wall after the monument was removed and the painting was first revealed*



**Fig 3**

*View showing the wall painting prior to conservation, after the builder had filled the adjacent area of loss.*

**Figs 4.**

*Detail showing the painted areas covered with the later grey limewash layer.*



**Fig. 5.**

*Detail showing the two painted schemes with fragile edges of painting that are lifting away from the surface.*



**Fig. 6.**

*Detail showing the Japanese tissue applied to protect the painting during grouting.*



**Fig 7**

*Detail showing the lower area of painting after conservation.*





**Fig. 8**

*View showing the whole area after conservation*

