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HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, GUILDFORD
REMEDIAL CONSERVATION TREATMENT OF THE APSE DOME PAINTINGS

MAY 2016

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The eastern apse of the 18th century Holy Trinity Church in Guildford is decorated with an elaborate scheme of wall and vault paintings dating to the late 19th century, when the church was enlarged. Deterioration has been observed on the paintings in recent decades. The 2014 condition survey demonstrated that, while some of the damage was historic, some areas remained vulnerable due to defects in the building envelope and rainwater disposal system.[1]

In 2015 a programme of building repairs was undertaken as part of an HLF funded programme of works and it is understood that this programme addressed the areas which were at increased vulnerability of water ingress. In 2016 a short phase of remedial conservation was undertaken. The aim of the conservation treatment was to repair damaged plaster, stabilise the worst areas of delaminating painting on the main cornice and dome and to carry out surface cleaning in these areas. No treatment was undertaken on the main figurative paintings on the lower walls of the apse which, although dirty, were largely stable.

Conservation treatment was carried out on site in May 2016 with Bianca Madden, Claudia Fiocchetti and Miguel Aguilar.

2.0 THE BUILDING

Holy Trinity Church is situated in an elevated positon on the south side of the High Street in the centre of Guildford on a sloping site which falls to the north. To the south there is a small churchyard, which is flanked by buildings.

Figure 1. External view of the church from the north east.

The church comprises a wide nave, without aisles, which opens to the chancel and is flanked by short transepts with north and south chapels and a central eastern apse. At the west end there is a central square tower, with a small chapel to the north and a staircase to the south. In the south western corner, there is the large Weston Chapel and, in the south east corner, there is a small vestry.

, the main walls of the church are of red brick construction with limestone dressing, with the exception of the Weston Chapel, the walls of which are rubble construction with flint and freestone diaper work external facing. Internally, all of the walls are rendered in a hard lime plaster. The roofs are of slate laid over gapped timber boards and, in some areas, a layer of felt. The exceptions are the tower roof, which is of clay tile and the Weston Chapel, which is covered with a synthetic membrane pitched back towards the main church.

[1] Tobit Curteis Associates, *Holy Trinity Church, Guildford, Preliminary Condition Survey of the Apse Paintings*, November 2014

Internally, all of the walls are rendered with a hard lime plaster which is painted with an emulsion type synthetic paint. The floors are a mixture of ledger stones, modern tiles and, in the chancel, mosaic. The chancel ceiling in the nave is a flat suspended structure built of lath and plaster with ornate moulding on its underside. In the chancel there is a barrel vault with elaborate molding on its underside.

Figure 2. Internal view of the nave and chancel facing east.

Although there was a substantial medieval church on the site, this was largely destroyed in 1740 when the tower collapsed after a period of restoration. The one remaining part is the Weston Chapel, which dates to 1540. The present building was constructed between 1749 and 1763 under the architect, James Horne. In 1867-1869 substantial reordering was undertaken under Henry Woodyer. The Byzantine inspired apsidal east end and the short transepts were added by Sir Arthur Blomfield in 1886-888, and the vestry was built in 1910. Extensive repairs took place in 1947. The church is understood to have been redecorated in 1972 and 1993-4. [2]

The church is listed grade I and is in the diocese of Guildford.

3.0 Apse Painted Decoration

The wall paintings are part of Blomfield's designs for the Byzantine east end of the church. It is understood that they were begun in c.1889 and were completed and dedicated in October 1891.[3] The paintings, which are at half height in the apse, comprise seven gilded frames each of which contains figures of saints and fathers of the church, standing in classical landscapes and facing the central scene of the Crucifixion with Christ on the cross flanked by the Virgin Mary and St John the Evangelist. From left to right the figures have been identified as Aaron, David, Isaiah, St Paul, St Stephen and St Augustine of Hippo. Stylistically the paintings are drawn from 15th century Italian sources and, in particular, from Perugino's Crucifixion in Santa Maria Maddalena de Pazzi in Florence. The paintings were carried out by Messrs Buckeridge and Floyce, well known church artists of the period. The tier of paintings is approximately 310cm in height, with the canvas paintings approximately 90cm by 280cm, with the exception of the central Crucifixion, which is approximately 180cm by 208cm.

[2] Building listing 288969, N. Pevsner, I. Nairn and B. Cherry, *The Buildings of England, Surrey*, London 1971, pp.270-271 and church records.
[3] Pers. com. Mary Alexander

Figure 3. General view of the apse.

Above the figures there is a deep and ornate cornice with gilded dentals, below which is a band of gilded text reading: *Thou Art Worthy Oh Lord To Receive Glory & Honour & Power*. Below the figures there is a less ornate cornice, with a band of gilded florets against a red background.

On the west return walls of the apse there are panels of ornate classical decoration. This is complemented by the extremely finely painted altar frontal decorated by three carved and painted roundels containing the Lamb of God surrounded by seraphim in the centre, while in the right and left roundels there are sensing angels. The quality of the painting is extremely high and includes impasto work and incised decoration. Also in the sanctuary, there are two small tables which are carved and decorated as part of the same scheme. Although the furniture is not part of the current survey it is mentioned here to demonstrate that the wall and vault paintings are part of a larger decorative scheme, which incorporates the chancel and the sanctuary as a whole.

The walls were rendered with a hard plaster, apparently directly onto the brickwork. The decorative paintwork and the gilded frames are applied directly onto the plaster, but the individual paintings of the saints and the Crucifixion in the centre are painted on canvas, which has been applied to the wall with an adhesive and nailed at the edges. It was not possible to examine the adhesive material, but marouflage painting of this type was commonly fixed in place with white lead paste.

Figure 4. General view of the painted dome.

The painting in the vault shows the figure of Christ in Majesty seated on a throne in a gilded mandorla with his right hand raised in blessing and the orb in his left hand. The mandorla is bordered by winged seraphim and, at the apex of the dome, there is the dove of the Holy Ghost set within a gilded disc. Christ is flanked by kneeling figures of the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist with attendant angels with red and blue wings and further small seraphim with gilded wings. It is understood that the painting was originally to be carried

out by Buckeridge, but he died before the commission was commenced and so it was undertaken by Percy Bacon Bros. at the recommendation of Blomfield.[4]

The vault appears to be of brick construction and is rendered with a hard plaster, presumably lime based. This is coarsely applied and in raking light the tool marks are clearly visible.

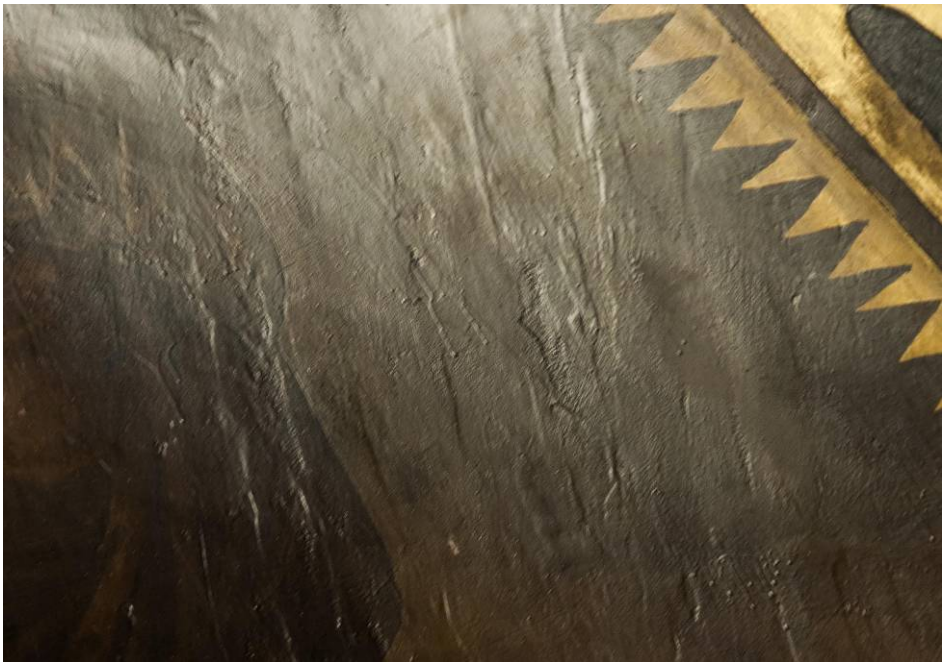


Figure 5. Coarsely applied plaster on the vault.

The painting is executed in thick brushstrokes and appears to be oil based. There appears to be a single grey green ground over the whole of the dome onto which the figures are applied. Only limited laying out was observed with coarse underdrawings on the text scrolls

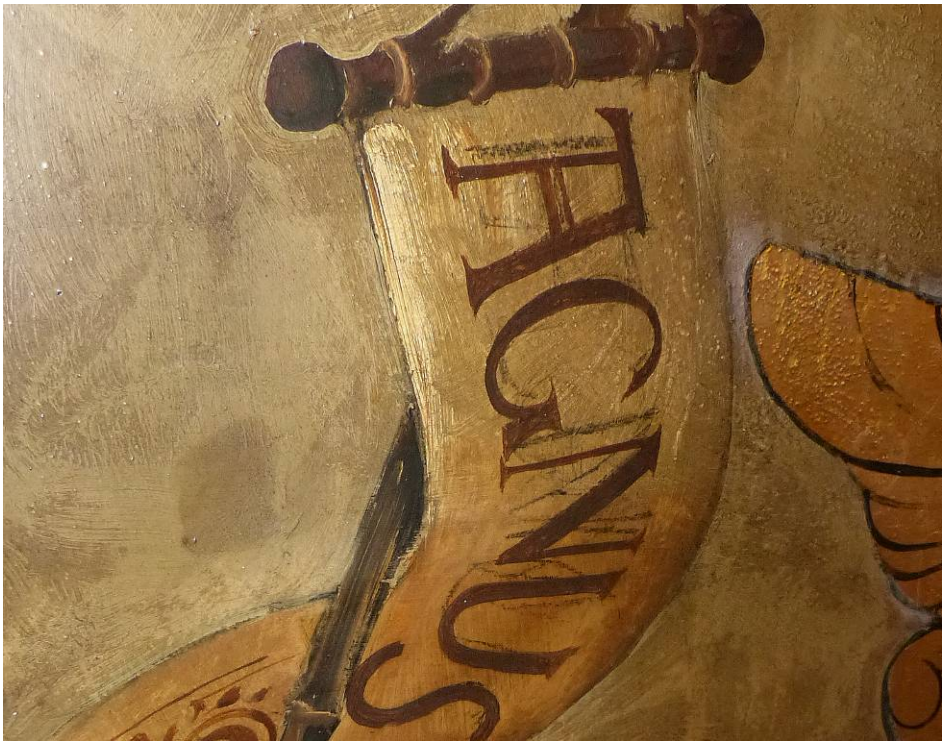
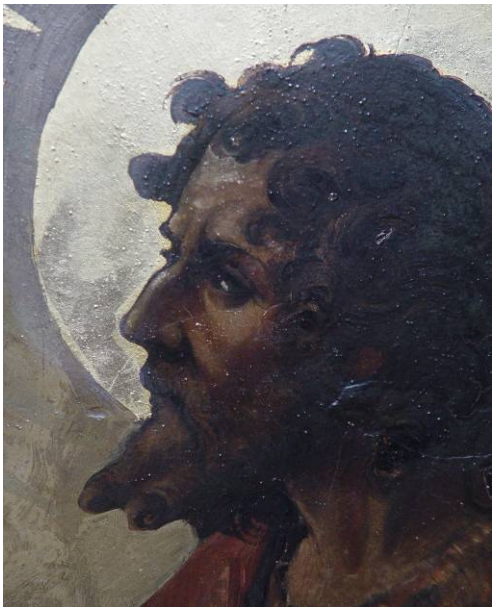


Figure 6. Coarse underdrawing below the text scroll.

IR imaging showed no obvious underdrawing indicating that the final paint layer is comparatively thick with a high level of coverage.

[4] Pers. com. Mary Alexander



Figures 7 & 8. Visible and IR image of the face of St John the Baptist shows no obvious underdrawings. (Image: Claudia Fiocchetti)

3.1 Previous Interventions

No documentary record of previous interventions is known. However, it can be seen that the entire painting has been coarsely cleaned removing some of the painting, including details of the putti's wings. The background was originally painted (or repainted) in large areas and the whole area was heavily varnished (with numerous drip marks), which has since discoloured. This may have occurred on more than one occasion.

Figures 9 & 10. Paint loss due to aggressive cleaning and repainitng of the background. (Images: Claudia Fiochetti)

Figures 11 & 12. Areas of varnish runs in UV and visible light. (Images: TCA and Claudia Fiochetti)

It was noticeable that, in many areas, the new varnish had become mixed with dirt which had been smeared onto the surface of the painting. It was clear therefore that the paintings were relatively dirty and for this reason it seems likely that a cleaning exercise would have taken place first, although this may suggest that this was not carried out with particular care.

Figure 13. The dirt layer has been mixed with the varnish and smeared over the background of the painting.

Later rough retouching was observed in a number of areas of the background, sometimes on sections of plaster around cracks, but also on areas of mechanical damage.

Figures 14 & 15. Areas of retouching on the Holy Spirit in UV and visible light. (Images: TCA and Claudia Fiochetti)

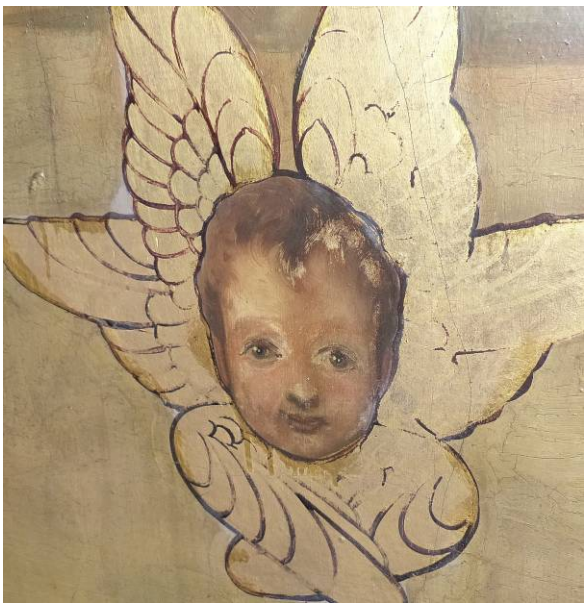
4.0 Condition Before Conservation[5]

In most areas it was found that the render retained a good level of cohesion and was well bonded to the brick substrate. There were a large number of hairline cracks, but these appeared to be old and dirty and, in most cases, were below the varnish layer. These appeared to have resulted from initial setting cracking and, in some cases, from low-level structural movement. However, none appeared to be recent.

Figures 16 & 17. Historic hairline cracks on the dome and cornice.

Numerous areas of mechanical damage were observed on the cornice, as well as on the painting itself. These were recent and consistent with impact damage from scaffolding or other access equipment.

In all areas that were examined, the paint layer retained a good level of cohesion and was well bonded to the plaster substrate. There was a heavy craquelure in most places, but on the ground this was not visible and does not have a significant impact on the appearance of the painting. Some minor discolouration and blanching was also observed on a number of the details, including the faces of the seraphim.



Figures 18 & 19. Detail of the craquelure and of one of the seraphim.

[5] Comments in this section are on the areas of painting on and above the main cornice. The lower walls are discussed in the 2014 report.

The most serious deterioration had occurred in areas where there had been localised water infiltration at cornice level. The most severe deterioration was on the north side of the apse where, although the plaster retained a good level of cohesion there was extensive delamination of the paint layer at the interface between ground and substrate. This had led to macro flaking with large, well cohered flakes of paint peeling away, as well as micro flaking with very small flakes and a partial loss of cohesion.

Figures 20 & 21. General view of the damage on the north side of the apse and detail of the delamination and flaking of the paint layer.

The damage had affected both the paint layer and also the gilding on the moulding which, due to its generally thinner nature and the more aggressive salt activity, had suffered loss of cohesion and widespread loss.

Figure 22. Eastern section of the lower molding on the cornice showing the delamination of the gilding.

Figures 23 & 24. Raking light details of the salt activity and the micro flaking of the paint layer.

Adjacent to the areas where the paint layer has been lost, there were small sections where there had been delamination between the varnish and paint layer, with salt activity at the interface, resulting in severe blanching.

Figure 25. Delamination and blanching of the varnish.

All areas of the painting were covered with an accumulation of surface dirt consisting, apparently, of particulate dust and a fine, slightly oily dust consistent with candle smoke and/or industrial pollution.

5.0 CONSERVATION TREATMENT PROGRAMME

5.1 Aims and Treatment Areas

The aim of the conservation treatment was to stabilise, clean and treat the plaster and paint layers on the upper cornice and dome, in order prevent further loss and to improve aesthetic presentation. No treatment on the more stable lower figurative areas was carried out. The during the course of the programme the work was extended to repair and reintegrate damage to the high level cornice running around the north, south and west walls of the chancel, which had previously been entirely repainted and had suffered numerous small areas of mechanical damage.

5.2 Treatment Techniques

Tests were undertaken at the outset of the project to confirm that the treatment techniques evaluated during the survey were appropriate and effective. The materials and techniques employed were as follows.

- *Repair of the plaster substrate (painting):* The small areas of loss were repaired using a lime putty and silver sand mortar to create a mortar of similar colour and texture to the original.
- *Repair of the plaster substrate (cornice):* Areas of damage were repaired using a base fill of Pollyfilla with a surface coating of Flugger. In the one area where a deep loss had occurred, steel pins were inserted with epoxy resin to prevent detachment.
- *Readhesion of the plaster layer (painting):* In the very small areas where it was necessary to stabilise the delaminating plaster layer, grouting was carried out using a lime grout, with the inclusion of Rhinish Trass.
- *Readhesion of the plaster layer (cornice):* One section of the cornice on the west wall was found to be detached with a low but recognisable risk of failure. This was readhered with epoxy resin and repairs were undertaken with Flugger.
- *Readhesion of the paint layer:* Readhesion of flaking paint layers was undertaken using a weak solution of the acrylic dispersion Plextol B500.[6] In areas where the flakes were thick and flexible, the surface was relayed using heated spatulas.
- *Cleaning:* The aim of the cleaning was to remove the superficial dirt layers but not the discoloured varnish. The loose surface dirt was carried out using soft brushes and Akapad sponges. The fine adhered dirt layer was reduced using a 2.5% solution of tri-ammonium citrate in deionised water, applied on cotton wool swabs. Clearance was with deionised water.
- *Reintegration:* The aim of the reintegration was to reduce the aesthetic impact of small losses and to recreate the small areas of stencil decoration which had been lost. This was undertaken with Windsor and Newton artists' acrylics.

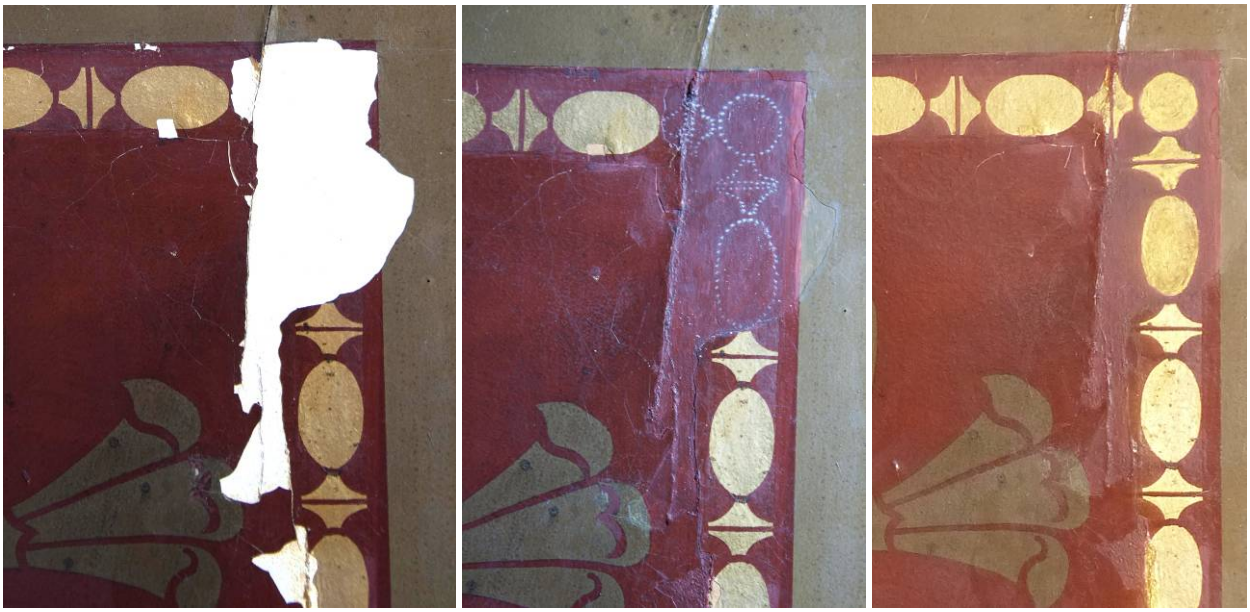
[6] Plextol B500 is a product of Röhm


Figures 26 & 27. Removal of surface dirt and dust from horizontal surfaces.


Figures 28 & 29. Surface cleaning on the gilding and paint surface.


Figures 30 & 31. Retouching and regilding tests.

Figures 32 & 33. Areas of stabilised flaking with reintegration completed.



Figures 34 -36. Reconstruction of small areas of lost details.

6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

The treatment of the painting has been successful in stabilising plaster and paint layers. However, having suffered damage in the past, the scheme is now more vulnerable than was historically the case and is at risk of damage both from water infiltration and from unstable environmental conditions. It is essential that there is a regular and thorough programme of inspection and maintenance of the building envelope and rainwater disposal system in order to minimise the risk of damage.

Consideration should also be given to the re-lighting of the chancel both to better display the paintings and to improve the aesthetic balance between the nave and the chancel.

The appearance and presentation of the lower paintings would be considerably improved if they were conserved and cleaned. However, now that the building envelope and rainwater disposal system have been repaired, the principal risk of damage has been removed.

7.0 Limitations

The condition survey involved a visual and superficial examination of the church and paintings where safe access was available. No opening up or intrusive investigations were undertaken and no materials analysis has been carried out. In areas which were not accessible, it is possible that conditions may vary. Any comments on the building structure are in general terms only and should be referred to the church architect.