

John Betjeman Awards 2018

And the winner is... Death Reawakened at Guild Chapel, Stratford-upon-Avon

Project manager **Cate Statham** writes about this year's remarkable winning project

Dominating the corner of Chapel Lane and Church Street, the Grade I-listed Guild Chapel of the Holy Cross has been a fixture of Stratford-upon-Avon for 700 years. Starting life in the 13th century as a small private chapel for use by Guild members and a hospital, then altered to its current form in the 15th century, its fortunes grew in line with success of the town's Guild. By the height of its influence and wealth the Guild had created an impressive complex of buildings, most of which still remain and include almshouses, the Guildhall and King Edward IV school.

Arguably the Guild Chapel's most significant survival is a collection of late 15th/early 16th-century wall paintings, bequested by well known benefactor (and former Lord Mayor of London) Hugh Clopton. The wall paintings are a rare survival of national importance, unique in iconographic and art history terms (several of the subjects are not known to have any other existent examples in the UK), and provide an insight into the social and religious attitudes prevalent in the period. They depict a mixture of religious, allegorical and mythological scenes including a

Doom, Dance of Death, Erthe upon Erthe poem, a sequence depicting the Legend of the Holy Cross, the Martyrdom of Thomas Becket, Saint George and the Dragon, the Whore of Babylon, the Life of Adam and a selection of saints. What we know of the full original scheme tells us the Chapel was once fully adorned with paintings and our understanding of them being conceived and

Below left:
Detail from
Erthe upon
Erthe painting
after
conservation



executed at the same time as a complete scheme adds to their uniqueness.

In 1563 the Reformation caused the paintings to be defaced and limewashed under the supervision of John Shakespeare (William Shakespeare's father). They were subsequently painted over a number of times more and remained in that state until 1804, when the majority were uncovered. Unfortunately a number of them have been lost entirely through deterioration or deliberate alterations to the Chapel over the centuries. Fortunately, antiquarian Thomas Fisher documented the paintings in 1804 and his lithographs, kept in the local archive, have subsequently provided evidence for future researchers. A complete internal reordering under architect Stephen Dykes-Bower were undertaken once more in the 1960s and further documentation of the paintings was made at this time by local art teacher Wilfred



The Guild Chapel,
Stratford-upon-
Avon



Puddephat. However, records were disconnected and poorly archived, with the result that there was a lack of cohesive record and no modern analysis or recording techniques had been applied.

Since 1994, the paintings have been the subject of detailed study and research by conservation architects Hawkes Edwards, wall painting conservators Tobit Curteis Associates and York University. This, combined with the recent conservation work carried out by Perry Lithgow Partnership, has allowed a good understanding of the original scheme to begin to take shape. Assessments of the paintings' condition and the environmental conditions of the Chapel identified that the paintings were deteriorating and, because of accumulated paint layers, dirt and flaking, were unable to be viewed at their best. Following works to improve the environmental conditions within the Chapel, in 2015 a Heritage Lottery Grant of £100,000 was

awarded to the Death Reawakened Project, to undertake a programme of conservation works to a selection of the paintings alongside a wider programme of engagement and education.

The Death Reawakened Project was focused specifically on three paintings; the Doom, Erthe upon Erthe poem and Dance of Death. The conservation work aimed to stabilise the paintings in order to prevent further loss, remove layers of paint, wax, limewash and grime that had accumulated and to carry out limited reintegration in order to increase the legibility of the paintings. Some of the pre-existing loss and damage to the paintings had occurred as a result of now outdated conservation techniques (wax-based coatings) or a lack of recognition of the importance of the subject (the removal of painted plaster from the chancel) and, as a result, the team was very aware of taking a conservative and reversible approach to the works.

Conservation approach and work

Care was taken in all aspects of treatment in order to ensure a conservative and thoughtful approach. Constant discussion and regular meetings were encouraged among the team to ensure the best course of treatment could be resolved upon and the conservation coordinated as a whole. All materials used were well-tested and widely-used – sympathetic to the original with high levels of reversibility and good ageing properties. Detailed photography was undertaken before, during and after treatment, including IR/UV/technical photography, alongside Visual Examination (raking light to constantly monitor condition during treatment).

Through this careful approach we were able to ensure no loss of fabric to the 16th-century paintings, with loose and flaking paint re-adhered and stabilised. Some later overlayers of paint, distemper and limewash were removed to render

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the wall paintings visible but this was assessed at each stage. A number of exciting and previously unknown elements were uncovered as a result of this careful and diligent approach. For example, an interesting section of gilded paintwork from a later decorative scheme remained across a small part of the Doom, and this was retained as having intrinsic historic value in its own right. Likewise, areas of a later fictive-panelling decorative scheme was discovered on the south wall and was also retained.

Graphic recording of condition and treatment was undertaken and the photographs and graphics form a significant part of the final documentation/conservation record. A side project was also begun in partnership with the new volunteers and local archive service to better organise and catalogue archive material relating to the Guild buildings, which has benefit not just to the ongoing work at the Chapel but future works as well.

This large scene over the chancel arch had had a wax coating applied in the 1920s, the purpose of which was to consolidate powdering paint, to act as an adhesive for re-attaching flaking paint, to saturate the colours, and to act as a durable protective coating. It is now recognised that these coatings tend to darken over time as a result of chemical reactions in the oil/resin component and can increase the fragility of mortar joints. Furthermore, the wax attracts dirt, causing the surface to darken further.

The coating also restricts the free passage of moisture between the wall and the environment which can result in paint flaking and plaster damage. The wax layer was reduced as far as possible without causing damage to the underlying paint.

The full splendour of this vibrantly coloured scheme had been muted through deterioration of the green paint in particular; this damage is typical in copper resinate-type paints, and is irreversible. Much of the paint surface had also been severely abraded; some of this damage may have been due to intentional iconoclasm or rubbing down prior to overpainting in 16th century, as well as when the covering layers were removed in 1804. The remaining paint was adequately bound but there was significant micro-flaking over large areas.

In general, the stone and the pointing mortar were in good condition, but with numerous fixing holes and associated damage. The Doom is painted directly onto close-fitting limestone ashlar blocks and lime-mortar pointing. The masonry surface has distinctive tooling indents but no effort was made to fill these prior to painting. All open cracks, pointing loss and empty fixing holes were filled with lime-based mortar of similar texture to the original. Previous



Right: Volunteers going up the scaffold with conservators

Left: Erthe upon Erthe after conservation

Centre: Erthe upon Erthe before conservation

Below: St Michael from the conserved Erthe upon Erthe



lime plaster repairs that were loose, proud of the surface or overlapping painted detail were replaced. All repair plaster was toned with limewash grounds and watercolour washes so they recede into the background and do not distract from the surviving painted detail. To enhance the clarity of surviving painted detail, distracting small lacunae within otherwise coherent areas of the scheme were reintegrated (toned-in) using conservation grade acrylic-based pigments in a technique obvious on close inspection. This process enhanced the clarity of the scheme without compromising its originality. Also it serves as a visual guide for monitoring future losses.

Paint sample analyses identified a complex technique using coloured under-layers and overlapping, opaque and transparent paints and gilding to create a vivid, almost three-dimensional effect. The painting has an orange/brown ground based on earth colours. Other pigments were found to be as follows:

- Grassy meadow (green) – mixture of Verdigris and copper green in an oil and resin medium;
- Virgin's robe (blue) – azurite;
- Red details (angel's wings, red highlights on the flowers) – pure vermilion;
- Dark-red flowers – organic red lake ;
- Purple flower petals – mixture of yellow and red ochres, carbon black, and some lead white;
- Blonde hair (one soul in a group outside the gates of heaven) – mixture of lead tin yellow and lead white.
- Traces of gold leaf were found on the headdresses of some resurrected souls and St Peter's key.

As well as the Doom portion that can be seen within the Chapel, there is also a portion retained above the existing ceiling line (the 15th century ceiling was replaced in 1804 with what is in place today, cutting off the top section of the Doom).



As part of the project, this was accessed and documented, showing Jesus's head and angels still in remarkably good condition. Also, as part of the archive project, a number of timber angels surviving from the 15th century ceiling were also rediscovered.

Allegory on Mortality – Erthe upon Erthe painting

This painting depicts seven stanzas of a poem encouraging viewers to reflect on their mortality, with Archangel Michael presiding over an entombed body. This unique painting was exposed for a brief period during the 1950s refurbishment before being covered by timber panelling as part of the 1960s reordering. The panelling was effective in protecting the painting from damage but equally effective in obscuring it from view. Approximately 25 per cent of the painting was hidden beneath layers of overpaint; limewash, distemper and oil paint, traces of which were still present.

Findings

Sample analysis confirmed the painting was applied directly onto the dressed stone, with two layers of white preparatory ground. The pigments include lead white and carbon black. The blue in the eyes is indigo mixed with white lead. The pink cheeks are small particles of vermilion in white-lead. The lips of the figures are a mixture of red-lead and vermilion as are the capital letters and the angel's feathers. The green windows of the buildings were painted using a synthetic copper green pigment.

The team debated for some time as to whether the panelling obscuring the poem should be permanently removed, reinstated or whether the panelling could be adapted in some way. Following consultation with both Historic England and other projects it was decided that an authentic approach was best and the painting should be displayed as simply as possible. It was therefore decided to carefully deconstruct the panelling and put it into storage, and to design some loose furniture to create both a display for

interpretation and a subtle barrier in front of the painting to prevent touching. There was a great deal of concern on the part of some stakeholders at this approach and the Chapel's CCTV coverage has been augmented with CCTV coverage to dissuade any would-be vandals. Removing the panelling also required a discreet UV mesh to be installed to one of the south-facing windows, in order to prevent direct sunlight affecting the painting now it was exposed.

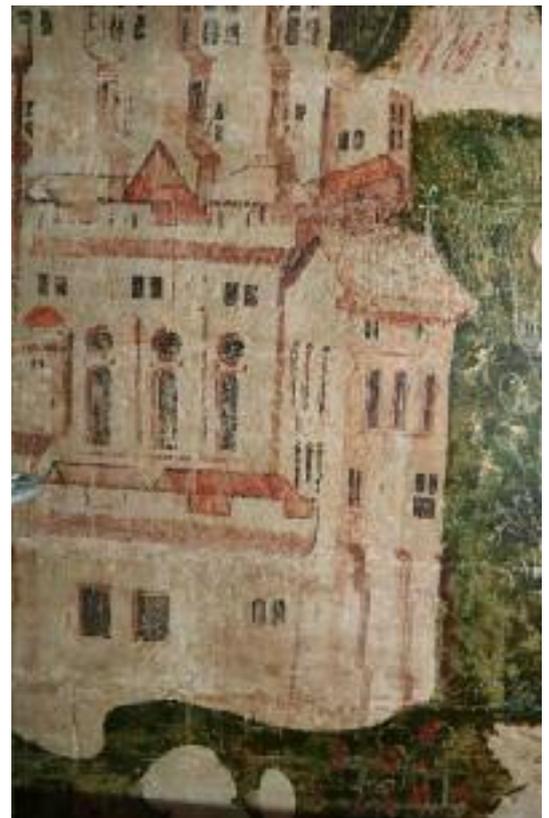
Dance of Death

This painting covering the north wall of the Chapel had not been exposed since the mid-20th century and was poorly documented. The project allowed us to open a section of the panelling covering it, which in turn provided an opportunity to investigate and check the painting's stability and trial treatments to small exposed sample areas. It was obvious from this exercise that a great deal of the painting has been lost, possibly due to a combination of direct

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Details of the Doom painting, Damned, left, The Dead Rising, right, and Heaven, below right



sunlight, water leaks and later decorative works. Unfortunately, the cornice of the 1960s panelling sits over the most intact area of detail, making detailed investigation difficult without complete removal of the panelling. This is now being planned and awaiting consent, so that any remaining pieces of this fragmentary painting can be documented and analysed.

Life of Adam

Opposing the Dance of Death, this painting stretches across the entirety of the South wall of the Chapel. The project team had no reason to

believe much remained of this painting, and it was an amazing surprise to find that not only was there a great deal of the scheme to be seen, but with some cleaning trials on small areas, a great deal of the original and later decorative schemes, can be ascertained.

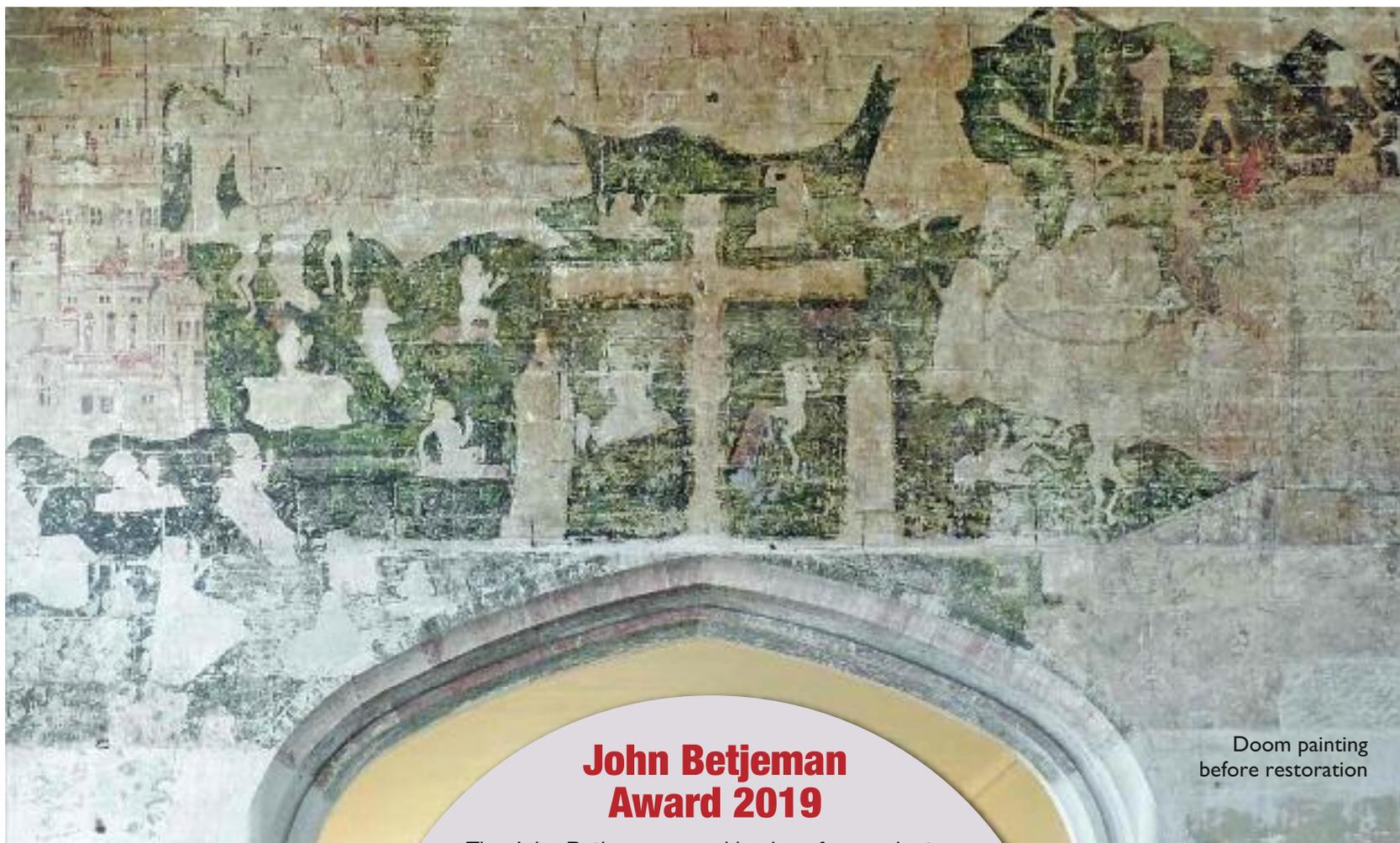
Areas of a later fictive-panelling decorative scheme was discovered overlaying the earlier painting and this was retained.

It is now clear that removing the panelling completely in order to document and analyse this painting will be very worthwhile and plans are under way.

Technical information

1. Cleaning trials: Removing or reducing the discoloured wax-based coating – the wax was removed/reduced using xylene/acetone/isopropanol (0.62/0.25/0.12 mix) in free solvent form applied by swab. This method afforded greater flexibility and control than using a poultice method, especially in areas where the priority was consolidation rather than wax removal.

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Doom painting
before restoration

John Betjeman Award 2019

The John Betjeman award is given for repairs to a specific element of a building, rather than for a general programme of works, and projects must have been completed within the previous 18 months. Work of any scale is eligible, but must be to the fabric of the building (eg, tower, wall, roof, floor) or to a significant element of its furnishing (eg, monument, screen, tomb, pew, pulpit). Cathedrals are not eligible. Importantly, the award is always made to the building rather than to an individual, so this is a chance for a whole community to celebrate the quality of work completed in its building. The award takes the form of a certificate featuring an image of Inglesham Church in Wiltshire, a favourite church of Betjeman's and the subject of an early SPAB campaign by the Society's founder, William Morris. This striking image was created for the SPAB by artist and friend of Betjeman, John Piper. To find out more about entering a project for the 2019 Award go to www.spab.org.uk/about-us/awards/john-betjeman-award
The closing date will be February 26, 2019

2.Consolidation of the paint layer:

In general the paint had a good level of cohesion although some areas that had been protected from the wax coating by residual overlying limewash had a slightly friable, powdery surface. These areas were lighter in tone than the previously exposed and wax-coated surrounding paint. A weak solution of Paraloid B72 (3-5 per cent in acetone) was applied to these areas as a consolidant and to saturate the colours. Flaking paint and ground required reattachment before the cleaning/wax treatment could be carried out to avoid the risk of inadvertent loss. This was undertaken using solutions of Primal B60A (a water-based acrylic colloidal dispersion) applied through tissue.

Engagement

Bringing awareness of the Chapel's various schemes and reordering over the centuries was a key part of the engagement and interpretation aims of the project. All work was undertaken

while keeping the Chapel open to the public seven days a week. Through the project, 35 volunteers were recruited, allowing the Chapel to be manned for much of the week, and school groups/special events were

arranged to encourage more visitors to the Chapel. Visitor numbers have continued to increase and the volunteers are now embarking upon formal tours and talks as part of a wider range of outreach and engagement. Ongoing partnerships with York University and the local archive service has opened up further avenues for research and are informing future potential projects.

What's next?

Consents have been submitted to alter the ceiling at one end of the nave, in order that the hidden top section of Doom painting can be reunited with the rest, and permission has been sought to temporarily remove all the panelling in the Chapel so that a full survey of the painted surfaces can be undertaken and potentially further conservation work to areas of interest.

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