

Ancient Monuments Laboratory  
Report 35/97

WALL PAINTING CONDITION AUDIT,  
FINCHALE PRIORY, DURHAM

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Summary

This condition audit of wall paintings at Finchale Priory includes a wall painting record, general audit information, documentation of original materials and execution of the painting, and deterioration and damage including previously used materials and treatment, as well as proposals for treatment and monitoring strategies.

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## Finchale Priory Durham

The following report has been generated by the Wall Painting Section database. This archival system provides a computerised record of all wall paintings in English Heritage Historic Properties and is intended to comprehensively document the collection. Each report has been subdivided into four sections to present the data in a clear format. These include:

**1 Wall Painting Record:**

Includes a description of the site and paintings, as well as archival information, such as bibliographic references and photographic records.

**2 General Audit Information:**

Describes any monitoring undertaken and a synopsis of future conservation requirements.

**3 Technique:**

Documents the nature and condition of the original materials and execution of the painting which is described according to its stratigraphy and any related analysis.

**4 Deterioration and damage, added materials, treatment:**

*Deterioration and damage* lists the types of alterations which may have occurred, that is either deterioration (natural alterations such as cracking or delamination) or mechanical damage (such as graffiti).

*Added Materials* documents all non-original materials present on or within a painting. These may include naturally occurring substances (accretions, such as dirt and dust) or deliberately added materials (coatings, coverings and repairs).

*Treatment* documents previous interventions and proposed treatment and monitoring strategies.

Throughout each section, an area of painting is assigned a number between 1 and 4 which is intended as a general indication of present condition. These are: 1 good, 2 fair, 3 poor, 4 unacceptable.

This report is based on information gathered prior to March 1996 and does not include any changes in condition, further research or treatment undertaken after this date. Amended editions will be produced as necessary.

# 1 Wall Painting Record

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<b>Property name</b>	FINCHALE PRIORY		
<b>Region</b>	North	<b>County</b>	Durham
<b>Location of painting</b>	choir piers		
<b>Orientation</b>	SOUTH		
<b>Century</b> 13 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Height (cm)</b> 250	<b>Width (cm)</b> 40
<b>Subjects included</b>			
Various decorative motifs			

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## Description

### THE SITE

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Finchale was first occupied as a hermitage by St Godric who settled in the area in 1115. It is said that Finchale at the time was a 'wild and overgrown place, liable to floods and infested with poisonous snakes' and that Godric's first home was a 'simple hut with a turf roof.' (Peers, 1991:13) However 'after a while Godric built a small structure of rough timber as a chapel of St Mary, and attached to it a building where he could live and keep his possessions. In later years, perhaps about 1150, when his reputation for sanctity had attracted many visitors, a second chapel, of stone, was built for him from their offerings. It was larger than St Mary's Chapel and was dedicated in honour of St John the Baptist...He died at the age of 105, in the Chapel of St John, where he lay during his last illness, and was buried against its north wall, where his bed had stood.' (Peers, 1991:13-15).

'At Godric's death the hermitage and its buildings came into the hands of the Prior and Convent of Durham, who sent two of their monks, Reginald and Henry to live there. This occupation... continued till 1196, when the place became a cell of Durham, and Benedictine monks were settled there under Thomas the Sacrist of Durham as the first Prior of Finchale.' (Peers, 1991:15)

Finchale was founded as a monastery, following a grant from Henry Puiset (a son of Hugh Puiset, Bishop of Durham, 1154- 91). (Peers, 1991:15)

'The tomb of Godric brought many visitors to Finchale, and the new monastery grew and prospered... [however] the formal setting out of a church with cloisters and the regular monastic buildings was not begun till about 1237, and not completed till near the end of the thirteenth century.' (Peers, 1991:15)

'The number of inmates was always small, rising to fifteen in 1278, but even this was not long maintained, and at some time in the fourteenth century Finchale took on its peculiar function of serving as a holiday place for the monks of Durham. Statutes drawn up in 1408 give precise details of the arrangement. The number of residents was fixed at five - a prior and four monks and, in addition, four monks from Durham, on leave. The latter stayed for three weeks, and were then replaced by another four, and so on in succession. On each day two of the four kept the usual round of services, while the other two, except for attendance at Mass and at Vespers, had leave to walk "religiously and honestly" in the fields. This practise continued until the Suppression.' (Peers, 1991:16)

### THE CHURCH AND WALL PAINTINGS

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'The first part... [of the existing ruins] was the church. Its eastern arm, containing the choir... and the presbytery containing the high altar, was sufficiently advanced by 1239 to allow the consecration of the high altar of St John the Baptist, and two others, of St Mary and St Cuthbert. The church is cruciform, 194ft (59m) long and 99ft (30m) across the transepts... and as originally built had north and south aisles to nave and choir... the aisles... were taken down about 1364 and the arches opening to them blocked with masonry. The church was much larger than so small a community needed, and it seems likely that this

expedient was adopted to save the cost of repair'. (Peers, 1991:5-7)

'Pillars belonging to Early English arcading, originally between the choir and choir aisles, but walled in apparently during the Decorated period, were found, when uncovered c.1925, to have retained their decorative painting in comparatively good condition. The remains are as follows: South side, first pier from the west [west pier], on five stones, chevron ornament in black, yellow, and red on a white ground, broken by a narrow band of red enriched with circles in white enclosing diamonds in black; second pier [east pier], diamond pattern executed in red outline on a white ground, with roundels at the intersections also in red outline, enclosing others in white and black respectively, that in black in the central position. North side, second pier, vestiges only of painting, from which it may be discerned that the decoration resembled that just described. Description taken from sketches by Mrs Bardswell.' (Tristram,1950:545)

The paintings have deteriorated significantly over the past 70 years, and as of the August 1995 audit only the chevron pattern (on the first pier) and part of a roundel (on the second pier) was barely visible.

#### **Photographic Record**

29/6/94 EH 'current' contact photo files; no images of wall paintings.

8/95 TM colour slide

#### **Bibliography**

Peers, C. Finchale Priory Durham, English Heritage Guide, first published by HMSO 1933, first published by English Heritage 1984, reprinted 1987, revised edition published 1991.

Tristram, E.W. and Bardswell, M., English Medieval Wall Painting The Thirteenth Century, Oxford University Press, London, 1950.

## 2 General Audit Information

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Property name	FINCHALE PRIORY	County	Durham
Region	North		
Location	choir piers		
Orientation	SOUTH		
Century 13th	Date	Height (cm)250	Width (cm) 40
Auditor(s)	TM/JD	Start date	01/08/95

**Overall condition score**      **3**

### Recommendations

The site is exposed and deterioration of the decoration since it was uncovered in 1925 appears to have been considerable judging by comparison of the decoration visible in 1995 with Tristram's 1950 description of the paintings. It appears that the paintings were covered with some sort of protective sheet (possibly Perspex) which may account for their survival until the 1950s. At some stage this cover was removed and it may be that the painting has deteriorated rapidly since then.

Unfortunately, as the site is exposed, it may prove difficult to conserve the remaining fragments of paint. Therefore documentation and recording of the remaining fragments of decoration is recommended. A few minor repairs to edges of the stone support (which are eroding and spalling seriously) are advisable in order to prevent further loss of the surface. The installation of some appropriate form of covering to offer protection from the elements could also be considered but may be regarded as inappropriate within the context of the site.

### 3 Audit Information: Technique

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Property name FINCHALE PRIORY  
Region North County Durham  
Location choir piers  
Orientation SOUTH  
Century 13<sup>th</sup> Date Height (cm) 250 Width (cm) 40  
Auditor(s) TM/JD Start date 01/08/95

**Overall Condition Score 3**

#### Stratigraphy

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Layer type Support Layer Specific condition Score 4  
Thickness 00 cm

#### Comments

The stone support appears to be of a fine sandstone type. The original pointing is a lime mortar with fine sand and charcoal aggregate. However both columns have been extensively repointed using a 'scotch mortar' of cement and large aggregate. Stone deterioration (spalling and erosion) has taken place.

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Layer type Ground Layer 1 Specific condition Score 3  
Thickness 0.1 cm

#### Comments

A limewash ground is present. It is fairly smooth but slightly raised brushmarks are visible. The limewash has a very faint pinkish colour.

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Layer type Paint Layer 1 Specific condition Score 3  
Thickness

#### Comments

Only a few fragments of paint have survived. Red, yellow, black and white pigments are present. The red and yellow colours appear to be earth pigments.

#### Identified pigments Colours

--- yellow  
--- red  
--- white  
--- black

## 4 Audit Information: deterioration and damage, added materials, treatment

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Property name	FINCHALE PRIORY		
Region	North	County	Durham
Location	choir piers		
Orientation	SOUTH		
Century	13th	Date	
		Height (cm)	250
		Width (cm)	40

### DETERIORATION AND DAMAGE

#### Deterioration phenomena

**Type** spalling

**Location** west column, lower area and east column, upper area.

**Comments** Stone decay, including spalling and erosion have affected the stone columns, resulting in loss of the support, ground and paint layers.

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**Type** salt activity

**Location** general, see for example west column, lower area.

**Comments** Fine white crystals are present throughout the surface of the columns.

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**Type** general erosion

**Location** general

**Comments** The site is exposed to direct weathering. The limewash ground appears to have been particularly badly affected by exposure to the elements as the limewash has been worn away entirely from the high points of the tooling of the stone support.

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**Type** flaking

**Location** general, where coating fragments survive

**Comments** A translucent whitish coating has survived in areas. Some of these fragments are now lifting off in small flakes -possibly also removing some of the underlying paint.

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**Type** infestation

**Location** general surface

**Comments** There is extensive lichen growth within the paint and ground layers.

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#### Mechanical damage

**Type** insertions

**Location** surface of stone adjacent to the west column

**Comments** Corroded fixings, which appear to have held a perspex/glass sheet (not present) over the painted column, are present in the surrounding stonework.

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**Type** abrasion

**Location** general surface

**Comments** It is almost certain that damage was caused to the painting during blocking-in and unblocking. Abrasion may have contributed to the loss of the paint and limewash ground from the high points of the tooling of the stonework.

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## ADDED MATERIALS

### Accretions

**Type** mosses/lichens

**Location** general

**Comments** The presence of lichen over many areas of paint and ground is likely to be contributing towards the deterioration of the painting.

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**Type** dirt

**Location** general

**Comments** Dead insects, grass, dirt and dust are present in corners and generally over the painting.

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**Type** cobwebs

**Location** general

**Comments** Numerous active spiders and cobwebs were noted during inspection.

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### Coatings/Coverings

**Type** unidentified

**Location** general, fragmentary

**Comments** A translucent whitish layer survives in fragments throughout the surface. These may be the remains of a 'wax preservative' coating.

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**Type** perspex covering

**Location** W. column.

**Comments** Corroded fixings are present in the stonework surrounding the W. column. These fixings appear to have been used to hold a protective covering (perspex/glass?) over the column. No covering was in situ during audit inspection 1995.

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### Repairs

**Type** cement

**Location** support, repointing

**Comments** The columns have been extensively repointed using a 'scotch' type mortar of cement with large aggregate.

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## TREATMENT

### Past Treatment

**Type** APPLICATION OF COATING      **Date** 01/01/01

**Person** Unknown

**Comments** A fragmentary translucent whitish coating appears to be the remains of a 'wax preservative' coating applied to the painting in the past. Date unknown.

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**Type** STRUCTURAL REPAIRS      **Date** 01/01/01

**Person** Unknown

**Comments** Extensive repointing using a cement and coarse aggregate mortar has been carried out. Date unknown.

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**Type** TEMPORARY COVERING      **Date** 01/01/01

**Person** Unknown

**Comments** Fixings adjacent to the west column appear to indicate that during some period the painting was covered by a protective perspex/glass sheet. The date of its installation and subsequent removal are unknown.

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### Proposed Treatment

**Type** FILLS/REPAIRS INSERTION      **Date** 01/08/95

**Person** TM/JD

**Comments** It would probably be advisable to undertake minor repairs to vulnerable edges of the stone support which have been exposed by spalling and erosion.

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**Type** MONITORING CONDITION      **Date** 01/08/95

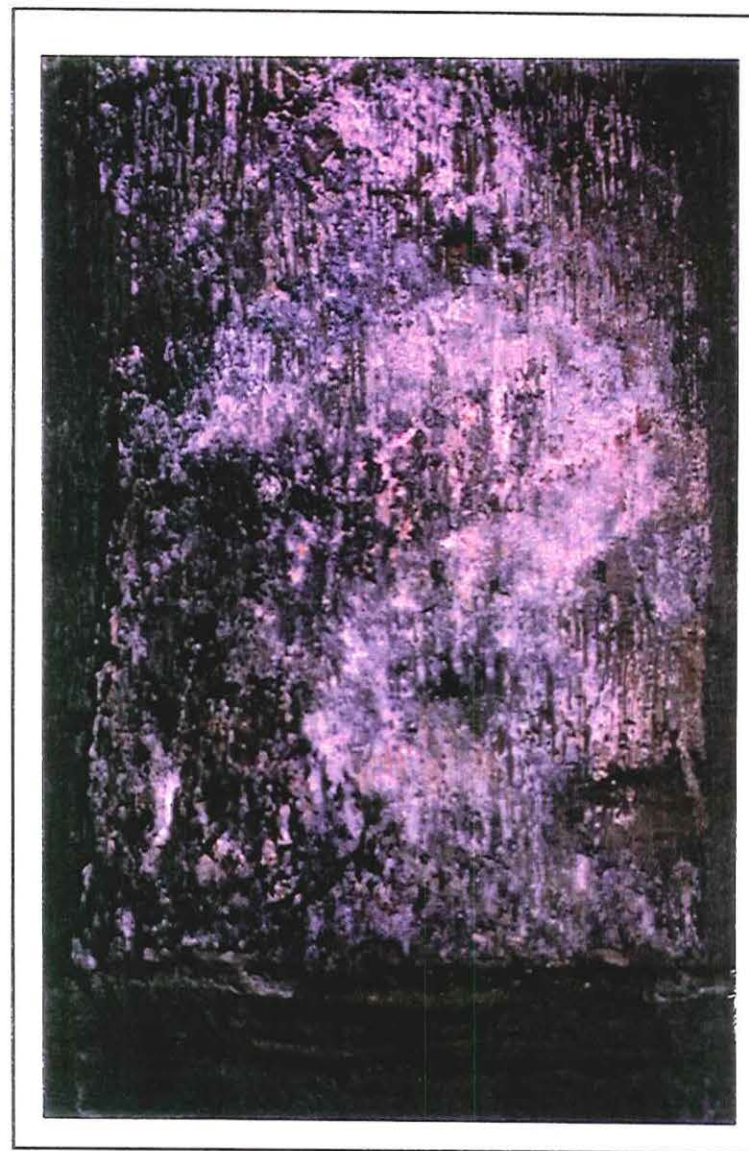
**Person** TM/JD

**Comments** Documentation and recording are recommended.

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Chancel, south side, western arch of blocked arcade



Detail, embedded column with traces of red chevron pattern