



St Mary the Virgin Church, East Knoyle

Seventeenth Century decorative plasterwork

What makes the decorative plasterwork adorning the walls of the chancel so valuable both historically and artistically is that it was conceived, designed and paid for by Dean Wren, father of Sir Christopher Wren. Robert Brockway, a local craftsman from Frome, was the craftsman who undertook the work. Dean Wren's theology was shaped by his lifelong devotion to Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, a central figure in the 'Laudian' beautification of sacred environments in early Stuart ecclesiology.

Some areas of the decorative plasterwork had been deliberately damaged, in particular a scene of the Ascension at the west end of the chancel and two scenes related to Jacob's Dream at the east end of the chancel. It is not known when this was done or by whom, but is tied in with the English Civil War and Dean Wren's links to the Royalist cause. Originally there was a flat ceiling

to the chancel at wall plate level, itself covered with decorative plaster of the same period. This was removed in the Victorian era, but fortunately fragments of it remain in a display box in the church.

The programme of conservation focused on cleaning the plain painted surface of the decorative plasterwork in response to the parish's wish to redecorate the chancel. Cleaning is preferable to repainting as with each repainting more and more detail is obscured. In this instance the plain paint on the decorative plasterwork is not original but a relatively recent overpaint.

During cleaning some overpaint was disturbed providing a serendipitous glimpse of the original surface of the decorative plasterwork. Tool marks from modelling and setting out lines for the text were revealed, it was as if the centuries had fallen away.

