



Return of the Torbryan two

Rachel Morley goes behind the scenes to discover the panel repair work undertaken at Holy Trinity, Torbryan

Rising out of a leafy Devonshire glade is Holy Trinity, Torbryan. The 15th-century walls and tower dazzle with a heavenly white light. Under a vaulted porch, the heavy oak door greets you with a groan.

From behind the box pews a row of ancient faces fix their gaze on you as you enter. Breaking the silence and stillness of the church, their looks seem accusatory. The saintly figures stand under deeply moulded tracery of cinque-foiled and cusped arches, in a screen

crested with gilded flower-heads spanning the width of the building. The rood screen, a decorative partition between the nave and chancel, separated the clergy from the worshippers and enabled the revelation and concealment central to the medieval mass.

Originally, 44 portraits lined the screen. Incredibly, by the 20th century, just four panels had been lost, making the Torbryan screen arguably one of the most complete sets of pre-Reformation figures,

Above
Damage to the St Victor panel
(Eddie Sinclair, ACR)



Above left
St Margaret of Antioch
following conservation
(Rachel Morley/CCT)

Above right
St Victor of Marseilles
following conservation
(Rachel Morley/CCT)

having managed to survive the tyranny of iconoclasm under a veil of whitewash.

Despite surviving the ravages of time and rot, the panels were not safe from harm. In 2003, three figures were ripped from the south side of the north aisle. In 2013 history repeated itself with a further two panels stolen from the north aisle; an act which left a third panel severely damaged. Their loss was a heartbreaking discovery.

The kidnapped faces of St Margaret of Antioch and St Victor of Marseilles created an unprecedented media sensation and, almost two years later, just as hope seemed lost, the panels were recovered! Elation soon dissipated, however, when the panels were returned in splintered fragments:

it was clear that extensive and expensive conservation work was urgently needed.

CCT's appeal for support was met with an astonishingly generous public response. In no time at all, enough funds had been raised for conservation to begin and, over the next 12 months, a team of expert conservators got to work, among them timber specialist Hugh Harrison, conservation joiner Stuart Anderson and polychromy conservator Eddie Sinclair.

Even before they were stolen, the ancient panels had been in a fragile state. The deadly duo, damp and death-watch beetle, had teamed up to weaken the woodwork; considerable conservation had been previously undertaken to arrest this process.



Hacked from their frames, the panels and paintwork now cracked and crumbled. Indeed, such was the state of decay that, upon recovery, it was discovered that their thief had undertaken some conservation work of his own, crudely sticking fragments back together with PVA glue and pinning a cardboard photo-frame to the reverse. Needless to say, these are not methods which CCT would endorse.

The conservation work needed to address the structural requirements of the panels as well as the paintings themselves; this was even more of a challenge given that the panels would be returning to their church home rather than to the controlled environment of a museum.

Whilst considering the enormity of the task at hand, facing paper was applied across damaged areas to preserve the vulnerable paint and timber before the fragments were

reassembled and realigned like a complex jigsaw puzzle.

On inspection of the panels, the true scale of insect infestation was revealed; a network of channels and tunnels coursed through the wood. Restoring strength and integrity to the panels would require extensive filling and consolidation.

Moreover, the fillers used had to be not only compatible with the original fabric and previous conservation materials, but also flexible and stable, while strong enough to repair the damage. Discreet trials of varying concentrations and compositions were undertaken to find the most suitable material.

Once chosen, the consolidant was injected with the utmost care through the insect flight-holes which pepper the panels. Given the depth to which the insects had tunneled, it was necessary to apply the consolidant in multiple phases over several weeks. However, this



Above left
Conservator Eddie Sinclair using a heated spatula to relay paint flakes
(Eddie Sinclair, ACR)

Above
Nave view at Holy Trinity, Torbryan
(Rachel Morley/CCT)

Above right
Retrieved panel fragments
(Eddie Sinclair, ACR)



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alone was not sufficient and additional grouting fillers were injected locally to penetrate the voids deep within the woodwork.

The fragments were now – to everyone's relief – in a stable state, and work to stitch the scenes back together could begin. For this, thickened fillers were used to support vulnerable edges and blend with the surface texture of the panels. Bridging fractures and filling surface losses, these mixtures were gradually built up before an isolation layer was applied and new decoration was integrated with the old. This isolation layer is essential for separating new work from original elements, meaning that the conservation work can be easily read and, even more importantly, can be reversed in the future without affecting the underlying surface. To respect the panels' hard-earned patina, new repairs were only toned in where they were particularly disfiguring or distracting.

The next challenge was to preserve as much of the original paintwork as possible. Working under magnification, Eddie painstakingly injected minute quantities of acrylic resin solution under delicate loose and flaking paint, to stick the lifted paint-film to the surface of the panel. Each flake was then gently laid back into position and planed with a heated spatula. Once the surfaces were secure, a dammar resin varnish was applied to protect the paintwork and re-saturate the rich colour palette.

Following these repairs, Stuart installed bespoke oak battens to the backs of the panels to provide additional support, further enhanced by specially designed stainless steel straps.

St Margaret and St Victor finally rejoined their holy companions in Torbryan in June, marking an extraordinary story of skill and survival against all odds. ▲