

St Thomas à Becket Church, Warblington

*Following a fire in January 2011, the church suffered extensive smoke damage.
This is a short summary of the restoration work undertaken between
February and June 2011*

Cleaning

The walls, stonework and high-level woodwork were cleaned with a latex solution that was painted on and then peeled off when dry. The latex was impregnated with cleaning agents (including ammonia and EDTA). Initial cleaning tests were done on an area of the North wall, just to the left of the kitchen area to establish the concentration of chemicals needed to do the job without damaging the limewash and stone.

Decorative woodwork (eg the altar) was cleaned using soot sponges and then polished with a solution of white spirit and boiled linseed oil. The beams were waxed with a beeswax and turpentine solution.

The monuments were cleaned with a weaker latex solution in the same way as the walls and then as the dry latex was peeled off the monuments were gently sponged with clean water. Once cleaned the marble monuments were waxed and buffed and the lettering was touched in where necessary. Only one brass monument was polished (because of condensation damage) and the rest were simply cleaned with water in line with current conservation principles.

The floors were treated in the same way as the walls, with latex. One area however was not cleaned with latex: the raised area in the Sanctuary on which the wooden altar stands had been covered with carpet and rubber underlay for some years. Rubber underlay doesn't allow the floor to breathe and the floor has developed a 'bloom'. This will be very gently cleaned at six monthly intervals and we are hopeful that eventually this bloom will disappear. This area will now remain uncarpeted.

The walls have been limewashed. Some walls received up to 6 coats but the walls still look rather patchy in places. We think this may be because limewash used to decorate the walls in the past may have had modern emulsion paint

added to it to give it better coverage. Once this has happened, pure limewash will never adhere very successfully.

The walls in the area now used as a kitchen were painted with a clay-based paint rather than with limewash. This paint was selected because when this area was updated, the walls were plastered with a modern plaster not suitable for pure limewash.

The stained glass windows only required gentle cleaning with distilled water.

The organ was restored by Geoff Griffiths, a very experienced organ repairer who has looked after our organ for many years. The heat of the fire damaged leather straps inside the pipes so the job took longer than originally expected. Cleaning trials on the decorative organ pipes indicated that the paint was too fragile to survive cleaning and so Nigel Searle was commissioned to repaint them pipes in March 2012.

Conservation

The conservators, Humphries & Jones, found evidence of previous conservation work. Some areas of the Chancel roof ceiling were discovered to be plasterboard painted with emulsion rather than lathe & plaster painted with lime wash. This work was probably done some decades ago. It isn't causing any problems but doesn't represent best practise these days.

On the south wall of the Sanctuary near the altar it is possible to see where in the past an attempt was made to deal with a damp problem. This misguided damp proofing used hard impenetrable cement render. The damp has simply travelled up the wall to where the cement render stops and the nitrate salts in the cement have contributed to the efflorescence you can see.

**For more information about the fire, including photos of the restoration work, visit
www.warblingtonchurchrestoration.org.uk**

The oak frame surround for the skylight in the Chancel roof was found to be in very poor condition and has been replaced.

Elsewhere minor mortar repairs were evident to the trained eye. Most of these are not in need of any further work but one or two are beginning to crack. It is important to use a soft mortar when repairing mortar cracks to allow for the natural movement of the building.

Evidence of much some older wall decoration was discovered during the cleaning process in the Nave. This was photographed and then the surface sealed before being covered with lime wash again. This is normal procedure, protecting the decoration from damage. The conservators also found traces of brightly coloured paint on one of the stone effigies in a side chapel.

Time Capsule

During the cleaning of the Nave the restorers discovered records left by previous workmen. A letter recording the work done when re-plastering and redecoration took place in 2004 along with a copy of the Daily Mirror had been placed in the eaves above the pulpit. Luckily they weren't damaged by the fire below so the site manager, Neill Fraser, added information about the work done in 2011 and returned the documents back to their hiding place in the eaves for future workmen to find.

Wildlife

St Thomas à Becket is plagued by inquisitive and very determined squirrels and they regularly find new ways into the roof space. Immediately after the fire the squirrels stayed away from the church but they soon overcame their dislike of the noise and disruption of the restoration work! Every time we block up their entry point, they manage to find another one!

The contractors had quite a challenge on their hands when a robin and then a sparrow flew into the Nave in the week before Easter and wouldn't leave. The site manager fed and watered them for a few days but as the Easter holiday approached he realised that he had to get them out because the church would be locked and empty for a week. Attempts to chase them out failed, as did attempts to catch them in a net. Finally part of one of the

windows in the Nave had to be removed so that the birds could escape.

Although there is evidence that bats have been in residence in the past (there are bat urine stains on pillars in the Chancel) there is nothing to indicate that bats currently live in the church tower.

St Blaise

Our main contractor was St Blaise, a company that specialised in conservation. They appointed Neill Fraser as our site manager and it was Neill who had the job of coordinating all the different tasks and sub-contractors. We considered ourselves very lucky to have had such a delightful and conscientious man overseeing the repairs to our church.

Neill grew up in Portland in Dorset. At 17 he became an apprentice stonemason and his very first job in the early 1990s involved him in the rebuilding of a c17th stone shell as a modern dwelling. It was this early experience that sparked his interest in conservation. As well as becoming a fully trained stonemason he also gained a Postgraduate Diploma in Architectural Materials, Conservation. Neill's last job before coming to St Thomas à Becket was in Christchurch Priory where as Conservation Manager he coordinated the conservation of stonework in the Clerestory and North Aisle. Shortly after leaving us, Neill was offered and accepted a position with Cathedral Works, another well-known conservation company.

Sadly, just as our restoration project was coming to an end, St Blaise went into Administration. Over 50 employees, many of them experienced and respected craftsmen & women, lost their jobs.



The first service to be held in the whole church following the restoration programme was the annual Roman Catholic service to celebrate the life of the Blessed Margaret Pole, who lived in Warblington Castle and was beheaded in The Tower of London.

Bishop Christopher of Portsmouth re-dedicated the church at a service on July 31st 2011.



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