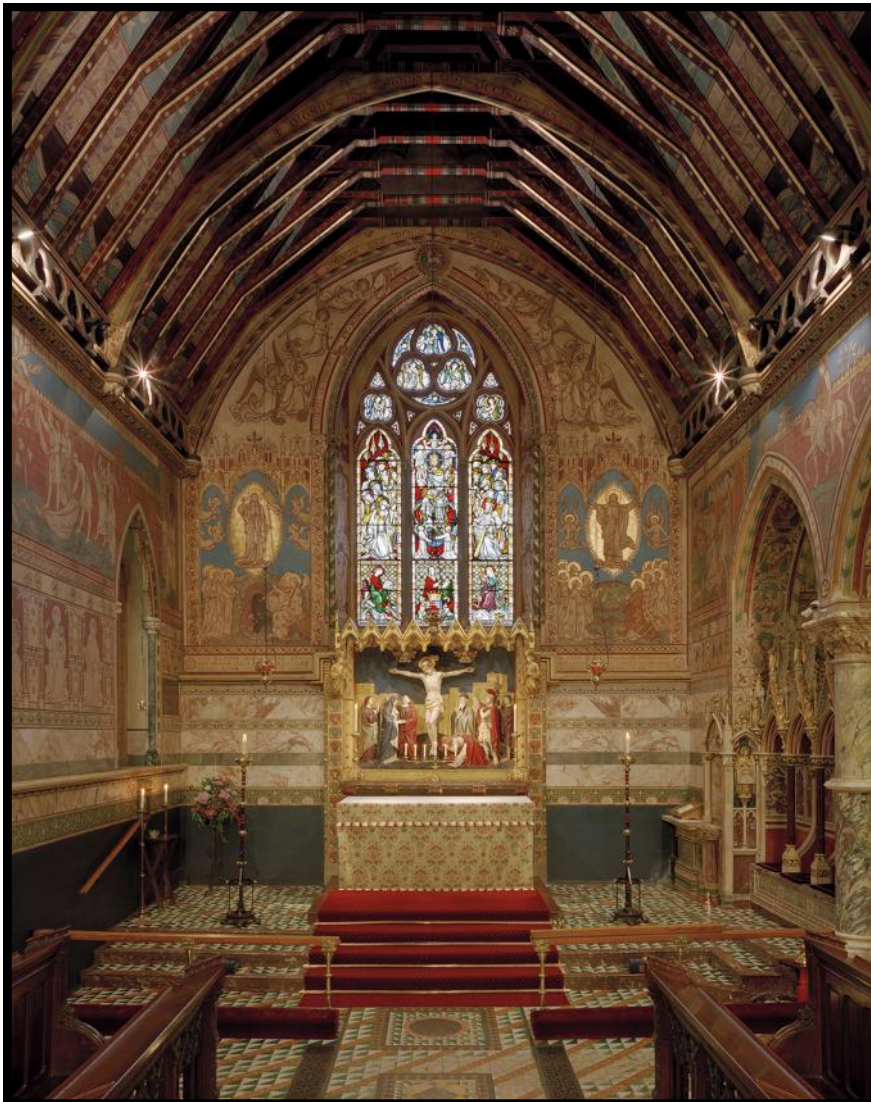




St Leonard's Church
Newland

The Chapel of the Beauchamp Almshouses

The restoration and re-instatement of the Clayton & Bell frescoes



Report written by C Raphael Brownlee
Archivist

From the outside St Leonard's is an unprepossessing building; a typical small Victorian country church.

Yet nothing prepares the visitor for what they are about to see as they walk through the door for the first time.

This breathtaking church is Grade I listed for one reason and one reason only; the magnificent frescoes and decoration which cover the entire surface of the church.



“The hidden gem of Worcestershire”

A brief history of the frescoes

One of Clayton and Bell's masterpieces

The elaborate frescoes were devised by Revd James Skinner, the first vicar-warden and work on them began immediately after the consecration of the church in 1864. Frederick Preedy was commissioned to execute the frescoes but neither the Revd Skinner, P C Hardwick, the church architect or Gambier Parry, who acted as artistic advisor, were happy with his work and in 1868 the frescoes were entrusted to Clayton & Bell of London who executed the entire design. They are rightly considered to be one of Clayton & Bell's masterpieces.

Skinner used his fresco designs as an aid to preaching the Christian faith and is truly the work of a genius and the unstinting generosity of himself and his family in their donations allowed the work to continue.

He retired in 1877 and the following year the new vicar-warden, Revd Cosby White, to his great credit, consulted with Skinner regarding the designs of the frescoes for the south chancel and vestibule, so that the entire scheme could be completed.

Restoration and cleaning was carried out on the frescoes in 1973 and 1986 and since then no major work has been undertaken until last year. Overall, the decoration is in good condition but some urgent repair work is now required, together with a carefully planned restoration and re-instatement project over the next few years, so this remarkable building can be handed on to future generations in prime condition.

C Raphael Brownlee
Archivist

2015

Restoration work carried out by Donald Smith



We are indeed fortunate to have our restoration work carried out by Donald Smith, who was involved in the 1986 cleaning of the frescoes and who has undertaken work on them over the years since.

His speciality is the restoration of 19th century murals and frescoes and he has an international reputation in this field.

Donald has a great love of this church and we are delighted to be working with him on this restoration project.

Re-instatement of the Chancel : February 2016

This is the most exciting part of the project which will see the re-instatement of the original design to the Chancel and South Aisle.

Next stages of restoration

Stage 1 : page 6

Restoration of the Sedilia

Stage 2 : page 8

Restoration of the Reredos

Stage 3 : page 10

Making good damage caused by removal of old electrical wiring, thermostats, etc and the repainting of the chancel skirting

Stage 4 : page 11

Re-instatement of the designs into the chancel window jambs

Completed Restoration Work

Chancel Arch : page 15

October 2015

Vestibule & Church : page 12-14, 16-17

Completed 2014-2015

Re-instatement of the chancel decoration

To Commence February 2016

Almost three years in the planning, the most exciting phrase of the restoration is nearing fruition; the re-instatement of the original design to the chancel walls.

In 1928 an act of unprecedented cultural vandalism was perpetrated on the frescoes in the chancel by the then vicar, Revd Maurice Bell.

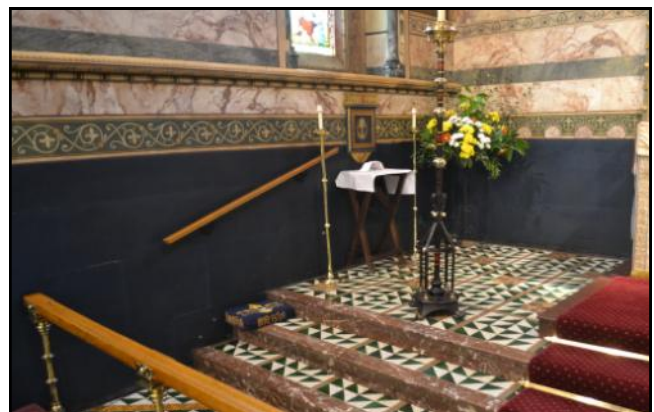
So devastating was the effect that we are still left with part of that legacy today; the ugly blue green oil colour around the walls of the chancel and the repainting of the reredos, which completely destroyed the balance of the decorative scheme.



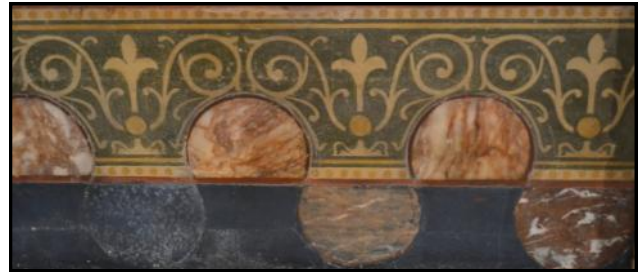
By 1928 the frescoes had become dirty with an accumulation of dust, grime, smoke and the fumes of candles, gas and incense, so the Revd Bell had the cleaning and 're-brightening' of the chancel undertaken. This was carried out by Clayton & Bell (no relation to Revd Bell) with great success but the Revd Bell decided to take the 're-brightening' a step further.

Carrying out the work by himself, as Clayton & Bell would have no part in it, the frescoes of the north chancel and sanctuary wall, depicting the six female saints, the designs under the dado border of the entire chancel and the marble banding either side of the high altar together with the rear of the reredos were painted out in the blue-green oil colour which you see today. The intricate designs inside the chancel window jambs were also painted out in cream paint and the figures on the reredos over-painted with ugly heavy colours.

Bell realised, too late, that the obliteration of so much of the original scheme was a terrible mistake and far from 're-brightening' the chancel, the heavy oil paint which now covered vast swathes of the walls looked dark and depressing...not to mention a complete disregard for the original design. Bell resigned the following year.



The blue-green over painting which obliterated the designs under the decorative dado border and covered over the marble banding either side of the High Altar.



The over painting of the marble sanctuary walls and the design of inlaid marble roundels. The outline can be seen beneath the overpainting and by the credence table the roundels have been at some point crudely uncovered but give a glimpse of how fine they once looked.

The part-restoration of 1937

Not until 1937, when the original designs were discovered in the archives of Clayton & Bell and money raised, were the six female saints reinstated with masterly skill by Clayton's. (see page 21) However, there was no money left to remove the paint under the dado or to reinstate the window jambs or the reredos to their original design.

Work has been completed to restore the six figures of saints which had been painted out with a great patch of blue in years gone by. The patch has ever since been an eyesore along the whole North wall of the chancel. It is a great satisfaction to see the figures again.

Parish Magazine, 1937.

Re-instatement of the original design



The original south aisle border

Over the years, there has been three further attempts to restore the original designs, none of which came to fruition.

Then in 2012 a chance conversation between Fr Roger, the then Chaplain and myself cemented the desire to finally have the restoration work undertaken and the chancel and south aisle restored to their original design and glory.

Donald Smith, the restorer, has concluded there is sufficient evidence of the original designs in

both the chancel and south aisle to undertake a full re-instatement. The chancel had an intricate and detailed design, whilst the south aisle is a continuation of that in the vestibule.

The lengthy and complex process of obtaining a faculty was initiated and due to the churches Grade I listing, every facet of the restoration was considered in detail by various panels of experts before the faculty was finally granted in 2015.

Fundraising has commenced in order to have the church restored to its original glory, which will be the legacy we leave to future generations.

Restoration of the Sedilia

STAGE 1

Donated by Mrs Skinner, c1883, in memory of her husband James, the first vicar-warden of the church and almshouses who was the driving force behind the lavish decoration of the church.

For such a magnificent decorative feature we have no records as to who carried out the work but the decoration is almost certainly by Clayton & Bell.

Over the years, various parts have become damaged, including pinnacles, trumpets and the doves head, all of which are safely stored in a box.



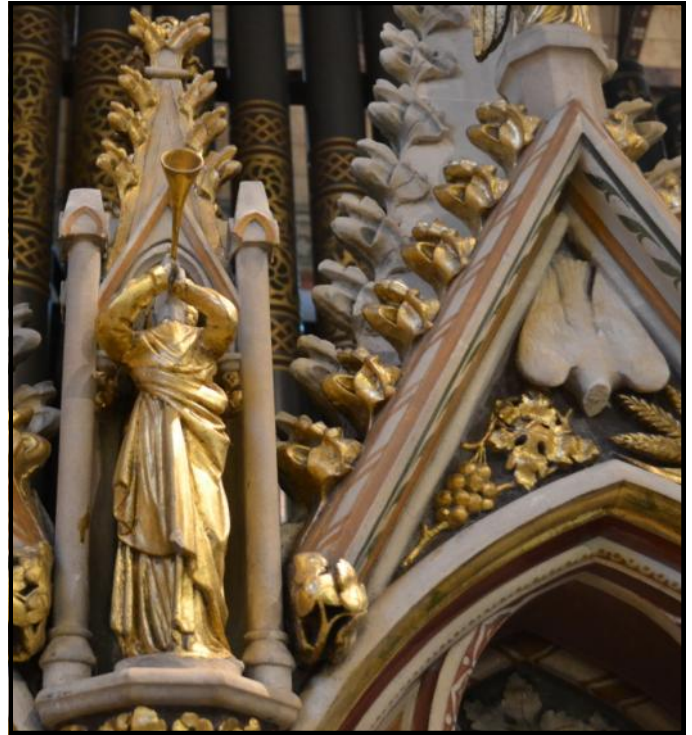
Restoration

Overall the Sedilia is in good condition but there is a great amount of minor damage which requires painstaking restoration, particularly on the upper canopy.





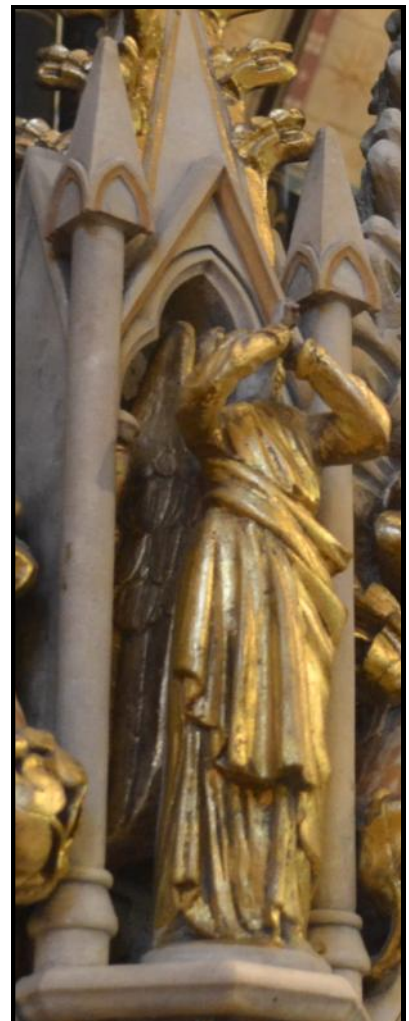
Missing columns and finials



Missing finials and doves head



Missing numerous small parts of decoration



Missing trumpets

Restoration of the Reredos

STAGE 2

Depicting the Crucifixion, the reredos is carved from Caen stone in high relief by R L Boulton & Sons of Cheltenham, whose speciality was the carving of reredoses.

The gilded canopy, the angels, the emblems of the passion which flank the sides and the main scene of the crucifixion were decorated by Clayton & Bell.



The Revd Bell, (no relation to Clayton & Bell) assisted by the then organist, decided that as a further part of his 're-brightening' of the chancel in 1928, the central part of the reredos now required their attentions. Fortunately, the canopy and passion emblems were spared the paint brush.

The appearance of the reredos was dramatically changed from something elegant and ethereal to something crude and ugly with the painting out of the original gold hatched background.

On the left can be seen part of the original gold background design with the outline of the pattern clearly showing through the blue overpainting.



However, the worst excesses were the crude over painting of the figures in dark, solid colours.

Until 1928 the figures had remained as intended in the original cream Cairn stone with the robes highlighted in subtle colours and patterns.

The figure of Christ is the only one to remain in original condition, showing the delicate colour and pattern of the loin cloth against the uncoloured stone.





The heavy and crude painting of the figures is beginning to wear off in parts, revealing the original subtle colouring and design which you can see opposite.

You can also see above the intricate design on the hem of one of the robes which was painted out.

As part of the 1986 cleaning of the frescoes, the reinstatement of the original design of the reredos was planned but funds were not available.



Handle of Centurions scabbard is missing.



Thumb of Centurion is missing.



Top of the halberd is held in place with blu-tac.

The stone corbels supporting the marble gradine (altar shelf) are chipped and damaged.



Restoration of Miscellaneous Items

STAGE 3

Electrical wiring damage

Considerable and needless damage has been done over the years with inappropriate electrical wiring, undertaken without any regard whatsoever for the frescoes. Some of the wiring is now defunct and some needs to be repositioned. The most serious damage caused by wiring was corrected and repaired in Stage 1 of the restoration work in the Vestibule of the church.



Defunct thermostat/wiring removed and damage repaired



Electrical socket to be more discreetly located and damage repaired



Defunct cabling removed; damage repaired



Defunct cable/switch removed; damage repaired



Electrical socket/cabling moved to more discreet location

Nave Skirting

The nave skirting which is painted onto the walls is after a 150 years of being kicked and knocked about understandably in a poor state of decoration and required repainting.



The chancel & sanctuary window jambs

STAGE 4

The jambs of the two double light windows in the chancel and the single light window in the Sanctuary were also painted out by Revd Maurice Bell as part of his 're-brightening' scheme of 1928.

They stand there, looking incongruous, as the only part of the church not covered with lavish decoration.



Chancel window jambs



We are most fortunate to have a detailed watercolour of the interior of the church from 1876 which shows the original design of the chancel window jambs, which you can see on the left.

When the six female saints were added to the chancel soon after 1877 (see page 21) it is thought these window jambs may have been repainted to depict St Ambrose and the incarnational passages in the Te Deum.

As the Revd Bell kept no records of what he overpainted, further investigative work is required into the lost designs of the jambs.

Sanctuary window jambs

The window at the north of the sanctuary was a gift from the Skinners in memory of their mother, Anne.

The main light is St Leonard in his chains and the bottom panel is St Anne teaching her daughter, the Blessed Virgin Mary, to read. The loss of the frescoes on this pair of jambs is particularly significant as they depicted two saints famous for the devotions, St Stephen and St Laurence.

These would have been painted in the same stylised manner as the angels in the East window jambs, which have survived intact.



Completed Restoration

2014

Vestibule

Situated between the cloisters and the church this was in poor state of repair, due to years of heavy footfall, neglect and water ingress.



Below the dado was particularly damaged and at some point had been over-painted with a cheap green paint, which was not the original colour.



By a stroke of good fortune, the original colour was discovered at the back the cupboard in the photograph. The double line decoration was re-instated and the woodwork repaired and polished.

Botched earlier restoration had caused significant damage to the dado decoration, as seen on the left.

The same section after restoration, seen on the right.



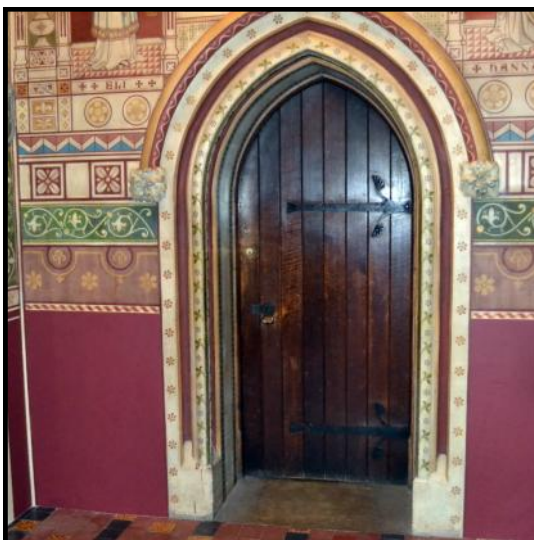
During previous rewiring of the church significant damage, together with further botched restoration, had left this corner of the vestibule in particularly poor condition with great chunks of plaster and decoration missing.

The completed restoration of this very badly damaged area has been carried out with consummate skill.



Water ingress through the Vestibule roof has caused considerable damage to the upper frescoes and painted woodwork.

Work on the Angel Gabriel is complete and major restoration of 'St Christopher with the Christ Child' will take place in September this year in conjunction with the repairs to the Chancel arch.



The sacristy door leading off from the Vestibule showing the completed restoration of this area.

Church



Considerable damage to the area beside the pulpit had been caused by old electrical wiring. This has been removed as has old and ugly defunct sockets.

Further defunct wiring around the church will be removed and made good as the restoration work progresses.



At some point in the past, an ill-advised 'Donations' box with descriptive plaque had been fitted into the wall, causing splitting of the stonework and damage to the frescoes.



The tools of the trade

Completed Restoration of the Chancel Arch

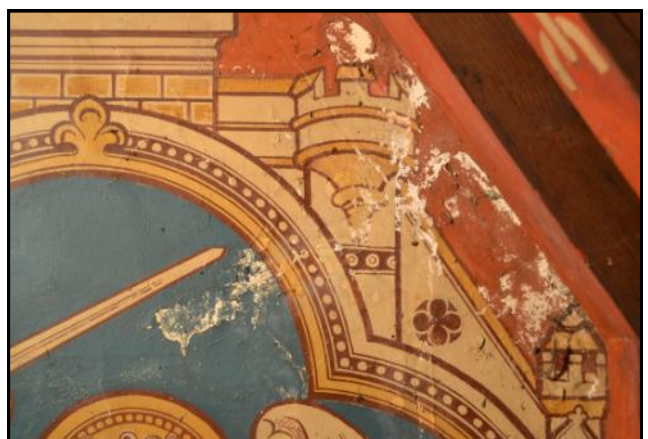
2015

During a high level inspection of the chancel arch, serious damage was found due to the ingress of water. The underlying cause has now been rectified and major restoration work was required on sections of the chancel arch and upper section of the vestibule. An Archdeacons Licence has been granted and the work was completed in October 2015.

Examples of the extensive damage to the Chancel arch



An example of the 'before & after' on the chancel arch



Vestibule

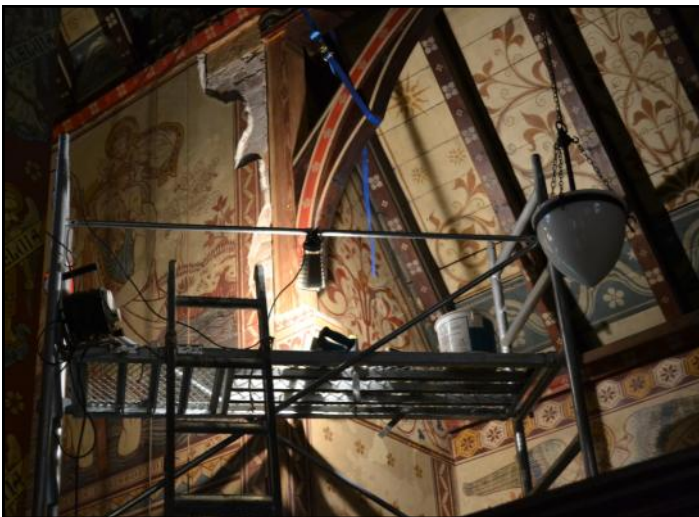
Although the lower levels of the vestibule were restored in 2014, there was serious and major damage to the two large upper frescoes behind the organ case.

This is due to water ingress, salt corrosion, cracking of the stonework and decorated plaster coming loose and disintegrating. The photos below show the 'before & after' restoration of St Christopher and the Christ Child.



Dry Rot

When the scaffolding reached the upper levels, dry rot was discovered in one of the main beams and in a decorative fascia beam.



The effected pitch-pine beams have been cut out and replaced with reclaimed beams of a similar age.

Some of the decorative plaster work has been cut out and taken back to the original brick work so the beam could be fitted.

The walls will be re-plastered with the decorative pattern re-instated and the new beams will be repainted in the original design.





The restoration of Ethan the Instrumentalist has been delayed due to the dry rot but work should be completed on this fresco by April 2016



'Before & After' restoration above 'Ethan the Instrumentalist'

One final piece of restoration in the vestibule is the re-sighting of this ugly cable and junction box.



Photographic record of the frescoes and windows



Alastair Carew-Cox is an award winning architectural photographer specialising in Victorian churches.

He has exhibited throughout Europe and Japan, having produced books on Pugin, the Pre-Raphaelites and Burne-Jones but to name a few.

Educated at Malvern College and continuing to live in Malvern, Alastair has a passion for our church and in conjunction with him we hope to produced the definitive record of the frescoes and stained glass, with an eventual view to the production of a lavishly illustrated book on the subject.

The photograph on the front cover and those on the next two pages are taken by Alastair of our church, showing the fresco panels in the kind of detail which only professional photography of this standard can achieve.





Please note the home printing of these photographs does not match their true quality.



