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# Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

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(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XCV  
for 2006



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*Plate 13. Watercolour of the Cambridge Observatory by Richard Banks Harraden, showing the landscape of west Cambridge in the 1840s. By kind permission of Prof Lord Martin Rees.*

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# Conservation of early 17th Century allegorical wall paintings in St John's College, Cambridge

Tobit Curteis

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*In 1924 two wall paintings were discovered in a small room in Second Court of St John's College, Cambridge. Stylistic and art historical information indicates that the paintings are more or less contemporary with the building of Second Court at the turn of the 17th century. Although the subject matter was originally thought to be associated with a poem by Dryden, the current study has demonstrated that the paintings are in fact an allegory of the Five Senses, using animal imagery, a subject not uncommon in the decorative arts in this period. Analysis of the original materials and painting techniques showed that the paintings were relatively sophisticated with a wide range of pigments employed.*

*The paintings suffered considerable mechanical damage during uncovering and following their discovery they were treated with a layer of beeswax, a common practice at the time. The coating subsequently became dark and cloudy, obscuring much of the detail. In addition, the hair plaster substrate on which the paintings were executed had become detached from the lath structure of the wall and was vulnerable to further damage. In 2003, a programme of remedial treatment was undertaken to stabilise the paintings, to prevent further deterioration and to improve their visibility. The conservation programme not only enabled the paintings to be treated, but it also provided the opportunity for a detailed technical and art historical study.*

## The building

The Second Court of St John's College was built between 1598 and 1602, immediately to the west of First Court and in place of Metcalfe's Court which was offset to the southwest. (RCHM 1959, 196) The court was constructed of red and yellow brick, with Northamptonshire stone dressings and a Collyweston slate roof. The original internal walls appear to have been of a timber construction with lath and plaster, although many are now covered with 18th century panelling. The original agreement with the builders of 1598 states that

'all the roomes of this building shalbe plaistered ouerhead with good reed lime and hare and the particions

shalbe well plaistered betwixt euery fellows chamber on both sides of the same to be double latched with good lath lyme and hare as also all other places wher plaisteringe is needfull, and all that is playstered shalbe well whited over.' (Willis & Clark 1886, 252)

## The wall paintings

The paintings are situated in a small room, entered through a moulded timber doorway, on the east side of room K4, in the south west corner of Second Court (Fig. 1). The walls of the small study or closet have the structural timbers exposed and are rendered, with the paintings occupying the upper part of the north and west walls above the central horizontal rail. On the west wall is a large landscape scene with animals and birds and a small townscape on the north end (Plate 2). In the centre of the painting is a stag sitting with a group of musical instruments including a drum, a trumpet and a viol. To the left is a large standing bird, now very disfigured, which appears to be an eagle or other large raptor. Below are a standing grey dog, and a seated animal with a large hump, believed to be a tortoise, while in the top left corner is a sun complete with radiating rays and a face. The left hand edge of the painting is hidden behind modern panelling. The whole scene is surrounded by a green frame with a black border, which extends onto the timbers above and below the painting.

The painting on the smaller north wall is also framed in green, but unlike the west wall, it is split into two pictorial panels with a green frame between them. On the left side is a chained ape with a basket of fruit set within a landscape of foliage and trees, while on the right side is a curious green church with black outlines and details, also set in a landscape (Plate 3). Due to damage on the north side it is not possible to tell if other significant details were present.

The location of the paintings on the upper part of the walls in a small study such as this has well documented parallels. The late 16th century wall paintings in the north range of Hill Hall in Essex are similarly

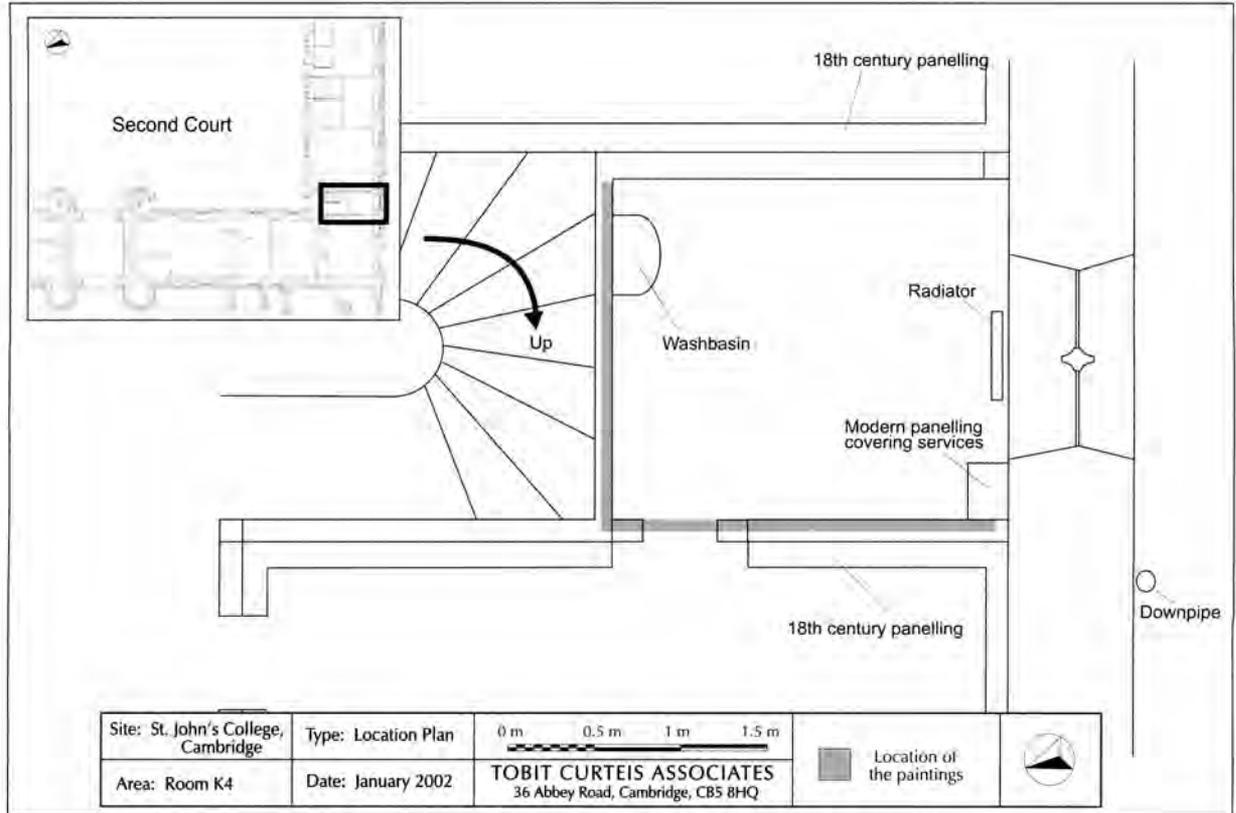


Figure 1. Plan of the room (Tobit Curteis Associates 2006)

located, as are the more famous examples in Wolsey's Closet in Hampton Court Palace of c.1537. In both of these examples it is probable that the lower part of the wall would have been decorated with panelling (in Wolsey's Closet the panelling remains in place). However in the case of the St John's paintings, it is possible that the lower wall would have been plainly painted.

### Iconographic interpretation

Following their discovery in 1924 an article was published suggesting that the paintings were an interpretation of 'The Hind and the Panther', a theological fable by Dryden, published in 1687. (Anon, 1926) This interpretation relies on the fact that the paintings post-dated the poem and were in fact carried out in the period 1688–1690 when the rooms 'may have been inhabited' by one Matthew Prior, fellow of St John's, who had written a parody of this fable. The interpretation itself also requires a considerable leap of faith in seeing the stag (rather than a hind of the title) as representing the Catholic Church, while the curious humped tortoise, described rather imaginatively in the article as a 'spotted panther', represents the Anglican Church.<sup>1</sup>

However, an examination of the evidence for dating and the use of contemporary iconography suggests a more straightforward explanation. Prof EW

Tristram of the Royal College of Art (and one of the leading wall painting experts of his time) examined the paintings immediately after their discovery and dated them on stylistic grounds to c.1600, in other words contemporary with the building of Second Court. This dating is supported by the fact that the paintings are partially framed by the original timbers which had been painted green. Other green painted timbers were discovered in a room on the east end of the south range of Second Court, as well as fictive green timbers painted on hair plaster on the opposite wall (Tobit Curteis Associates, 1993). Technical evidence indicated that both the real green painted timbers and the fictive timbers were part of the original decorative scheme, and records suggest that this form of decoration extended throughout the whole court.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the iconography, the painting is almost certainly an allegorical representation of the Five Senses, a subject which, with the rise of humanism, was not uncommon in both the decorative and fine arts (Wells-Cole, 2000). In depictions of the Senses where animals are employed, the ape (sometimes eating fruit) represents Taste, as shown in one of the wall paintings in the Great Staircase at Knole of c. 1605–8 (Figs 2 & 3) the stag with musical instruments, Hearing, as shown in an engraving by Pieter de Iode, (Figs 4 & 5) the eagle, Sight, the dog, Smell and the tortoise (sometimes accompanied by a pecking bird), Touch. Recorded examples of the Five Senses in wall paintings of a similar date include the



*Fig. 2. Detail of the ape on the north wall (Tobit Curteis Associates 2006).*



*Fig. 3. Allegory of taste in the Great Staircase at Knole. (Tobit Curteis Associates 2006).*



*Figure 4. Detail of the stag on the west wall (Tobit Curteis Associates 2006).*



*Figure 5. Allegory of Hearing by Pieter de Iode. (©V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum)*

Great Staircase at Knoles of c.1608, the Pillar Parlour in Bolsover Castle c.1620, and at Thurnalls House, Melbourn, Herts of 1635. (Croft-Murray, 1962, 212) The one element which does not fit within the Senses interpretation is the church on the east side of the wall. It is possible that the damage to the lower part of the scene hides details which would make its inclusion possible. However, given that it is separated from the adjacent painting by a heavy border, it appears more probable that it is part of a separate series of paintings which extended onto the east wall and have since been lost.

#### **Original materials and technique**

The original render consists of a single thick layer of lime-rich hair plaster applied over laths. On the north wall, the plaster has been applied in two stages with the right hand side having been applied once the left was dry. Analysis of the paint layers showed that they had been applied over a preparatory layer of white limewash, with a second limewash ground tinted with ochres, visible in some areas.<sup>3</sup> The palette of pigments was reasonably extensive and included red and yellow ochre, red lead, orpiment, indigo, lime white, vermilion, terra verte and carbon black. In general, the layer structure was relatively simple with a

background colour over which a detail was painted, resulting in, at most, three pigment layers. Shading and gradation of colours was achieved by pigment mixing rather than overlaying layers. Although no medium analysis was undertaken, it was clear that an organic medium would have been employed, but no varnish or other original coating was observed.

### Previous interventions

The paintings were discovered in 1924 during the removal of old wallpaper (Anon, 1925), at which time considerable mechanical damage appears to have occurred. EW Tristram, the leading authority on wall paintings at the time, was consulted as to their treatment and it appears likely that he recommended the use of a beeswax 'preservative' treatment in common with most other wall paintings which he examined at this period (Curteis, 1991). Watercolour copies of the paintings were made by Mrs Agatha Hall Shore, the wife of the junior bursar, and were deposited at the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>4</sup> (Plate 4)

Two types of repairs were observed on the paintings, both of which appeared to have been made using Plaster of Paris and pre-date the application of the wax coating. The most extensive repairs are likely to have been made at the time when the paintings were discovered and have been crudely painted in an unsuccessful attempt to disguise them. No retouching or other treatment appeared to have taken place.

In the middle of the painting on the left side of the north wall were three modern, cleaning tests.

### Condition before conservation

Large areas of the wall paintings were found to be in relatively good condition. Most of the hair plaster substrate was coherent and while slight delamination was identified in some sections, in most areas the plaster was firmly attached to the laths below. The exception to this was at the base of both paintings, where there was a significant level of delamination. As the plaster contained a large proportion of hair, the delamination had caused fractures, but not complete collapse. Hairline cracks were observed on the plaster on both walls, but in particular on the west, where the angle of the cracks suggested that they resulted from early structural movement. Most of the losses to the substrate appeared to relate to mechanical damage inflicted during or before the uncovering. There were numerous nail holes (and in some cases nails) suggesting that at some stage a covering was attached over the surface of the painting.

Because of the presence of the wax coating, cohesion and adhesion of the paint layer was reasonably good. In some exceptional areas flaking was observed, but this was very limited. However, the loss of the paint layer due to early deterioration or damage during uncovering was significant and in some areas the painting is unreadable.

In general the pigments remained in good condition, but there were a small number of instances where the original materials appeared to have deteriorated. In a number of areas the green paint layers had changed in appearance as a result of the deterioration of the pigment. The green frames were found to be a relatively unusual combination of indigo and orpiment, rather than a more common copper green. Deterioration of the medium had caused the paint layer to become less saturated, so that in some areas the layer appeared blue-grey, while in other areas it appeared green. Indigo is photosensitive and subject to fading, and it is probable that in some sections the blue component had deteriorated making the layer appear more yellow. The same pigment mixture was used on the timber beams, although in this case, the darkening is due to overpainting and later varnishing. In a number of areas on the red grapes on the west wall, dark patches had occurred as a result of the chemical alteration of the photosensitive pigment vermilion. The most disfiguring feature was the coating of beeswax, which gave a dull grey appearance to the surface as a whole. Although the wax was relatively thin, in some sections it had accumulated in areas of damage causing large cracked pools to form.

As is typically the case in paintings in a domestic setting, there were a number of areas of damage associated with modern services or cabling. On the far right of the north wall was an area of blackening around the line of an electrical cable (now removed) which appeared to have smouldered or burnt. More seriously, in the centre of the west wall, was a yellow painted line with a number of screw holes running through the middle of the stag. A photograph of the paintings taken in 1924 showed what appears to be a cable duct running across the painting in this area.

### Conservation treatment

The aims of the treatment programme were to repair and stabilise the painting (both the paint layer and the substrate), and to remove and replace unstable or potentially damaging historic repairs. Damaged plaster was repaired using a lime and sand mortar and unstable areas were re-adhered with a lime based grout. The wax coating was reduced using a gelled solvent mixture, in order to increase the visibility of the painting and to reduce subsequent accumulation of dirt particles (Plate 5). New repairs were reintegrated, but no retouching or reconstruction of lost areas of the original painting was undertaken. Wherever possible, materials were compatible with the original, and new materials were only added when absolutely essential (Tobit Curteis Associates, 2003).

Throughout the programme a detailed graphic and photographic record was kept in order to record the condition of all areas before treatment and the specific treatments applied to the different sections of the paintings (Plate 6).

### Long term conservation and conclusions

It was clear from the condition survey that the most significant causes of deterioration were historic. The recent conservation treatment was successful in stabilising the paintings and thus reducing their vulnerability to inadvertent mechanical damage. In addition, improvement in their appearance means that they are more likely to be noticed and appreciated by those using the room. However, despite the treatment, wall paintings of this type are delicate and remain vulnerable to both mechanical and environmental damage.

The best form of conservation is preventative, rather than interventive. Therefore, in this case, as in so many others, it is essential that those who are living and working in the vicinity of the paintings know of their presence and understand their vulnerabilities. As these paintings are located in an institution where the value of conservation is understood they are less at risk than many similar paintings in a less controlled environment. Nevertheless, periodic monitoring of their condition is a prerequisite of successful long term conservation.

Although there have been some encouraging developments in recent years, the *corpus* of knowledge on the technical nature of English domestic wall paintings is limited. Therefore, the opportunity to study the original materials and techniques of paintings such as these, during the course of a programme of conservation, is important not just for the individual project, but for the development of the field as a whole. The iconography of domestic wall paintings is also little studied and so the chance to identify an unusual iconographic scheme such as this is equally welcome.

### Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to the Master, Fellows and Scholars of St John's College, Cambridge for commissioning the conservation project and to Malcolm Underwood, Deborah Howard and Stan Moorehouse for information regarding the historical and art historical background. I am also grateful to the Conservation of Wall Paintings Department at the Courtauld Institute of Art, for allowing access to material in the National Survey of Medieval Wall Painting, and to the Victoria and Albert Museum for allowing me to examine the original watercolours. Finally I would like to thank the conservators, Heather Little, Rachel Witt and Anna Kendrew who worked with me on the project.

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### Endnotes

- 1 The sex of the deer is explained by saying that the expression looks rather like that in an engraving of Dryden and that therefore the deer is Dryden.
- 2 'The 18th-century panelling in the upper Tower Room facing into Second Court was removed by the college staff. It revealed a stud and plaster partition on the west side with the plaster painted green. The plastered brickwork on the south side had been painted with similar green lines to simulate stud work...' *Diary of Second Court Restoration 1957–1964*. 19th October 1959.
- 3 Paint analysis was undertaken using optical microscopy and microchemical tests. Cross sections were mounted in clear polyester resin and examined at magnifications of up to x300. Dispersions were mounted in Cargille Meltmount and examined at magnifications of up to x400.
- 4 The watercolours are catalogued as E936, 937–1924, and are available in the Print Room.



*Plate 2. The wall painting on the west wall, after conservation (Tobit Curteis Associates 2006).*



*Plate 3. The wall painting on the north wall, after conservation (Tobit Curteis Associates 2006).*



*Plate 4. Watercolour of the painting on the west wall by Agatha Hall Shore (©V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum).*



*Plate 5. Detail of the ape during the treatment of the wax layer. The area on the left has had the wax layer removed. (Tobit Curteis Associates 2006).*

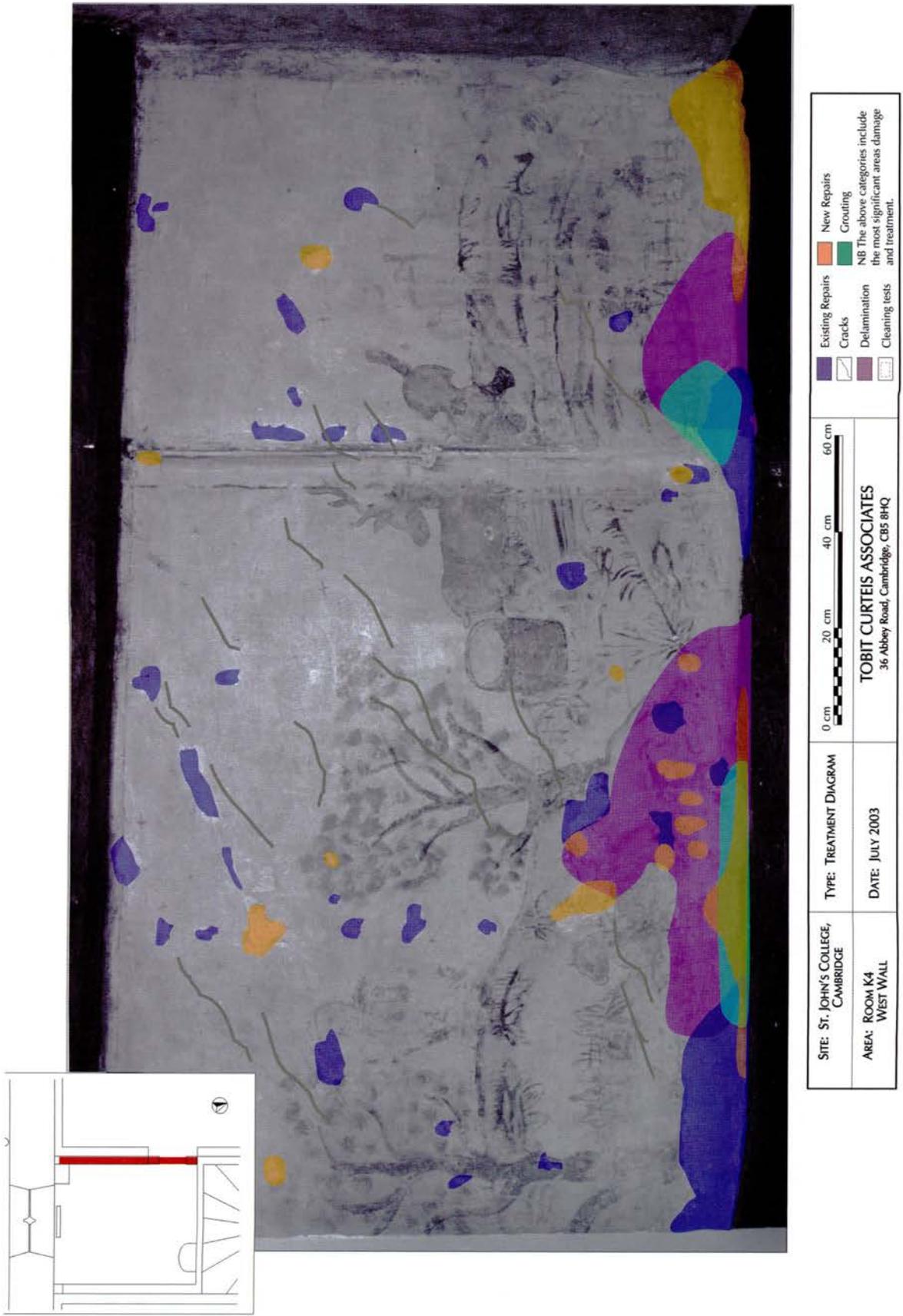


Plate 6. Part of the graphic documentation for the conservation treatment (Tobit Curteis Associates 2006).

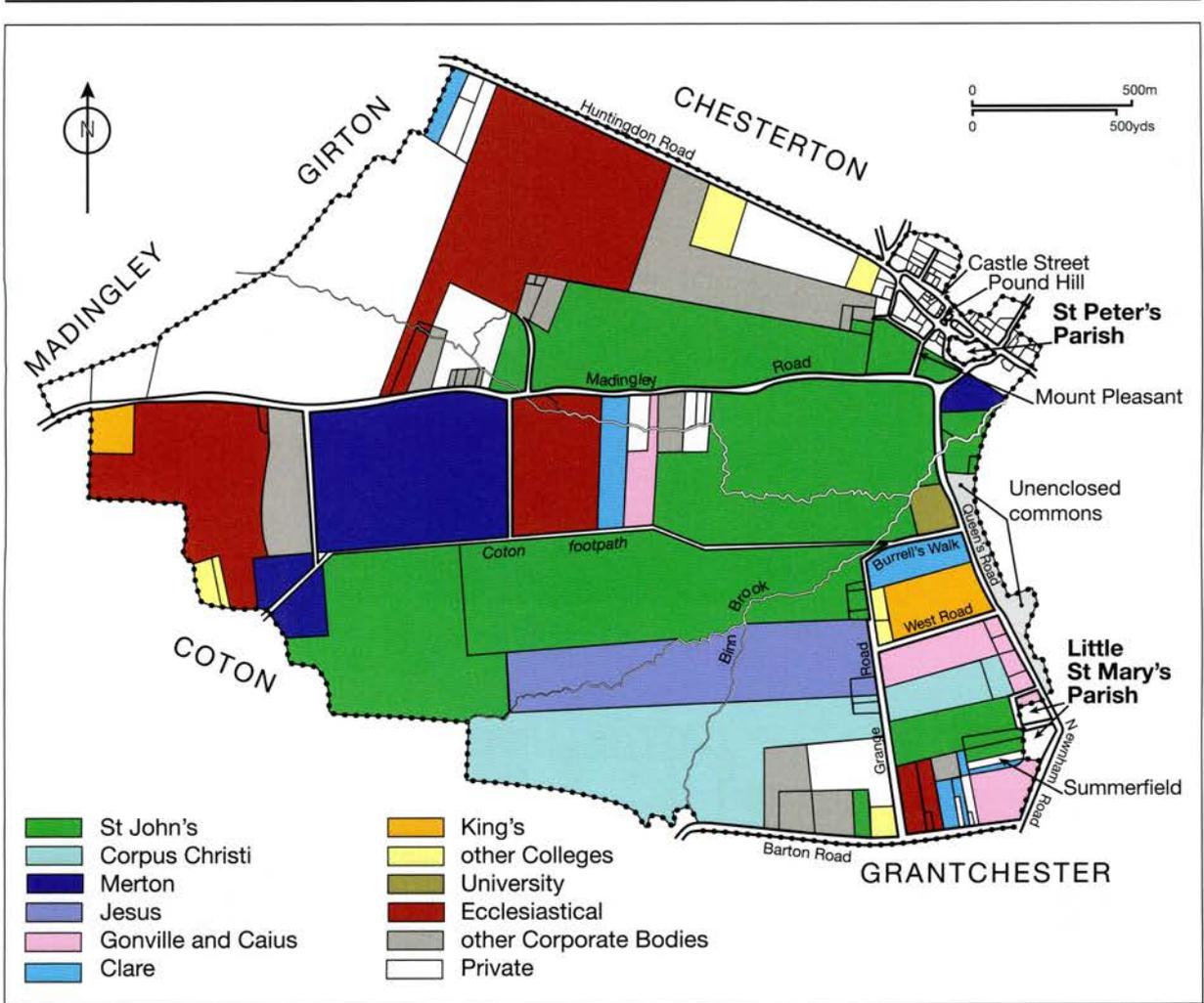


Plate 7. The ownership pattern following Enclosure of St Giles Parish, 1805.