

Ancient Monuments Laboratory
Report 32/97

WALL PAINTING CONDITION AUDIT,
BYLAND ABBEY, NORTH YORKSHIRE

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T Manning

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BYLAND ABBEY, NORTH YORKSHIRE**

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Summary

This condition audit of wall paintings at Byland Abbey includes a wall painting record, general audit information, documentation of original materials and execution of the painting, and deterioration and damage including previously used materials and treatment, as well as proposals for treatment and monitoring strategies.

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Byland Abbey North Yorkshire

The following report has been generated by the Wall Painting Section database. This archival system provides a computerised record of all wall paintings in English Heritage Historic Properties and is intended to comprehensively document the collection. Each report has been subdivided into four sections to present the data in a clear format. These include:

1 Wall Painting Record:

Includes a description of the site and paintings, as well as archival information, such as bibliographic references and photographic records.

2 General Audit Information:

Describes any monitoring undertaken and a synopsis of future conservation requirements.

3 Technique:

Documents the nature and condition of the original materials and execution of the painting which is described according to its stratigraphy and any related analysis.

4 Deterioration and damage, added materials, treatment:

Deterioration and damage lists the types of alterations which may have occurred, that is either deterioration (natural alterations such as cracking or delamination) or mechanical damage (such as graffiti).

Added Materials documents all non-original materials present on or within a painting. These may include naturally occurring substances (accretions, such as dirt and dust) or deliberately added materials (coatings, coverings and repairs).

Treatment documents previous interventions and proposed treatment and monitoring strategies.

Throughout each section, an area of painting is assigned a number between 1 and 4 which is intended as a general indication of present condition. These are: 1 good, 2 fair, 3 poor, 4 unacceptable.

This report is based on information gathered prior to March 1996 and does not include any changes in condition, further research or treatment undertaken after this date. Amended editions will be produced as necessary.

Contents

1 East End, south chapel

2 Sculpture

1 Wall Painting Record

Property name	BYLAND ABBEY		
Region	North	County	North Yorkshire
Location of painting	East end, south chapel		
Orientation	EAST AND SOUTH WALLS		
Century 14 th	Date	Height (cm) 0	Width (cm) 0
Subjects included			
Rosette(s)			
Scrollwork			

Description

'The Abbey of Byland was regarded in its heyday as one of the three great monasteries of the north, alongside Rievaulx and Fountains. But its beginnings were unpromising: it was only after forty-three years and numerous moves from one unsuitable site to another that the community of Byland found its permanent home. It started life... as a monastery of the reforming order of Savigny, founded from Furness Abbey in Cumberland, and was absorbed into the larger Cistercian order in 1147.' (Harrison, 1992:fronticepiece)

'The earliest surviving building on the site is the west range, which provided accommodation for the lay brothers. Completed by about 1165, it may indicate that the lay brothers had occupied the site in advance of the choir monks, to help with the construction of the building... the monks first moved... in 1177, [when] most of the monastic buildings were completed, but construction of the church had barely begun... it was finished in the 1190s and was built around a temporary church which was progressively demolished as parts of the new church became usable.' (Harrison, 1992:27)

When Byland Abbey was first constructed it was the largest Cistercian church in Britain (100 m long and 43 m wide). Harrison regards the building as 'by far the most elaborate attempted by the Cistercians... [which] broke away from their previous adherence to simple, plain churches... [and] reached a splendour far removed from earlier Cistercian buildings.' (Harrison, 1992:3)

He describes the interior of the church (presumably using evidence from the surviving fabric and excavated archaeological material) as being 'limewashed inside, with false masonry lines painted in red, a theme carried onto the walls of the chapels which in places had painted vine scroll patterns and flowers. Some of the main columns were also decorated with vine leaf and scale pattern, and all the carved capitals were highlighted by having their details picked out in red. The plain chalice (cup-shaped) capitals were also painted in red to imitate those of carved form. In the later period, when the floors were tiled... the aisle walls were decorated with figurative paintings, including a depiction of Our Lord's Pity showing the dead Christ on His Mother's knee on the wall of the north aisle of the nave' (Harrison, 1992:4)

The abbey was placed under the guardianship of the Office of Works in 1921.

North wall painting

It is not entirely clear what subject the painting on the north wall of the north aisle actually depicted. Peers (1952:6, in DP, personal notes) stated: 'There were ... figure subjects of a later date than the original decoration, and on the north wall of the north aisle of the nave there was once a large... [Pieta]... probably of late fourteenth-century date, but now no longer visible.' Apparently an EH photo album and documentary records exist (Harrison 1989) which confirm that a wall painting showing a 'Pieta' was situated 'on the north wall of the nave in bay nine from the west' and that 'for many years it was protected by a cover and treated annually with beeswax and turpentine, but the cover rotted away and the painting allowed to perish'. However, Tristram described the painting: 'On the north wall of the north aisle, towards the east end, is the remains of a figure with bare legs and a piece of red drapery... It has been suggested that the figure may

have been that of St. Christopher.'

No evidence of painted decoration on the north wall was found during audit inspection in July 1995.

Remains of decoration, east end, south chapel

The fragments of paint audited in 1995 appear to be the remnants of a rosette and scrollwork design, in red on a limewash ground. These remains can be seen at the east end of the church, in the southern chapel on the east and south wall.

These remains do not appear to have been recorded by Tristram.

Photographic Record

29/6/94 EH 'current' contact photo files; no images of wall paintings.

Photograph search, DOE files, EH photo library (JD24/03/95)
Byland Abbey; no relevant DOE photographs found.

JD, TM 7/95 colour print and slide

Bibliography

Harrison, S. correspondence with David Park, 8/1/1989.

Harrison, S.A., Byland Abbey, North Yorkshire, English Heritage guide book, H.M.S.O., 1990, reprinted 1992.

2 General Audit Information

Property name	BYLAND ABBEY	County	North Yorkshire
Region	North		
Location	East end, south chapel		
Orientation	EAST AND SOUTH WALLS		
Century 14th	Date	Height (cm) 0	Width (cm) 0
Auditor(s)	TM/JD	Start date	11/07/95

Overall condition score **3**

Recommendations

The fragmentary remains of painted decoration have been given a poor condition score (3) because of their worn appearance and exposed location. However, it is difficult to assess the rate of decay; they may have been in this condition for a long period of time, and presently appear fairly stable.

The painting should be fully photographed and documented as a record of the (once extensive) decoration of the church. It is hoped that knowledge of their survival and location will serve to preserve these traces of paint in the event of future building works, etc. The custodian was informed of their existence after auditing, 11/7/95.

3 Audit Information: Technique

Property name	BYLAND ABBEY		
Region	North	County	North Yorkshire
Location	East end, south chapel		
Orientation	EAST AND SOUTH WALLS		
Century 14 th	Date	Height (cm) 0	Width (cm) 0
Auditor(s)	TM/JD	Start date	11/07/95

Overall Condition Score **3**

Stratigraphy

Layer type	Support Layer	Specific condition Score	3
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Thickness 50 cm

Comments

Limestone ashlar support. The support appears to be in reasonable condition for a ruinous structure. However micro-spalling and powdering, together with lichen and unidentified biodeterioration pose a threat to the stone surface. The stonework has been repointed, but the fineness of the ashlar blocks implies that the original pointing would have been applied flush with the stone surface.

Layer type	Ground Layer 1	Specific condition Score	3
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Thickness

Comments

There appears to be a limewash ground. However this layer is difficult to discern as it is mineralised and visually similar to the spalling stone surface.

Layer type	Paint Layer 1	Specific condition Score	3
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Thickness

Comments

The paint layer consists of thinly applied red paint. In places, where it appears preferential erosion of paint and ground layers has occurred, 'ghosts' of scrollwork pattern can be seen. A red rosette is visible to the eastern end of the south wall.

Identified pigments **Colours**

--- red

4 Audit Information: deterioration and damage, added materials, treatment

Property name	BYLAND ABBEY		
Region	North	County	North Yorkshire
Location	East end, south chapel		
Orientation	EAST AND SOUTH WALLS		
Century 14 th	Date	Height (cm) 0	Width (cm) 0

DETERIORATION AND DAMAGE

Deterioration phenomena

Type loss

Location General.

Comments The building is a ruin and large areas of the support have been lost.

Type general erosion

Location General.

Comments The surfaces of the support, ground and paint layers have all suffered from weathering and erosion due to the exposed nature of the site.

Type spalling

Location General.

Comments The surface of the stone is lifting and scaling.

Type flaking

Location Centre and west side of south wall.

Comments Small areas are lifting into 'cupping' type flakes. This phenomenon appears to be associated with a black layer over the surface, and not exactly with the paint layer itself.

Type loss of cohesion

Location Centre and west side of south wall.

Comments Where areas of 'cupping' flakes have been lost the underlying stonework appears to be powdering.

ADDED MATERIALS

Accretions

Type biodeterioration

Location General.

Comments There is a blackish growth over most of the area.

Type unidentified deposit

Location Especially to centre and west of south wall.

Comments There is a blackish growth/deposit over most of the area. This forms almost into a coherent coating in places and appears to be associated with loss of the underlying surface due to 'cupping' type flaking. This layer may possibly be a form of sulphation.

Type algae

Location Base of south wall.

Comments There is some algal growth and higher plants at the base of the wall.

Type black surface crust

Location Red paint layer, in several areas.

Comments There appears to be some type of natural crust (sulphation?) integral with the paint layer in areas. This deposit does not form a distinct coating.

Repairs

Type cement

Location Pointing.

Comments The stone support has been repointed using 'Scotch mortar', a coarse cementitious mortar.

TREATMENT

Past Treatment

Type FILLS/REPAIRS INSERTION **Date** 01/01/01

Person Unknown

Comments The stone support has been repointed using 'Scotch mortar', a coarse cementitious mortar. It is not known at what date or by whom the repairs were carried out.

Proposed Treatment

Type VARIOUS **Date** 11/07/95

Person TM/JD

Comments The painting should be fully photographed and documented as it appears to be the only remains of once extensive decoration within the Abbey.

It may not be possible to conserve the surviving fragments as they are severely eroded and it would prove difficult to successfully carry out any conservation treatment of the paint layer. However, consolidation of the stone and/or removal of the black crust over the surface may be considered desirable.



East end, south chapel, southeast corner



Detail, painted rosette on south wall

1 Wall Painting Record

Property name	BYLAND ABBEY		
Region	North	County	North Yorkshire
Location of painting	sculpture		
Orientation	UNKNOWN		
Century 12 th	Date	Height (cm)0	Width (cm) 0
Subjects included	Various decorative motifs		

Description

'The Abbey of Byland was regarded in its heyday as one of the three great monasteries of the north, alongside Rievaulx and Fountains. But its beginnings were unpromising: it was only after forty-three years and numerous moves from one unsuitable site to another that the community of Byland found its permanent home. It started life... as a monastery of the reforming order of Savigny, founded from Furness Abbey in Cumberland, and was absorbed into the larger Cistercian order in 1147.' (Harrison, 1992:fronticepiece)

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The abbey was placed under the guardianship of the Office of Works in 1921.

Remains of painted sculpture

Tristram recorded that: 'In the museum are various stones with decorative patterns, and one with an arcade of arches, some round-headed, in red'

D. Park also noted the survival of painting on some of the carved capitals from Byland, based on information supplied by Stuart Harrison (see files):

'These include the stone with painted arcading mentioned by Tristram..., a stone with what Harrison thinks is remains of red scrollwork, and a capital with painted leaf designs...but without any carving. All this [material] is in room (loft above museum?).'

There did not appear to be an on-site museum when visited by auditors in July 1995. These fragments may

be held at the Northern Store (Helmsley).

Photographic Record

Photograph search, DOE files, EH photo library (JD24/03/95)
Byland Abbey; no relevant DOE photographs found.

Bibliography

EH internal files; 10131/2 part 2.

Harrison, 1989 Harrison, S. correspondence with David Park, 8/1/1989.

Harrison, 1992 Harrison, S.A., Byland Abbey, North Yorkshire, English Heritage guide book, H.M.S.O., 1990, reprinted 1992.