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THE CHURCH OF ST. EDWARD THE MARTYR, GOATHURST, SOMERSET.

SINGERS GALLERY PANELS

CONDITION SURVEY

MAY 2025

1. INTRODUCTION

The PCC of Goathurst Church requested that McNeilage Conservation examine the painted panels now situated at the base of the tower that used to form the front of the Singers gallery.

This report concerns the results of an on-site examination of the painted panels. It includes a brief description and history of the panels, the results of the condition survey and cleaning trials and recommendations for treatment.

The cleaning trials were undertaken in collaboration with Elizabeth Holford (Elizabeth Holford Associates) who provided further advice concerning the removal of complex varnish coatings.

1.2. Management

Author Ruth McNeilage (McNeilage Conservation)

Client Brenda Smith (Churchwarden) St. Edward Martyr, Goathurst.

2. DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY

2.2. The building

The church is built of rubble with ashlar dressings and comprises a chancel with north aisle, a nave with south transept and porch, and a west tower. The transept was probably added in the late 15th or early 16th century and the north aisle in 1559. In 1424 William Paulet of Beere bequeathed money for the tower, which dates from this period. The western doorway was put into the tower in the 16th century.

The Victoria County History Online states that there was a gallery by 1707. In 1884 the church was restored by J. Houghton Spencer. The gallery and a wall between the Halswell aisle and the chancel were removed, and the chancel arch was renewed with Decorated mouldings. Carved bosses were fitted to the roof.

2.3. The Singers gallery painted panels

A considerable amount of helpful research has already been undertaken by a local historian David Bunney. One very useful reference are the topographical notes by Edmund Rack 1780-1787 that are held at the Somerset Heritage Centre. Rack records “The singers’ gallery (Goathurst) is fronted with wainscot; in the panels are eight emblematical paintings poorly executed”.

The panels contain paintings of various biblical figures including King David with his harp and the four evangelists depicted as learned men each with their appropriate symbol, the lion (Mark), the bull (Luke), the angel (Mathew) and the eagle (John). The eagle is not currently visible but is probably currently obscured by later varnish layers that have a white bloom. There is also a seated female figure playing a harp that may be allegorical, yet to be

identified. The remaining two figures depicted as learned elders are thought to represent some of the church fathers (either Augustin, Jerome, Ambrose or Gregory).

Rack's assessment of the quality of the paintings seems somewhat harsh. These are engaging and moving paintings that are perfectly well executed for their purpose as the decoration for a Singers gallery.

According to Bunney, Rack records many singers' galleries, twenty-nine of which were painted with emblematical figures. Of the twenty-nine paintings in western galleries, no less than sixteen had a picture of King David playing his harp. Most of these were sadly removed by the Victorian restorers making these surviving panels at Goathurst church particularly important as a record of liturgical and musical practices from this period.

West galleries became popular in the Georgian period. They were erected for singers and instrumentalists. West gallery music, also known as Georgian psalmody, refers to the sacred music (metrical psalms, with a few hymns and anthems) sung and played in Church of England parish churches, as well as nonconformist chapels, from 1700 to around 1850.

Bunney refers to, 'The Bridgwater Mercury's report of the 12th November 1884 re the church's restoration comments "By the removal of the western gallery " It would have been at this time that the panelled wainscot would have been moved to the "Poor house." The panels were '*discovered*'(?) in the Poor House in 1902 and moved from there into the church.

3. STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

The panelled sections that made up the gallery front consist of oak panels with bolelection mouldings set within a post and rail frame. These have been attached to the north wall of the tower with iron cramps. They are mounted one above the other to form a large panel measuring 1660 x 2870 mm approximately 100mm above ground level.

The paintings are executed with oil paint.

4. CONDITION

4.1. Timber structure

The panels have been placed directly onto the wall of the tower with no air gap. However, there is no evidence on the front face to indicate that they have been affected by environmental issues such as moisture ingress or fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity. The walls of the tower have a hard 19th century plaster that is thought to contain some cement.

Judging from the condition of the hatchments that are fixed higher up the tower walls the environmental conditions within the tower are remarkably stable.

It is unfortunate that an electrical socket has been fixed into the frame at the centre of the lower section of panelling and a radiator has been placed on the west wall immediately adjacent to the lower painted panel at the west end.

4.2. The painted surface

The painted surface appears to be generally stable apart from localised areas of damage. Paint loss is visible in the area at the west end, partially obscured by the radiator. In other areas there is some evidence of mechanical damage where paint loss has also occurred.

In raking-light, it is possible to see that there has been some flaking of the paint film particularly along the lower edge of the panels. As a result of this flaking paint there has been an amount of retouching to disguise the losses. However, the paint appears to be sound.

The paintings have clearly been restored more than once, and several disparate surface coatings were identified. The earliest varnish layer is a fragmentary dark brown layer that appears to have been partially removed. A second layer was applied either to secure flaking paint or to make the images visible. In doing this the lower layers of varnish in contact with the paint film have fractured away from the paint appearing opaque and obscuring the image. To ameliorate this, more recently a layer of PVA varnish / medium has been applied. This film no longer allows the painted image to be seen. It is for this reason that there appear to be streaks of white over the surface.

5. CLEANING TRIALS

Small areas of cleaning trials were undertaken to remove the various varnish coatings using different solvents and cleaning agents applied with cotton wool swabs.

Cleaning tests were carried out first using “Saliva” which removed surface dirt and started to remove the PVA layer. “White spirit” was used as a control, as it was unlikely to affect the solubility of the various layer but showed through wetting how the paint film might appear after varnish removal. The PVA coating was removed using ethanol followed by dilute ammonia. This was followed by alternate applications of tri-ammonium citrate and acetone to remove the earlier varnishes and surface dirt under the varnish layers.

6. TREATMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Removal of inappropriate electrical fittings

Prior to treating the panelling, it is recommended that the radiator on the north side of the west wall is moved to the south side. The electrical socket should also be removed and refitted in a more appropriate position on the wall, preferable not near the panelling.

6.2. Refixing the timber panelling

The timber is thought to be in good condition. However, it is recommended that the panelling should be refitted with stainless steel cramps with an airgap behind between the wall and the timber. This would ensure that any moisture ingress or condensation runs on the wall, will not affect the panelling in the future. It would be better if the panelling could be moved approximately 500mm east to provide an airgap on the west side.

6.3. Cleaning the painted surface and removal of previous deteriorated varnish layers.

Prior to removal of the coatings the surface should be cleaned using saliva applied with cotton wool swabs.

The various coatings will be removed using solvents and cleaning agents as appropriate to the situation. The PVA can be softened with ethanol and further removed using dilute ammonia. The earlier varnishes can be removed using alternate applications of Acetone to remove the varnish and Tri-ammonium citrate (5%) to remove dirt layers between the varnish layers. This work would be undertaken using cotton wool swabs with the aid of a magnified head lens.

The painted panels would be revarnished using a suitable conservation resin such as Regalrez 1094 with added Tinuvin UV stabiliser dissolved in Shellsol T.

The surrounding frame would be surface-cleaned and the losses and holes filled with coloured wax.

6.4. Retouching

A limited amount of retouching of areas of loss will be undertaken using Gamblin retouching colours.

6.5. Documentation and report

The work would be thoroughly documented and recorded with photographs with a fully illustrated report of the treatment and findings provided on completion. Once the figures have become more legible it should be possible to identify them.

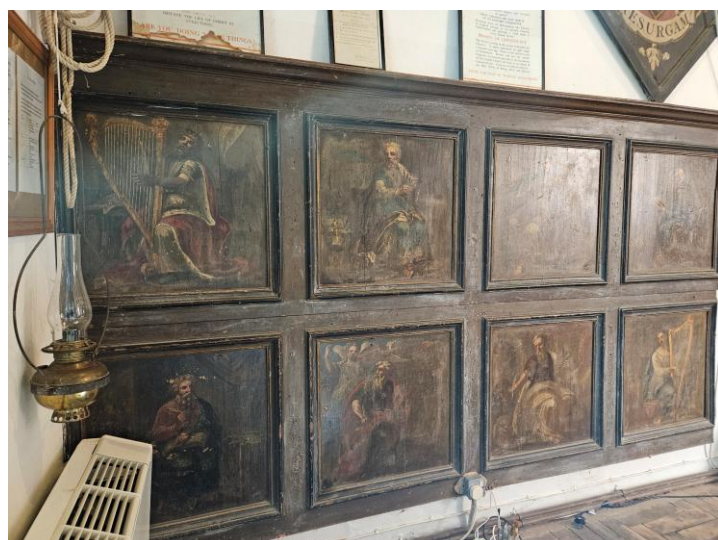


FIG 1

Gallery panels viewed from the west.

Note the radiator at the east end and the electrical socket in the central lower rail.

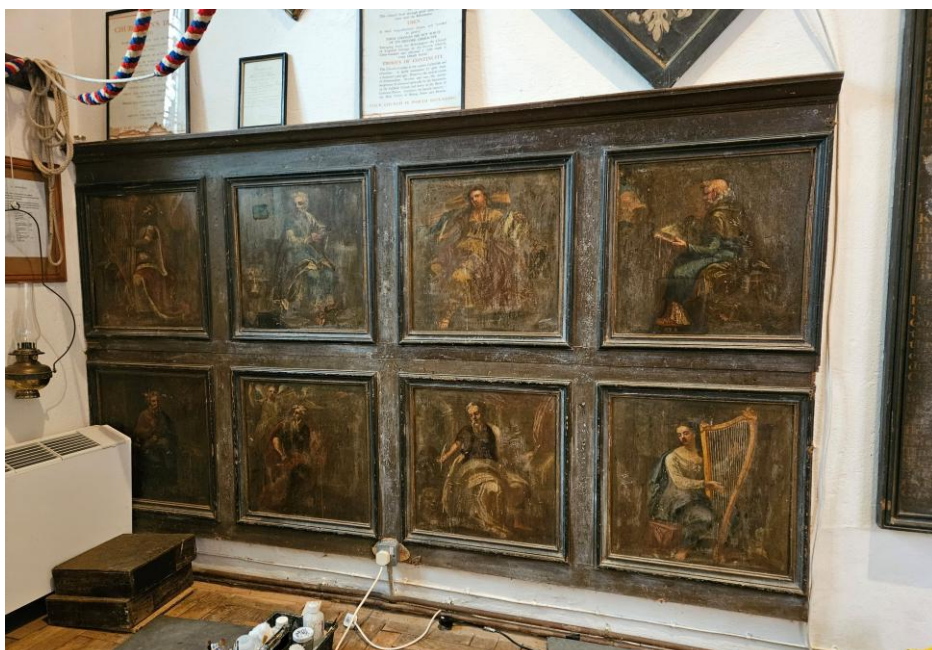


FIG 2

Gallery panels viewed from the east.

FIG. 3

King David playing his harp. Note the white veil of the deteriorating varnish layers.



FIG. 4

Lower left figure. Some loss of paint from mechanical damage is visible. This may have occurred when the radiator was put in. This figure has yet to be identified.

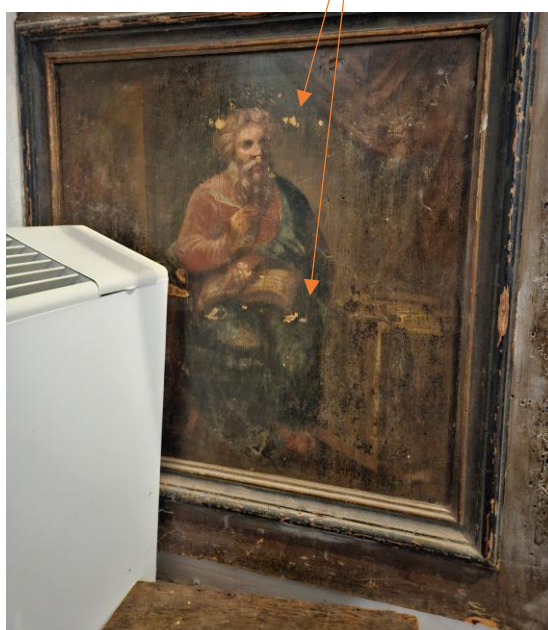


FIG. 5

The Evangelist Luke identified by his symbol the bull in the lower left corner. Much of the image is obscured by the varnish.



FIG. 6

The evangelist Mark with the symbol of the angel in the upper right corner



FIG. 8

It is thought that this may be a depiction of a young John the Baptist, although the eagle is not currently visible.



FIG. 9

Mark, the evangelist with the lion in the lower left corner.



FIG 10

Elderly learned figure thought to be one of the church fathers. Remains of earlier darkened varnish.



FIG. 11

Female figure playing a harp, dressed in classical costume. This scene maybe allegorical.



FIG 12

Detail showing the holes and paint loss on the post and rail framework.



FIG 13

Second upper panel from the left (Luke).

Results of preliminary cleaning trials to remove the layers of varnish that are obscuring the painting of the sky. Note the contrast between the area where the varnish layers have not been removed where the sky is barely



FIG. 14

Second upper panel from the left. Removal of the varnish and some later retouching revealed areas of previous loss.



FIG 15

Preliminary removal of varnish layers on the right-side upper panel. In this area there is still some of the darkened varnish remaining to be removed but removal of the upper layers has revealed the colours of the painting.

7. ESTIMATE

Cleaning and removal of decayed varnishes, filling holes, retouching and revarnishing.	£6400
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Refixing the panelling with new stainless-steel brackets with an airgap.	Allow £1280
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Total	£7,680
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Plus VAT@20%

This estimate is valid for 10 months from 12.05.2025