



# ST JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH

MAIN STREET - COLD OVERTON - LEICESTERSHIRE

## CONSERVATION TREATMENT REPORT OF THE MIEVEAL WALL PAINTINGS

SECOND PHASE

OCTOBER 2018

REPORT NUMBER: CO-MWP-006B-CTR

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3. This report does not constitute a formal specification for conservation treatment, building repairs or other work. Recommendations are in general terms only and if any intervention is to be undertaken the advice of the appropriate professional adviser should be sought, and a formal specification prepared by them.

## 1.0 Introduction

Client:

Peter Rycroft  
 St John The Baptist church  
 9 Main Street  
 Cold Overton-Oakham  
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 Leicestershire

Conservator:

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Location: National Grid Reference: SK 81024 10152

Following the emergency conservation phase carried out in July 2018 in order to stabilise the plaster and the paint layers that were of great risks to collapse, from the 3rd September to the 5th October 2018 Claudia Fiocchetti wall painting conservator has undertaken conservation treatments on Cold Overton wall paintings in order to stabilise further the paintings, prevent further loss and to improve their overall presentation and readability reducing the superficial dirt and the wax coat applied in a previous intervention.

## 2.0 The building



<b>Heritage Category:</b>	Listing
<b>List Entry No :</b>	1075150
<b>Grade:</b>	I
<b>County:</b>	Leicestershire
<b>District:</b>	Melton
<b>Parish:</b>	Knossington and Cold Overton

For all entries pre-dating 4 April 2011 maps and national grid references do not form part of the official record of a listed building. In such cases the map here and the national grid reference are generated from the list entry in the official record and added later to aid identification of the principal listed building or buildings.

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<b>List Entry NGR:</b>	SK 81024 10152
<b>Map Scale:</b>	1:2500
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**Name:** CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST



Historic England  
[HistoricEngland.org.uk](http://HistoricEngland.org.uk)

English Heritage official listing location<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1075150>

Cold Overton is the Leicester county on the Rutland border. The GPS position of the village is: -0°48'11"E, 52°40'58"N. The church is set back from Main Street through Cold Overton with grave site around the whole perimeter.

St John the Baptist church is in a conservation area and it is listed as Grade I. It was listed for the first time on the registered on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1968. List entry number: 1075150 under Listing NGR: SK8102410152.

The church is predominantly Ironstone ashlar construction, Jurassic Lias limestone tracery, quoins, mouldings and other decorative features. The roof is timber construction and clad in wood roll, sand cast lead-sheet and aluminium standing seam.

There are early English features in the arcades with the north elevation pre-dating this. The South aisle and chancel are late 13<sup>th</sup> Century and the clerestory and tower are perpendicular. There have been various campaigns of restoration, notably in 1889-91<sup>2</sup> and the roof replacement of 1893. There have been recent restoration works to the external façade including repointing works and other repairs which cannot be dated. The most prominent features of the church are the medieval wall paintings in the South aisle on lime plaster, a polychrome slate monument in the north aisle and various gargoyles and carved bosses on the tower corners at low and high level.

All walls have had several layers of lime-wash, most contemporary with post-reformation redecoration in white. There has obviously been some uncovering of the lime-wash to reveal the painted schemes as there are clear scalpel and tool marks on the surface and residual layers of lime-wash still covering paint layer areas.

### 3.0 The wall paintings

The extent and quality of the medieval wall paintings at Cold Overton are a particularly unusual survival and justify careful conservation.

The surviving wall paintings, for a total of six scenes, are located on the South and East wall of the South aisle.

Below are described in general the materials and techniques used and the current conditions of the wall paintings. Some more details, to be taken into attention, for each scheme will follow.

In the survey report each painted scene has been marked with a code to make easier their identification in the plan and in the following conservation programme. Here is the list of the painted schemes with their code:

*St Catherine* **E1**

*Gathering of the apostles* **S1**

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<sup>2</sup> Restored by J. T. Micklethwaite, 1889. <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1075150>

*Nativity*        **S2**

*St John*        **S3**

*Funeral procession of the Virgin*   **S4**

*St Margaret ?*        **S5** (later it was identified as a crowned male figure)

### **3.1 Condition before the conservation treatments**

#### 3.1.1 East wall paintings E1

##### St Catherine (103x51 cm ca.)

The painted scheme on the East wall represents St Catherine (photo 1) complete with a crown, wheel and processional crucifix on the right hand side, and it is believed to be part of a scheme lower down the wall. It is the only scene that seems to be uncovered from the lime wash almost completely. Only few small remains of lime wash are on the surface and all the scene is wax-free with the exception of the fragmented chevron border design in red and yellow pigments which separates this scene from the one above. The figure is side profiled with one hand raised up to her chest and the other holding the wheel out in front. Above the chevron border design there is two pairs of feet from an unknown character. On the lower edge of the scene there are fragment of a previous decorative scheme (photo 3).

Most of St Catherine figure is constituted by an old repair, probably done by Tristram.

The paint layers of the unnamed characters' feet above were particularly poorly adhered.

##### Nativity (together with the above Gathering of the apostles scheme 212x120 cm ca.)

There it seems to be more of the scheme underneath the lime plaster edge. It seems that the majority of the surviving painting has been favourably uncovered along with the profile of the figures, leaving subsequent lime-wash layers over the plain areas.

The painted scheme on the South wall depicts the Nativity scene (photo 4) in a traditional mediaeval style. There are two figures surrounding the image of Christ in a manger with animals in the background. It seems that the majority of the surviving painting was favourably uncovered leaving subsequent lime-wash layers over the plain areas. There is a chevron border design above in red and yellow pigments which separates this scene from the one above (Gathering of the Apostles).

It appears that the profiles of the figures and the chevron design was painted in red on a ochre-pink ground.

The main area of lost plaster is on the left side scheme at the centre top of the left side figure and the plaster repairs on the right hand side detached significantly. There were several examples where the plaster delaminated from the substrate and the plaster appeared hollow on the right side of the scheme. All of the deterioration is on-going and directly linked to the poor permeability of the substrate and consequential salts and moisture retention. The historic repairs were not stable as they delaminated from the original plaster or the stone substrate. The plaster repairs were involving already important focal points and the risk of greater loss of decorative information was possible.

The decorative layer was particularly weak around the blown historic repairs.

### 3.1.2 South wall paintings

#### Gathering of the apostles (together with the below Nativity scene 212x120 cm ca.)

The painted scheme on the South wall is believed to be the Gathering of the Apostles (photo 12). There are six figures on the left and equally reflected with six on the right. The figures at the front hold what appears to be books and are holding their hands up to each opposing group in prayer. It seems that the majority of the surviving painting has been uncovered and there is evidence of later cleaning attempts on the top and bottom right corners of the scheme. There is a chevron border design below in red and yellow pigments which separates this scene from the one below (Nativity). Most figures are outlined only, with only two figures wearing robes which are saturated fill colours.

The main areas of plaster loss is on top left side of the scheme which is severely detached, forming a large void between the detached plaster and stone substrate.

There are two areas of partial cleaning trials which have not worked effectively.

#### Funeral procession of the Virgin (together with the above St John's scene 182x101 cm ca.)

The painted scheme below St John is believed to be the Funeral procession of the Virgin Mary (photo 20). It seems that the majority of the surviving painting has been favourably uncovered along with the profile of the figure, leaving subsequent lime-wash layers over the plain areas. There are four figures with a processional crucifix at the front, two figures walking forwards, one holding out a book/literature and two figures bearing the processional carriage. The carriage extends over to the right but is still covered by lime-wash layers and plaster repairs.

This area had substantial de-lamination of the plaster surface and there were numerous historic plaster repairs. The upper most section of the painting including the figures heads and shoulders was detached and hollow and required stabilisation. The bottom right side of the scheme was in the same condition and included some attempts of repairs. The bottom left side of the scheme was of extreme concern and requires immediate consolidation; comparing the photographic records taken in 2012 with the

ones taken in March 2017 it was evident that further losses had occurred (see report March 2017 and August 2018). The plaster layers detached completely and a substantial section of the painting was likely to be damaged and lost.

Residues of the covering lime-wash are extensive and there are many areas which would benefit from further lime-wash removal to uncover more of the scheme. This was particularly prevalent on the scheme around the heads and the carriage on the right side of the scheme. De-lamination was wide spread and not only concentrated along the edges of the damaged areas of the substrate.

#### St John (together with the below funeral scene below 182x101 cm ca.)

The painted scheme on the right hand side of the window represents St John (photo 37) complete with disk containing the ram emblem and crucifix. It seemed that the majority of the surviving painting was favourably uncovered along with the profile of the figure, leaving subsequent lime-wash layers over the plain areas. St John is stood within the river Jordan with his right hand raised with the disk and the left hand pointing to it. He is robed in the usual fashion.

The plaster and substrate in this area of the South wall was in better condition overall with limited de-laminated areas: the bottom right portion adjacent to the feet of St John and the water. The rest of the substrate was well adhered and in good condition. There are no historic repairs within this area.

It was particularly relevant on this scheme that the residues of the covering lime-wash were obscuring the decorative paint. This scheme would have benefit significantly from further lime-wash residues removal to develop and uncover more of the scheme, particularly the head, disk and water areas, which was carried out in this phase II of the conservation treatments.

#### St Margaret? (60x45 cm ca.) (later it was identified as crowned male figure)

The painted scheme on the south wall was described by Tristram as the representation of *St Margaret* (photo 45) with a crown holding her hand out to the front. Unfortunately, most decorative details were obscured by the level of deterioration. It seems that the majority of the surviving painting has been favourably uncovered along with the profile of the figure, leaving subsequent lime-wash layers over the plain areas.

The plaster is particularly damaged in this area and has many losses and the cohesion was generally very poor. This scheme was in a particularly poor state as the de-lamination of the plaster and the thick wax layer was obscuring the details.

#### Other scheme

Above St John and slightly on his right there is a small uncovered area very deteriorated and obscured by a thick layer of wax. It shows 2/3 different schemes that appear to be more recent than the ones of the 6 scenes just described.

## 4.1 Materials and technique

### 4.1.1 Substrate

A coarse lime putty plaster applied in an irregular fashion without being finished flush and plumb and appears to be applied in one layer over the stone wall.

### 4.1.2 Paint layers

A thin white-cream lime-wash ground is followed by one or two pigmented layers. The range of pigments employed in the scheme is limited.

Mostly the figures are outlined only with no traces of saturated fill colours.

## 4.2 Previous interventions

The condition of the wall paintings shows that they underwent significant restoration at least on two occasions in the past. The most recent repairs are made in pink modern filler similar to Polyfilla (photos 4, 6, 10). There are a number of large plaster repairs which cut into the painting, some of which have been retouched and over-painted. These belong to an older intervention, during which a wax treatment was applied over the painting on south wall in order to to stabilise the deteriorating surface.

On the basis of the materials used, and the type of treatment which was undertaken, it seems probable that the work would have been carried out between the 1920s and the 1950s. It is a kind of treatment that Prof. E. W. Tristram undertook in many other medieval paintings in the England. However, no record of the treatment was found in the archives of the Council of the Care of Churches, or in the National Survey of Mediaeval Wall Painting at the Courtauld Institute. Leslie, one of the church warden, gave me a good hint, as he had an electronic version of the photos of the water colours that Prof. Tristram made of the Cold Overton paintings in 1928 and published in 1950.<sup>3</sup> I looked up the text in the Queen Mary library at the Queen Mary-University of London and at the moment of writing this report I am waiting an appointment at the V&A archive to see in person the Tristram water colours, as the are a couple of them mentioned in the text but not published there.

More recently two cleaning tests were carried out on the *Gathering of the Apostles* scheme (S1), but it is not clear exactly when and by who.

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<sup>3</sup> *English medieval wall painting*. Vol. 1 & 2, *The thirteenth century* ; with a catalogue by E.W. Tristram, compiled in collaboration with M. Bardswell. Vol. 1 pages 532-533; Vol. 2 Tables: 113 a&b, 114 a&b, 115 a&b.

## 5.0 Conservation treatments

The aims of the wall paintings conservation treatments were:

- to stabilise even further the areas of exposed wall paintings and plaster layers;
- to remove more in depth the surface dirt and deposits from the wall painting surface and reduce as much as possible the wax coat applied by Tristram in late 20s;
- to remove and replace the filling and repairs that failed or weren't at all sympathetic with the original surrounding.

In the survey report was mentioned a few times that the paintings were also affected by some paint layers delimitation. However, during the actual conservation campaign, accessing very closely with fixed scaffolding it was clear that in many areas it was the wax layer that was flaking. Only on St Catherine scheme occurred that the paint layer was detaching and flaking in many areas.

In details the conservation treatments carried out were:

- Re-adhesion of the plaster layer: In vulnerable areas and edges where it was necessary to further stabilise the delaminating plaster layer, grouting was carried out using a lime based grout, with the inclusion of the hydraulic additive Rhinish Trass (1:1).
- Repairs of the plaster substrate within the remain of the decorative scheme: in order to provide stability for the surrounding plaster and to reduce the aesthetic disruption caused by the large number of different surfaces, the areas of loss was repaired using a lime putty and sand mortar of a colour and texture similar to the original in proportion of 1:3. Most of the recent repairs, which were unstable, cracked and smeared on original painted surface, were removed and replaced. However, in some areas this would have put the original material at risk and therefore they have been left in place (St Catherine photos).
- Light surface cleaning: The removal of accumulated surface dirt was carried out mechanically using dry methods, soft brushes and Akapad sponges to remove the surface dirt layer.
- Reduction of the wax based coating: Cleaning tests were carried out and the most effective cleaning method to dissolve and reduce the waxy layer was using aromatic solvent mixture of Xylene:Acetone:Isopropanol (5:2:1) applied for extended periods on cotton wool swabs. Because of the depth of penetration of the wax, the aim of this

treatment could only be to reduce the thickness of the coating and the accumulated dirt layer, rather than to completely remove the wax layer.

- Uncovering: the remains of old and thick lime wash on all the scenes (except St Catherine) were quite extensive and often were still hiding details of the paintings. In fact, it appears that the majority of the surviving painting in the past, probably when they were discovered, were favourably uncovered along with the profile of the figure, leaving subsequent lime-wash layers mainly over the plain areas. In addition to that, in many areas are visible the tool marks of a quite crude uncovering action. In this last conservation project the lime wash remains were carefully removed with scalpel and using optivisor. The removal of lime wash layers revealed both original painting and old paint and plaster losses.
- Following uncovering trials carried out during the first phase of this project it was decided to remove the lime wash residues. The uncovering treatment was undertaken mainly mechanically, using a scalpel. Many original paint areas that were under the lime wash are now visible and in better condition than the ones that were crudely uncovered in previous intervention and treated with wax.
- Re-adhesion of paint layer: Where fine flaking paint layers had occurred it was re-adhered using a weak solution (up to 10%) of the acrylic dispersion Plextol B500, following pre-wetting with water and denatured alcohol 1:1 and using lens tissue as an intervention layer. Where de-lamination had occurred between thick lime-wash grounds it was re-adhered using lime slurry.
- Consolidation of the paint layer: In some areas, specially on the red outlines the paint layer was poorly bound and it has been consolidated using a weak solution of acrylic resin Paraloid B72 in ShellSolvA (2%).
- Reintegration: In order to reduce the aesthetic disruption new fills would be toned out using water colours or toned lime-washes. No reconstruction of missing elements of the paintings would be undertaken.
- Lime wash: The surrounding plastered areas around the exposed paintings is very dark and stained. For this reason have been provisionally lime washed.
- Full documentation and treatment report: A detailed digital photographic record of the painted scheme before, during and after treatment has been made. This includes in a full written report which would conform to the guidelines in the English Heritage PIL1 The Production of Wall Paintings Conservation Documentation. In addition to hard copies of the reports, all material would also be supplied in PDF format.

## 6.0 Recommendations

- Inadvertent mechanical damage, often from decorators or other contractors is one of the greatest risks to the paintings. It is important that those working in the vicinity of the paintings are made aware of their value and vulnerability and that no physical contact should take place. In particular, ladders and tools should not be leant against areas of the walls where paintings survive. In addition, great care should be taken when any

future redecoration is taking place in the vicinity of the paintings. Advice on the protection of wall paintings during building work can be found in the English Heritage leaflet on the subject.<sup>4</sup>

- The presence of bats is a significant concern for the painted schemes and general health due to the amount of bat frass and urea on the walls and pews. It is an issue that has been addressed and the hope is that in few years there won't be any possibility for the droppings to reach the inter of the church, but be trapped between the roof and the ceiling. However, in the meantime it should be considered a maintenance cleaning plan carried out by a qualified wall paintings conservator at the beginning of each Autumn, when the bats migrate, in order to remove any droppings from the wall paintings, otherwise if kept there for long they would damage further the paintings.
- It could also be possible that some medieval plaster or painting may survive below the plaster and lime-wash in other areas of the church. Therefore, considerable caution should be exercised if any plaster is to be removed or disrupted for repair and redecoration works. If medieval plaster or painting is discovered a conservator should be consulted.
- It is also recommended that the paintings are inspected on a five yearly basis by a qualified wall paintings conservator.
- Removal of the cement render on the East and South wall bottom (below the windows sills line) in order to encourage water evaporation. To be carried out by an experienced builder and possibly in presence of a qualified wall paintings conservator that could take care of render removal of the areas immediately in contact with the paintings.
- It is also recommended that the lighting in the church is reconsidered. The use of discrete lighting could considerably improve the appearance and readability of the painting.
- The vicinity of the plants to the building, specially the big tree in front of the porch, remain of great concern.
- There are monuments on walls and floor, as well as carved stone heads on arch pediments that are affected by the environment condition already described in the 2017 report and that have being addressed, hence the works in progress at the moment of writing this report. It is highly recommended that when all the works finished after 2-3 years that the fabric will be left to dry properly the stone works will go under conservation treatments in order to stabilise their condition and arrest their deterioration.

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<sup>4</sup> Gowing, R., & Heritage, A., *Temporary Protection of Wall Paintings During Building Works, Practical Information Leaflet 2*, English Heritage, 2002.

## 7.0 Photographic documentation



Photos 1 & 2: St Catherine scene before and after the conservation treatments. Some more details were uncovered removing lime wash residues (e.g. portion of the wheel)



Photo 3: Details of a previous painted scheme.



Photos 4 & 5: Nativity scene before and after the conservation treatments.



Photos 6 & 7: Detail of Nativity scene: previous repair before and after removal. A large portion of original painting was uncovered.



Photo 8: Detail of Nativity scene: new repairs replacing the old one (see photos 6 & 7).



Photo 9: Nativity scene during the cleaning phase (wax and lime wax removal).



Photos 10 & 11: Details of Nativity scene during the lime wash removal, uncovering original areas of the painted scheme.



Photos 12 & 13: Gathering of the Apostles scene before and after the conservation treatments.



Photos 14-17: Details of Gathering of the Apostles scene: New repairs (photos 15 & 17 on the right) replaced the old ones (photos 14 & 16 on the left).



Photo 18: Detail of the Gathering of the Apostles scene during the lime wash removal, uncovering original areas of the painted scheme and old plaster and paint layer losses.



Photo 19: Detail of the Gathering of the Apostles after the conservation treatments.



Photos 20 & 21: Funeral procession of the Virgin before and after the conservation treatments.



Photos 22 & 23: Detail of the Funeral procession of the Virgin during the lime wash removal, uncovering original areas of the painted scheme and old plaster and paint layer losses.



Photos 24-26: Detail of the Funeral procession of the Virgin before, during and after the wax and lime wash removal.





Photos 27-29: Detail of the Funeral procession of the Virgin before, during and after the wax and lime wash removal.





Photo 30: Conservator Claudia Fiocchetti blending in the paint losses.



Photo 31: Detail of the Funeral procession of the Virgin after conservation treatments.



Photos 35-37: Detail of St John scene before, during and after the wax and lime wash removal.



Photos 32-34: St John scene before, during and after the conservation treatments.





Photos 38-39: Detail of St John scene during and after the conservation treatments.



Photos 40-44: Details of tSt John's scene before, during the wax and lime wash removal.



Photos 45-46: Crowned male figure before and after the conservation treatments.



Photos 47-48: Detail of the crowned male figure before and during the conservation treatments.



Photo 49: Detail of the beard of the crowned male figure after the wax and lime-wash removal. The new detail reveal that the figure that Tristram believed to be St Margaret, was in fact a male crowned figure.



Photos 50-51: Detail of the crowned male figure before and after the conservation treatments.