

# Holy Trinity Church, Torbryan, Devon

## Rood Screen Panels

March 2016

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## **Background**

In 2013 two painted panels were stolen from the north aisle screen of the 15th century rood screen in the Church of the Holy Trinity, Torbryan, Devon, at which time a third panel was severely damaged. Remarkably the stolen panels were retrieved in early 2015, although they had deteriorated significantly and sustained considerable damage. The church is under the care of The Churches Conservation Trust.

Following discussions from August 2015 and meetings and debate through October and December, collaborating with timber specialist Hugh Harrison, the broken fragments were re-assembled by conservation joiner Stuart Anderson. After this, detailed conservation was carried out between 8th January and 26 February 2016 in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter where space was rented in the conservation laboratories.

The following report summarises the work carried out that relates to the polychromy. The structural aspects will be reported on separately by Hugh Harrison FSA. The panels now await their return to the church where they will be inserted behind their tracery overlay and mounted in a specially designed frame.

## **Condition**

Prior to the theft the panels had been cleaned and conserved by Jane Rutherfoord some time between 1999 and 2013. It was a shock therefore to find that the two retrieved panels had deteriorated to the extent that they had become broken, with crumbling edges in places resulting in significant losses. An examination of the panels revealed that they have been so severely tunneled by death-watch beetle in the past that they have little strength and limited access for applying consolidants. The backs of the panels in particular, are severely degraded and in many places the original wood surface no longer survives.

## **Conservation**

The conservation work carried out after the theft had to take account of what was known about the previous conservation work. No report has been seen but helpful discussions with Jane Rutherfoord indicate that work consisted of:

- Removal of discoloured linseed oil.
- Consolidation of death-watch beetle damaged wood with Paraloid B72 resin.
- Treatment of the deteriorated backs of the panels involved the use of an epoxy resin.
- The application of a thick, protective coat of dammar resin varnish.

After the theft Jane Rutherfoord carried out some emergency measures. These consisted of:

- Gathering up broken fragments and storing in a shoebox.
- Applying protective facing paper to the exposed broken edges of the damaged figure panel.

## **Summary of present conservation**

- Application of additional protective facing paper to vulnerable edges prior to removing the fragmented panel, to allow easy separation of the fragments by the conservation joiner, but preserve all vulnerable paint.
- A series of trials were carried out looking at consolidants and fillers, of different strengths and proportions.

Eventually the following processes were carried out:

- Consolidation of fragile wood.
- Consolidation of lifting/loose paint.
- Application of fillings.
- Surface cleaning.
- Application of isolation layer.
- Re-integration of fillings.
- Application of dammar resin varnish.
- Selection of five paint samples for analysis. To be carried out at a later date.

### **Note**

Conservation work on the backs of the panels was carried out after the joinery repairs. Hugh Harrison will be discussing these in his forthcoming report. In essence the panels will be strengthened and supported by:

- The gluing of specially designed ribbed tulip wood battens to the backs by conservation joiner Stuart Anderson.
- The tracery overlay that remains in situ.
- A specially designed stainless steel frame.

The presence of the tulip wood battens meant that not all of the back surface was accessible for treatment. Where the original panel back could be accessed, consolidant was applied in multiple applications over several weeks. The addition of inert fillers will provide additional support to voids in the wood, where they could be accessed.

Areas that remain weak but cannot be accessed without risking further damage, will benefit from the various protective coatings applied to provide a buffer to the environment in the church.

### **Analysis**

Although paint analysis was not a requirement for the conservation work on the panels, the fragile state of the paint surface meant that dislodged minute samples could provide a valuable resource for future analysis. Five samples were taken and analysis at a future date could add further intriguing information regarding the material and techniques used by the sixteenth century artists working on Torbryan screen.

### **Conclusion**

The work on the panels has been a real marathon and an extremely challenging exercise. In spite of a considerable amount of consolidation the panels will never be really robust, due to the extent of death-watch beetle tunnelling. In places the paint surface was held together solely by the paint layers where the wooden support has particularly deteriorated. When re-installed in the screen, the panels will be strengthened and supported by the tracery overlay and the new framework.

Torbryan church has extremely high humidity levels which the panels will have become acclimatised to over many years. From the appearance of the stolen panels, on their return, it is likely that they have been kept in far drier conditions which will have contributed significantly to their deterioration.

It may take some time for the panels to re-acclimatise when returned to the church. I recommend therefore that they are monitored periodically, when a little localised conservation work may be required.

It has been a privilege albeit a rather stressful journey to bring the panels to life again. Hopefully once again they will be a source of interest and significance for future generations.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am particularly grateful to Alison Hopper Bishop, Head of Conservation for allowing me to work in the conservation laboratory in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. This was a great source of interesting discussions as well as a safe environment in which to carry out much of the toxic conservation work.

Eddie Sinclair ACR  
March 14<sup>th</sup> 2016

## List of Materials

Industrial Methylated Spirits (now Industrial Denatured Alcohol), Isopropyl Alcohol, Shellsol T (aroma-free turpentine substitute), Shellsol A, White Spirit, Acetone.

Consolidation:

Paraloid B72 in Acetone/IMS, in varying proportions and dilutions.

Fillings:

Paraloid B72 in Acetone/IMS, with microballoons and coconut shell flour (1:1), with varying grades of particle size, as required.

Isolation layer:

B72 in Shellsol A.

Varnish:

Dammar resin, made up with Stoddards Solvent (White Spirits to BS 245 having less than 20% aromatics content) and Cosmolloid 80H wax (a blend of refined microcrystalline waxes without solvents or chemicals).

All materials used in the above tests and listed below have been used successfully in different combinations and applications on Devon rood screen polychromy. Equipment and tools include, heated spatulas, facing paper, melinex, syringes, gloves and respirator.



Above, north aisle screen, showing Bay 1, with damaged female saint and two southernmost missing (stolen) panels. Three panels stolen from Bay 3 in 2003 were eventually replaced with carved blanks (see top right) made by carver Laurence Beckford working for Hugh Harrison.

Above overview and right detail, after application of emergency facing paper by conservator Jane Rutherford and below details of smashed fragments stored in shoebox. The panel is clearly weakened by death-watch beetle tunnelling.



Bay 1, back view after theft. Showing facing paper supporting the female saint and spaces where the stolen panels would have been housed.



Fragments before re-assembling. Left, front face. Right, back view, showing how deteriorated the wood is.





This panel was deliberately smashed in order to steal the neighbouring two panels. Like all the panels this one is extremely fragile due to extensive tunnelling from death-watch beetle and the blows it will have received during the theft broke it into several pieces. The larger south section remained in situ, held in place by the architectural framework (see previous page) as well as facing paper (showing as white in the photographs).



Detail showing powdery wood and beetle frass.



During consolidation of lifting paint.



Above left, after removal of protective facing paper, before fragments were re-assembled and re-aligned. Above right, detail, after joinery repairs. In this photograph the gap is still to be filled (see overleaf).



The back of the panel, as with all the panels, is severely degraded. Consolidant was applied in multiple applications over several weeks. The addition of inert fillers will have provided additional support to voids in the wood. However many weak passages could not be accessed. The tracery overlay and the specially designed architectural frame will provide the best protection for the panels once they have been re-installed in the church.

### Unidentified Female Saint





The broken fragments, once joined, needed fillings to bridge the gaps and restore integrity to the painting.

The edges of the panel were particularly deteriorated. Extensive deep fillings were necessary here to restore some strength to the edges (see red arrows, left image and red ovals above).

Fillings were built up in stages, before being cut back, and re-integrated over an isolation layer.

Panel after joinery repairs by Stuart Anderson, above left and above right with joinery repairs highlighted blue. Ribbed tulip wood battens, visible at the bottom of the panel, to be discussed in Hugh Harrison's report.





Detail of panel, showing built-up, cut back fillings, sealed and ready for toning out.



Fillings have been sealed and isolated from the original surface. Finally they have been re-integrated, using a reversible paint system, prior to the application of a protective varnish. For details, see overleaf.



These images show the stages involved in filling and integrating damaged areas. Not all fillings were toned out as in many instances they appear as bare wood, which is appropriate to their location in the painting.

With the strong pattern of the tiled floor however, it seemed appropriate to treat the filling in such a way that it would optically disappear and not detract from the painting.

All materials used are reversible, according to the ethics of modern conservation.



In situ detail. Area of decayed wood needing protection prior to dismantling. Note lower tracery overlay.



Damaged areas protected by facing paper (showing as a white veil).



Above left, after consolidating and filling the damaged pocket. Above centre, after application of an isolation layer and the first stage of toning out the filling. Above right, after building up further toning-out layers.

### **Details of tiled floor and treatment of fillings: Female Saint.**



Above and below, details of the fragile edges. In places the surface was held together solely by the paint layers.



This panel had sustained two breaks.

Left and above detail show the main break across the panel and across the grain of the wood. The wood here was extremely soft and crumbling badly where death-watch beetle tunnelling had weakened it.

Below close-up showing break across the painted tiled floor, glued with a PVA type glue, by the 'thief'. Unlike on the St Margaret panel, the joint was relatively successful and more damage would have been caused to reverse it. It was therefore left and surface fillings bridged the space.



## St Victor of Marseilles





Close-up above, showing the break across St Victor. Conservation joiner Stuart Anderson glued the broken section and re-assembled the panel (right overview and blue highlight below).



Detail below showing consolidation and the extent of the void. The syringe needle can be glimpsed in the beetle exit hole (see red arrow), 40mm into the wood.



St Victor re-assembled. It was fortunate that there were smaller losses around the surface of the break than on the St Margaret panel, so a tighter joint could be achieved here.

However, within the body of the panel there were significant voids and a considerable amount of consolidation was required. Where accessible, voids were filled. This was not always possible.





Detail showing condition of back of panel.

The timber has been badly damaged by damp and death-watch beetle.



Overview of back showing specially designed ribbed tulip wood battens designed by Hugh Harrison FSA and made by conservation joiner Stuart Anderson.

St Margaret, patron saint of women in childbirth, is depicted in medieval iconography as emerging from the belly of a dragon.

This panel was also split in two, sadly across the dragon. Here the crumbling wood was so severe that large portions of the surface of wood and paint were missing (see also overleaf).



**St Margaret**





St Margaret before joinery repairs

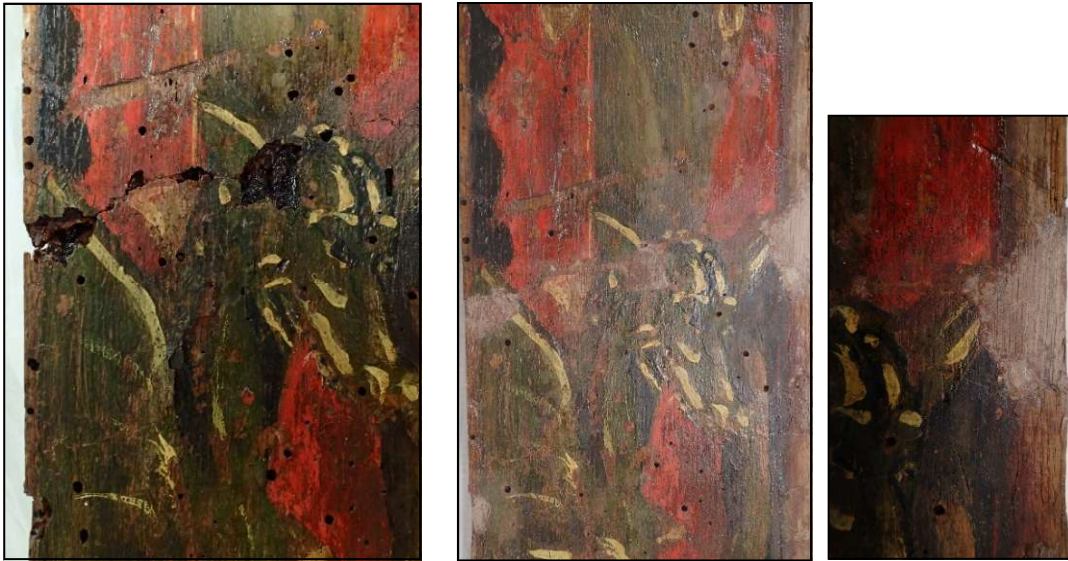


When the panels were retrieved, a crude support was visible on the back, across the break of St Margaret. As can be seen above, a splint made from a picture frame was attempting to 'hold' the two sections together .



After joinery repairs (see blue highlight above)





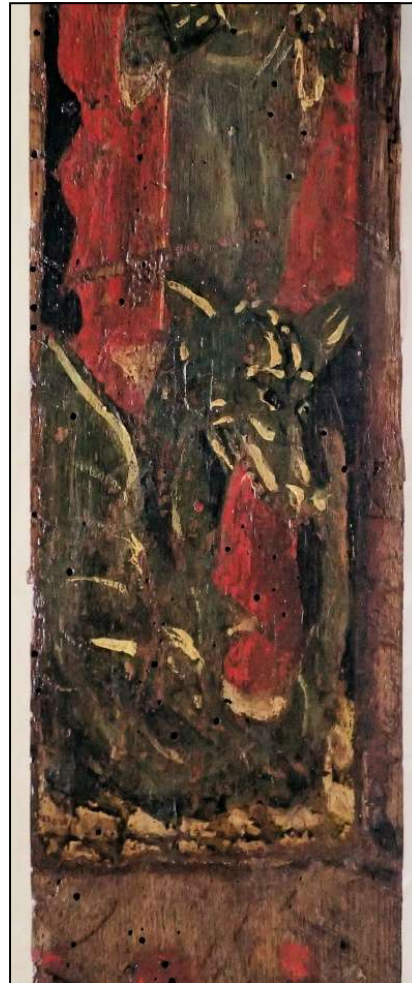
Above left, during consolidation of wood along the break. Note how much of the surface is missing here. Above centre, fillings have been built up and cut back. Detail of filling shown top right.



Using a heated spatula to lay back detaching paint, after application of consolidant.

Lower part of panel showing dragon on completion of consolidation, fillings, reintegration of losses and varnishing.

Note the deep gash across the panel, just above the dragon. This is from previous iconoclasm and has been left, as it is stable and remains part of the history of this panel.



### Conservation in progress





Above, detail of Bay 1 after conservation by Jane Rutherfoord, between 1999 and 2013.  
Above right Bay 1 after the theft in 2013 and vandalism of the adjacent panel with the unidentified female saint.



The three panel paintings after conservation





**Portrait details after conservation**





Location of paint samples (see arrows above). Numbering continuing from previous analysis in 1999.