

Wall-Paintings from a House in Upper High Street, Thame

By MALCOLM R. AIRS and JOHN G. RHODES

INTRODUCTION

A series of wall- and ceiling-paintings in 34 Upper High Street, Thame, found in the 1930s but subsequently believed destroyed, was rediscovered in 1968 and generously presented to the Oxford City and County Museum, Woodstock, by their owner, Mr. J.B. Braithwaite. The series dates from the third quarter of the sixteenth century, and provides some interesting clues to possible sources for the subject matter of domestic wall-painting at this period.



1 Numbers 34 and 35 Upper High Street, Thame: the street frontage. (Photo M. R. Airs).

PART I: 34 and 35 UPPER HIGH STREET, THAME.

BY MALCOLM R. AIRS

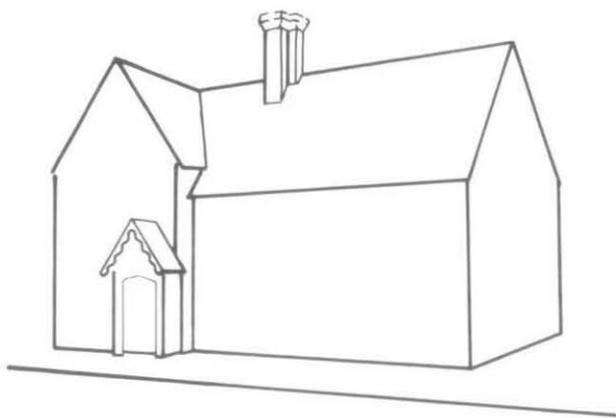
Number 34 Upper High Street is situated at the south-eastern end of the principal commercial street in Thame. The topographical evidence suggests that it lies within the

area of the new town founded by the Bishop of Lincoln in the late twelfth or early thirteenth centuries, but within one of the parts which were not fully developed with permanent structures before the post-medieval period.¹

Although the wall-paintings were located in the property presently known as number 34 Upper High Street, the original building also included part of number 35 and, accordingly, the two properties will be treated as one structure in the ensuing discussion (Plate 1). The building was originally fully timber-framed and its present form largely derived from four clearly distinguishable periods of building activity.

1. Sixteenth Century (Fig. 1)

The earliest surviving building on the site is a house of four bays aligned parallel to the street with a two-bay cross-wing situated at right angles at the south-eastern end (Figs 2 & 3). Confirmatory evidence that this was the full extent of the original building is provided at roof level where the outer face of the north-westernmost truss is clearly weathered. The structure is timber-framed in comparatively large panels strengthened by curved arch-braces, one of which remains externally visible in the cross-wing. Although the majority of the close-studded timber work displayed on the gable-end of the cross-wing is of modern date, it is probable that the framework was originally exposed. Despite the presence of a brick panel laid in a herringbone pattern below the collar of the north-western truss, it is almost certain that this was a secondary insertion and that the original infill was of wattle and daub. Most of the framework survives intact at upper storey level but, inevitably, parts of the ground storey framework have been removed to accommodate later changes in the use of the building. The front-wall of the parallel range has been raised some 4 feet in height to provide more spacious accommodation on the first floor, and it has been largely rebuilt in brick.

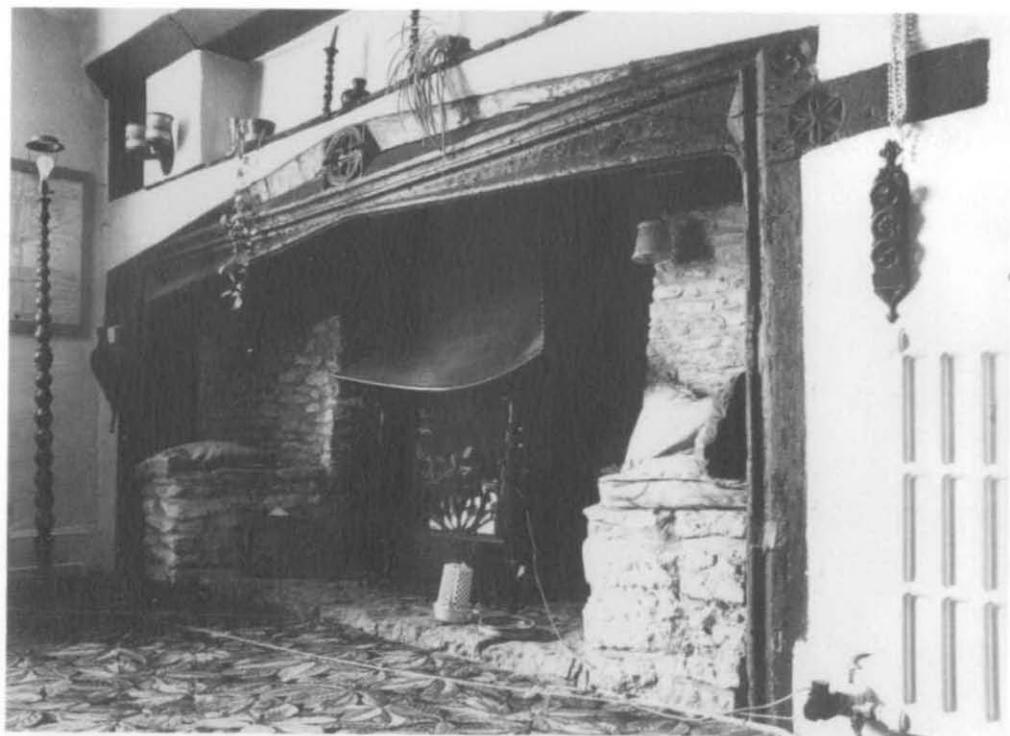


c.1560

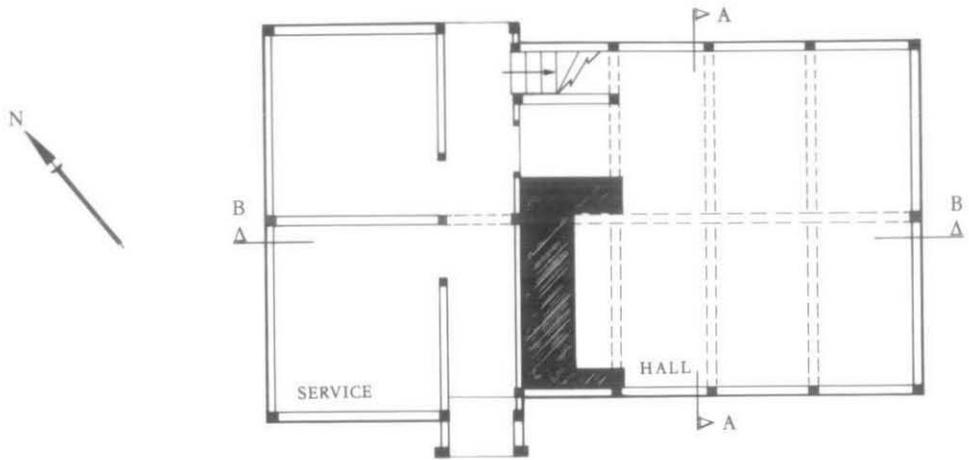
Fig. 1

¹ K. Rodwell (ed.), *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire* (1975), 152.

The building is of two storeys throughout and the roof trusses of both ranges are complete and totally free from smoke-blackening (Fig. 4). The roof over the range parallel to the street is an elaborate structure composed of five trusses, of which two were open and two framed the markedly narrower chimneystack bay. Apart from the north-west truss marking the end of the building, they are of arch-braced collar construction with no tie-beam and a double row of butt-purlins on each side (Fig. 5). The purlins are supported by curved wind-braces springing from the principal rafters to give the effect of a double series of pointed arches on both slopes of the roof. The top-plates are scarfed with squint-butted secret bridle scarf joints with two edge pegs. The roof to the cross-wing is a simpler variation on the same arch-braced collar type (Fig. 4). The central truss is open and there is only a single purlin to each slope supported by more-widely spaced wind-braces. It was originally ceiled above collar level. Both roofs are of an admirable standard of carpentry and were clearly designed to be exposed to view as part of the upper storey rooms. They have subsequently been ceiled over, although the full height of the cross-wing has recently been restored by the present owner. The large axial chimneystack of three flues which occupies the south-eastern bay of the parallel range is an original feature serving both ground and first floors of that range and the upper chamber of the cross wing. It is decorated on the ground floor with a large moulded wooden fireplace with a flat four-centred arch and elongated chamfered spandrels (Plate II). It is flanked by deeply carved roundels in a variety of patterns and is surmounted by a central quatrefoil. The spacious staircase shares the same bay and its framework at upper storey level bears traces of its original ochre colouring.

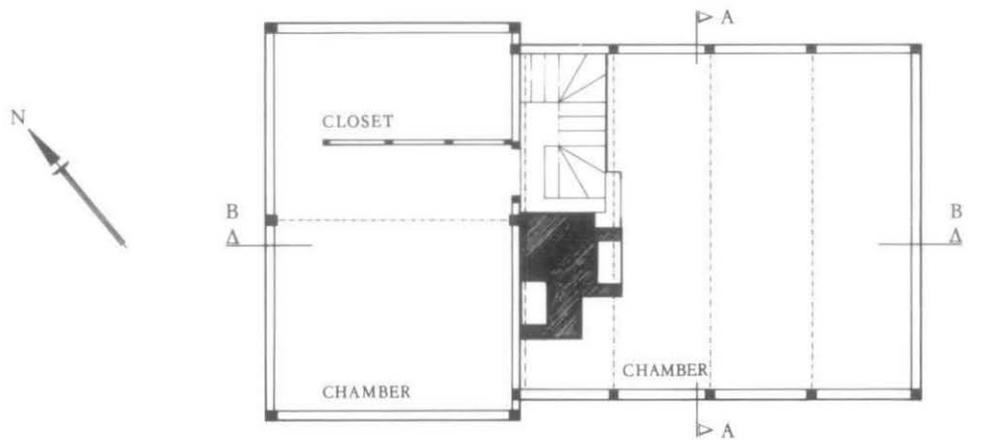


II Fireplace in the principal ground floor room of 35 Upper High Street, Thame. (Photo M. R. Airs)



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

Fig. 2



UPPER STOREY PLAN

Fig. 3

The projecting porch with its decorated barge-boards and spandrels appears to be an original feature and the rarity of such a survival was noted as early as the nineteenth century when Buckler sketched it on a visit to Thame.² The original arrangements provided for an entrance from the porch into a passage in the cross-wing with a service area to the left and a doorway beyond the stack leading into the large ground-floor hall, using the word in its medieval sense, on the right (Fig. 2). The service area was divided into two rooms in the conventional manner and the mutilated remains of both doorways have recently been discovered. The exposed framework in the passage was coloured with ochre. The staircase was beyond the hall door and led to the two principal chambers on the upper storey (Fig. 3) That to the right, above the hall, was probably the principal chamber judging by its size and the lavishness of its exposed carpentry. The chamber to the left in the cross-wing was considerably smaller, being less than 1½ bays in length. It was sub-divided by a timber framed partition to provide a closet in the remaining ½ bay to the south.

It was on the chamber side of this partition that the main wall-painting was found. The quality of the carpentry throughout, the spaciousness of the rooms, and the opulence of the decoration — whether it be the grand fireplace to the hall, the prodigal use of timber in the hall-chamber, or indeed, the wall-paintings in the smaller, more private, chamber over the cross-wing — all proclaim that the house was built for someone of marked wealth and status in Thame society. It has not proved possible to establish the identity of the builder on documentary grounds, and consequently any discussion of a date of construction for the building will be largely tentative and derived exclusively from the evidence of the structure.

By virtue of the fact that the building is of two storeys throughout and contains as an original feature a centrally placed chimneystack which heats all the principal rooms on both ground and upper storeys, it can be concluded that it is post-medieval in form. Nevertheless, a number of features are indicative of a comparatively early date. The large ground floor room suggests a reluctance to break completely with the medieval practice of providing a formal hall as an indication of status, as does the vestigial screens passage with service rooms beyond at the side of the stack. The passage occupies a considerable amount of space in the service wing, whereas if the entrance had been placed in front of the stack the house could have functioned in the lobby-entry form which had been fully developed in the area by c. 1600 at the latest. The arch-braced roof, although aesthetically impressive, must be seen as a conservative feature by the post-medieval period. An exact parallel to the Thame roof can be found in the Manor House at Ewelme, where the roof to the first floor hall is similarly adorned with double purlins and pointed wind-braces but continues into the domestic chambers in a single purlin form with gently-arched wind-braces.³ The Ewelme roof dates from shortly after 1430 and was built for the Earl of Suffolk, but the type had filtered down the social scale by c. 1480 when it was used at Manor Farm, Chalgrove.

It seems likely, therefore, that the building was constructed at an immediately post-medieval date, probably early in the second half of the sixteenth century. Recent research into the chronology of scarf-joints in the area would appear to confirm that the squint-butted secret-bridled joint found in the house is likely to be of that period.⁴ Consequently it is probable that the wall-paintings which are the principal subject of this paper are

² BL Add.MS.36,436, f.535.

³ M. Airs, 'Ewelme', *Archaeological Journal*, 135 (1978) 280.

⁴ C.R.J. Currie, 'Scarf-joints in the North Berkshire and Oxford Area', *Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 185.

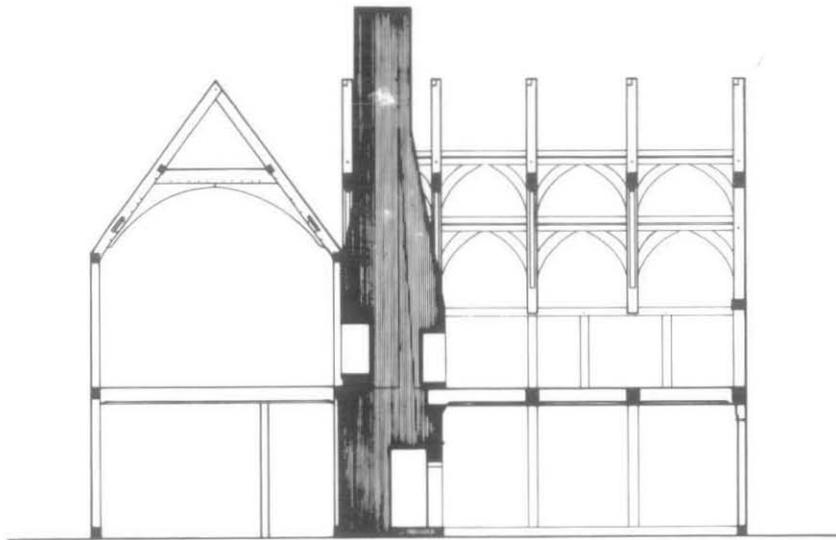


Fig. 4 SECTION B-B

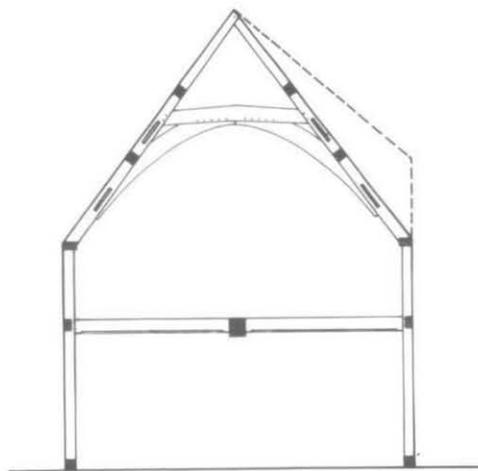


Fig. 5 SECTION A-A



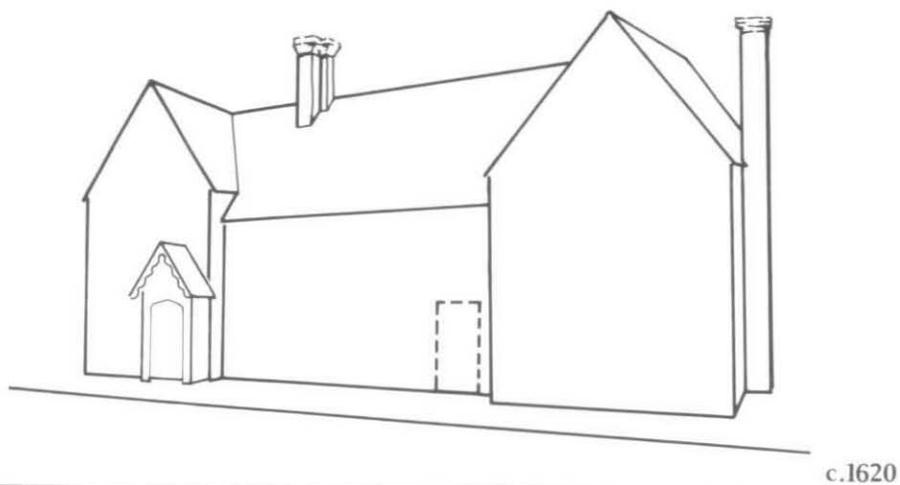


Fig. 6

contemporary or nearly-contemporary with the construction of the building in which they were found.

2. *Early Seventeenth Century* (Fig. 6)

The north-western wing was added early in the seventeenth century, either to compensate for the prodigal use of space in the original building at a time when the domestic trend was towards the provision of a greater number of more private rooms with specialised functions, or possibly, as a result of the early sub-division of the property into two units.

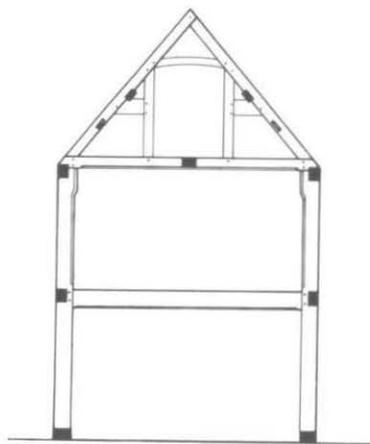


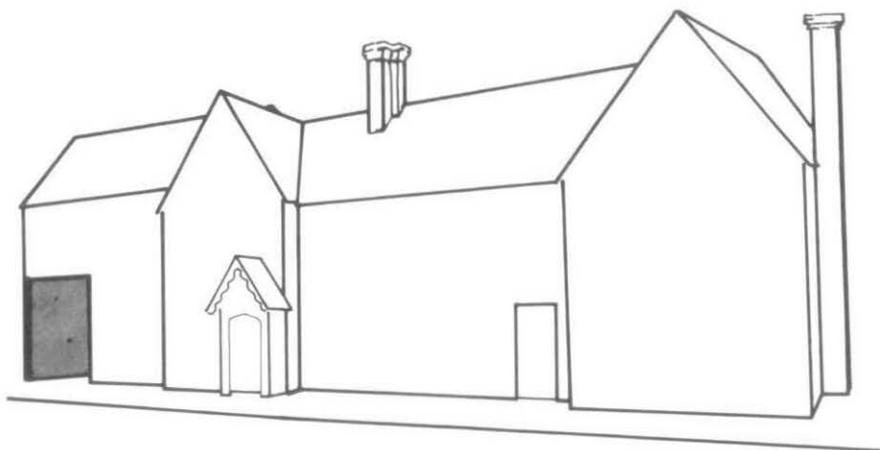
Fig. 7

SECTION : WEST WING



It is a timber-framed structure of two bays, aligned at right-angles to the street, and so designed as to produce a symmetrical appearance in conjunction with the original building. Despite this superficial symmetry, additional accommodation was provided in the new wing by ceiling over the first floor rooms and inserting an attic storey in the roof space lit from the gable ends. The roof structure was never intended to be open to view from an important room, and it differs considerably from the sixteenth-century roofs already described (Fig. 7). It is of proper tie-beam construction with substantial queen-posts rising to the principal rafters and surmounted by a curved collar. The single through purlins are trapped in the angles between the principals and the horizontal queen-post ties and are strengthened by curved wind-braces. The queen-post construction allows of easy access between the two bays at attic level.

The two principal floors are heated by a massive chimneystack set on the outside of the north-west wall. A characteristic early seventeenth-century stone fireplace has recently been discovered in the ground floor front room. It has a flat four-centred arch decorated with prolific roll-moulding extending across the full width of the opening. The triangular spandrels are blank. Although it has once again been concealed from view, it remains *in situ*.



c. 1680

Fig. 8

3. *Late Seventeenth Century* (Fig. 8)

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the building was further extended by the addition of a wing at the south-eastern end placed parallel with the street and containing a tall wagon-entrance in its final bay. The higher eaves level of the new wing possibly provided the stimulus to raise the front wall of the original building, although the fashionable dictates of contemporary ideas of seemly proportion no doubt acted as the underlying inspiration. It is probable that the front elevation was rendered at the same time in a successful attempt to disguise the old-fashioned and, by then, socially inferior timber framework.

4. *Nineteenth Century*

Very little alteration seems to have taken place in the building during the eighteenth century, and the changes brought by the nineteenth century were mainly cosmetic. The north-west corner of the north-western wing was extended outwards to provide a closet or alcove at the side of the chimney breast, and various single-storey service buildings were attached at the rear. Sometime after 1850⁵ the gable end of the south-eastern wing was given its present timber framed appearance and *c.* 1897 a shop-front was inserted to number 34 when the ground floor was converted into a bicycle shop.⁶ The shop-front was removed in 1979 when the present brick facade was constructed.

Number 34 was restored in 1977 and extended in 1979 by the present owner, Mr. S. Dyson, and number 35 was refurbished in 1979 by Mr. and Mrs. M.J. Neal.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The examination and recording of the building has taken place over a number of years and I am extremely grateful to the previous owners, Mrs E.K. Burbridge and Mr. J.B. Braithwaite, and the current owners Mr and Mrs M.J. Neal and Mr S. Dyson, for their kindness in granting me access. The late Mrs Burbridge, in particular, made my visits a pleasure. I am indebted to Roger Mant for his meticulous survey and the production of the finished drawings.

PART II: THE WALL PAINTINGS

By JOHN G. RHODES

Introduction

The series of wall paintings at 34, Upper High Street, Thame, first came to light this century in the 1930s when they were published by Philip M. Johnston⁷ and Francis W. Reader.⁸ Neither actually saw the paintings, basing their brief descriptions on photographs, and Reader, who was aware only of one section of the series, believed the paintings to have been destroyed by the time of his article, which may well account for the general absence of further notice after that date. Unlike other domestic wall-paintings in Oxfordshire, they are not well documented.⁹

The paintings, however, survived to be rediscovered in 1968. At that time their owner, Mr. J.B. Braithwaite, recognising that they were in the circumstances at risk of destruction and that restoration *in situ* was not practicable, generously offered them to the Oxford City and County Museum, enabling them to be preserved and put on display at the County Museum in Woodstock. The removal of all the paintings then apparent was

⁵ J.H. Brown & W. Ernest, *A History of Thame* (Thame, 1935), photograph facing p.176.

⁶ Letter from Mrs Burbridge, 4 September 1974.

⁷ Philip M. Johnston, 'Mural Paintings in Houses, with special reference to recent discoveries at Stratford-on-Avon and Oxford', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* xxxvii (New Series) (1932), 75.

⁸ Francis W. Reader, 'Tudor Domestic Wall Paintings, Part II', *Archaeological Journal* xciii (1936), 220.

⁹ See, for example (i) Johnston, 'Mural Paintings in Houses, etc.'; (ii) W.A. Pantin and E. Clive Rouse on 'The Golden Cross, Oxford', *Oxoniensia* xx (1955), 46.;(iii) E. Clive Rouse, 'Some Domestic Paintings in Oxford', *Oxoniensia* xxxvii (1972), 198.

carried out during 1972 and is described in a Technical Appendix. They consisted of four main elements (described below, Sections A-D) enclosed when discovered in the roof space above the first floor room in the sixteenth century cross wing. Originally, however, they formed part of a decorative scheme on the ceiling and upper walls of this room when it was open to collar beam level and served as a private chamber for the owner of the house. The ceiling over of the room at a lower level in the seventeenth century hid the paintings from view and providentially preserved them.

Subsequent to their removal, however, the restoration of the room to its original form by new owners in 1977 discovered, at and just below the level of the inserted ceiling, the lowest portion of the main painting, Section A, together with parts of a decorative border, confirming that the whole scheme had once formed a frieze around the upper portions of the chamber. These latter elements will be conserved as part of the restoration of the room.

Description

Technique

The greater part of the paintings was carried out in black line on a white ground, on a lime plaster containing a high proportion of hair filler. There are indications that the paint was applied as a distemper, the medium consisting of an animal protein, size or casein, with some drying oil, forming a water based emulsion. A high pigment-to-medium ratio would have resulted in a very matt finish, which might suggest that the fresco-secco technique of painting on dry plaster with lime water was used. The black pigment, however, appears to be carbon black, a greasy pigment which would be difficult to apply with lime water alone. The condition of the paint layer when found may well have been caused by bio-deterioration of the medium.¹⁰

In view of the earlier description of the 'red devil'¹¹ the paint layer was carefully examined with a hand magnifying lens, but only black pigment on a white lime background was discernible in those portions removed in 1972.

The Paintings (Fig. 9)

Section A

The main surviving section of the scheme (Plate III, Museum Accession No. 5989) was on the trapezoid shaped infill, 4.7 metres wide \times 1.45 metres high, above the stud partition dividing the chamber from the closet. The central element is a circular cartouche set in an elaborate strapwork surround which is rendered three-dimensionally though without a clear grasp of the perspective principles involved. Placed centrally above the cartouche is a lion's head with streamers running from each ear. Within the cartouche is a black letter inscription according with St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans Chapter 11, verses 33-36 in the Authorised Version, but apparently taken from an earlier version:

¹⁰ I am indebted to Miss Pamela Pratt of the London Institute of Archaeology for this note on the technique.

¹¹ Johnston, *op.cit.*, 85.

The First E
of Saint Paul to ye (?Romans)
O the depnes of the abundant
Wisdom of God: how uncerchable
are his iudgements & his wayes paste
finding out: for who hathe knowen ye
minde of ye Lord? Or who was his con
celoure? Other who hathe given unto
him first that he might be recompencyd a
gayne? For of him, and through him
and for him are all things
To him be glory for
ever and ever
Amen

To the left of the cartouche the extreme edge of the painting was destroyed in the original entry into the roof space which discovered the series. There remains an arm and hand grasping the neck of a stringed instrument, half of the body of which, together with the tip of the bow, has also survived, allowing it to be identified as a bass viol. Its top is joined to the cartouche surround by a garland of leaves. At the base of this part of the

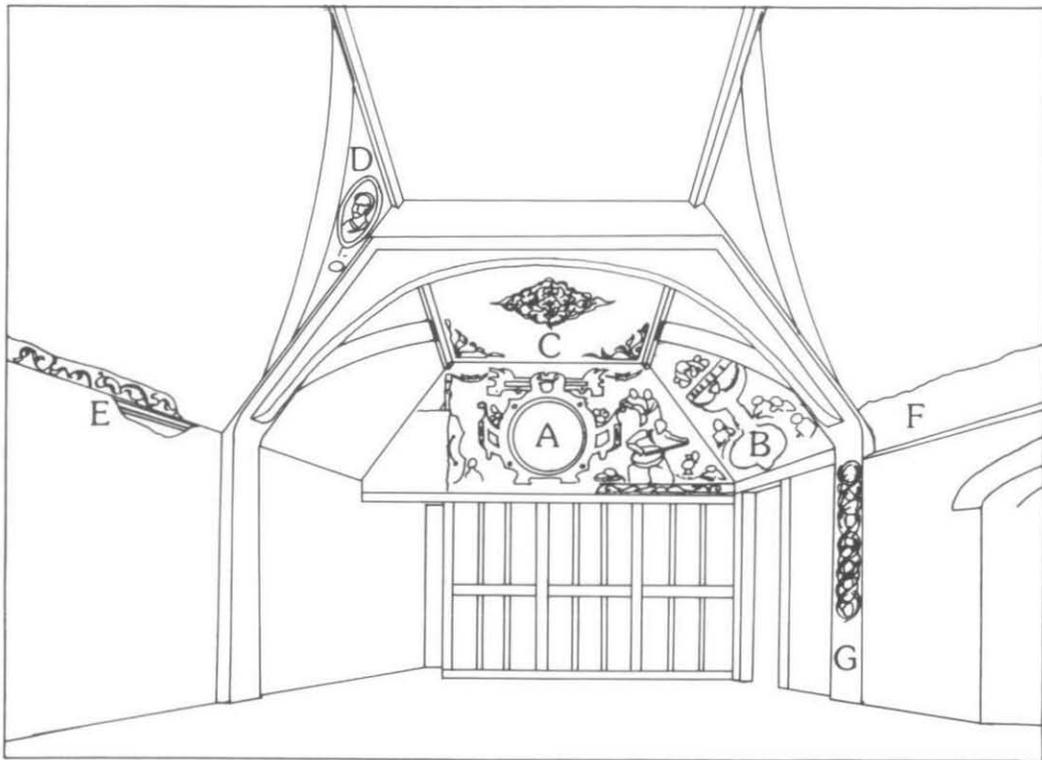


Fig. 9



III Main section of wall-painting (Section A) in situ. (Photo D. Carpenter).

picture a small boy rests looking up towards the viol player. To the right of the cartouche sits a woman, dressed in flowing drapery and tuning what must, although casually drawn and with the wrong number of strings (eight), be intended as a lute. Behind the woman stand two boys, singing from an opened musical score, beneath a garland which matches that on the left hand side except that one end floats free. Beside the woman's right knee is a sleeping boy, his head resting on crossed arms, while another sleeps in the corner to her left beyond a round bodied jug, apparently of metal, with a high curved handle and pedestal foot.

The lower edge to this painting, discovered in 1977 and still in situ, contains the base of the cartouche surround with two splayed 'feet', the bottom edge of the woman's dress, the right leg of the boy sleeping to her right, and the stand for the metal jug, embellished with a beaded swag. The right hand half of a decorative border of running leaf scroll between horizontal lines was also revealed, its lower edge at 2.3 metres above floor level.

Section B (Plate IV, Museum Accession No. 5991)

To the right of this main section and projecting at right angles to it is a smaller, triangular section of painting, 1.92 metres high \times 1.31 metres wide at the base, enclosed between the top of the wall and a wind brace springing from the main truss. It is, again, largely black line on a white ground, although the oval cartouche at its base carries an inscription in white reserved against a black ground. This inscription as it survives is less completely readable than that in Section A, although the following has been suggested by Dr. P.T.V.M. Chaplais:¹²

'Desire nothing of God save
what is . . . table. S(ci)ence is
had by diligence. But . . . rea . . .
wisdom cometh of God.'

The text is not biblical, and searches for a source elsewhere have not to date proved productive. The possibility remains that it may have been taken from a theological treatise on prayers, though it may simply have been a favourite 'wise saying' of whoever commissioned the painting. The lower edge of the cartouche is interrupted by the face of an elderly woman bearing a cheerful and benign expression. Above the cartouche is a section of strapwork broadening into a semicircular structure with fluted border, containing the mask of a lion with beaded swags running from its jaws. Above this in the apex of a triangular field a figure sprawls forwards, apparently asleep, across a mound of fruit with melons or pumpkins as its base. To the left of the cartouche leans a sleeping figure, while a group of three further figures sleeps to the right.

Section C (Plate V, Museum Accession No. 5990).

On the rectangular section of flat ceiling, 1.92 metres \times 1.31 metres, above the main painting and between it and the main truss are pieces of purely decorative painting, in black line on white, using intertwined running leaf motifs. The main element is an elaborate central lozenge with two smaller and simpler triangular designs in the two corners nearest to the main painting.

¹² Letter from Dr. Chaplais dated 22 February, 1976.



IV Secondary section of painting (Section B) after removal and restoration. (Photo J. Brasnett).



V Ceiling painting (Section C) after removal and restoration. (Photo J. Brasnett).

Section D (Plate VI, Museum Accession No. 5992).

To the left of the main Section A but separated from it by the main truss is a further triangular section enclosed between truss, wind brace and purlin, which differs from the rest of the series in style and technique; instead of using black line on white ground it is executed in solid grey with white highlights. The main subject is the head and shoulders of a youth, framed in a roundel, but there are also the traces of other subjects including the possibility of lettering on the rim of the roundel, though quite indecipherable. It has not been possible to display this section at the museum.

Below this last section, at the junction of the former sloping ceiling and the left hand wall of the room, a further length of decorative border (Fig. 9, Section E) some 1.90 metres long, similar to that bordering Section A and at the same height, was discovered in 1977 (Plate VII); above this border the whole of the original sloping ceiling below the wind braces was destroyed by the addition of the late seventeenth century wing. The restoration work also revealed, at the base of the sloping ceiling above the stepped top of the brick chimney breast on the right hand side of the room, a length of coved plasterwork bearing a red ochre colouration (Fig. 9, Section F). A further area of red ochre lay on the framing on the staircase side of the doorway into the room and within the service passage on the ground floor. This red colouring is interesting in view of Johnston's mention of the 'red devil' though it occurs in areas which could not have been known to him in 1932, and it was a common treatment of exposed internal timber framework in the sixteenth century.

In addition to the wall and ceiling paintings on plaster described above, at least one revealed structural timber carried decoration: the post supporting the right hand base of the truss, next to the brick stack, is decorated on the upper two-thirds of its face with a



VI Secondary section of painting (Section D) after removal and restoration. (Photo J. Brasnett)



VII Portion of decorative border (Section E) revealed in 1977 at junction of wall and sloping ceiling below Section D, in situ. (Photo J. Hall).

well-rounded guilloche design in white and black on the bare wood (Plate VIII, Fig 9, Section G). Although no other traces of painting were found on surviving plaster or timberwork of the sixteenth-century room, most of the available surfaces had in fact been destroyed, and it is likely that the original scheme once extended to these surfaces too, covering with a range of subjects the whole of the compartmentalised ceiling and wall areas above the level of the border.

Discussion

Domestic Wall-Paintings of the English Renaissance

Domestic wall-paintings are referred to as familiar objects by Shakespeare in two of his plays, in both cases at inns. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Act IV, Sc. v, the Host of the Garter Inn at Windsor describes Falstaff's room thus:

'There's his chamber . . . 'tis painted about with the story of the Prodigal, fresh and new . . .'

In the second part of *Henry IV*, Act II, Sc. i, Falstaff consoles the Hostess over the prospect of having to pawn her tapestries by saying:-

' . . . and for thy walls, a pretty slight drollery, or the story of the prodigal, or the German hunting in waterwork, is worth a thousand of these bed-hangings and these fly-bitten tapestries.'¹³

¹³ Johnston, *op.cit.*, 85.



VIII Decorative treatment on post below right end of main truss. (Section G). (Photo J. Hall).

As Mr. Edward Croft-Murray points out,¹⁴ the presence of wall-paintings at an inn is also referred to in William Bullein's *A Dialogue . . . against the Feuer Pestilence* (1564, but not published until 1573) in which the protagonists put up at an inn, 'its walls and hangings decorated with all sorts of edifying paintings — politico-religious allegories, portraits (including one of Thomas Cromwell) and wise sayings.'

Wall-paintings would also be used in those private houses of the middle-classes where tapestries or wooden panelling would have been too expensive and where 'painted cloths' were not preferred.¹⁵ They were seldom of a high level of technical accomplishment. Geometrical patterns or formal designs of flowers were often accompanied by verses of a religious or moral character, generally in black letter. In the latter part of the sixteenth century fresh material was provided by Flemish and German engraved designs, sometimes from Italian originals then circulating in England.¹⁶ Polychrome was rare; it was what the late Professor E.W. Tristram has called 'the black manner' which was popular.¹⁷ John Leland, writing c. 1540 recorded that

'The Olde House of the Cheyneis (Chenies, Bucks). is so translated by my Lorde Russel . . . that little or nothing of it yn a maner remaynith on-translated: . . . The house is within Diverse Places richely paintid with antique Workes of White and Blak.'¹⁸

Where Biblical events, for example, were illustrated, they would be shown in contemporary costume, like the Tobit story at the White Swan Hotel, Stratford-on-Avon.¹⁹ Classical motifs, such as columns and arches, might also be employed.²⁰

It has already been suggested that the Thame wall-paintings formed a frieze. Mr. Croft-Murray²¹ mentions that 'though the layout of this homely kind of decoration was very haphazard on account of the irregular structure of the rooms, an attempt was often made at some rudimentary order by arranging the historiated compartments as a frieze at the top of the wall. The frieze . . . was certainly a most important feature in Tudor wall decoration. Besides figure subjects it could be made up of landscapes, heraldry, grotesques, or moral sayings and texts in cartouches. But whatever its treatment, it always stood out very noticeably, and sometimes contrasted strongly with the wall below, which, when not wainscotted, was covered with some repetitive pattern . . .' Among Mr. Croft-Murray's examples is a local one, the Painted Room at No. 3 Cornmarket Street, Oxford, where a frieze of texts in cartouches surmounts a repetitive, though rich, pattern; similar examples exist at Burford.

The domestic use of wall-painting — at any rate where monochrome was concerned — tended to die out by the end of the reign of James I (1625), perhaps as a result of the increased use of wood-panelling²² though, in addition to the special hazards to which

¹⁴ E. Croft-Murray *Decorative Painting in England 1537-1837*, i, 1962.

¹⁵ See Reader, op.cit., 118.

¹⁶ J.F.A. Roberts 'English Wall Paintings after Italian Engravings' *Burlington Magazine*, lxxvii (1941) 86-92. The article deals in particular with the Cupid & Psyche paintings at Hill Hall, Essex, some of which are now at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

¹⁷ Note by E.W. Tristram on the gift by Lord Kitchener to the Victoria & Albert Museum of painted plaster from Broome House, *Burlington Magazine*, xxix (1916), 171.

¹⁸ *The Itinerary of John Leland the Antiquary*, 3rd Edition, Oxford 1768, i, 117.

¹⁹ Johnston, op.cit.

²⁰ J. Buxton, *Elizabethan Taste*, (1963) 93-94.

²¹ Croft-Murray, op.cit. 29.

²² M. Jourdain, *English Decoration and Furniture of the Early Renaissance*, (1924), 89. Reference is also made in this work to a large number of English wall-paintings then extant.

wall-paintings are subject, the general hazards of our damp climate might have been a contributory factor.²³

The Subject Matter of the Thame Paintings

To take first the main Section A of the series as including the widest range of diverse elements, these elements divide naturally into two — the inscription itself, and its surrounding group of figures either engaged directly in the production of music or in some way affected by it. The text from Romans is based on Tyndale's translation, and the Matthew Bible of 1537, which brought together the best work of Tyndale and Coverdale, appears because of its spelling to be the most likely source, though not identical to the Thame text. Between 1535 and 1539 the only available English translation was that of Tyndale, or edited versions of it, but the impact of the Great Bible in 1539 means that few editions of Tyndale's translation appeared in later years; that of 1566 was the last until 1836. It would therefore seem probable that the painting was not done before 1537, and although whoever commissioned the painting may have had a special affection for the Matthew version which makes difficult the setting of a date by which the painting must have been completed, it is likely on this evidence to have been not too long after 1539 rather than much later in the sixteenth century. There remains the problem that the Thame text seems to be headed 'The First E(pistle) of Saint Paule to ye (Romans),' implying the existence of a second epistle, which is not known in any version. Two possible suggestions have been put forward, that Romans traditionally appears as the first of St. Paul's epistles, and that a comma is implied after 'Paule', or that there is a natural break in Romans after Chapter 11 which may in the sixteenth century have led on occasion to reference to First and Second Epistles; the suggestions are, however, only tentative ones. Perhaps the explanation of this problem, together with the variation in spelling as against the Matthew version, lies in the commissioner of the painting specifying a favourite but incompletely remembered text to a painter working without reference to the original.

There seems to be little or no relationship between the theme of the text and its musical surroundings, which appear to be entirely secular. A woman with a lute symbolizes music in a woodcut by Lucas Cranach the Elder on the title page of the *Tenorstimmbuch des Novus opus musicum* (1545) by Sixt Dietrich,²⁴ and has a similar function on the title page of William Cunningham's *Cosmographical Glasse* published by John Day in 1559, which was subsequently used with very little alteration as the title page of books of music by Morley, Dowland and Rosseter. Both viol and lute, especially the latter, appear frequently in renaissance painting, such as the murals by Francesco del Cossa (1470) in the Salone dei Mesi at the Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara; the instruments also appear in Holbein's 'The Ambassadors' (1532/3) in the National Gallery, London. Moreover, in the contemporary language of emblems the lute — provided its strings were unbroken — signified concord; when, as in 'The Ambassadors' a string is broken, discord is signified.

Accepting that the two instruments are a bass viol and a lute, the former is too incompletely preserved and the latter too casually depicted to be of much help in dating. The lute cannot be accurate, its outline vaguely recalling the fifteenth century but quite

²³ Buxton, *op.cit.* 93.

²⁴ See F. Blume, *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, iii (1954) 450 for a reproduction.

unrealistic for the mid-late sixteenth century. The bass viol could be from about 1560 onwards and is rather Italian looking.²⁵

Though the painting does not allow the sheet music from which the two boys are singing to be identified, there were Continental publications from about 1570 onwards of secular songs — with often very worldly texts — with parts for lute and for two or more voices, and these might well have been performed with the bass viol in the bass part. English specimens of such music were rarer and later. The two boys, however, perhaps suggest church music, but evidence for religious pieces with lute accompaniment is lacking. Perhaps, therefore, the design was intended to suggest the various elements of music or some sort of allegory. The only remaining elements potentially of some help in dating are the woman's clothes, which certainly seem to be of a general mid sixteenth-century form, and the jug to her left. Nothing of exactly the design or proportions of the jug is known, and it appears to be highly stylised and simplified to produce something of a vaguely second half of sixteenth century character.²⁶ The type of strapwork employed as surround to the cartouche is of similarly little help in close dating; like the jug it is generalised European renaissance in character.

The impression, then, is of a rather loose amalgam of diverse musical and other elements, implying several different sources of inspiration and suggesting European rather than English influences. It has already been mentioned that copying was to be expected in wall paintings, and that sources could be Continental. The general appearance of the painting, indeed, strongly suggests that it was copied from an engraved original.

In this context, it is worth turning for a moment to the ceiling painting with its panels of elaborate leaf-scroll in black on white. While the central lozenge pattern is not a slavish copy of any of them, it does bear a remarkably close affinity to some of the designs in a pattern book published in London 1548, *Morysse and Damashin renewed and encreased very profitable for Goldsmaythes and Embroiderars* by Thomas Geminus, the earliest line-engraver working in England.²⁷ If the painter of the Thame series had seen this book, then its title page, with elaborate cartouche with fruit packed into the spaces of the strapwork, would itself have suggested the use of these motifs to him for the main painting. But in addition to this, printed music of the sixteenth century was sometimes accompanied by engraved title pages, or covers, of great intricacy of design, and the natural supposition is that, if any copying was done by the painter, this would be his most likely source with, of course, the title of the music in the cartouche replaced by the text from Romans. Against this there is the problem referred to, that although works for the ensemble depicted would have been available to the painter, it is unlikely that young boys would be expected to sing them, while the church music appropriate to young boys was not written for the ensemble in question. However, just as the musical contradictions might be resolved in the theory that the intention was to suggest a musical amalgam or allegory, so the design itself might be a composite one, with inspiration being drawn from several music title pages.

²⁵ Letter dated 3rd October 1974 from Mr. Anthony Baines.

²⁶ Letter dated 24th June 1975 from Mr. J.K.D. Cooper, Department of Metalwork, Victoria & Albert Museum.

²⁷ Reproduced in A.M. Hind, *Engraving in England in the 16th and 17th centuries, I The Tudor Period*. (1952) plates 25-27. 'Morysse' = Moorish = arabesques; 'Damashin' = Damascene. For a consideration of Thomas Geminus in the light of the Thame ceiling designs see J. Edwards 'Morysse and Damashin; A Source for a Ceiling', *Oxford Art Journal* 3 (1979), 64.

The only modern work devoted exclusively to decorative music title pages²⁸ reproduces 55 designs from the sixteenth century, and though none of these is in any sense an original for the Thame painting, the impression of a distinct affinity of inspiration is a strong one. While recognising that the published selection is a subjective one, this impression may be given some degree of statistical support by noting the incidence of the eight main elements in the main painting (lute; viol; the fact of the instruments being played; cartouche; small boys; sheet music; lion's head; fruit) in the twenty seven published designs which include either a lute or a bass viol. Of these twenty-seven, twenty-three have a lute, twenty two a viol, eighteen both lute and viol; twenty show one or both instruments being played, thirteen have a cartouche, twelve show small boys, fourteen show sheet music, twelve include fruit and six have one or more lion's heads.

Although none of the twenty seven designs has all the elements of the main Thame painting, at least five have seven of these elements. The impression that published title pages of this nature were available as models to the Thame painter is supported by the content of the subsidiary painting, Section B, with, again, a cartouche surmounted by fruit, and with the incidence of the lion's mask. Although none of the elements here is specifically musical, the motif of the sleeping figures, used in the main painting, repeats what may simply have been a wry observation on the part of the painter at the soporific effect of music. The only fresh element is the lively face of the elderly woman. Otherwise, however, the impression is of the filling up of the awkward shape of available ceiling here with elements already used in the main painting. At the same time opportunity was taken to include a favourite saying which, although incompletely readable, seems to echo the theme of the text from Romans — the Wisdom of God.

If, as seems highly probable, the design of the main Thame painting was made up of elements taken from a number of different musical title pages, the identification of the sources used seems unlikely now to be possible, given the ephemeral nature of such publications. The designs reproduced by Fraenkel are mostly European, and although by the last quarter of the sixteenth century such musical titles were being produced in England, the Continental affinities of some of the elements, together with the generally European liveliness of the painting which makes an English source seem less likely, support the idea of a rather earlier, European source for the engravings used.

Dating

Both Reader and Johnston dated the Thame paintings as having been produced in the second half of the sixteenth century, Johnston putting them 'about 1560' and Reader saying 'the costumes are not of such definite character to fix precisely, but they indicate a date between 1550 and 1580'. The only specialist in English wall-paintings known to have inspected the paintings *in situ*, Mr. E. Clive Rouse,²⁹ dates them 'as showing people of about the mid-sixteenth century in contemporary costume.' The additional light thrown on the question of dating by the Biblical quotation, the musical instruments, the publication dates of potential sources in pattern and music books, together with the jug, while not allowing for close dating, all lend support to the idea of the paintings being produced during the third quarter of the sixteenth century, a date range which fits in well with the

²⁸ Gottfried S. Fraenkel, *Decorative Music Title Pages* (1968). See also A.F. Johnson, *One Hundred Title Pages 1500-1800* (1928); *German Renaissance Title Borders*, (1929); *Catalogue of Engraved and Etched English Title Pages to 1691*, (1934).

²⁹ Letter of 26th November 1968 to Mr. D.E. Montague.

suggested date for the building of the house. They thus represent a contemporary decorative scheme for a new house, commissioned by the unknown man for whom the house was built. Little has been or can be said about the artist responsible for the work. The variations in technical competence and style apparent within the scheme may imply that more than one artist was anyway engaged on their production; the purely decorative leaf-motif treatment of the flat ceiling and the borders, together with the competently executed inscriptions, for instance, display much more controlled and accomplished work than the loose, but vigorous, handling of the figural and strapwork elements. The low rate of survival of such decorative schemes, often anyway regarded only as cheap substitutes for hangings, does not easily allow the identification of individuals or schools where no documentary evidence has survived. However, the relative frequency of decorative painted plaster in the sixteenth century, evidenced by Croft Murray³⁰ implies the existence of a body of painters, presumably itinerant and not all of high technical competence, with a stock of pattern books and other source material from which their clients could select subjects while specifying their own texts for inclusion, and we must imagine the Thame series as having been produced through such an arrangement.

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TECHNICAL APPENDIX

THE TRANSFER AND CONSERVATION OF THE PAINTINGS

By PAMELA PRATT and A. SHISHTAWI

Removal and Reconstruction

Negotiations for the removal of the paintings began in 1969 and presented no difficulty, except for the perennial problem of finance. Fortunately only the cost of removal and reconstruction arose; the paintings themselves were generously donated by Mr. Braithwaite. All the arrangements for financing the operation were completed by 1972. Some saving was effected on insurance premiums, the museum's insurers having declined the risk.

The conservation team included Miss Pamela Pratt and Miss Elizabeth Pye of the Institute of Archaeology, London University, Mr. Ahmed Shishtawi, Conservation

³⁰ Croft-Murray, *op.cit.*, 28.

Officer, and Mr. David Smith, Chief Technician, of the Oxford City and County Museum.

A photographic record of the paintings, before removal, was made to serve as a guide for later reconstruction. To ensure that there would be no damage to the structure of the house during the transfer of the paintings, a platform was built across part of the attic to provide a safe working area. Acrow props were used to support the attic floor from below. Lighting was provided by long leads from the nearest electrical main.

The removal of the paintings

The transfer of the paintings started on 5th April, 1972. Because of uncertainty over the condition of the wall support and also because access to the attic area was through a hatchway only 2ft. square, it was decided to use a transfer technique known as 'Strappo'. This is a method of removing the paint layer alone, a thickness of approximately 2 mm., leaving the plaster ground intact. It enables the conservator to remove large areas of painting in one operation, thus eliminating the risk of damaging the painted surface by cutting it into sections. Paintings lifted in this way can be rolled up like large scrolls making it possible to pass them through quite small openings. The choice of the Strappo method for transferring the Thame wall paintings enabled the team to remove individual paintings intact without the use of any heavy equipment, which might have threatened the safety of the fabric of the building.

Procedure

A preliminary examination was made of the paint surface. Surface dirt and dust was removed by careful brushing with a soft brush. As the pigment was in a powdery condition in some areas, the surface was consolidated with a 5% solution of soluble nylon in industrial methylated spirits.

Polyvinyl/acetate emulsion was chosen as the adhesive to attach layers of material to the paint layer to act as a support during the removal operation. Two layers of material, known as facings, were used; the first a fine butter muslin, and the second a heavy linen scrim. Care was taken while applying the facings to avoid trapping air between the material and the rather uneven surface of the wall.

Electric fan heaters were used to help the facing adhesive to dry, a procedure which took approximately two days owing to damp weather conditions. The facing, with the paint layer firmly attached to it, was then peeled away from the plaster ground.

The transferred paintings were then transported to the museum laboratory where they were nailed, face down, to wooden boards to prevent them from distorting due to contraction of the facing adhesive.

The work in April 1972 did not include the removal of the paintings on the ceiling as it had been thought that there was too much risk of the ceiling supports collapsing. In June that year, however, Mr. Shishtawi, the Museum Conservation Officer, decided to tackle this with the assistance of Miss D. Hemmings. The same method of removal was used but there was an unexpected difficulty as the facing was too heavy to remain on the ceiling until the facing adhesive had dried. The problem was overcome by tacking the material to the ceiling with drawing pins while the adhesive was drying and the operation was satisfactorily completed.

Remounting

Old plaster was removed from the back of the paintings so that only the paint layer remained attached to the facing material. A reversible resin, polymethyl methacrylate, in solution in toluene, was mixed to a thick paste with marble powder. This paste was applied to the back of the paintings and was reinforced with chopped strands of fibre glass. This paste is used to form the new ground for the paintings and can be removed should they need to be re-treated in the future.

A second, rigid, backing was applied to this, made of polyester resin reinforced with fibre glass, incorporating a wooden support. This support had been carefully designed by the Museum's Chief Technician to give strength and to facilitate the reconstruction of the painted area for exhibition.

When the backing was dry the facing material was removed by dissolving the adhesive with industrial methylated spirits. The painted surface was then cleaned to remove remaining adhesive and surface dirt.

The remounted paintings were then fitted together under the direction of Mr. Smith, and mounted in their original relationship in the museum gallery.

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