

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 43/97

WALL PAINTING CONDITION AUDIT,
BATTLE ABBEY, EAST SUSSEX

J Davies

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BATTLE ABBEY, EAST SUSSEX**

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Summary

This condition audit of wall paintings at Battle Abbey 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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Battle Abbey East Sussex

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

Property name	BATTLE ABBEY		
Region	South East	County	East Sussex
Location of painting	Abbots chapel		
Orientation	EAST WALL, ALTAR RECESS AND NORTH WALL		
Century 14 th	Date	Height (cm) 45	Width (cm) 40
Subjects included			
Architectural motifs			
Crucifixion			
Masonry pattern			

Description

The Abbey was built following the Battle of Hastings to fulfill a vow taken by William the Conqueror prior to the battle in which he promised to build a monastery free of episcopal control if God granted him victory. Building work proceeded from c.1070 and the abbey church was consecrated in 1094. The monks' quarters were laid out around a cloister to the south of the abbey church. The original buildings were extensively remodelled in the early thirteenth century. The west range contains the Outer Parlour, Abbot's Hall and Abbot's Great Chamber. In the late thirteenth century an additional hall was built to the south of the Great Chamber.

In 1538 Battle Abbey and estate were given by Henry VIII to Sir Antony Browne who used the abbey as a country house. The estate was sold in 1715 to Sir Thomas Webster and remained in his family until 1857 when it was purchased by the Duke and Duchess of Cleveland. The Webster family re-purchased the estate in 1901 and retained it until 1976 when it was acquired by the government. The property has been occupied as a school since the 1920's. The western range was extensively damaged by fire in 1931.

Brakspear (1933) described red masonry pattern and a 9" deep painted frieze of running floral pattern, both in poor condition to the walls of the great chamber. No access was granted to the great chamber on 10-08-94 as the room is now in use as a residential flat. However the site 'handyman' reported that no remains of painting are now visible in the chamber as it has been extensively repaired and redecorated.

To the south side of the western part of the great chamber is a small chapel. On the east wall of the chapel there is a tall lancet window, and below this is a pointed-segmental arch, 7' wide, partially lost by the insertion of a doorway to the north of the wall. Within this recess there are the fragmentary remains of a painted scheme showing an elaborate canopy with crocketed pinnacle to the south, surmounting a crucifixion. Brakspear (1933) attributes the painting to the fourteenth century. Remains of red masonry pattern are visible on the north wall of the chapel.

Photographic Record

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

Photograph search, DOE files, EH photo library (JD24/03/95)
Battle Abbey; no relevant DOE photographs found.

Bibliography

Brakspear, H. 'The Abbot's house at Battle', *Archaeologia*, 83 (1933).

Coad, J.G. *Battle Abbey, East Sussex, English Heritage Guide Book*, English Heritage, London, first published 1984, third edition, 1994.

2 General Audit Information

Property name	BATTLE ABBEY	County	East Sussex
Region	South East		
Location	Abbots chapel		
Orientation	EAST WALL, ALTAR RECESS AND NORTH WALL		
Century 14 th	Date	Height (cm)45	Width (cm) 40
Auditor(s)	JD	Start date	10/08/94

Overall condition score **4**

Recommendations

EAST WALL, ALTAR RECESS (condition score: 4)

Fixing of flaking paint, grouting and edge repairs to delaminating plaster are urgently required [Time scale: 2 conservators, 1 week, within 3 years].

The painting area has been pointed out to the School Bursar, Christine Hughes. However it seems sensible to confirm its presence and importance to the school administration in writing. In addition it should be pointed out that it is in very fragile condition and will require conservation treatment in the near future. The school should be warned not to allow any dusting or cleaning in this area in case damage is caused inadvertently.

NORTH WALL (condition score: 3)

Further areas of masonry pattern probably exist below smoke deposits, limewash and repairs and uncovering tests may reveal the extent of painted decoration. In the meantime further edge repairs are required to remaining early plaster. Light surface cleaning could also improve the appearance of the painting [Timescale: 2 conservators, 1 week, within 3 years].

3 Audit Information: Technique

Property name BATTLE ABBEY
Region South East County East Sussex
Location Abbots chapel
Orientation EAST WALL, ALTAR RECESS AND NORTH WALL
Century 14th Date Height (cm)45 Width (cm) 40
Auditor(s) JD Start date 10/08/94

Overall Condition Score 4

Stratigraphy

Layer type Support Layer Specific condition Score 2

Thickness

Comments

EAST WALL, ALTAR RECESS

Rough dressed stone support with tile/brick inclusions which even up the stone courses.

NORTH WALL

The support has very obvious repairs and repointing in a grey mortar, possibly cement. Several areas of early plaster still remain. No original pointing is visible.

Layer type Render Layer 1 Specific condition Score 3

Thickness 1 cm

Comments

EAST WALL, ALTAR RECESS

Lime/sand construction skim to smooth out uneven surface of support.

NORTH WALL

Beige-coloured lime/sand render, appears to be similar to the render layers present on the east wall of the chapel. There may be areas on the wall where two layers of similar mortar were applied, as noted on the east wall, but this is not clear.

Layer type Render Layer 2 Specific condition Score 3

Thickness

Comments

EAST WALL, ALTAR RECESS

Lime/sand mortar, beige colour, appears of similar composition to render layer 1. However the boundary between the two layers is visible, indicating two applications of mortar.

NORTH WALL

White-coloured thin lime/sand skim, similar to that found on east wall of chapel.

Layer type	Render Layer 3	Specific condition Score	4
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Thickness

Comments

Thin lime/sand skim. Wet incised drawing outlines the curved edges of the canopy. Incision lines are quite thin with steep sides, therefore it is assumed incision was direct. Incisions extend down into ground and upper surface of skim (render 3) layers.

Layer type	Ground Layer 1	Specific condition Score	4
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Thickness

Comments

ALL AREAS

White limewash ground, surface smooth, no visible brushstrokes.

Layer type	Paint Layer 1	Specific condition Score	4
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Thickness

Comments

EAST WALL, ALTAR RECESS

Red and yellow earth, black and white pigments appear to be present. Paint layer is discoloured, brown and flaking, which obscures the original pattern.

NORTH WALL

Red masonry pattern.

Identified pigments	Colours
---	black
---	white
---	yellow
---	red

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

Property name	BATTLE ABBEY		
Region	South East	County	East Sussex
Location	Abbots chapel		
Orientation	EAST WALL, ALTAR RECESS AND NORTH WALL		
Century 14th	Date	Height (cm)45	Width (cm) 40

DETERIORATION AND DAMAGE

Deterioration phenomena

Type delamination (paint layer)

Location east wall, altar recess

Comments The paint layer is suffering from extensive and severe flaking.

Type delamination (render layer)

Location east wall, altar recess

Comments The plaster support is bulging from the wall, and several losses of plaster have occurred.

Type cracking

Location east wall, altar recess

Comments Cracking appears to be associated with delamination of the render layers and consequent movement.

Type losses (render layer)

Location all areas

Comments Several losses of render have occurred.

Mechanical damage

Type minor losses

Location east wall, altar recess

Comments There are two holes through render layers below the remaining area of paint which appear to be the result of the insertion of nails, possibly for hanging of decorations.

Type abrasion

Location north wall

Comments General wear and tear probably accounts for abrasion and minor scratches on plaster surface.

ADDED MATERIALS

Accretions

Type dust

Location General

Comments The presence of dust and cobwebs at least shows no one is dusting the painting which would certainly damage the highly fragile flakes of paint.

Type cobwebs

Location General

Comments The presence of dust and cobwebs at least shows no one is dusting the painting which would certainly damage the highly fragile flakes of paint.

Coatings/Coverings

Type wax

Location Entire painted surface

Comments The paint has a slight surface sheen and has become discoloured to a golden brown, indicating that a wax or wax/resin 'preservative' may have been applied at some date.

Repairs

Type unidentified

Location Edges of painting.

Comments White unidentified edge repairs. They may be a lime-rich plaster. Further losses of (now) undecorated plaster have occurred below the painting after insertion of edge repairs.

Type cement

Location east wall, altar recess

Comments Hard, dense and dark grey repairs appear to have been carried out in cement to apex of arch soffit and general area.

Type cement

Location north wall

Comments Edge repairs and repointing have been carried out in what appears to be a cementitious mortar.

TREATMENT

Past Treatment

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

Person Unknown

Comments Edge repairs and 'waxing?' may have been carried out by a restorer.

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

Person Unknown

Comments The insertion of white edge repairs may have been carried out by a restorer.

Type UNSPECIFIED **Date** 01/01/01

Person Unknown

Comments General repairs in a grey mortar, possibly cementitious, are present on all four walls of the room.

Proposed Treatment

Type CLEANING **Date** 10/08/94

Person JD

Comments All areas: cleaning may substantially improve the appearance of all areas of original decoration which is, at present, difficult to decipher. However no attempt at cleaning should be made before the fragile flaking paint has been successfully consolidated.

Type CONSOLIDATION **Date** 10/08/94

Person JD

Comments East wall, altar recess: flaking paint is in a fragile condition and requires consolidation urgently.

Type FILLS/REPAIRS INSERTION **Date** 10/08/94

Person JD

Comments All areas: edge repairs to areas of loss are required.

Type GROUTING **Date** 10/08/94

Person JD

Comments East wall, altar recess: grouting to refix the delaminating plaster renders to the support is required. However, the paint layer is in a very fragile condition and consolidation of the paint layer is recommended before any grouting is initiated.

Type UNCOVERING **Date** 10/08/94

Person JD

Comments North wall: examination and trial uncovering tests may reveal further areas of painted decoration.



Abbot's chapel, east wall, altar recess



Abot's chapel, north wall, overall view of masonry pattern