

Paine & Stewart

**Gwydyr Uchaf Chapel, Llanrwst, North Wales:
Treatment of the painted decoration**

September 2006

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Gwydyr Uchaf Chapel, Llanrwst, North Wales: conservation of the painted decoration ~ May 2006

1 Introduction and summary of the project

This report outlines the conservation of the painted ceiling within the chapel, undertaken in May 2006. The scheme is composed of painted angels amidst fictive clouds set around symbols representing the Trinity, and covers the entire wooden panelled ceiling. The decoration is extremely significant and, despite its rather crude appearance, has previously been described as: 'one of the most remarkable examples of this class of seventeenth-century art in Britain'. However, although traditionally dated to the third quarter of the 17th century (largely on the basis of a date applied to the fascia of the west-end gallery), it is now becoming increasingly clear, based on the style of the decoration, that an earlier dating towards the first quarter of the 17th century is more appropriate.

A Condition Survey undertaken in March 2006 concluded that the scheme was relatively stable but that some areas were prone to flaking of the paint layer and were covered with substantial deposits of dirt and dust. In addition, the overall appearance of the scheme was heavily compromised by the retouched canvas strips used to cover the panel joins during the extensive restoration undertaken in the 1950s by the Ministry of Works. A programme of treatment was therefore recommended, 'not only to attend to the stabilisation of the scheme, but also to attempt to address issues of its presentation'.

This report² outlines the treatment undertaken in May to June 2006, which included readhesion of loose canvas strips, the stabilisation of nails, fixing of areas of flaking and surface cleaning. Some reintegration was also undertaken, which was successful in reducing the visual impact of the canvas strips and areas of discordant repainting. In addition, it may now appear from the close access afforded by this present project that the painted scheme is generally of a better quality than has previously been thought, but that many details have been lost due to the previous restorations.

2 Description of the building and paintings and summary of their history³

Described as a 'simple structure in a blend of Gothic and Renaissance styles', the building of Gwydyr-Uchaf is a small private chapel⁴, traditionally considered to have been built by Sir Richard Wynn, son of Sir Owen, in 1673 – the date referenced on the front of the cross beam supporting the rear choir gallery.⁵ Internally the walls are panelled at

¹ Robinson, *Heritage in Wales* 1989, p.153.

² Some sections have been largely replicated from the Condition Survey of March 2006.

³ Paine and Stewart are very grateful to David Park, Conservation of Wall Painting Department, Courtauld Institute of Art, for access to the National Survey of English Medieval Wall Paintings for historical information regarding the chapel, and to Peter Welford for the sharing of his extensive historic knowledge of the chapel.

⁴ RCHM, 182. Apparently 'its dedication may have been to the Holy Trinity, which is the subject of the painted ceiling, but there is no record of this, or of the chapel ever having been licensed.'

⁵ The dimensions of the building are 11.11m by 6.66m, and 5.98m in height.

⁶ Further research is required into the whole issue of the dating of the chapel and its paintings. It seems likely that the date of 1673 refers to a period of renovation rather than necessarily the original build of the

dado level, and then plastered above. There is a gallery at the west end and on the south wall there is a large painted panel bearing the arms of Charles II.

The internal appearance of the chapel is dominated by the elaborate painted wooden ceiling, 'a design inspired by high Anglican or Roman Catholic liturgical tradition'⁷. Painted onto the three-sided panelled barrel vault divided into four bays, the scheme is based on the Holy Trinity, the symbols of which are positioned in the three eastern-most central panels, flanked by angels on clouds. The east end shows the monogram of IHS and the pierced heart with cross in a glory; the second bay the seated figure of God the Father; and in the third bay the dove symbolising the Holy Ghost. The western bay contains two trumpeting angels announcing the Day of Judgement, while above the gallery there is a demi-glory with the monogram INRI against the wall and a cross *formée* from which radiates a banner announcing WATCH FOR YOU KNOW NOT YE DAY OR HOWRE. Finally, the boarded apex of the east wall contains a representation of the firmament and heavens, and night and day and the Hebrew tetragrammaton in a demi-glory in the centre. The whole composition is set against a background of a pale blue sky with clouds and gold stars, or in the bay with the dove representing the Holy Ghost, drops of Pentecostal fire. Just above the wall-plate level there are the figures of angels either full frontal or in profile looking towards the west. There are also flat 'cut-out' angels at the base of each roof truss holding scrolls bearing inscriptions. The painted decoration also extends into the window splay which is plastered. At the west end there is also a small wooden cartouche below a carved cherub's head (*Plates 1–6*).

The seemingly rather crude style of the scheme has been commented on previously, for as Hague notes: 'The painting which was probably done by the local painter and decorator was described in 1800 as 'most miserably executed', and it certainly lacks the panache of Verrio and his school with their command of perspective. At Gwydir there are no swirling sensual vortices carrying off scantily clad females and over-fed putti; this rustic work is painted in two dimensions on plain boards and is a continuation of the local tradition of boarding over the altar bay which is best represented by the medieval example at Gyffin near Conway'⁸. Nevertheless, as Hague continues: 'The iconography of the painting at Gwydir is cultivated and was probably provided by Sir Richard or his circle of friends which certainly included the Jesuit Edward Petre'⁹. This is also emphasised by Lord who notes that: 'As at Rug, it [the scheme] was clearly of artisan workmanship but followed a scheme whose iconography was designed by, or to meet the needs of, a sophisticated patron in touch with prominent church leaders'¹⁰.

3 Conservation history

The chapel came under the guardianship of the Ministry of Works in March 1952, after which time a major programme of works took place including the repainting of the walls, repair and renewal of the window frames and the reglazing of the windows. Apparently the slate roof was also stripped at this time 'and its main timbers, which had suffered

whole chapel. Likewise, the style of the paintings strongly suggests a date towards the first to second quarter of the 17th-century.

⁷ Robinson, p.153.

⁸ *Arch Journ*, p.261.

⁹ *Arch Journ*, p.261.

¹⁰ Lord, 48.

from attack by beetle, repaired¹¹. The painted ceiling was then extensively 'restored' by the Ministry of Works. Unfortunately the exact components of this treatment have not so far been established but two photographs show the condition of the ceiling prior to this work and give some indication of the extent of the treatment subsequently carried out¹². Clearly the building was in extremely poor condition (see for the example the plaster on the east end wall) and the painted ceiling itself appears to have suffered extensive loss and abrasion (*Plates 7- 8*). The treatment therefore comprised the re-application of strips of canvas over the joins of the boards and extensive retouching with the intention of unifying the whole scheme.

However, during the course of this conservation project it became clear that a much earlier restoration occurred, perhaps during the 19th century, during which time the original canvas strips, or packing between the boards, was applied. While it could be argued that the canvas strips were part of the original technique, intended to smooth over the join between boards, such an application seems highly unlikely. For example, the wooden boards have been accurately cut, thereby allowing a smooth surface upon which the design could be painted. Furthermore, there is enough evidence for original painting surviving beneath the strips to suggest that these are a later application. In tandem with this work it would also appear that the background dark blue/grey 'sky' was applied over the original lighter background colour, which in many areas has been crudely applied around figures. The 1950s restoration is a re-restoration of this work.

4 General description of the original technique of the scheme

4.1 The building

The building is composed of sandstone ashlar with some slate.

4.2 The ceiling

The ceiling is made up of wooden planks, typically 30cms. in width and averaging 2 metres in length, and nailed directly onto the underlying ceiling rafters (*Plates 9- 10*). Although depth could not be assess, the boras seem to be thin, typically 5–7mm.

4.3 The east window

The splays of the east window are composed of a single render layer.

4.4 Ground and paint layers

The nature of the ground was not established but the paint layer is composed of a very matt paint, most likely a distemper – that is, a paint bound with an animal glue or casein. The range of colours is simple and includes originally a pale light blue for the sky (later overpainted with the current blue/grey) with a variety of other colours including a vivid red, browns, yellows, greys, fleshtones and blacks, as well as gilding (*Plates 11- 12*). However, much of the quality of the original scheme has been significantly

¹¹ Craster, 105.

¹² Paine and Stewart contacted Robert Gowing, Senior Architectural Conservator (Wall Paintings), Building Conservation and Research Team, English Heritage but unfortunately he could find no record of the treatment project.

compromised by later restorations; perhaps most significantly by the rather leaden blue/grey background layer.

4.5 *Attachments*

There are six wooden angel panels, connected to the wall plate at the springing of the principal rafters (*Plates 13–15*).

5 **General description of the condition before treatment**

The results of the Condition Survey concluded that the scheme was relatively stable but that some localised areas were found to be in a poor or vulnerable condition. In addition, the overall appearance of the original scheme had been radically altered by the retouched canvas strips used to cover the panel joints, as well as what is now thought to have been the 19th – century addition of the dark blue/grey background applied to the scheme as a whole.

5.1 *The building and environmental conditions*

As was noted during the Condition Survey, the building appears to be in reasonable condition although the guttering on the north side is in very poor repair and the water disposal system at the south-east corner does not appear to be dispersing water adequately away from the building. The internal conditions did not appear particularly damp at that time, nor during the entire treatment programme, although as has been noted previously clearly the building and paintings have suffered as a result of the effects of moisture in the past. For example, the presence of ‘blooming’ over some areas, including the Coat of Arms, may indicate previous condensation events, or consistently high ambient moisture levels. Indeed, apparently the walls were extremely damp in 2000 due to water penetration.¹³ There is no heating system.

5.2 *Wooden panelling*

There is no evidence of any infestation or rot affecting the wooden panelling which is therefore generally in good condition.

5.3 *The plaster within the window splays*

The plaster generally appears to be in good condition, although there are extensive lime/sand repairs indicating extensive previous loss.

5.4 *Ground and paint layers*

A number of areas were found to be flaking and delaminating from the underlying wooden support. In addition there are large quantities of cobwebs and surface dirt and dust.

¹³ Information supplied by CADW: ‘Lead flashings were inserted into the gables and the walls were again stripped of their cement plaster and replastered in a lime-based plaster. Some cross ventilation was introduced by means of opening vents in the existing windows. The ground behind the west gable was excavated, tanked and reinstated. Some of the timber work was re-grained and the east window was extensively repaired.’ Specification for works.

Some areas also show the effects of previous water staining, for example, on the roof trusses. (*Plates 16- 17*). Some blackening was also noted within areas of the angel panels and a number of gilded star motifs. Such blackening may be the consequence of oxidation of, for example, applied silver foils, or possibly microbiological growth.

5.5 *Added materials*

- **Canvas strips:** There are extensive canvas strips (5cm in width) glued to the panel joints which were applied during the Ministry of Works campaign of treatment (it is not known what adhesive was used in their application). This intervention reflects an earlier attempt to fill gaps that had formed between the wooden planking due to contraction. Some of these were found to have come loose or were buckling or split. Some areas also appear to show that the underlying adhesive has discoloured. (*Plates 18-19*).
- **Retouching:** The canvas strips have subsequently been overpainted in order to unify them with the overall scheme. However, these have either been repainted in a different colour or have aged differently with the consequence that many were found to be much lighter in tone and therefore particularly visually disruptive. There is no evidence of any coatings having been applied, although the blanching occurring to the cross beams does suggest the possibility of a coating having been applied at some stage in the past. (*Plates 20-21*). Much further retouching has also clearly been undertaken, in particular the dark blue/grey background which covers a much lighter blue colour.
- **Nails:** There are many nails, of differing periods, the heads of which were found to be rusting severely. (*Plates 22-25*).

6 **Conservation of the ceiling – May 2006**

This project concentrated on the issues raised by the Condition Survey, specifically:

6.1 **Remedial treatment**¹⁴

6.1.1 *Readhesion of loose canvas strips (Plate 26)*

A number of canvas strips that fill the gaps between panels were found to be delaminating, requiring reattachment. The material considered most appropriate for this purpose was the adhesive BEVA 371. This was applied by brush behind the canvas strip, and the area then pressed back with a mildly heated spatula.¹⁵

¹⁴ All materials used were selected according to recognised standards of performance criteria (compatibility, reversibility and/or retreatability, stability, absence of soluble salts etc).

¹⁵ BEVA 371 is a heat seal adhesive widely used principally for the lining of oil paintings (Composition: Ethylene vinyl acetate, paraffin, ketone resin in aliphatic and aromatic solvents. Melting point: 68°C). It is non-aqueous, has good elasticity and chemical stability, and is dissolved in non-polar petroleum fractions known to be harmless to most paint films. It is applied cold. It causes no contractions, expansion or softening of the materials to which it is applied making its application possible on even the most delicate surfaces. Shrinking and distortion is minimal.

6.1.2 Stabilisation of nails (Plate 27)

Many of the nails used to locate the wooden panels were found to be corroding. Therefore, all the nails (3,500 in total) were initially abraded with a glass-fibre brush and spot treated with an anti-rust paint¹⁶. The recess above the nail was then filled with an inert cellulose fillers. These fills were coated with a 10% solution of Paraloid B72¹⁷ in propan-2-ol, prior to retouching with acrylic paints.

6.1.3 Fixing of areas of flaking

Many areas of the paint layer were subject to flaking. Readhesion was therefore carried out using small injections with a preliminary wetting agent (a 50% solution of Industrial Methylated Spirits (IMS) and deionised water) followed by 5% solution of Plextol B500¹⁸ in water. The flakes were then pressed back through gentle pressure.

6.1.4 Surface cleaning

The entire ceiling was surface cleaned with soft brushes and vacuum extraction to remove loose debris and dirt. The surface was then cleaned with deionised water applied with cotton wool swabs. Additional use was also made of Wishab™ sponges to further reduce areas of accumulated dirt and grime. The cleaning level was closely observed at all times, so as to avoid any unevenness that might be detectable from the chapel floor.

The blanching noted on a number of areas of the wooden cross beams was treated with a 50% solution of tri-ammonium citrate and water, applied with cotton wool swabs, which worked effectively to reduce this phenomenon. Clearance was achieved by tamping the treated surface with deionised water and cotton wool.

6.2 Presentation

It was considered that to completely de-restore the ceiling would almost certainly prove overly destructive to the underlying original paint layers. Nevertheless, the appearance of the scheme had been significantly compromised by the repainted canvas strips used to cover the panel joints. It was therefore decided to reduce the impact of these visually intrusive additions, in order to re-present the scheme in a more complete and coherent manner.

6.2.1 Repainting of canvas bands (Plates 28-38)

As the canvas bands had been so crudely repainted in the 1950s it was considered acceptable to attempt to improve their presentation with further reintegration. Therefore, testing was undertaken using casein-based paints (*Pelikan Plaka*) that very effectively mimicked the rather flat, matt finish of the earlier retouching.

¹⁶ Hammerite No.1 rust-beater™, an oil modified alkyd containing organic/inorganic pigment, aliphatic and aromatic solvents.

¹⁷ Paraloid®B72, manufactured by Röhm and Haas, is an ethyl methacrylate co-polymer (Tg: 40°C).

¹⁸ An acrylic dispersion manufactured by Röhm (pH:9.5; MFFT: 7°C; Tg: <29°C).

6.2.2 *Reintegration of nails*

Although the same *Plaka* paint was tested on the nail heads, the results were not considered acceptable. Instead, acrylic paint was successfully used to reintegrate the nail heads.

6.2.3 *Repair and reintegration of the east window splays (Plates 39–42)*

Previous plaster repairs had been applied to the widow splay of the east end window, both to the north and south sides. These repairs were retouched with *Plaka* paints applied as colour washes over the repairs.

6.3 **Other issues**

6.3.1 *The coat of arms (Plates 43–45)*

The entire surface was lightly surface cleaned using Wishab™ conservation sponges. In addition, losses within the frames were filled with a cellulose-based filler and retouched. The level of cleaning was deliberately kept to an absolute minimum, so as to avoid any jarring contrast with the cleaning level achieved elsewhere in the ceiling.

6.3.2 *The wooden angel*

A carved wooden angel head has been stolen from the panelling adjacent to the door a number of years ago. A replacement figure in limewood was commissioned from wood carvers Gillian Yorath and Lewis Esposito, and subsequently reattached adjacent to the south window, in the location of the original.¹⁹

7 **Conclusions and recommendations**

This present project has attended to the short-term measures recommended in the Condition Survey of 2006.

7.1 *Longer-term issues*

Whilst there are no immediately apparent defects in the fabric, it is clear that the ceiling has suffered to a certain extent from adverse environmental conditions (for example, rusting nails and localised areas of staining). However, it is not clear whether this deterioration is still active. Therefore, in the longer-term it would prove prudent to instigate a focussed programme of environmental monitoring intended to establish the prevailing environmental conditions within the building.

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¹⁹ Gillian Yorath and Lewis Esposito trade under the name of Revival, Ty Salem, Betws Garmon, Gwynedd LL54 7YR, tel: 01286 650 397.

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Documentation glossary

-  Canvas strips
-  Cracks in the wooden panels
-  Nails
-  Panel joins



Figure 2: overall photograph of the east wall decoration, showing aspects of condition

Documentation glossary

-  Canvas strips
-  Cracks in the wooden panels
-  Nails
-  Panel joins

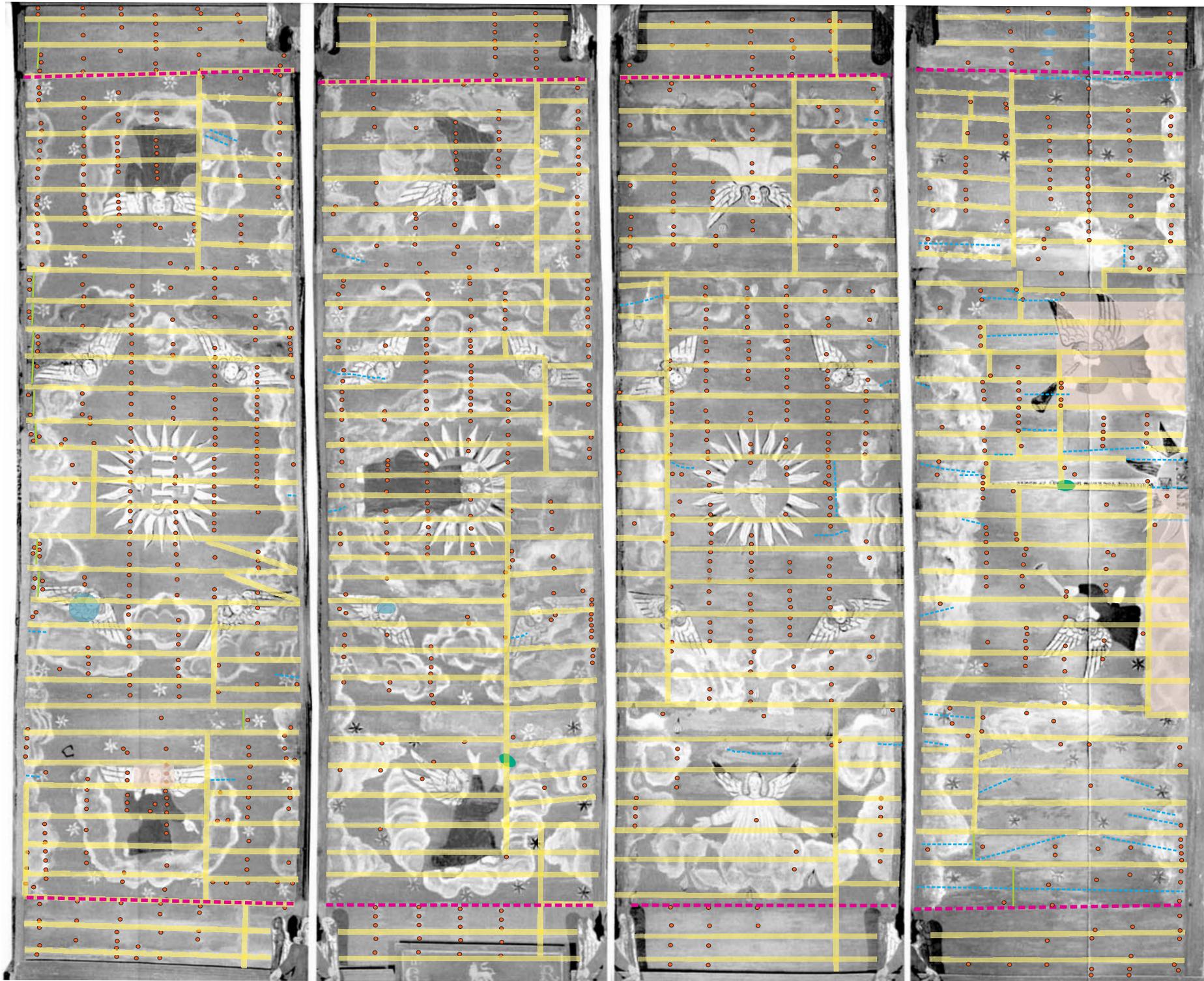


Figure 2. The ceiling, showing a range of condition phenomena



Plate 1 (above). A general view looking towards the east end of the chapel, before conservation. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 2 (below). The western end of the chapel. (Photo: CADW 1993)





Plate 3 (above). The western half of the painted ceiling, before conservation and cleaning.
(Photo: CADW 2004)



Plate 4 (above). The eastern half of the painted ceiling, before conservation and cleaning.
(Photo: CADW 2004)



Plate 4 (above). General view of the ceiling, showing condition before conservation and cleaning. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 5 (below). Detail of the Christ figure, before conservation, showing the extent of past restorations; applied strips of canvas, added grey/blue painted background and rusting nails predominate. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)





Plate 6 (above). At the base of each roof truss there are flat wooden panels, cut and decorated to form angel figures, displaying Latin text banners. Photographed here before conservation and cleaning. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

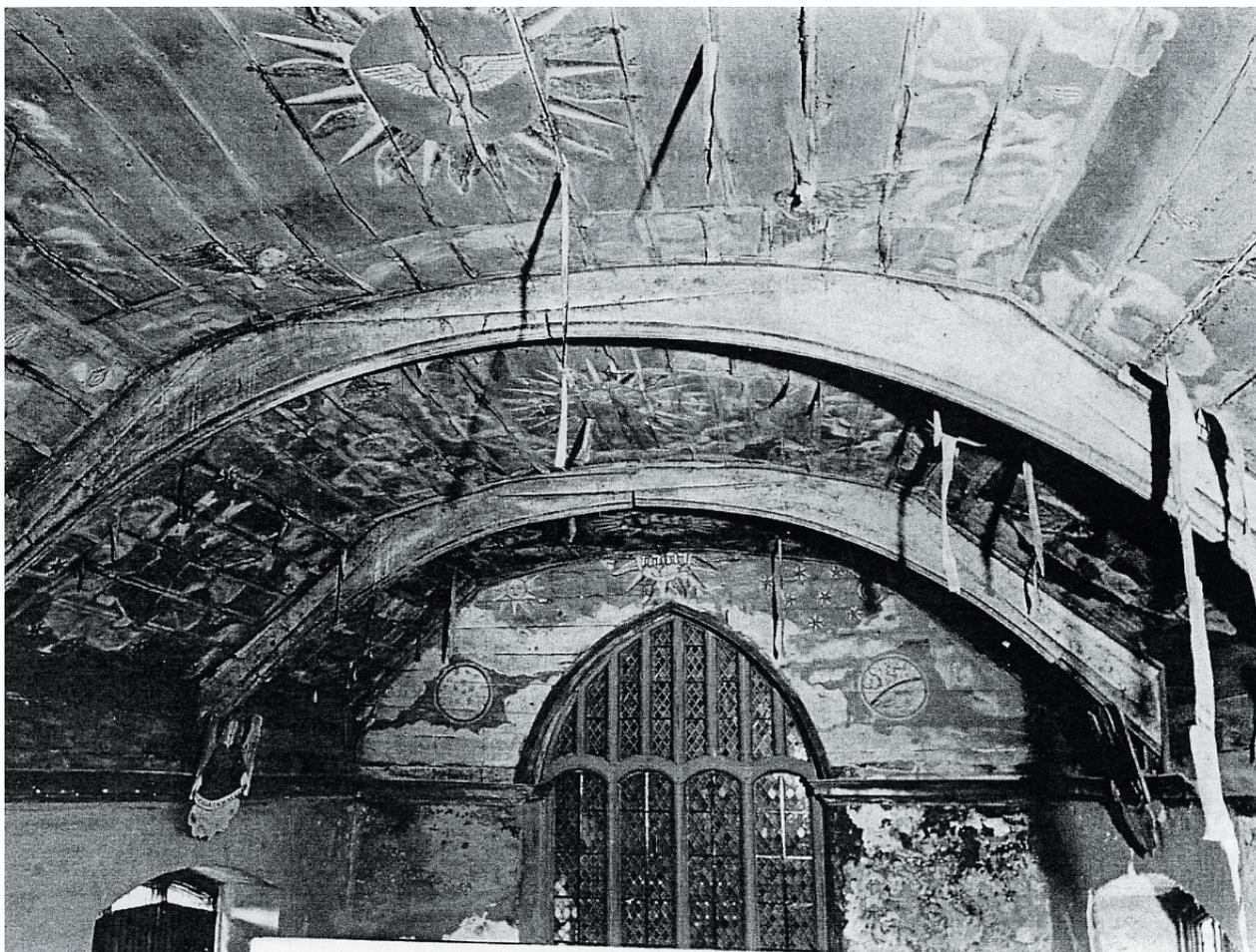


Plate 7 (above). The state of the chapel ceiling before the restoration work by the then Ministry of Works, c. 1952. The strips hanging down would appear to be remnants from a previous restoration (19th century?). The work of the 1950's aimed to replicate this technique in masking the gaps that had developed between the planks. However, it may be assumed that the original ceiling was made up of tightly abutting timber planks, without any recourse to wadding or canvas strips. (Photo: CADW)

Plate 8 (below). Circa 1952, looking towards the southern side of the ceiling. (Photo: CADW)





Plate 9 (above). The short lengths of planks (typically around 2 metres in length) used to cover the ceiling can be noted. Also note the poorly applied restoration from the 1950s. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 10 (below). Detail of the ceiling, before conservation, showing the nature of the support and aspects of original technique. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)





Plate 11 (above). Detail of a hand, which is quite competently painted. Note the in-painting of the darker blue background colour – this is part of the extensive (probably) 19th- century restoration. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 12 (below). The quality of the original painting can be clearly noted in this largely unrestored head of an angel. The emphasis of the lower eye lid is typical of all the figure drawing. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)





Plate 13 (left). There are 6 painted angel panels located at the springing of each of the roof trusses. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 14 (below left). Detail of the rear of the panel shows the nature of the construction. Each is made up of typically 4 panels (2.5 cms thick), and bonded together with added strips of supporting timber. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 15 (below right). At Rug Chapel (early 17th century and close to Gwydir Chapel)) a similar (though slightly more elaborate) stylistic device is used at the base of each roof truss. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

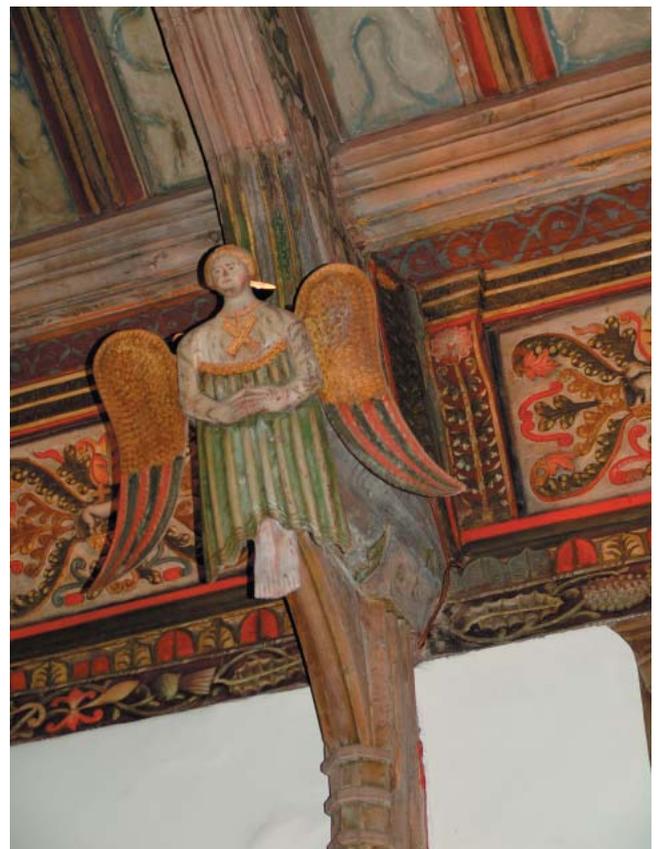




Plate 16 (above). In a number of locations across the ceiling blackening has occurred to the gilded stars. This may be an oxidised silver layer or microbiological growth adhering to an organic-based coating. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 17 (below). Note the flaking of the paint layer, which appears to be largely original, other than some retouching within a part of the forehead. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)



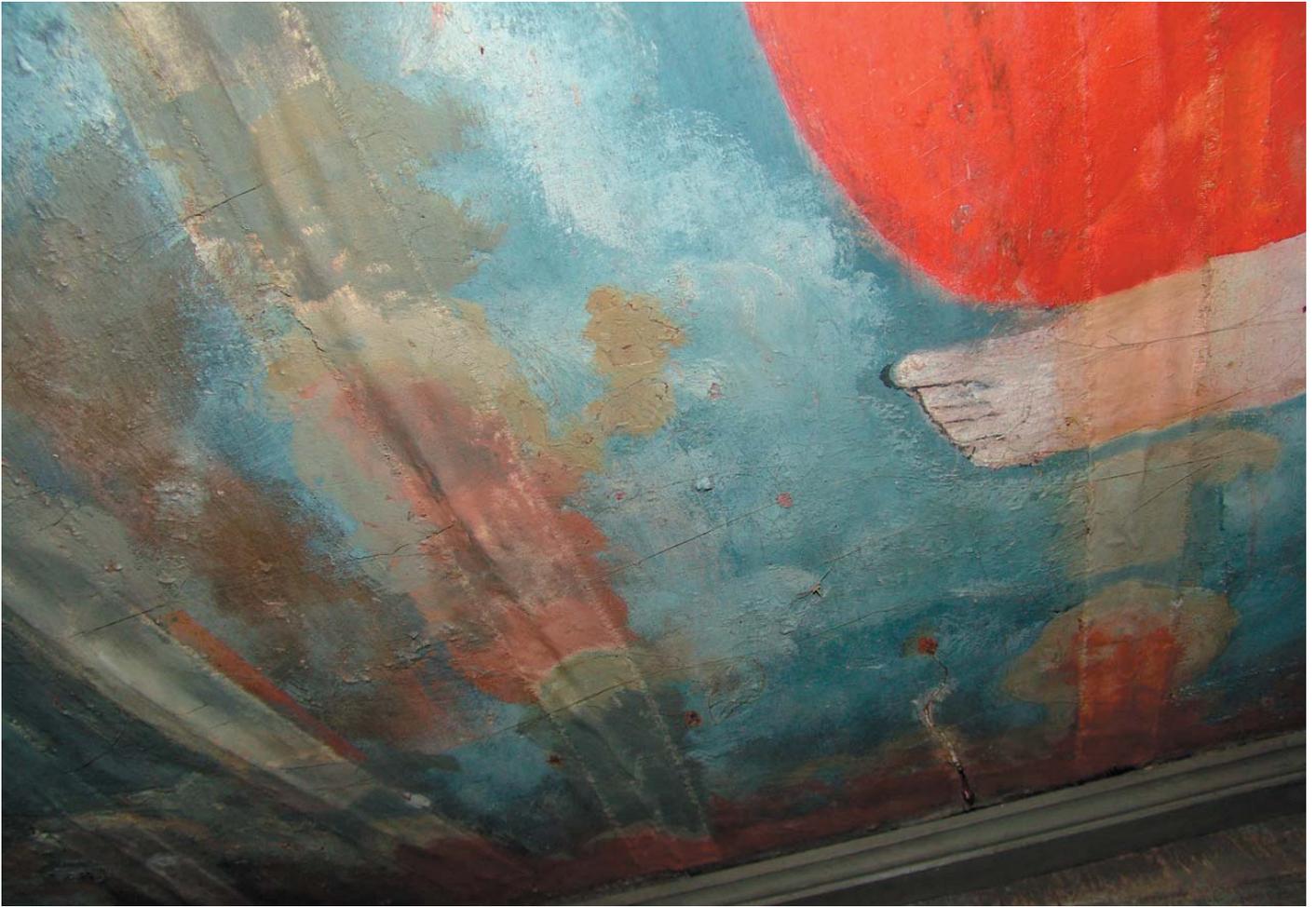


Plate 18 (above). Evidence for past restorations can be clearly noted here, specifically, canvas strips, over-painting and nails. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 19 (below). A number of the canvas strips were found to be delaminating from the wooden support. Original painting can be seen beneath the applied canvas strip. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

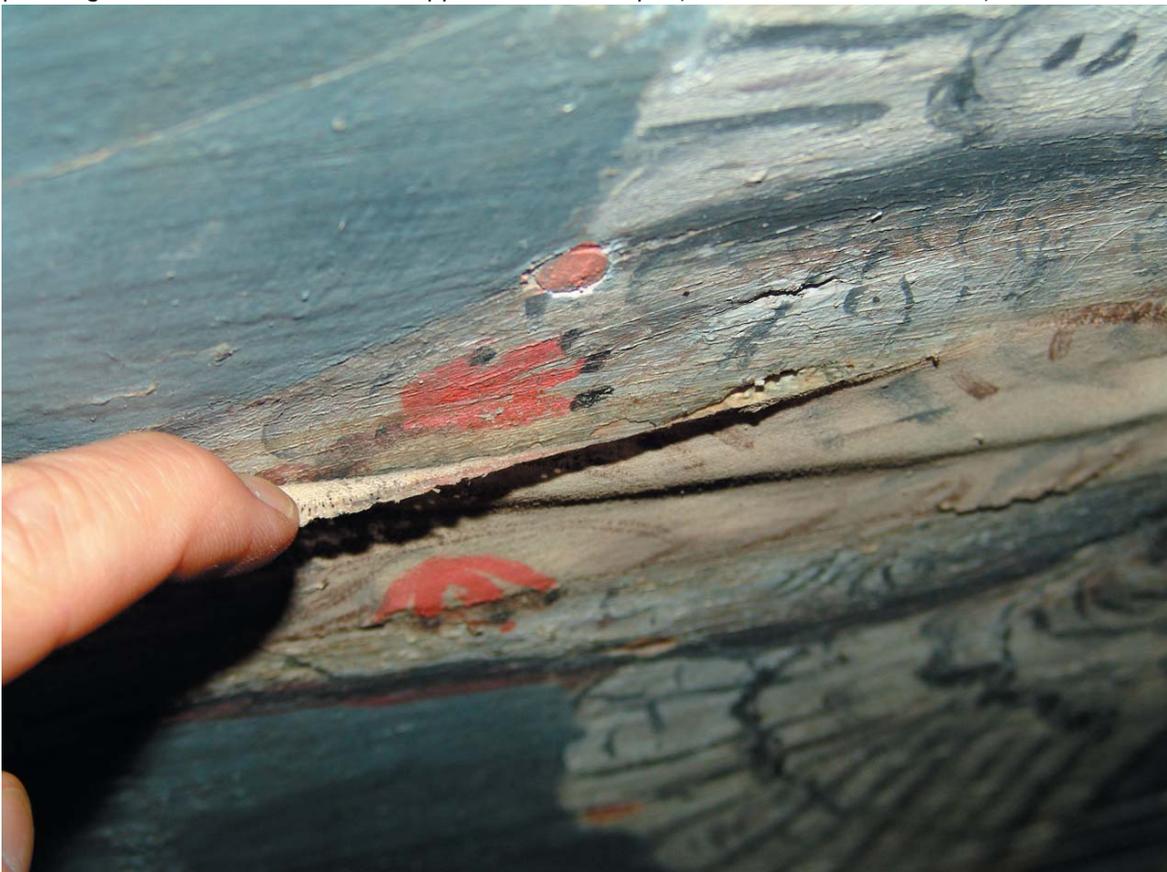




Plate 20 (above). The original painting of the angels trumpet contrasts markedly with the leaden quality of the 1950s restoration. It is details like this that would appear to contradict the claim made in 1800 that the ceiling paintings were “most miserably executed”. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 21 (below). View of the surface showing the disrupted paint layer and canvas strips.





Plate 22 (above). Detail of nails here shown before treatment. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 23 (below). There was much evidence for blanching within areas of the cross beams. The causes of this are unclear but may well be the consequence of the failure of a previously applied coating. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)





Plate 24 (above). While many of these edging strips (between ceiling planks and trusses) are replacements, the principal for such elements is probably an original one, since the decoration does not appear to extend beneath them. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 25 (below). The crude nature of the 1950s restoration can be noted here in the poor quality retouching of exposed nail heads. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

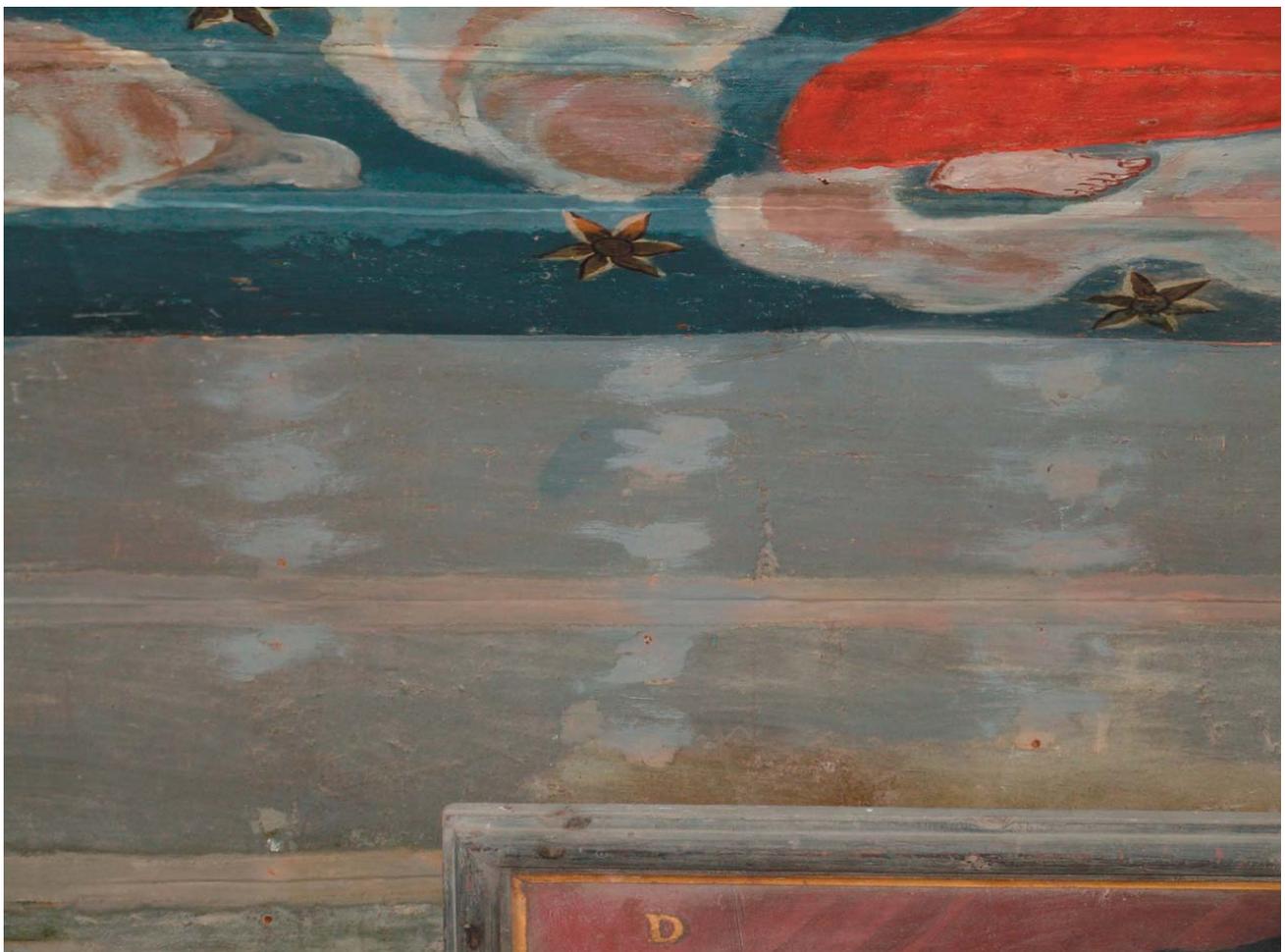




Plate 26 (above). Conservator Aneta Szemiel and James White attending to the readhesion of a detaching canvas strip using a heated spatula. *(Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)*

Plate 27 (below). Throughout the ceiling there were over 3500 rusting nails that required treatment. *(Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)*





Plate 28 (above). General view of the western end of the ceiling, showing work in progress, with multiple nail heads treated, filled and awaiting final retouching, (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)



Plate 29 (above). After treatment and final presentation. Note however, that the intensity of the flash used in the photography tends to over emphasise some of the retouching to the canvas strips. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)



Plate 30 (above). General view of the eastern end (south side) of the ceiling, showing final presentation. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)



Plate 31 (above). General view of the central bay of the ceiling (south side), showing final presentation. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)



Plate 32 (above). General view of the east end after completion of the reintegration. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 33 (below). Work in progress during the reintegration phase. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)





Plate 34 (above). The trusses displayed significant areas of blanching (probably resulting from previous coatings applied in the 1950s) and other unidentified disfiguring runnels, seen here prior to treatment.

(Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 35 (below). The same area after reduction of blanching through use of tri-ammonium citrate and water and some retouching of vertical runnels. *(Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)*



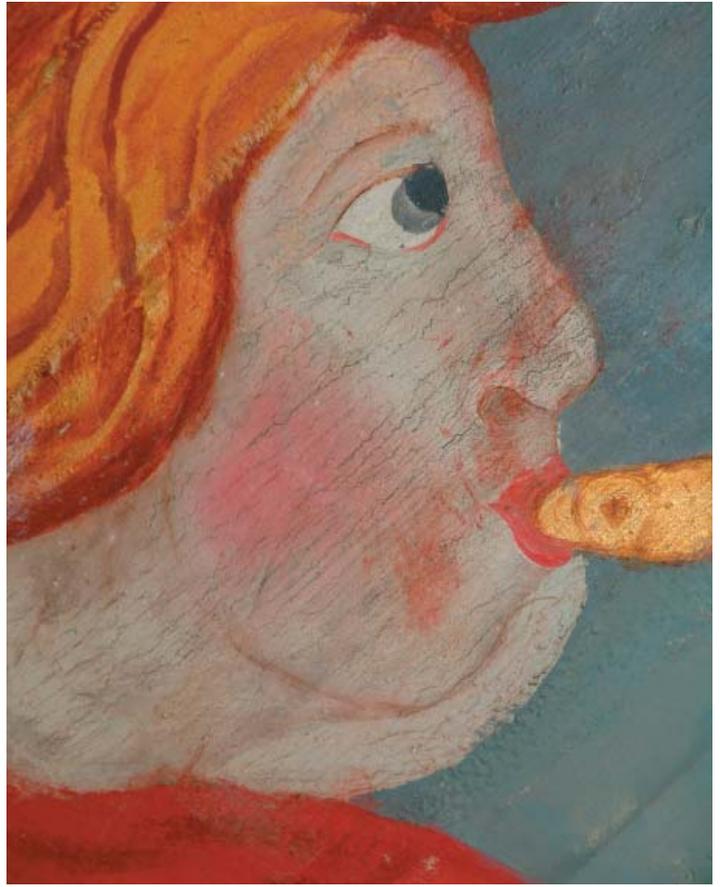


Plate 36 (above left). Detail from the east end wall of 'Heaven', after conservation. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 37 (above right). Detail of an angel after conservation – note the (possibly) 19th - century application of the dark blue background abutting the figures' face. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 38 (below). Conservator James White retouching nails heads with a casein-based paint. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)





Plate 39 (above left). Detail of the repaired window splay at the east end. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)



Plate 40 (above right). General view after reintegration of the plaster repairs. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 41 (below left). A panelled angel, after conservation and reintegration of small losses. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)



Plate 42 (below right). Detail of a panelled angel's head. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)



Plate 43 (above). The royal coat-of-arms after surface cleaning. The intensity of flash light, required to take the photograph, has tended to over-emphasise some residual blanching phenomena. A minimal surface cleaning was the primary intention here. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 44 (below left). Detail from the arms. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Plate 45 (below right). Detail from the arms. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)





Plate 46 (above). Because of a recent theft, a replacement wooden angel head was commissioned from Mr. Louis Esposito. (Photo: Paine and Stewart 2006)

Appendix 1



Photo 1 (above). An area of the ceiling photographed under UV illumination + 2B filtration. Owing to rather high ambient light levels, the amount of information that could have been elicited by this technique was limited. However, it does indicate clearly those areas of previous restoration and the added canvas strips.

Photo 2 (below). The same area photographed in normal light.

