

McNEILLAGE CONSERVATION

Weeks Farm | Talaton | Exeter EX5 2RG | T: 01404 822076
enquiries@mcneillage-conservation.co.uk | www.mcneillage-conservation.co.uk
Partners: Tineke McNeillage ACR | Ruth McNeillage ACR
VAT No. 756 7408 95

ST. JAMES' CHURCH, CAMELEY

CONSERVATION OF THE WALL PAINTINGS TREATMENT REPORT



August 2026

1. INTRODUCTION, BRIEF AND SUMMARY

The walls of Cameley Church are covered with a palimpsest of important wall paintings spanning from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. The church was closed in 1980 and has been vested in the Church Conservation Trust since 1981. The wall paintings were uncovered and conserved during the 1960's by The Eve Baker Trust. Since that time there have been various issues with failure of the exterior structure, leading to water ingress that has been particularly acute on the east wall of the nave. This has been a long-term issue and was recorded in previous reports (see Condition Survey).

In 2024 McNeillage Conservation were commissioned by the CCT and Friends of Cameley Church to undertake a survey of this unusual collection of wall paintings with a view to putting forward proposals for their conservation (condition Survey report).

This report concerns the conservation treatment carried out during March/April 2026 and includes new discoveries made during the project that have thrown further light on the sequencing of the wall paintings.

1.i. Management

Author Ruth McNeillage, McNeillage Conservation

Client James Routledge, Churches Conservation Trust

I would like to thank the friends of Cameley church for their support. In particular Bob and Fiona Medland who not only provided a water supply from their house but were constantly available to help with any access issues etc. and who clearly devoted a lot of their time to the care and maintenance of the building.

2. HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

St. James' Church is a grade I listed building situated in the Cam valley, and was a parish church until 1980. It stands alone outside the centre of the village which was relocated to Temple Cloud.

Much of the original twelfth century structure is still visible and retains early decorative polychrome notably the Norman doorway and the central and north chancel arches. The nave ceiling, which now has modern plaster retains the ridge rib and carved bosses.

The tower dates from the fifteenth century and the porch was added in 1620. An internal timber west gallery dating from 1711 extends along the south wall.

The chancel was rebuilt in the seventeenth century with a late nineteenth century open roof.

The building is constructed of squared, irregular coursed red and grey sandstone with limestone dressings to tower and rubble stone and dressed stone copings to nave and

chancel. The nave roof is covered with double Roman clay pantiles and half round clay ridge tiles. The chancel and south porch roofs are covered with slates.

2.i The Wall Paintings

The chronology and description of the wall paintings have already been covered in the condition survey report (McNeillage Conservation 2024), however several interesting discoveries made during this project have thrown a new light on the physical history of the building and understanding of the chronology of the wall painting schemes.

3. NEW DISCOVERIES MADE DURING THIS PHASE OF WORK

3.i. The East wall

It was previously thought that the fictive masonry design on the north was the earliest scheme in the building. This was largely based on the style of the plaster finish, the unusual colouring used for the scheme and its position beneath later schemes on the north wall. It was only thought to have survived on the north wall of the nave. However, recent conservation work on the chancel arch revealed that it was also present on the east wall of the nave.

Removal of previous repairs applied to cover imperfections in the shape of the arch revealed that the chancel arch and north side (blocked) arch had both suffered serious deformation in the structure and a number of the arch voussoirs had slipped after the painting of the earliest schemes - the scrolling trefoil leaf on the central arch and the palmette design on the north side arch. The north side arch that had appeared to be a gothic pointed arch was in fact a semi-circular Norman arch. Following this major movement in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, the deformation in the arches was corrected with a terracotta-coloured plaster, very similar to that on the north wall. The plaster covered the earliest paint schemes. On the chancel arch the same pink plaster repairs were overpainted with the pink scheme decorated with black diagonal lines thought to date from the thirteenth century.

On the northern side arch, the same terracotta plaster with a smooth finish was found on the wall just above the arch and there was clear evidence that it had covered the earlier palmette decoration. Unfortunately, no evidence of the white painted masonry lines was found. However, the smooth finish and colour of the plaster indicate that it is most likely to be from the same period (no analysis of the plaster was undertaken).

In previous surveys it had been thought that the red curving lines within the fictive masonry were part of the design. However, on close examination these lines were found to cut through the masonry lines and appeared to have been applied with a coloured crayon rather than paint.

FIG 1.

The fictive masonry design painted on the north wall. Thin white lines were applied to a polished terracotta coloured plaster.



FIG 2.

View showing the north side arch after the displacement of the stones had been revealed.

Area of the terracotta/pink plaster that was revealed that postdates the movement of the arch.



FIG 3.

View showing the soffit of the central arch after the more recent repairs had been removed.

Early repair with the terracotta/pink plaster. This repair supports the second early paint scheme on the soffit with diagonal bands.

The earliest scheme consists of the scrolling foliage with trefoil leaves and a red border line of the soffit.



FIG 4.

Second scheme that is contemporary with the terracotta/pink plaster

3.ii. The sun motif and early text

The removal of later fills on the upper part of the east wall of the nave also revealed that there were at least five previous limewash layers between the painting of the sun in red lines at the top of the wall and the eighteenth-century text panels. The sun with text is the earliest scheme on this area of wall. A sun in splendour used as a heraldic device by Edward IV and VI had a face in the centre. This sun has text. Interestingly the text itself is not Gothic in style which presents some questions as to its date. The words are difficult to decipher but it is possible to make out the word God. Another example of a sun motif containing text can be found on the north wall at Dore Abbey in Herefordshire where the sun contains the words Jehovah written in Hebrew. This is also partially hidden behind an early eighteenth-century Decalogue.

To the north of the sun some early gothic text has been uncovered that would have formed part of a text panel.

A closer examination of this area revealed that the wall was replastered in the eighteenth century from a line just below the words EXODUS and CHAP:XX at the top of the panels. The areas of wall to the north and south of the central decalogue were also found to also retain some earlier fragments of plaster.

FIG 5.

View of the upper north side of the east wall showing the palimpsest of different schemes.



FIG 6

Detail showing the sun motif with lettering in the centre.



FIG 7.

Detail showing the earlier gothic script.



3.iii. Jester/fool on the north wall.

There has been much conjecture about the highly unusual figure of the jester/fool depicted at the east end of the nave north wall.

Work on the lower wall revealed that the 'brocade' design found beneath the jester figure continued onto part of the horizontal timber beam/lintel above. Part of the timber is now unpainted but this area has sparrow pecks in the timber surface indicating that it had been plastered. It therefore seems likely that the painting continued in this area on a layer of plaster that has since been lost.

Work on the area behind the tester of the pulpit revealed an area of painting of the brocade design on the same level of limewash as the jester, indicating that these two schemes were contemporary. Above the horizontal timber mentioned above is a square section of timber painted with a design with a similar palette to the painting of the jester. Although the painting of the jester does not continue to this point it seems very probable that it is part of the same design.

The door to the rood stair is situated directly below the jester and the upper door (now blocked) was situated to the east of the painting. The jester is depicted kneeling. Dr Miriam Gill has suggested that he represents the fool who is stabbing himself with a sword and our discoveries support this as the most likely interpretation. A previous misinterpretation of the figure had described him as having a forked tongue. However, during the work it became clear that one long band (painted pink) emerges from the left side of his mouth and a similar long pink band emerges from the point where the sword has entered his stomach. These are most likely to represent blood. To the left of the figure are the letters US (?) in large Gothic script. These are likely to have been part of a text relating to the meaning of the painting. It seems likely that the jester formed part of a large didactic painting that filled the space between the window and the rood screen as a warning to unbelievers. This rather dramatic depiction of the fool dressed as a fifteenth century jester (very similar to figures found on fifteenth century playing cards) is extremely unusual and makes this painting highly significant.

The structure of the rood screen would have been open below to show the painting of the brocade decorating the lower east wall and the niches within the blocked niches. Soot marks at the top of the niches indicate that votive candles would still have been used in the niches at this date.

FIG. 8

View showing the Jester, taken from the scaffold.

It is thought that some of the black /brown bands may be a discoloured red and this will be confirmed by analysis.



Pink band similar to that coming from the mouth that is thought to represent blood from the sword wound.

FIG. 9.

Detail showing the lettering. Beneath the lettering there appears to be a rope with a tassel painted in grey/black lines.



FIG 10.

Detail showing the timber in the wall that is partially covered with the painting.
Unpainted area of wood where the plaster and paint are missing.





FIG. 11

Detail showing the brocade design on the lower wall that clearly also covers the timber in the wall.

3.iv Royal Achievement on the south wall.

The royal arms have been identified in previous reports as those of James I. However, without the royal initials visible it is not possible to distinguish which of the Stuarts these arms represent as they remained unchanged throughout the Stuart reign. The king's initials may well exist beneath layers of limewash on the wall below the seats on the south side gallery but this work was not included as part of the current project.

FIG 12.

View showing the extent of the Royal achievement visible on the south wall beneath the gallery.



3.iv. Graffiti of a ship in the porch

An examination of the incised design of a ship revealed that there are two incised images of ships and that depict seventeenth century warships with a forecastle and stern castle holes for the gun deck and shrouds for the rigging. A 17th-century sailing warship layout features a high multi-tiered stern, heavy tiered gunports along the broadside, and three tall masts supporting square and lateen sails. This indicates that the graffiti was probably carried out not long after the porch was built.

FIG. 13. View of the smaller incised image of a ship.

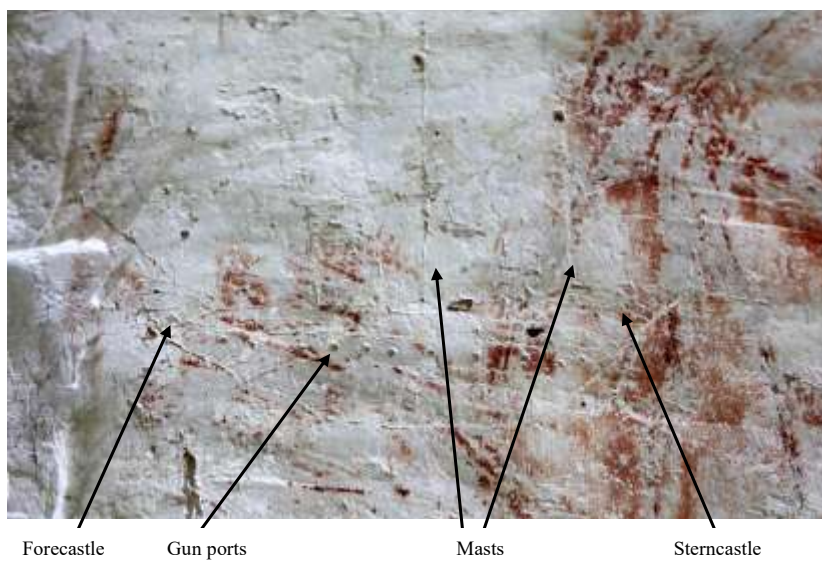


FIG. 14

Detail of the rigging on the larger ship.

4. CHRONOLOGY OF THE PAINTED SCHEMES

Phases 1-5 are pre-Reformation

Phase 1

South door Norman doorway - red and yellow paint scheme on the south door with diagonal lines found on the wall.

Chancel arch -Scrolling foliage with trefoil leaf cusps painted onto the stonework

North side arch – palmette design painted onto the stonework

Phase 2 (following some dramatic structural movement of the east wall causing both the chancel arch and north side arch to slip).

Use of terracotta-coloured polished plaster on the north and east walls. Some areas of this plaster retain the white masonry lines. This plaster was also used for very early repairs to the deformation of the central and north-side chancel arches.

Diagonal banded pink and white decoration on the chancel arch – applied directly over the scrolling foliage from phase 1.

Phase 3

Heraldic paintings on the jambs of the chancel arch.

Phase 4

St. Christopher on the north wall.

Phase 5

Jester and brocade designs on north and east walls

Phase 6 – post-Reformation

Sun motif high up on the east wall and early text

Phase 7

Royal achievement of arms.

Phase 8

Various phases of text panels found on east and south wall.

Phase 10

Graffiti in the porch

Phase 9

Eighteenth century Decalogue

5. TECHNIQUE OF EXECUTION

Most of the wall paintings were applied free hand and very few incisions or preparatory measuring marks have been found. Incision lines were used to mark the beginning of the lines for the eighteenth-century text panel on the east wall.

The outlines for the St. Christopher and the jester were clearly painted before the coloured areas were applied. In some areas the black was then reapplied to add emphasis.

The paintings are all lime-based with pigments applied in limewater or limewash onto a limewash ground. The colours used are mainly iron oxides in varying shades from yellow to red and carbon black.

There has been some later pink paint applied in the area of the jester which makes the painting slightly difficult to read.

The black/brown bands on the lower area of the jester's doublet may be a discoloured red such as vermilion or red lead and paint samples have been taken and sent for analysis to confirm whether this is the case (the results of the analysis will be sent in a later report).

6. CONDITION SURVEY AND DOCUMENTATION

Proper access provided by a fixed scaffold allowed a much more detailed examination of the east wall and east end of the north walls than had been possible prior to the initial condition survey. The following observations and photographs provide further insight from this examination.

6.i. Decalogue

The results of the survey revealed that there was a considerable amount of detachment of the plaster supporting the wall painting on the east wall and in many areas large voids were found behind the painting. The ceiling of the nave had been plastered with a hard gypsum plaster in the 1950's and this was found to have continued onto the east wall. On both the north and south ends of the east wall, large areas of cement and hard gypsum plaster were found beneath a later limewash.

The upper wall clearly retained a considerable amount of moisture in the internal structure and this unfortunately became more apparent once the hard cement and gypsum repairs were removed. The original mud plaster and pointing retained a significant amount of moisture. The ventilation grills on the ceiling above the east wall were found to be completely blocked with debris.

Salts and blistering paint were visible on the painted surface of the Decalogue. These only occurred on the upper wall, just below the area where the wall had been damp for some time - clearly a result of the wetting and drying process leading to the crystallization of salts on, or just behind, the painted surface.

A considerable number of vertical cracks were recorded on the surface. These must have occurred since the decalogue was painted in the eighteenth century and in some places the letters on either side of the crack had moved out of line with each other (see photo). The treatment of the lower wall involved removal of more recent repairs that revealed considerable historic movement in both the central arch and the north side arch in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century (see above).



FIG. 15

Detail showing the area at the top of the east wall. The ventilation grills were found to be completely blocked. Note the later hard cement fills at the top of the wall.



FIG 16.

View of the upper north side of the wall showing dark areas where later fills were retaining moisture

FIG. 17.

Detail showing the south side of the upper wall. Later limewash covers a number of inappropriate repairs that had already started to fail.



FIG 18. Left

Cracks and failing fills on the north side.



Fig 19

Later limewash covering a large cement and gypsum repair.



Fig.20

Detail showing failing original plaster covered with later limewash. Removal of the limewash to understand the extent of the original plaster revealed the gothic lettering.

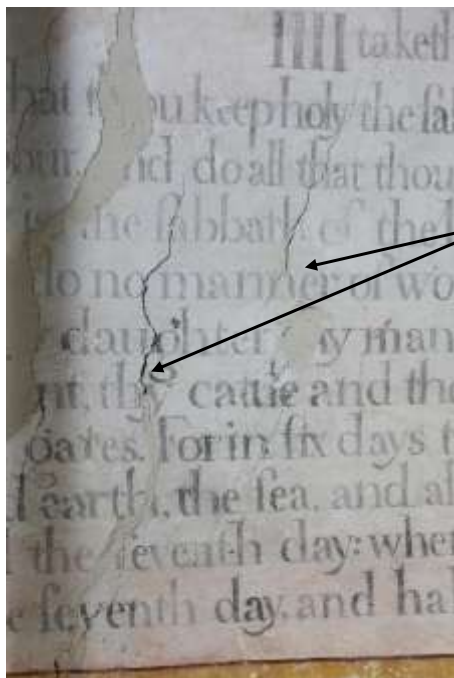


FIG 21

Detail of the central panel that was applied onto a later eighteenth-century plaster. A number of the previous repairs filling cracks had failed.



FIG. 22

Detail showing blistering limewash layers caused by salt crystallisation occurring just behind the paint layers

6.ii. Jester

As with the east wall a number of vertical cracks were recorded. It is thought that some of these may be related to the insertion of the tie bar in the nineteenth century.

The plaster was unstable at the bottom of the painting.

Numerous grout holes showed evidence of a previous grouting regime. However, several additional areas with loss of adhesion of the plaster were recorded. The paint layer was generally found to be stable.



FIG 23.

Detail showing detachment of the surviving fragments of plaster at the bottom of the wall painting.



FIG 24. Left

Detail showing cracks and previous grouting holes that were left unfilled.

FIG 25 below

Detail of the jester's head showing cracks in the plaster.



6.iii Fictive masonry

This area of wall was largely stable and there was clear evidence of previous grouting. However, there were still a number of lacunae with visible large voids behind the surface and areas of unstable plaster at the edge of the wall painting, adjacent to the later monument. Fine horizontal and vertical cracks were also recorded. In a number areas abrasion of the smooth plaster surface was recorded.

FIG 26

View showing the area of fictive masonry with visible lacunae and cracks at the edge of the plaster.



FIG 27

Detail showing abrasion and holes and the later sketch in red applied over the surface.



6.iv. St Christopher

Commented [RM1]:

The St. Christopher painting was applied onto an extremely uneven, thin plaster layer that covered the fictive masonry design. Areas of detachment of the thin plaster and flaking paint were recorded.

FIG 28

Detail of the surface showing areas of lifting paint.



6.v. Royal Achievement

Extensive loss of adhesion of the plaster and limewash layers was recorded making some areas extremely fragile. There were also numerous cracks in the surface.

The Royal arms are partially obscured by the later south gallery. The painting re-emerges higher up the wall where it is visible beneath the bench on the gallery. The painting in this upper area is in a rather precarious condition but this work was not included in this phase of work.



FIG 29

Detail showing numerous cracks in the surface.

FIG 30

Lifting paint at the edge of the painting.



6.iv. Porch - Graffiti of a ship on the east wall

A number of holes with deep voids were recorded and there was extensive detachment of the plaster on the north side of the area.

FIG. 31

Lacunae in the plaster



7. TREATMENT OF THE WALL PAINTINGS

7.i. Removal of superficial dirt and salts.

Superficial dirt and cobwebs were carefully removed from all areas of wall painting using a soft brush and hand-held vacuum cleaner on a low setting. The glass in front of the two paintings on the reveals of the chancel arch was taken down and all cobwebs and insects that had accumulated behind removed. The process of carefully cleaning the surface with a soft brush has a twofold purpose of enabling the first detailed examination of the surface.

Areas of salt efflorescence were carefully removed from the surface if there was no risk of losing paint flakes.

The glass in front of the heraldic paintings in the reveal of the chancel arch was removed and the area behind cleaned of all debris and insects that had accumulated on the surface of the paintings.



FIG. 32

Removing cobwebs using a soft brush and vacuum cleaner.

7.ii. Application of a temporary facing to provide support.

Japanese tissue was applied using a 2% solution of Tylose MH300 (Hydroxymethyl cellulose) to areas where the plaster has lost adhesion and required consolidating with a lime grout. Japanese tissue was also applied to areas where the paint layer was flaking and lifting away from the surface to provide temporary support prior to consolidating the paint that had lost adhesion.



FIG. 33 & 34 left and below

Facing paper applied to fragile areas of plaster that require grouting.



FIG 35

Facing paper applied adjacent to fragile areas where hard cement plasters are removed.

Note that the debris had also been removed from the ventilation grills using a small toll and a vacuum cleaner.

7.iii Removal of later inappropriate repairs

Various inappropriate repairs made from gypsum and cement were found beneath a later limewash on the east wall. In areas adjacent to fragile plaster small holes were drilled into the cement fills which enabled the fill to be carefully removed in small sections. In a number of areas earlier plaster and wall painting were found beneath the modern repairs. It had also covered some of the detail of the roll moulding on the south side blocked arch.



FIG 36

Detail showing the area at the top of the wall where the plaster has been removed. Much of the early mud-based pointing had been washed out of the joints by the continual moisture ingress.



FIG.37

Gradual removal of later failed repairs revealing large open cracks in the structure beneath.



FIG. 38 left

Removal of later cement and gypsum revealed earlier plaster beneath that was very similar to the terracotta/ pink layer used for the fictive masonry.

Fig 39 below

Wall on the north side of the east wall after removal of failed later plaster.



FIG 41 below

View showing the north side of the east wall after removal of the cement plaster.

FIG. 40 below

Holes drilled in the hard gypsum plaster so as not to damage the adjacent early plaster during removal.





FIG 42

View showing the detail of the moulding that was exposed after removal of the later cement plaster.

7.iv. Removal of later limewash layers.

It is the general policy of the CCT that no uncovering should be undertaken. However, there are some circumstances where it is necessary to remove later limewash layers in order to understand the extent of the painted area and in some cases to add support to the edges.

Later limewash was removed at the upper and lower edges of the Royal arms. Later fills and limewash layers that were failing were also removed from the chancel arch and the transitional arch on the north side of the east wall.



FIGS 43&44

Detail showing the soffit of the central arch before and after removal of later limewashes and repairs.



FIG 45

View showing the careful removal of overlying limewash layers from the border of the Royal achievement.



7.iv. Consolidation of the plaster

7.iv.a Grouting

Much of the treatment involved grouting the walls to re-adhere both the plaster. The work was largely undertaken using a hot lime grout with additional aggregate of varied grades depending on the depth of the void.

Deep voids on the east wall that had retained moisture were grouted using lime with a pozzolanic additive to aid setting. In areas where there was a large access hole it was possible to insert a lime and sand mortar to add additional structure to the support. Fresco presses were applied to the upper areas of the east wall to give support to the grouted areas and ensure that they were held in position while the grout cured.



FIG. 46

Grouting the lower area of the Royal achievement.



FIG. 47

Grouting to re- adhere the thin limewash layers on the St. Christopher wall painting.



FIG 48

Fresco presses applied to an area with a deep void that required a lot of grout.



FIG 49

Injecting a lime grout into the void on the north side of the ship graffiti.

6.iv.b Lime mortar repairs

The removal of gypsum and cement repairs on the east wall exposed a damp wall surface that had to be left for a number of weeks to dry out. In some areas the removal of later repairs revealed earlier schemes beneath. In these areas a dubbing coat was first applied to fill deep holes and mortar joints followed by two underlayers of lime plaster.

A significant amount of the work involved applying lime mortar repairs to stabilise fragile edges and lacunae in the plaster.

Hot lime mortar mixes were used, consisting of various grades of washed sand and Caen or Bath stone. Sands and stone dust were sieved for finer fills. A red Taunton sand was used for the fills on the fictive masonry design and the graffiti in the porch which also had a pink plaster.

FIGS 50 & 51

Applying terracotta-coloured fills to match the plaster in the fictive masonry design.



7.v. Consolidation of the paint layer

Flaking and detaching limewash layers were re-laid using a fine lime grout carefully inserted behind the flakes using either a brush or needle and syringe prior to them being pressed flat.

Areas where the salt was pushing the paint off the surface were carefully faced up with Japanese tissue applied using deionised water. A poultice of tissue was applied to the surface to draw out the salts prior to applying applying a 10% dispersion of Primal B60a – why was this used in this case?

7.vi. Cleaning

Gentle cleaning was undertaken to remove surface dirt using de-ionised water on cotton wool swabs.



FIG 52

Cleaning the surface with deionised water. The cotton wool swab is gently rolled over the surface.

7.vii. Aesthetic presentation

A limited amount of toning in was undertaken using Windsor and Newton artist quality water colours to reduce any distracting areas of loss.

A limewash tinted with earth pigments was applied to areas that had been previously limewashed with inappropriate colours and areas where the walls adjacent to the paintings were disfigured with dirt and soot layers from previous heating systems.



FIGS 53 & 54

Toning in losses in the paint layer.

8. FINAL PHOTOS

These photographs were taken before the scaffold was taken down.

FIG. 55

East wall upper area. Some of the fills were still not completely dry at this point.



FIG. 56

Detail of the decalogue after treatment.

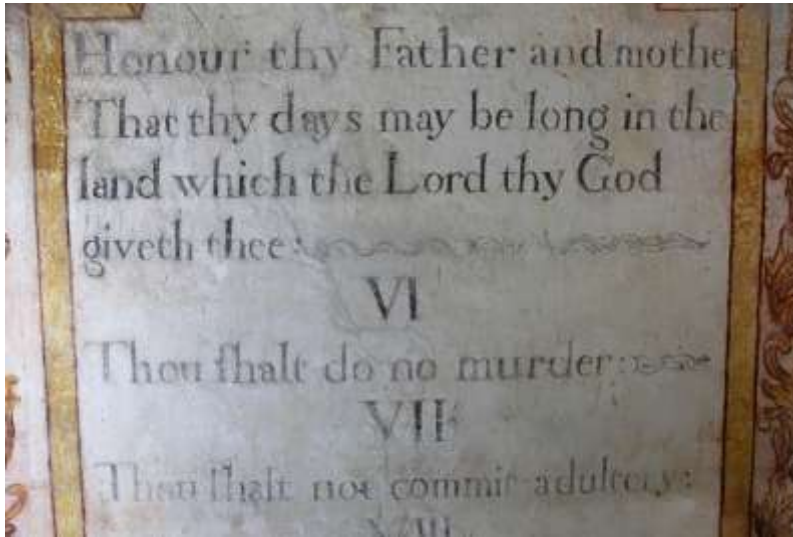


FIG.57

View of the upper area of the east wall showing earlier plaster now stabilised with new lime repairs.



FIG 58

The Jester after conservation treatment.



FIG. 28

View of the north side arch on the east wall following repairs and further uncovering of the original scheme.



FIG. 29

View of the north wall after conservation of the wall paintings and limewashing the adjacent walls.

FIG. 29

The fictive masonry wall painting after conservation



FIG. 30

Detail of the St. Christopher wall painting after conservation.



FIG 31

The Royal Achievement after conservation.

