

BATH ABBEY

**Conservation assessment on the monument to
Bishop James Montague (1618)**



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1. Introduction

This large monument is situated between two columns of the south nave arcade of Bath Abbey. Bishop James Montague was a great benefactor of Bath Abbey enabling, among other things, the re-roofing of the nave. Although he died in Winchester, he requested that he was buried in the nave of the Abbey and his executor Sir Charles Montague commissioned the monument. The elaborate base supports an effigy of James Montague robed in the Order of the Garter. The sculpture was by William Cure (later master mason to the Crown) and Nicholas Johnson the son of Gerard Johnson who was one of the many Flemish sculptors who moved to Southwark to escape religious persecution in the late 15th century.

As part of the 'Footprint' project currently under way at Bath Abbey, there had been a proposal to move the monument two bays to the west; there were objections to this proposal which has now been shelved. However, this report was commissioned by Charles Curnock (Director of the Footprint project) to undertake a survey of the current condition and make any recommendations for necessary conservation.

2. Description

The monument essentially consists of two different elements; the main chest tomb and the elaborate columns, entablature and cartouche at each end (east and west). The chest is 2460mm in length, 1140mm wide and 210mm high (including effigy). Including the entablature at each end, the total length of the monument is 3530mm and it is about 2 metres wide and about 5 metres in height.

The chest tomb is set on a chamfered Bath stone base with a plinth consisting of a moulded alabaster lower section, a black marble frieze and an alabaster cornice above. The plinth is thrown forward to form four column plinths, each of which has a black marble panel rather than a frieze. The main elements of the chest are shown in Fig 1.

The sides and ends of the monument are set on the plinth; each side consists of three panels and each end of one panel. The end panel on each side contains a polychromed heraldic shield. The central panel has a moulded alabaster frame within which is a black marble inscription with slightly recessed lettering; this is gilded on the north side and painted on the south side. The panel on each end of the chest is of black marble and blank.

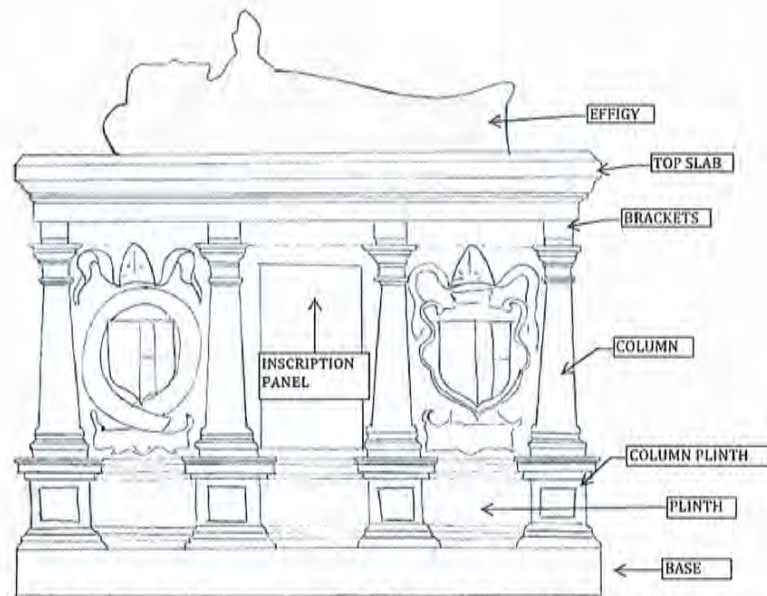


Fig 1: outline drawing of south elevation of the chest showing the principal elements

Above each of the column plinths, there is a circular column of black marble set on a moulded base with a simple capital with gilded frieze. This is surmounted by a bracket which supports the edge of the top slab. Behind each column is a slender sunken alabaster panel.

The moulded slab at the top of the chest is 225mm high and supports an alabaster effigy of Bishop James Montague clothed in the robes of the Order of the Garter and with his hands held in an attitude of prayer.

The base of the chest is flanked at each end by independent square section plinths with moulded base, diamond pattern strapwork panels and cornice; all of these elements are made from alabaster. These are set on a continuation of the Bath stone base but the face of this is vertical rather than chamfered. On top of each of the plinths is a substantial black marble column with gilded Corinthian capitals supporting a section of entablature. This has an alabaster architrave, a frieze with emblems at each end and a cherub head in the middle flanked by inlaid black marble panels. The alabaster cornice supports is surmounted by two small plinths with gilded emblems on each face and surmounted by gilded winged griffins. Between these two heraldic beasts is a large polychrome heraldic cartouche.

Access to the monument is restricted by the railings that surround it. These railings are original to the monument and consist of a bottom rail, individual square section balusters and a top rail which has a facing plate with embossed decoration. The tops of each baluster are pointed with a small irregular collar above the top rail. At each corner and at the mid-point on each side is a square stanchion with additional front plate and twisted upper section onto which is hung a polychromed metal flag and cross. Intermediate stanchions have a disc with polychrome heraldic shield.

3. Condition

The condition survey was somewhat restricted as it was difficult to look closely at all elements of the monument because of the railings. This also restricts the ability to have unimpeded photographs of each section.

3.1 Chest tomb

3.1.1 West end

This is generally in good condition with no active decay. The chamfered section of base has been indented on to an original vertical face. There are a number of indents where damage has been repaired by the insertion of replacement sections of alabaster (for example in the NW corner on the upper moulding of the plinth). There is also plentiful evidence of repointing and repair; this appears to have been carried out in plaster of Paris and then toned in by the application of pigmented wax. There is a filled diagonal crack in the top of the frame; this continues above the moulding into the top slab. This may be due to slight structural and historical movement.



Fig 2: detail of west end panel with indents and repair visible on the frame

All surfaces have a sticky feel and appearance consistent with the application of a wax coating; this is easily seen under a x 15 magnifying lens. The vertical joint between the small flanking panel and the frame of the central panel is open with the pointing having become detached. A covermeter survey showed no metal fixings used in the construction of the chest on this side.



Fig 3: detail of west end panel showing pigmented wax applied to the surface of repair/pointing

3.1.2 South side

The SW section is in generally good condition although there is a crack across the top corner of the polychrome panel. Many of the joints appear to have been extensively repointed and all areas have been waxed. This has led to some sections (notably the red areas of the heraldry) appearing rather milky as moisture has got behind the wax.



Fig 4: detail of repainted polychromy showing milky appearance of red

There are a number of indents and repairs, notably a large indent at the top of the plinth. Most of them are on the top surface of the plinth and on the base of the columns. These have been well executed and there is no further damage in the vicinity. The columns are in good condition with some streaking and a milky appearance where moisture may have got behind the applied wax. The covermeter survey shows that the columns are secured at the top with ferrous cramps.



Fig 5: detail of typical indent on the top moulding of the plinth

The central panel is also in good condition with the inscription remaining legible. It is interesting to note that the inscription is off centre with a large margin on the left side and almost no margin on the right side. There is a break across the top of the plinth and slight localised loss of pointing around the panel.

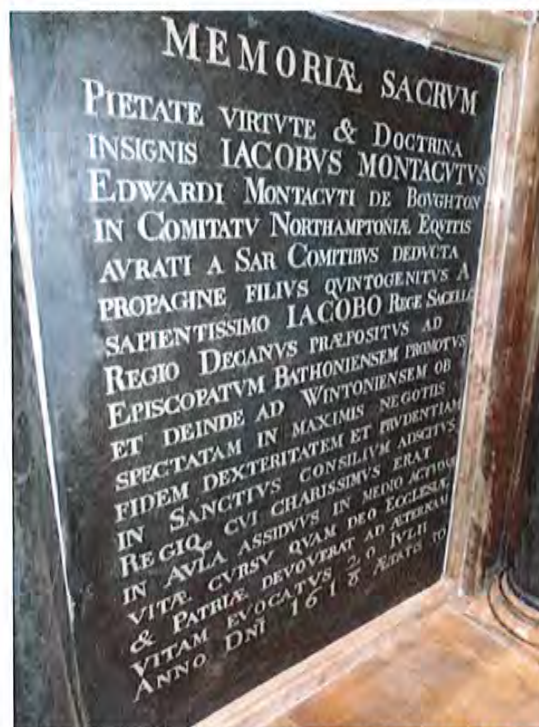


Fig 6: central panel showing wide margin on left and no margin on right

The SE panel is physically in good condition but it has some defects in the appearance. As with other sections, there are multiple indents and repairs, notably to the top of the plinth. There is a small indent missing from the SW corner of the eastern column capital. Other areas show signs of repointing and repair; many of these have been well disguised by the application of pigmented wax.

As with all of the monument, there is plentiful evidence that all areas of polychrome have been repainted. This has not always been done with the greatest care and it appears that the gilding may be gold paint rather than gold leaf. There is a general milkiness from moisture getting beneath the wax and in places (for example the cross), it is possible to see the craquelure in the underlying paint layer. In some instances this has caused the most recent paint layer to crack as well. Towards the base, the alabaster has a patchy appearance due to the deterioration of wax coatings.



Fig 7: SE panel



Fig 8: SE corner column showing some milkiness on the surface

3.1.3 East end

This is generally in good condition but it is extensively repaired and indented and there is also active loss of mortar from the vertical joint at the interface between the small sunken panel and the frame of the panel. The frame is broken into seven separate pieces which have been fixed together. The black marble panel itself has considerable condensation on the surface; this is causing some blanching around the irregularities in the marble but it was not possible to understand what the cause of the condensation might be.

It appears that this end has been rebuilt as there are a great many indents and also the bracket on the SE corner is of different design to the bracket on the NE corner.

There are two speakers wedged against the east end of the chest tomb; these have the potential to cause damage to the alabaster.



Fig 9: east end panel (partially obscured by speakers)



Fig 10: detail of indents on frame



Fig 11: condensation on east end panel

3.1.4 North side

The condition of the NE panel is generally good with less indents than on the south side but there are still some repairs. The most significant of these is a vertical crack that has signs of minor continuing deterioration. The pointing at the top of the panel also has slight decay. There is considerable evidence of pigmented wax applied over the repairs. Some of the polychrome has been rather crudely touched in and the columns have a somewhat milky appearance.



Fig 12: NE panel



Fig 13: detail of crack with minor deterioration

The central panel has a crack that has been repaired on the upper surface of the plinth. The inscription is legible having been repainted; as with the inscription on the south side, it is set off centre with a large margin on the left side and a very small margin on the right. The surface at the top west corner is roughened and there is some minor cracking on the lower west side.

The NW panel is in good condition. There are repairs to the pointing and cracks at the top and across the inscription; these have been well carried out. It appears however that repairs have been carried out at a number of different times as the nature of the fill material differs. The repainting of the polychrome is rather crude in places and there is some cloudiness in the colour due to moisture getting behind the wax. There is an indent missing from the top surface of the plinth.



Fig 14: central panel



Fig 15: detail of rough texture at top corner of central panel



Fig 16: NW panel

3.1.5 Effigy

This is a very accomplished piece of carving and is in good condition. The decorative tassels from the top corner of the pillow are missing. On the face, there is slight damage to the nose but otherwise the detail is mostly intact. The

hands have been replaced or refixed but the tips of the fingers and half of one thumb are missing. Examination of the surface of the robe shows a very large number of repairs. Some of these run across the figure for a good length but they are not breaks. It is possible they are weak beds in what was a very substantial piece of alabaster. The surface has a very fine comb scratching in many areas and this seems to be as a result of the removal of plaster and polychromy. Small traces of polychromy are still visible in deep recesses of the carving particularly beneath the pillow and between the ear and the ruff of the cloak.



Fig 17: view of effigy from above



Fig 18: detail of missing element from cushion



Fig 19: view of west end of effigy



Fig 20: detail of tooling on the surface



Fig 21: detail of remaining polychromy



Fig 22: detail of repairs to effigy



Fig 23: detail of replaced and damaged hands

3.1.6 Top slab

This is in good condition although here is some historic decay at the west end where there is a historic (but now stable) crack in the surface. There are a number of other faults running across the slab but these appear to be part of the geology of the stone as the roughness of the surface seems to change either side of the fault. On the north side, there is some decay to the arris on the underside of the moulding. The unpolished soffit of the stone has some localised flaking.



Fig 24: fault across slab with different surface effect on each side



Fig 25: faults running across the slab

3.17 West entablature (safe access to high level was not possible)

The NW column plinth has recent loss from the NW corner. There are indents on the corners of top and bottom mouldings but the column and capital are in good condition. All of the polychromy has been repainted.

The SW column is also in good condition. The alabaster moulding at the base of the plinth on the west side has been made up with plaster of Paris; there is an old indent on the SW corner of the upper moulding of the plinth. The surfaces are generally dusty and in raking light, it is possible to see differential staining due to condensation behind the wax.

The west entablature has a brown appearance due to the discolouration of the wax; this rather detracts from the vibrant appearance of the alabaster. There are a number of indents of the moulding on the east side and one particularly wide but filled joint on the west side. Griffins and cartouche all appear to be sound; there is a minor chip from the NW corner of the southern griffin base. The entablature is held in place with two large cramps restrained into the adjacent column; there is a further cramp at the top of the cartouche. All surfaces are dusty.



Fig 26: overall view of west entablature



Fig 27: detail of upper section of west entablature

3.1.8 East entablature (safe access to high level was not possible)

The NE column plinth has a new base stone and the alabaster plinth above has been extensively repaired especially at the NW corner. The NW corner of the lower moulding of the plinth is damaged and disrupted. All four corners of the plinth capital are indented. The column and capital are sound although the surface is dusty and there is some slight differential staining.



Fig 28: disrupted stone at base of plinth (NW corner)

The upper moulding of the SE column plinth has indents on all four corners. The east side of the lower moulding is made up with plaster painted to resemble alabaster. The column and capital are in good condition with a dusty surface and some slight differential staining.



Fig 29: detail of lower moulding on SE corner showing section made up in plaster

The east entablature is sound but has a deep brown appearance from the discolouration of the wax. The polychromy appears to be in good condition. The cornice has a large indent on the east side. There is a wide (but filled) vertical joint on the west side. The griffins and cartouche seem in good condition but are generally dusty. The entablature, which is cramped in the same way as the corresponding west entablature is being used as a support for a projector.



Fig 30: upper section of east entablature



Fig 31: detail of east side of east entablature showing how it is being used as a projector stand

3.1.9 Railings

Considering these are the original railings, they are in remarkable condition with all rails intact and all the ornament still present. They are a very significant part of the monument with a remarkable hand-made quality; each of the balusters is slightly different, whether in width, length of spike or in the gap between the bands.



Fig 32: north side railings



Fig 33: south side railings

There are no obvious signs of current corrosion and there is evidence (which could only be confirmed by carrying out cross sectional paint analysis) that the railings have been stripped and painted with red oxide primer followed by the current red/brown top coat. There are some areas of paint abrasion, particularly on the north side. The balusters on the north side are all loose presumably as a result of this side of the railings being removed to allow floor works to be carried out in 2013. There are a few loose bits of solder remaining on the top rail. As a result, the whole railing wobbles and, as it is regularly touched by the passing public, this may be getting worse. In contrast, the south side railings are firm as the tops of each baluster are brazed onto the top rail.



Fig 34: detail of paint loss from railings showing red oxide beneath

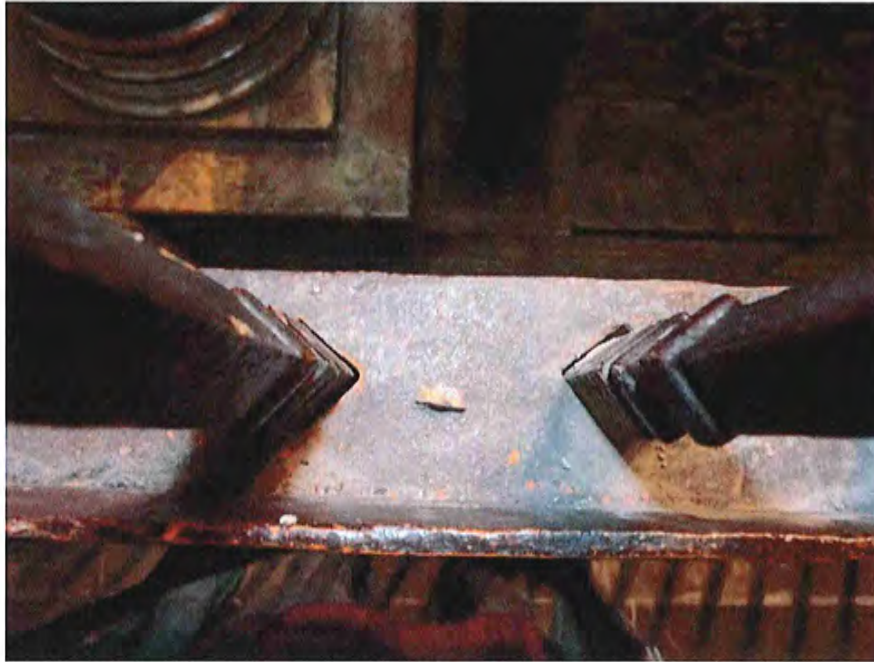


Fig 35: north side railings showing how balusters are not fixed to top rail

All of the polychrome shields and discs have been repainted.



Fig 36: example of polychrome disc set above railings

4. Summary of condition and considerations for conservation

The survey showed that the monument is generally in good condition. It has however been very extensively repaired; the archaeology of those repairs would require a separate study but it seems as though the main problems that occurred to the monument were through physical damage rather than through surface decay and deterioration.

This repaired damage is most evident (but not restricted to) the following areas:

- Top surface and moulding of the chest plinth
- East end panel
- Plinths of the entablature columns
- Entablatures
- Effigy

Apart from the effigy, the repairs have mostly been carried out by indenting new pieces of alabaster; the fact that many of these are at the corners lends credence to the fact that the repair had become necessary because of physical damage. This raises an interesting issue in that, if the railings are original and have always been in place, how was so much damage inflicted?

On the effigy and on various other elements of the chest, areas of decay have been repaired by the use of mortar which seems to be based on plaster of Paris. This has then been painted or coated with a pigmented wax to tone it in with the adjacent alabaster.

The appearance of the monument is very different now to how it would have originally been seen. The main differences would have been as follows:

- Effigy would have been painted
- All surfaces have been coated in wax which has cross-linked and darkened. As a result, the alabaster has taken on a brown colouration so the translucent pink appearance of the stone has been lost. In addition the wax, because it is slightly sticky (particularly in a warm environment) tends to encourage the accumulation of dust.
- All the polychrome areas have been repainted (probably in the mid 20th century?). Some of this repainting has been quite crudely applied and it is probable that the colours do not correspond to the original heraldic colours.
- In some areas, the polychromy has taken on a rather milky appearance. This occurs because of condensation behind the overlying wax layer. The same effect has caused the black columns to appear somewhat patchy.

In terms of surface, there are a number of places where mostly historic (and occasionally current) decay has caused some pitting or loss. This is most evident on the underside of the top slab, on the panel at the east end, and on alabaster adjacent to joints. There are also a few areas where the repairs or pointing have

begun to crack or deteriorate. At the moment, these are not widespread and are not causing damage to the adjacent sections of the monument.

The railings themselves are in good condition although the north side is rather loose due to having been recently removed to allow works to the floor. Their presence also ensures that the many visitors to the Abbey are not able to touch or interfere with the monument which is therefore well protected.

5. Recommended conservation/repair works

In terms of what work is essential, there is no absolute need for any intervention to the stone elements or the polychromy. A small-scale trial was undertaken using a melamine sponge to see if the surface wax could easily be removed; the result is shown in Fig 37.



Fig 37: area of plinth showing effect of light clean with melamine sponge

It might be thought desirable to remove the wax from all areas and, in so doing, to lighten the alabaster and remove the cloudy appearance from the polychrome and columns. Although this might be an option, it is an expensive and time-consuming process.

It is however recommended that the following works are carried out:

- 5.1 Remove speakers from current storage against the monument at the east end.
- 5.2 Remove projector and dismantle timber support from east entablature.
- 5.3 On the north side railings, secure individual balusters to top rail to reinstate the rigidity of the railings.
- 5.4 Using a soft bristle brush and vacuum, remove dust from all surfaces.

November 2014

