



Chapter 3 - The Architecture & Decoration of the Chapel

Understanding exactly how an old building once looked and how it has changed over the centuries is often an exciting puzzle...you have to use your best detective skills to look for evidence of how the Chapel has been altered over the years, and combine this with sources such as old archives, pictures and fragments of paint and wood to put the puzzle together.

Unfortunately there are some things we will never know unless we invent a time machine! Here are a selection of the major alterations the Chapel has gone through over the centuries; see if you can find any evidence of them still in the Chapel as you look around.

13-14th centuries

We don't know the construction or style of the original Chapel building and Hospital, although one source cites the earlier Chancel walls being constructed of rubblestone. We are likewise not sure when the Hospital was demolished or converted into the Nave of the Chapel but know it was in place by the end of the 15th century. As it exists today, the fabric of the east and south walls of the Chancel may date in part to 13th century.

15th century

The Chancel was remodelled and its north wall rebuilt in stone in 1450, as was the Nave, North Porch and Tower at the end of the 15th century. Hugh Clopton, a prominent local businessman, funded the work. This is also when we believe the earliest wall paintings date back to, with some evidence of the Chapel being decorated in 1424-27 by a William Payntour, in red, yellow and white paint. The main bulk of the paintings are from later on in this era and were funded from Hugh Clopton's will when he died at the end of the 15th century, as well as the continued remodelling of the Chapel.

We have no way of knowing exactly how the original ceilings of the Chapel would have looked but know they were very different to what you see today; the most likely design is a shallow-pitched ceiling (sloped rather than flat), made of timber and decorated with carved wooden angels. Some of these angels survive; they would have been painted in bright colours and the shields would have featured the coats-of-arms of the patrons and benefactors of the Chapel.

The Guild Chapel's angels, now found in the archives of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

There was also a highly decorative rood screen and loft, which were timber screens separating the Chancel from the Nave. These were see-through in their upper half and richly decorated, with a large cross sitting atop.



16th century

The wall paintings were limewashed over and some of them scraped away as a result of the changes of the English Reformation. At this time images of saints especially were sensitive so often, even if the paintings themselves were left, the saint's faces were scratched away.

If you look at the Erthe upon Erthe painting (shown here) you will see Archangel Saint Michael's face has been scraped away while the rest of the painting remains.



The rood loft (the upper part of the rood screen separating the Chancel and Nave) was also removed around this time.

17th century

We have evidence from this time that the Nave was repainted in a monochrome scheme depicting columns, panelling and mouldings. There might also have been some timber Jacobean panelling from dado height to the ground, to match the imitation painted panelling. Early in the 17th century the Chapel was divided up, with a wall dividing the Chancel from the Nave and the Chancel partitioned into tenanted chambers. They remained this way until the vicar got into great trouble for "allowing his children to play at ball and other sports therein, his servants to hang clothes to dry in it, his pigs and poultry and dog to lie and feed in it and the pictures defaced and the windows broken". After this in 1633 the great bell was made for the tower, and in 1641 the dividing wall between the Nave and Chancel was removed, as well as the rood screen, and the interior was limewashed once more.

18th century

If you look around the Chapel you will see remains of red paint upon the walls. This has been shown to be a painted decoration dating from the early 18th century, showing imitation marble pilasters with decorative tops, and fake panelling, all done to look like pink and white marble.

The grey marble font was also made and installed around this time.

19th century

A major refurbishment to the Chapel was undertaken in 1804, at which point the earliest wall paintings were rediscovered. They were documented by a man named Fisher and his records provide some of our earliest detailed information about the ones we cannot see today. Unfortunately the paintings in the Chancel were then destroyed by the subsequent works carried out to refurbish the Chapel but we know that they depicted the Legend of the Holy Cross in 10 separate pictures, a bit like a comic strip or storyboard, each part of the story continuing from the next.



After Fisher recorded the rest of the paintings around the Nave, the Nave was painted white, apart from where timber panelling was installed. Timber panelling was installed up to dado height around the Nave and up to the height of the new gallery on the west wall (where the organ is now). This gallery stretched right across this wall and allowed worshippers to sit on this balcony as well as in the pews in front. The pews themselves were in a different arrangement to now, facing forwards towards the altar. There was also a pulpit and organ at the front of the Nave, next to the Chancel arch.

The existing ceiling in the Chapel was also installed in 1804, at which point the earlier decorative 15th century ceiling was taken down.

At some point the Doom painting was then overpainted with scrolls and prayer boards (shown right) - we believe this might have happened around 1850.



20th century

The Doom, Dance of Death and Life of Adam paintings are uncovered and conserved by Tristram, who applied a wax coating to prevent any more deterioration in the paint.

The Friends of the Guild Chapel was formed as the Chapel had fallen into disrepair. They raised funds and undertook considerable repair and alterations to the Chapel under the supervision of architect Stephen Dykes-Bower, including the following:

- repairs to tower stonework
- repairs to porch stonework
- removal of gallery, box pews, panelling, organ and pulpit
- removal of Chancel floor and replacement with concrete flagstones
- removal of underfloor heating system
- installation of new pews and panelling, to resemble an Oxbridge college in style

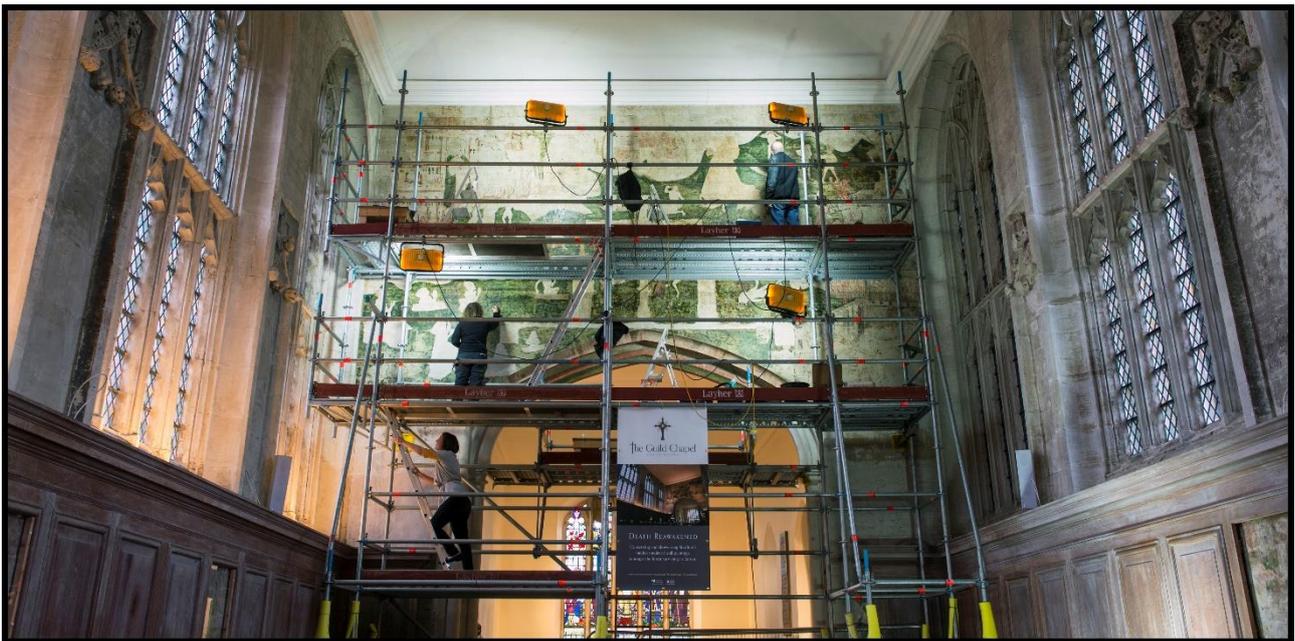


- replacement of the windows in the chancel with new stained glass designed by Vernon Spreadbury

21st century

A new organ and organ loft were installed in 2014, created in the tall western arch of the Nave.

In 2016 a HLF grant was awarded to undertake conservation work to the Doom and Erthe upon Erthe paintings, which has now been completed.



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