

The Somerton Hatchments: work in progress

Sally Woodcock, a professional picture conservator in Cambridge, is currently working on the three hatchments from the Fermor Chapel. This is part of a project which also includes the conservation of the reredos and the various Fermor monuments by another conservator Matthew Beesley. He hopes to finish his work by early September but unfortunately the conservation of the hatchments will not be completed till the end of October. Somertonians may therefore welcome this account of the work which Sally has sent us.

The hatchment to **Frances Fermor** is the least damaged of the three, although the change in its appearance is the most dramatic as a result of its very dirty condition. Once loose dust was removed from the front and reverse, the paint layer was cleaned by rolling small swabs of cotton wool moistened with a reagent (sodium tripolyphosphate) over the surface where it was safe to do so. Some of the red and blue paint and much of the gilding were very sensitive to cleaning and therefore only deionised water could be used in these areas.



The top right half after preliminary cleaning

Cleaning made a significant alteration to the appearance of the painting, but the damage caused by bat urine was afterwards more visible, showing up as dark splashes on the paler paint passages and as light splashes on the darker paint. This damage is permanent and cannot be improved by cleaning, but can be retouched to minimise its visual impact.



Detail showing bat urine damage

Wherever paint was found to be friable or flaking it was consolidated by feeding glue in through the cracks in the paint layer and then warming the area with a thermostatically controlled hot air blower to persuade the flakes to relax and return to plane.



Paint losses during consolidation

Once the painting was clean and secure it could be removed from the frame. This took a considerable time as every rusted nail head holding it in had first to be drilled out. The canvas was attached to a woodworm-damaged strainer, which, unlike a stretcher, cannot be altered dimensionally and therefore the canvas had tended to lose tension and go baggy. As the tacking margins were in good condition the canvas could be removed from the strainer and attached to a new, custom-made stretcher without having to add any additional canvas around the edges.

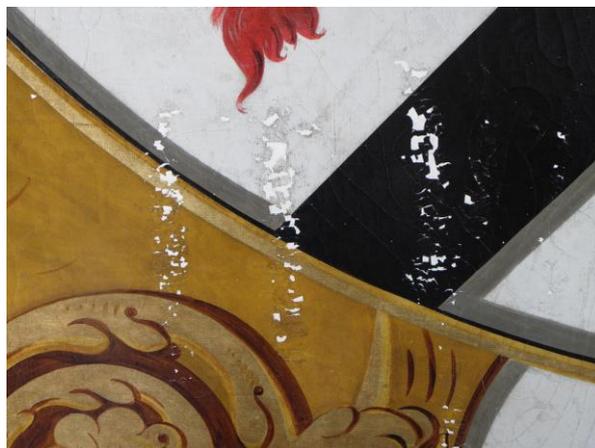


Rear view showing the new stretcher

Once correctly tensioned the painting was varnished and losses to the paint layer were filled with a chalk-based putty.



Hatchment after filling of paint losses



Detail of filled paint losses before retouching

These losses were then retouched by mixing dry pigments into a stable, conservation-grade resin. The bat urine damage could also be toned back to make it less noticeable and then a final, semi-matte varnish was applied by spray gun to give the painting an even surface.



Retouching in progress

All that remains is to refit the painting in the frame, adding a hardwood build-up to the reverse to accommodate the depth of the new stretcher, and fitting a breathable dust barrier to the reverse.

The hatchment to **Henry Fermor** is extremely fragile with extensive paint loss and much crushed paint on the surface. In order to transport it safely from Somerton to Cambridge the surface had to be faced with a long-fibre Japanese tissue paper attached with a methyl cellulose adhesive. This cushioned the paint layer and prevented it from flaking in transit.



Henry Fermor before the removal of the tissue paper transport support

On arrival in the studio the facing has been carefully removed in very small areas, allowing the fragile and disturbed paint layer to be both cleaned and consolidated once clear of the facing paper. The paint layer is very slow to respond to heat and moisture and therefore consolidation is a very slow process. However, once this process is complete, the paint layer will be sufficiently stable to undergo tear repair and lining and things will speed up. In this process a new piece of fabric (polyester sailcloth as it does not respond to the alterations in relative humidity often found in churches) will be adhered to the reverse of the painting in order to support the fragile original canvas. This will then allow the painting to be attached to a stretcher and put under tension. Once stretched and secure all the cosmetic work of filling and retouching losses and varnishing the painting will be carried out to restore the painting as close as possible to its original condition.

Work continues.