

19 December 2001

## **Survey of Paintings**

### **ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL Nineteenth-Century Royal Arms and Vault Paintings in the Crypt**

I visited the church on 21 November, at the request of Ian Stewart, to inspect a nineteenth-century carved and painted Royal Arms at present stored in the North Transept having been taken down from its usual position in the north choir aisle. While at the Cathedral Ian Stewart also asked me to review the painted decoration on the vaulting in the Crypt - particularly the kitchen area in the north-east corner (Bay 13) - and to submit recommendations for necessary conservation treatment.

#### **Nineteenth-Century Royal Arms**

The carved and painted wood panel displaying the Royal Arms with lion and unicorn supporters and the Dieu et mon Droit banner measures 3 ft high x 6 ft wide. It is of no great artistic merit and, probably, was never intended for display in the Cathedral - unlike the magnificent Stuart Royal Arms panel hanging above the entrance to the south choir transept.

The panel is structurally sound; the only damage being some superficial cracks within the body of the unicorn. A more detailed inspection would be necessary to establish precisely the construction technique and sample analysis to identify the materials involved. However, there is certainly some form of gesso/gypsum plaster layer covering the timber structure and acting as a ground for the original oil-based paint.

Very little of the original paint scheme is now visible: the gold elements within the arms and garter, the gold Dieu et mon Droit lettering and the lion supporter's eyes. Everything else has been insensitively overpainted, probably within the last 40 years: the areas of red, blue, white and black with a thick, glossy paint layer; the gold of the lion, the unicorn and the crown with what appears to be a dull 'gold' (probably bronze) paint. A thick gloss varnish layer separates the original decoration from the overpaint.

The later paint scheme makes the Royal Arms look as if it last decorated a fairground; although, it should be said that this impression is not due to the paint alone. Ideally the overpaint should be removed, but to do so without damaging the original scheme will be time consuming. There seems to be an intervening varnish layer which would offer some protection but then itself would have to be removed. The condition of the original paint is unknown; it may be indicative that the gilding on the shield and garter is considerably worn. In my view this is likely to be very expensive and the original scheme will look distressed. However, some uncovering trials and paint analysis are necessary to assess the conservation/restoration options e.g. whether uncovering is feasible, the condition of the original paint, and to establish the original colours used. The latter is particularly important to prevent restoration from making the object look like a twenty-first century fake rather than a twentieth-century one.

If the Dean and Chapter consider repainting the object to be the preferred option, the best way forward is to seek the view of someone used to restoring historic paint schemes. One name that comes to mind is James Finlay, Burcombe House, Chalford Hill, Nr Stroud, Glos. GL80 8EN Tel: 01453 731466. If he is unable to carry out the work himself he will be able to recommend other such specialists. These people will carry out paint scrapes, obtain samples for analysis and provide you will proposals and costs for restoration.

Should they wish to explore further the conservation option, we would be pleased to obtain paint samples for analysis, carry out trials for the removal of overpaint and varnish as well as removal of dirt from the original scheme, and submit proposals and costs conservation treatment. The cost of carrying out and documenting these trials would be as follows:

Conservators attendance on site (1 man day @ £175 per day)	£ 175.00
Documentation off site (1 man day @ £175 per day)	£ 175.00
Travel (258 miles @ 35p per mile)	£ 90.30
Paint sample analysis (ca. £20 per sample)	£ 120.00
Materials and photographs	£ 40.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£ 600.30</b>

The total is exclusive of VAT which shall be charged at the current rate.

### **Vault Paintings in the Crypt**

The Perry Lithgow Partnership has been involved in the conservation of wall paintings at Rochester Cathedral since 1983. A list of the works carried out and associated documentation together with a plan of the Crypt is appended to this report. Marked on the plan are the areas still requiring treatment.

The painted scheme covering much of the crypt vaults may well date entirely from the early 14th century, and is mostly ornamental, consisting of masonry pattern either left unadorned or enriched with rosettes or other motifs. In a few areas, figurative subjects are painted over the masonry pattern, as in Bay 1, and in Bay 18 and on its adjoining arches. Both of these areas were treated in the 1987/8 by ourselves in collaboration with the Courtauld Institute of Art, Conservation of Wall Paintings Department.

The most serious deterioration of the crypt vault has been the detachment and collapse of much of the painted plaster away from its underlying support. This has been provoked by past water infiltration and by recurrent cycles of salt crystallization; these, in turn, have contributed to the formation of a black calcium sulphate crust on the surface of the paintings, making cleaning extremely difficult. Following extensive analysis and tests an effective cleaning technique - involving the use of a poultice based on ammonium carbonate, sodium bicarbonate and EDTA (ethylenediaminetetra-acetic acid) - was developed during the 1988 phase of works in collaboration with the Courtauld Institute of Art, CWPD. This method was employed on Bays 40a & d and 33c and on Section c of the main area of figurative paintings in Bay 18, previously stabilised by the Perry Lithgow Partnership in 1985.

At the time there were reservations regarding the use of EDTA in wall painting conservation but given the particular circumstances at Rochester, and strictly controlled conditions, its use was considered justified. Further research and technical analysis since then has identified additional potential drawbacks associated with EDTA, to the extent that it should not now be considered for use on wall paintings. As a result the cleaning technique used in 1988 is no longer an option and there must be some doubt that we shall identify an appropriate alternative.

The areas with visible painted decoration still to be treated are as follows:

- Bay 18 and adjacent Arch Soffits F & G (surface cleaning still to be completed).
- Bay 33 Sections a, b, d
- Bay 40 Sections b, c
- Bay 13 Sections a, b, c, d
- Arch Soffit E

The areas with unpainted stone and plaster requiring treatment are as follows:

- Window recess adjacent to Bay 13
- Window recess adjacent to Bay 18
- Window recess adjacent to Bay 33

Although we already have a good knowledge of the painted scheme in the Crypt and the materials involved, the correct approach must still be to carry out a survey to establish exactly the condition of these areas and to determine the appropriate treatment and treatment methods and materials. The condition report will serve as the pre-treatment graphic and photographic record. It will include a description of the wall paintings, their history, conservation history, technique and condition with conclusions on the causes of deterioration together with a detailed photographic record in incident and raking light. The report will contain treatment proposals, with options if appropriate, a method statement and quotations for the work involved. As part of the condition survey we would carry out cleaning tests to try to identify an alternative method for removing the black calcium sulphate surface crust. However, I have to say that it is unlikely we will find a solution on the day of the survey: in which case we will have to propose that the paintings be stabilised but not cleaned.

The cost of a condition survey of the vault paintings within Bay 13 (the kitchen area) would be as follows:

Conservators attendance on site (2 man days @ £175 per day)	£ 350.00
Conservators attendance off site (2 man days @ £175 per day)	£ 350.00
Travel (258 miles @ 35p per mile)	£ 90.30
Materials and photographs	£ 40.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£ 830.30</b>

The total is exclusive of VAT which shall be charged at the current rate. These costs assume that a mobile access scaffold will be provided for the on-site survey work. The same cost would apply to a condition survey of the untreated vault segments in Bays 33 and 40 and of the Arch soffit E.