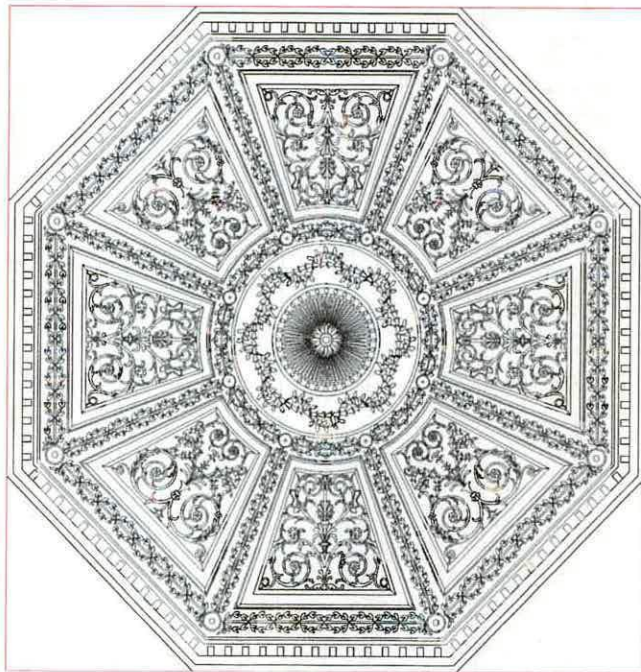


The Missing Ceiling Panel Decoration in the Saloon at Danson

*Notes on the available evidence and the
viability of its restoration*



by

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1. Introduction

The saloon is the most richly decorated room on the principal floor at Danson and although the gilded plaster ceiling was clearly intended to provide the high point in this display, not all of the original detailing survives.

English Heritage began the restoration of the saloon at Danson, along with the other principal rooms between 1997 and 1998. The aim was to return the room to its original appearance in the 1760s, Figure 1. However, until the 1920s, the eight ceiling panels contained plaster or composition decoration, Figure 10, which was removed some time after 1932, Figure 14.

During the 1860s, the principal interiors were refurbished and the saloon was redecorated in a French rococo style that relied heavily on the use of composition in the construction of the mirror surrounds and pelmets. Because it seems likely that the ceiling panel decoration was of composition, it seems reasonable to associate it with this phase of work but this appears not to be the case. The following detailed study of the photographic evidence for the Danson ceiling panel decoration argues, not only that it is earlier, but that it was original to Robert Taylor's original fitting out of the house in 1766. This conclusion is supported by the similarities between this ceiling and another at Chute Lodge, Wiltshire, known to be by the same architect.

The report discusses the evidence, both physical and photographic, for the reconstruction of the missing ceiling decoration, and the date it was installed. It also argues the case for the recreation of the missing detail within the forthcoming round of works that will complete the building's restoration and open it to the public.

As a report, it forms one step in a programme of analysis and research undertaken by the English Heritage Historical Analysis and Research Team in support of the restoration project. For a broader history and development of the site, see Lea and Miele 2001.

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1. *The pictorial and photographic evidence*

The Sarah Johnson watercolour, 1860

The earliest image we have of the interior the saloon is the watercolour painted by Sarah Johnson in 1860, probably soon after the death of her grandmother and prior to the sale of the house in 1863, Figure 2. Unfortunately, very little of the ceiling is shown and this only as a reflection in a mirror, Figure 3. However, from this reflected view, not only is it clear that it predates Bean's refurbishment of the 1860s but that the decoration of the panelled parts of the ceiling was gilded.

The 1920s photographs

The earliest photographs of the interior of the saloon date from about 1920, Figure 4 and Figure 6. One of them, Figure 4, was reproduced in the sale catalogue of 1922. Both show the interior still furnished as a private residence, presumably as left by Alfred Bean's widow when she died in 1921. They show the ceiling panel decoration *in-situ* although Figure 4 only shows them reflected in the mirror above the fireplace, Figure 5. The second photograph, Figure 6, shows the ceiling decoration in more detail and from this it is clear that the ceiling was designed with alternating patterns of panel decoration. The two patterns are described in this report as pattern A and Pattern B. Pattern A was used in the panels above the diagonal walls and pattern B in the panels adjacent to the main axial walls. The two patterns are essentially Roman in character and display an interest in third- and fourth-century Roman wall decoration in the wake of archaeological discoveries in Rome in the middle of the eighteenth-century.

The 1932 photograph

According to a photograph taken in 1932, the panel decoration remained *in-situ* in 1932, Figure 10. It shows the decoration in more detail than the earlier images, Figure 11 and Figure 12.

The 1976 photograph

By 1976, however, the decoration had been removed and the panels covered with wallpaper. Its removal appears to be undocumented but it probably occurred in the early 1950s when the exterior of the house was overhauled. However, the design of the ceiling panel decorations re-emerged as stains within the wallpaper, Figure 13.

2. *Parallels among other buildings by Robert Taylor*

Chute Lodge, Wiltshire

Chute Lodge, built by Robert Taylor for John Freeman, under construction in 1768, has an octagonal saloon and is generally very similar to Danson, although it is executed in brick. The design of the ceiling of the saloon is very similar to that at Danson and the corresponding panels are decorated with foliage, flowers, and urns, Figure 15.

Unusually, because Robert Taylor's drawings are very rare, the architect's drawing for the Chute dining room ceiling still survives, Figure 16.¹ Although the overall shape of Chute

¹ The image reproduced in Figure 16 is taken from a photocopy in the Historical Analysis and Research Team's files, which Roger White probably deposited there, in the early 1980s. The photocopy is annotated 'Taylor drawing for Chute Lodge dining room ceiling in Strickland Collection of drawings' but it appears it was subsequently sold. According to Marcus Binney, 'The catalogue of architectural drawings sold at Christie's on 30th Nov. 1983 (lot 182) includes a drawing for the ceiling of the dining

dining room is different - in fact, identical to the dining room at Danson - the vocabulary of decorative motifs used in the drawing is very similar to that of the Danson saloon ceiling.

3. *Reconstructing the ceiling panel decoration designs*

The ceiling plaster stains

By 1997, the wallpaper applied to the ceiling panels had been removed and the only physical evidence for their design consisted of patterns of staining in the original ceiling plaster, Figure 14.

The cause of the staining is not obvious but microscopic analysis of the affected plaster areas indicates that the stained parts of the ceiling had not been painted.² This suggests that the panel decoration was applied as part of the original fitting out before any painting took place. This is significant because it associates the work with Robert Taylor rather William Chambers who is known to have advised on some alterations to the interiors within a few years of the completion of the interiors in 1766.³

It is suggested here that the staining was caused by the use of animal glue or size to fix the mouldings, which were probably cast, to the soffit of the ceiling. If the mouldings were of composition, it is perhaps possible that glue was used alone. Alternatively, the mouldings might have been fixed in place with a lime plaster mix that included animal size as a secondary ingredient. The plasterer William Millar recommended this process in 1897:

The fixing stuff should be composed of haired putty, gauged with an equal part of fine plaster, and sufficient size water to retard the setting as required.⁴

During the 1760s, Robert Adam had brought Pergolesi to England and pioneered the use of composition in this country. At this date, the moulded decoration might therefore have been either plaster or composition.⁵

Tracing the outlines of the panel decoration

The outlines of the stains clearly do not relate exactly to the design of the ceiling panel decorations, but they do provide an approximate guide. From the two sets of photographs of the stains for the pattern B panels that were taken flat on, Figure 13 and Figure 16, it is possible to trace the outlines and aggregate the evidence, Figure 18. The details of the mouldings evident in the oblique views, Figure 9 and Figure 12, can therefore be plotted, using the outlines in Figure 18 as a base plan, Figure 19.

Pattern A, unfortunately, is more problematic because we do not have any photographs that were taken flat on. This is because the staining of the plaster was not as clear as that of the pattern B panels. However, the detail in the 1932 photograph is sufficiently sharp and the panel is square enough to the line of sight to allow a crudely rectified image, Figure 20. From this rectified image, a scaled drawing of the panel can be produced, Figure 21. Like pattern B, the missing detail is supplied by the oblique photographs, Figure 5 and Figure 7, resulting in the reconstruction, Figure 22.

Both of the reconstruction drawings, Figure 19 and Figure 22, are informed by the detail

room at Chute. Lot 184 is inscribed 'if this should not please then Mr Taylor desires Mr Freeman will please to write.' (Binney 1984, 102 fn. 22)

² Personal comment from Helen Hughes

³ See Lea and Miele 2001

⁴ Millar 1897, 130

⁵ Millar 1897, 22

shown in Taylor's drawing for the dining room ceiling at Chute, Figure 16. The overall plan of the ceiling with its two sets of alternating panels can therefore be reconstructed, Figure 23.

4. The case for the restoration of the ceiling panel decoration

It has been English Heritage's policy on this site to enhance the 1760s character of the building and its interiors.

The removal of the decoration is a relatively recent occurrence in the building's history. It would appear that the panels were decorated from the building's original completion in 1766 through to c 1950, a total of nearly two hundred years.

To present the interior to the public without the decoration of the ceiling panels would be to offer a false impression of an historic interior.

From the evidence available it has been possible to provide sufficient detail to specify the restoration of these features.

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Figure 1, the saloon in its present condition, after partial restoration by English Heritage. Photograph: English Heritage.

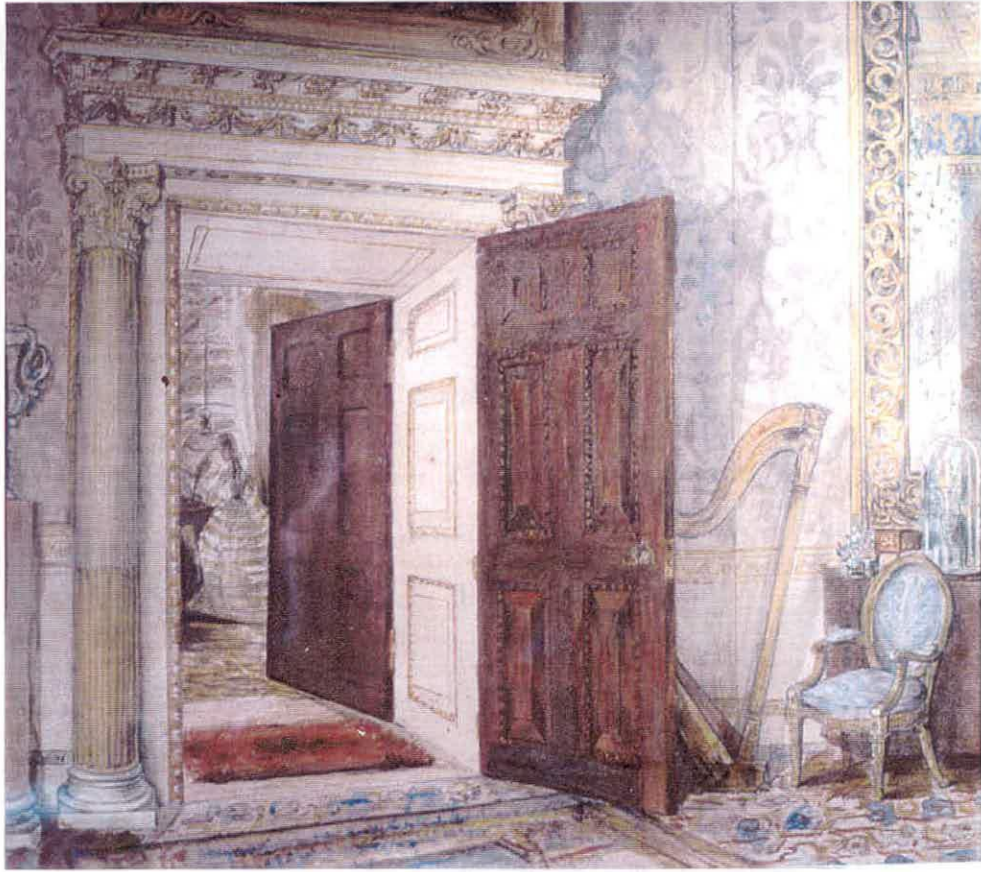


Figure 2, the watercolour by Sarah Johnson of the saloon, c 1860, looking west towards the library. Private Collection of William Charter, Lee-on-Solent.



Figure 3, a detail of the watercolour by Sarah Johnson, Figure 2, showing the ceiling reflected in the mirror. The decoration of the panelled part of the ceiling appears to have been gilded.

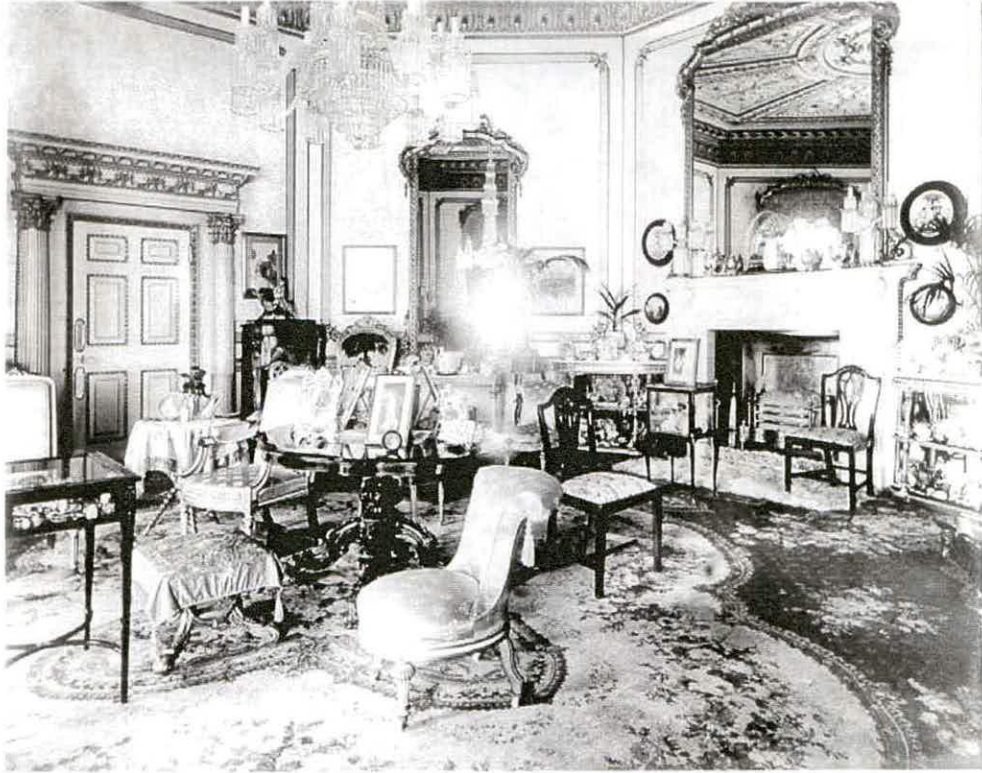


Figure 4, a photograph of the saloon, looking north-west, as reproduced in the sale catalogue of 1922.

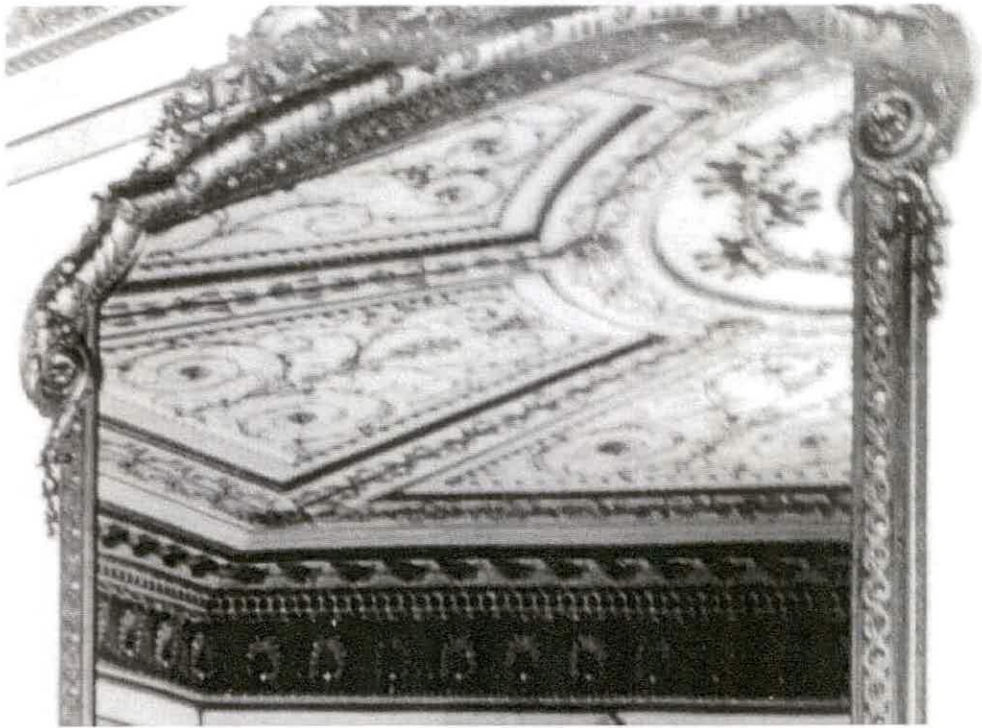


Figure 5, detail of Figure 4, showing the ceiling reflected in the mirror above the fireplace. The detail is sufficient to show that the ceiling was designed with an alternating system panel design.



Figure 6, the second photograph of the saloon from c1922, looking east.

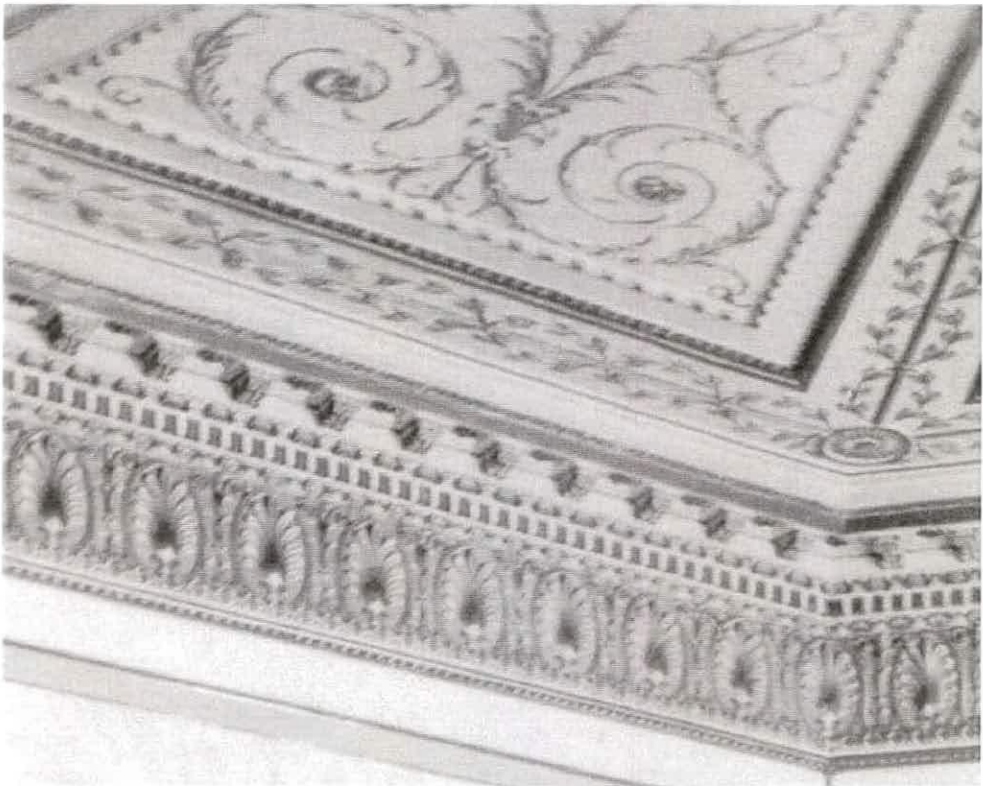


Figure 7, detail of the 1920 photograph, Figure 6 showing the ceiling panel decoration, type A, above the north-east wall of the saloon.

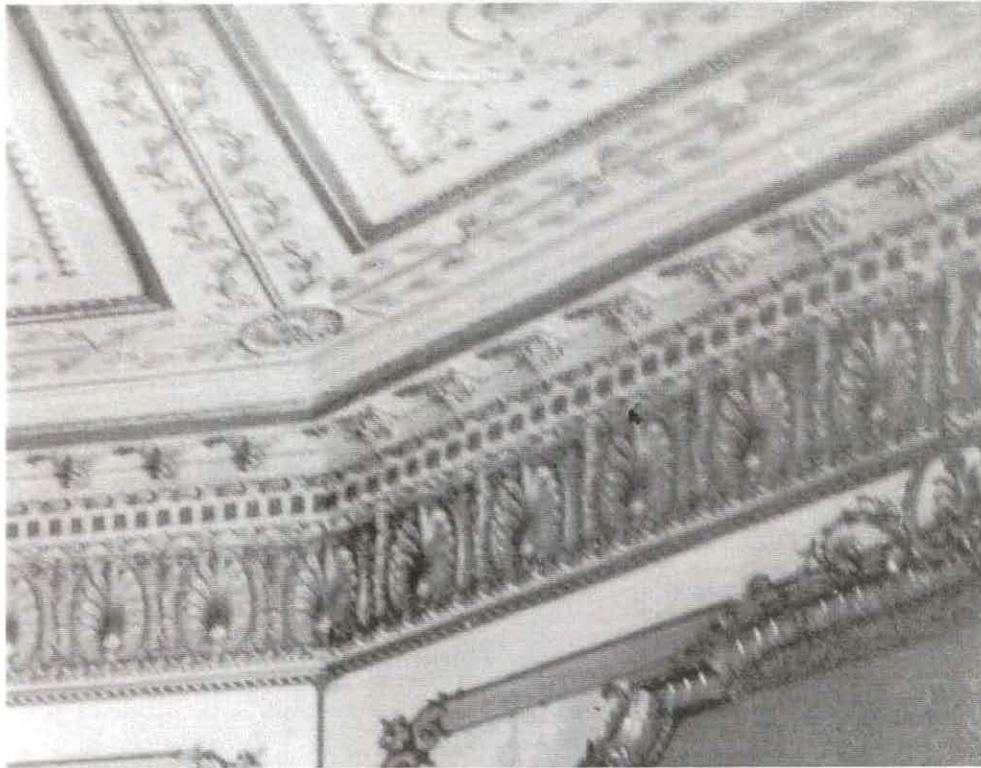


Figure 8, detail of the 1920 photograph, Figure 6, showing enough of the ceiling panel decoration to identify it as a repeat of the type A pattern.



Figure 9, a detail of the 1920 photograph, Figure 6, showing the ceiling panel decoration above the east wall of the saloon, pattern B.

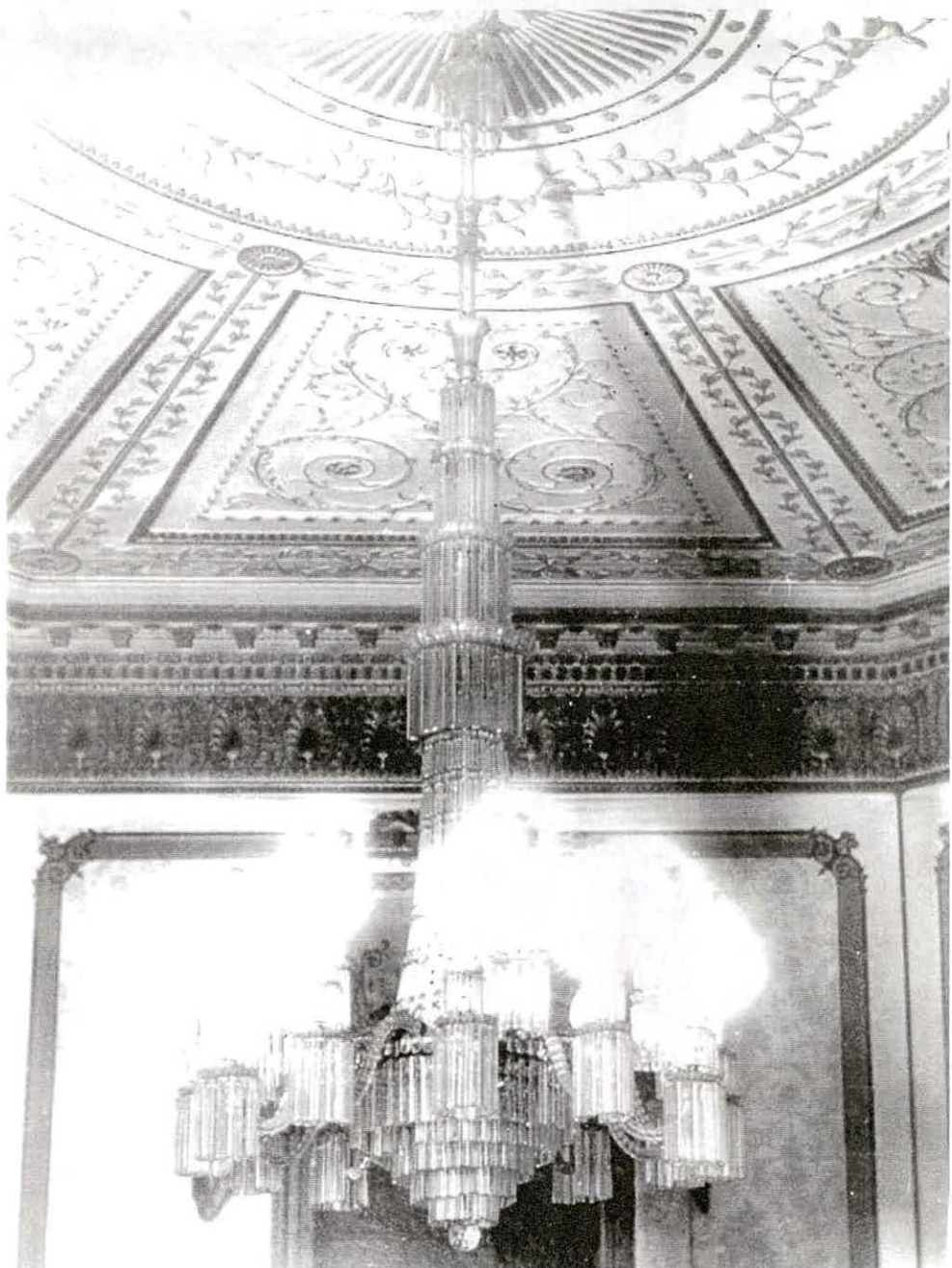


Figure 10, a photograph from 1932, showing the north-east or north-west wall of the saloon, with the ceiling panel decoration pattern A pictured behind the chandelier.

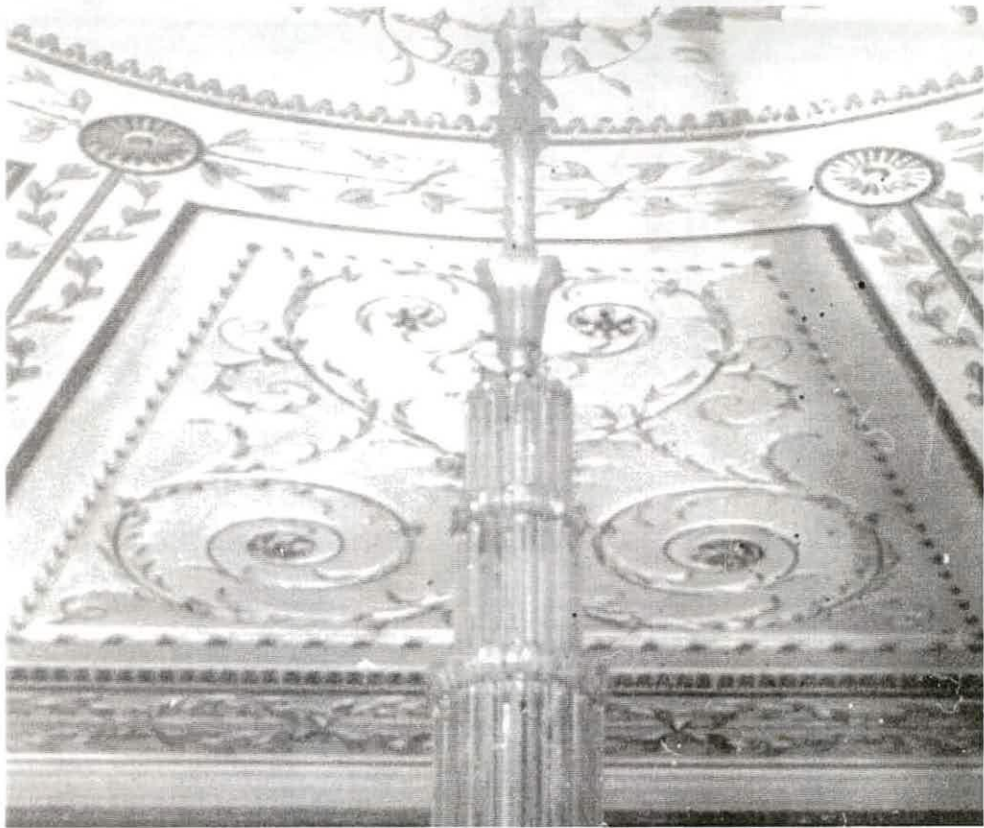


Figure 11, a detail of Figure 10, showing the ceiling panel decoration pattern type A above either the north-east or north-west walls.



Figure 12, a detail of Figure 10, showing the ceiling panel decoration, pattern type B, above either the north or east wall.

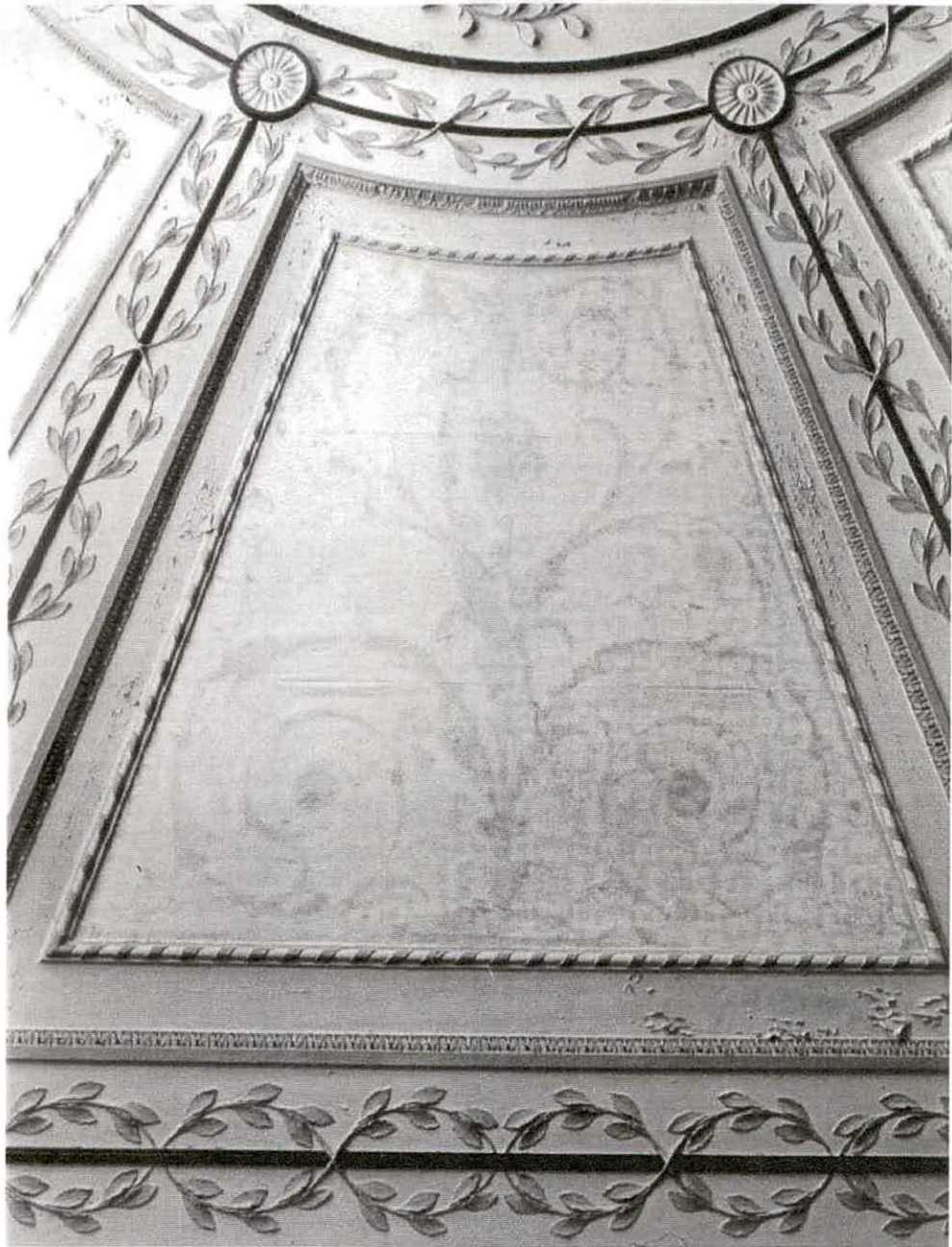


Figure 13, a photograph from 1976(?) showing the stains on the wallpaper applied to the ceiling that reveal the design of original ceiling panel decoration: pattern type B.



Figure 14, the saloon in 1995, prior to English Heritage's acquisition of the building. The wallpaper applied to the ceiling has either been removed or fallen away. Photograph: Paul Dixon for English Heritage.



Figure 15, the saloon or drawing room at Chute Lodge, Wiltshire (photograph *Country Life*, reproduced in Binney 1984)

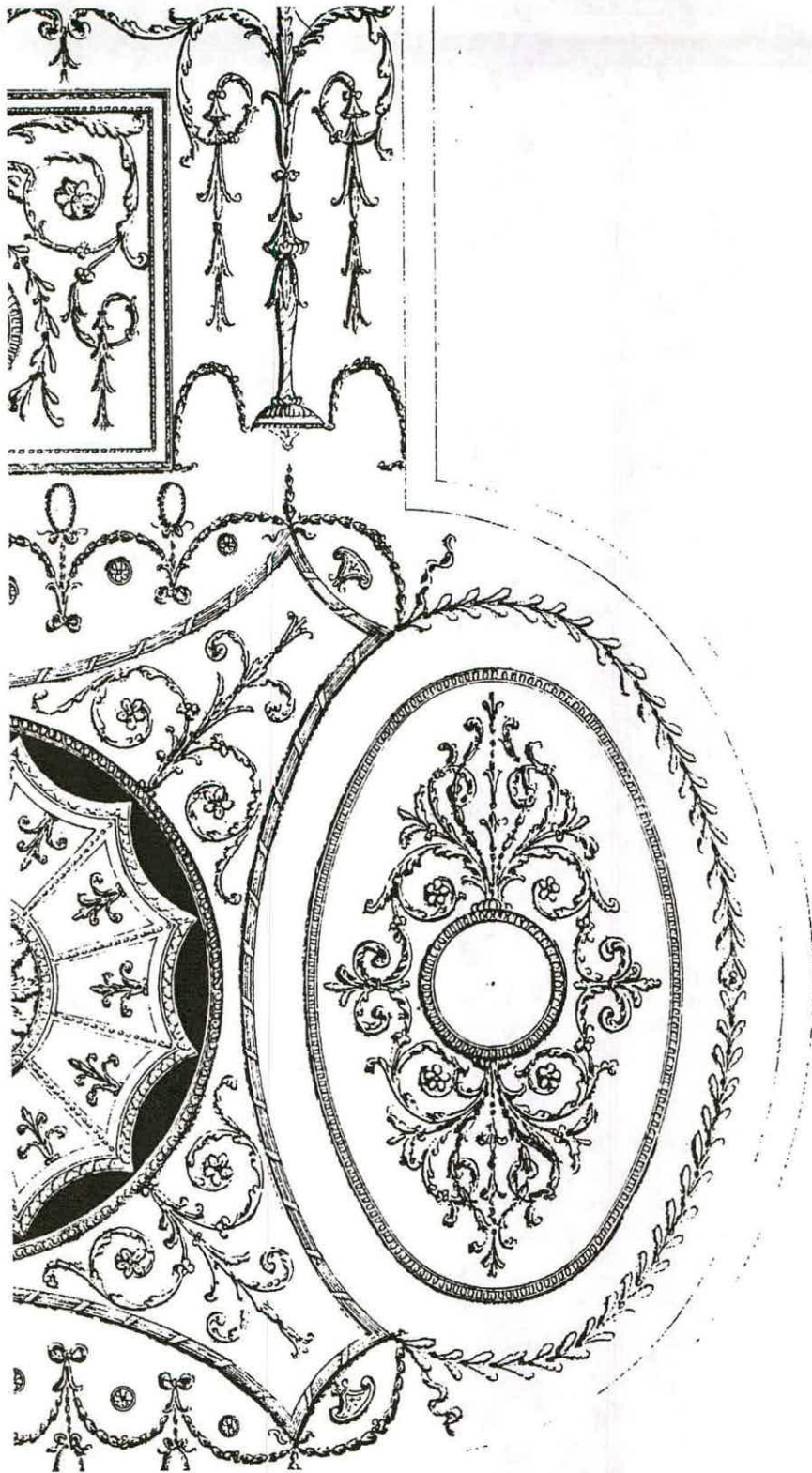


Figure 16, a detail from a drawing of the dining room ceiling at Chute Lodge, Wiltshire, by Robert Taylor (formerly in the Strickland Collection).



Figure 17, the ceiling panel above the door to the dining room, photographed in 1997 after the wallpaper had been removed and the plaster surface prepared for repainting. The decoration is pattern type B. Photograph: English Heritage, Historical Analysis and Research Team.



Figure 18, a composite drawing of the outlines of the ceiling panel decoration pattern B, used in the panels adjacent to the diagonal walls, based on photographs taken flat on to the ceiling, Figure 13 and Figure 17.



Figure 19, a reconstruction of the ceiling panel decoration, pattern B, based on Figure 18, Figure 9 and Figure 12.

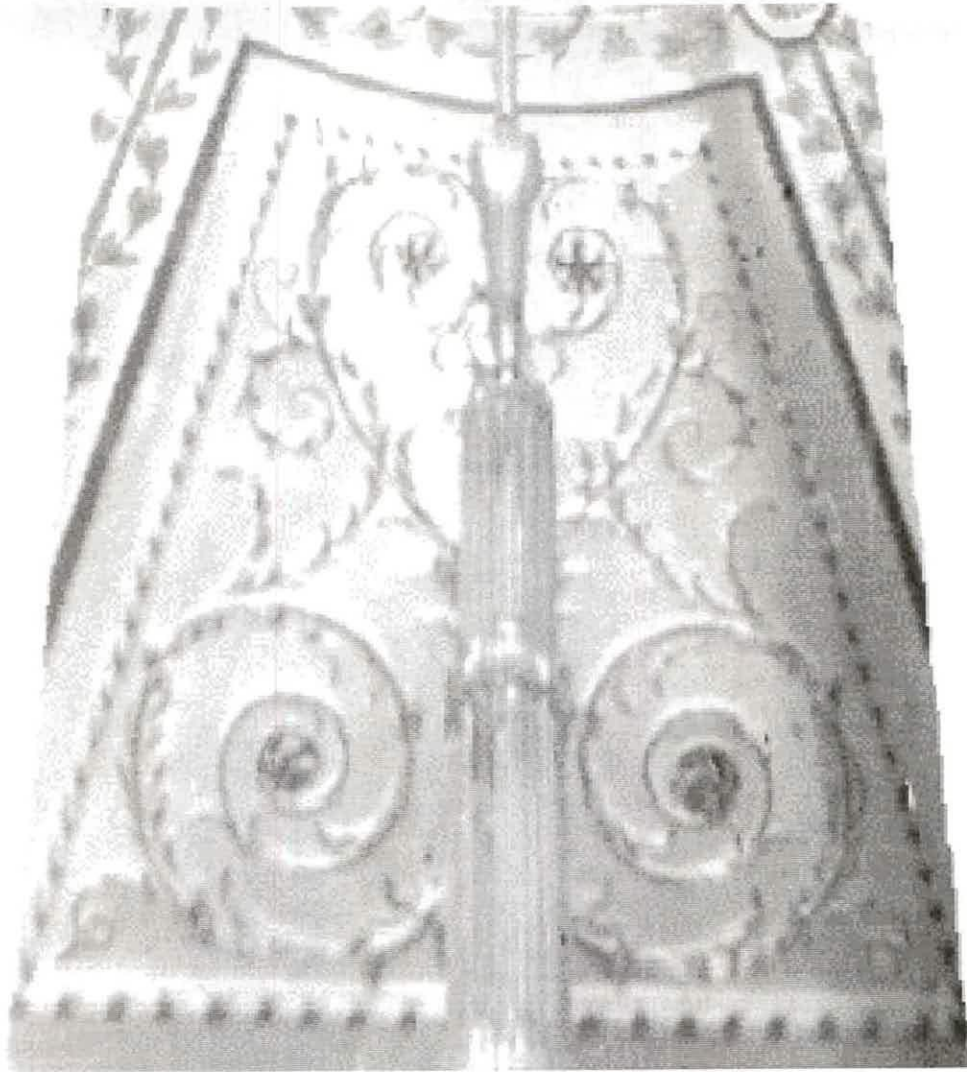


Figure 20, the panel shown in Figure 10, pattern A, enlarged and distorted to fit the plan of one of the ceiling panels.



Figure 21, a drawing of the outlines of the ceiling panel decoration, pattern A, used in the panels adjacent to the diagonal walls, derived from the 1932 photograph, Figure 10, via the crudely rectified image, Figure 20.



Figure 22, a reconstruction of the panel decoration, pattern A, based on the outline shown in Figure 21 and the details shown in Figure 5 and Figure 7.

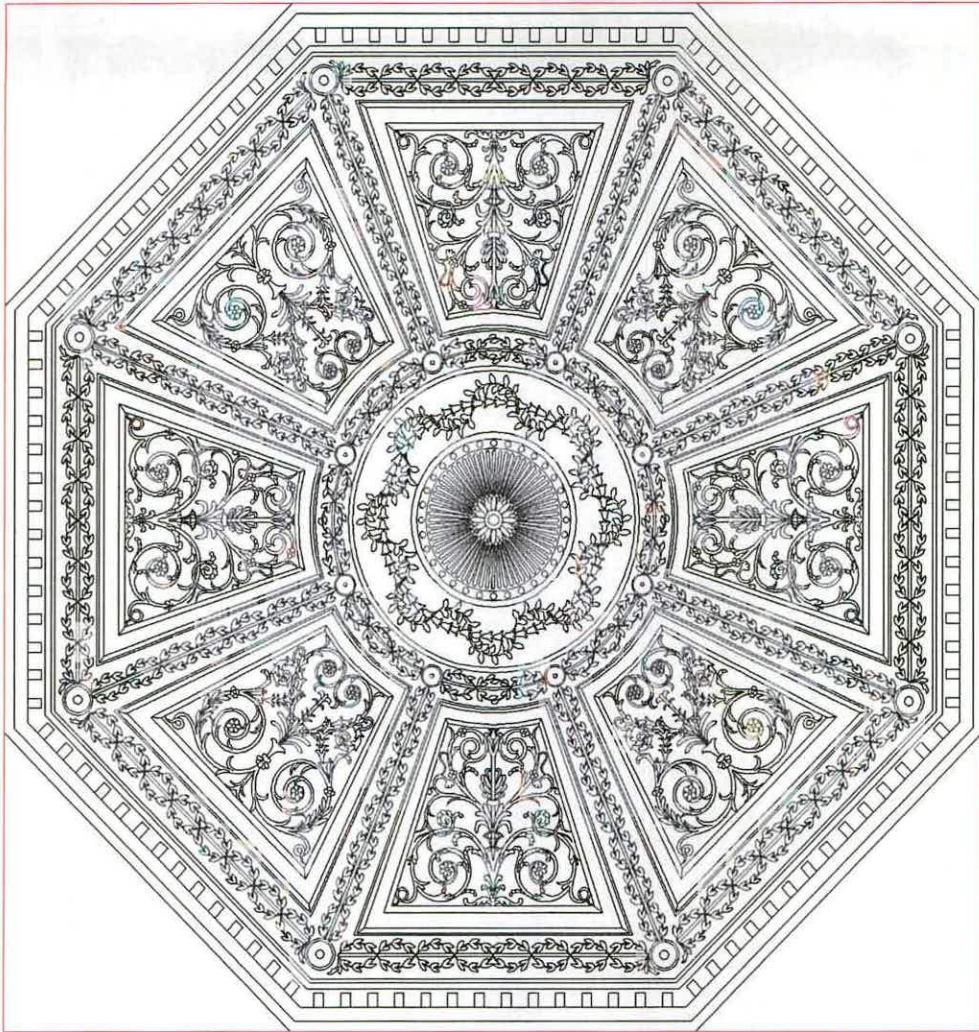


Figure 23, the overall reconstruction of the saloon ceiling showing the system of alternating panel decorations, patterns A and B