The Attingham Re-discovered Project of Improvements to Historic Interiors

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Abstract
An ambitious, long-term project called Attingham Re-discovered is now into its fifth year of reviving the historic interiors at Attingham Park, a late Georgian mansion with Regency interiors owned by the National Trust in Shropshire, England.

This project brings together a huge range of curatorial and conservation disciplines, all contributing their various specialisms, vital in ensuring a holistic approach to the multi-faceted nature of furnished historic interiors. The project’s proposals are founded on years of extensive archival and technical research and the resulting work ranged from stabilisation, to conservation, to restoration, depending on each particular case but, crucially, judged within the context of the whole. The paper discusses the approach and philosophy, the interaction of the team, the results of research and recreation trials and how they informed the conservation and recreation decisions.

Keywords
Regency, historic interiors, technical analysis, archival research, wallpaper, paint surfaces, multi-disciplinary

Pre-amble
The National Trust was founded in 1895 to protect places of historical interest and natural beauty throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Trust looks after the finest and most comprehensive historic collections in the world, comprising complete examples of houses and buildings, their contents, gardens and settings and provides extensive access.

Introduction
Built by George Steuart in 1785 and altered by John Nash in 1805-7, Attingham Park in Shropshire is a vast, austere, late Georgian mansion. The house has had extravagant
expenditure lavished upon it, survived periods of decline, neglect and even bankruptcy, and has each time been revived and resuscitated.

It was handed to the National Trust in 1947 by the 8th and last Lord Berwick, and until quite recently, visitors were only able to see a comparatively small proportion of its rooms. Many of those that were shown had become rather soul-less, sterile and institutionalised and had lost a convincing feel of ever having been lived-in.

Over recent years, greater visitor expectations and increasing transparency in the way the National Trust shows and explains its properties to visitors made it clear that improvements were needed and there was a need to carefully refresh the way the interiors were presented. This was a series of historic interiors that had been lived in for generations, not a museum, and these interiors needed to have life breathed back into them.

In 2006 the Attingham Re-Discovered project of improvements to the interiors set out to meet this challenge and has been making huge progress ever since. Its aims are to protect, reveal and enhance the significance of the place, its fabric, contents and stories.

Figure 1: John Fowler scheme in the Octagon Room © The National Trust

Approach and Philosophy
Although essentially occupied by members of the same family throughout its history, there are many overlapping layers in the development of Attingham. Physical legacies of the various periods, both in terms of decorative schemes and objects, survive to varying degrees in each space. It is important to reflect and respect this evolution within the spaces and tease out the various historic layers in order to help the visitor understand an unexpectedly complicated house. But more than this, the National Trust aims to generate support for its conservation work through increasing transparency about the processes and costs involved. Greater understanding leads to deeper relationships and is turning passive visitors into active
supporters. A key aim of the Attingham project is thus to provide as much interpretational and educational benefit as possible. Visitors are encouraged to gain greater insight into the issues involved by witnessing conservation-in-action and entering into the complex curatorial and conservation debates.

The Project’s proposals are based on ten consecutive years of documentary research into Attingham’s extensive archive, coupled with equally rigorous physical investigations and analysis of decorative schemes carried out by internal and external experts and advisers. The evidence was collated and divided up on a chronological, room-by-room basis, providing an evolutionary picture of each space in terms of its decorative appearance and contents. Accordingly, Statement of Significance and Philosophy of Approach documents were drawn up as guiding principles. This allowed a strategy to be developed which guided a sequence of investigations and considerations of re-decoration options. The work ranges from stabilisation, to conservation, to restoration, depending on each particular case but, crucially, judged within the context of the whole.

One of the biggest challenges is maintaining a balanced overview of the whole house. A further consideration is that it is divided symmetrically into the feminine apartments to the east and the masculine to the west. The east wing contains original late 18th and early 19th century decorative schemes and textiles, creating a delicate, faded patina. Here, the project’s approach is extremely cautious and conscious of the intangible atmosphere that could so easily be lost. The west, on the other hand, is to some degree institutionalised by the occupation of an Education College in the mid 20th century when historic schemes were painted out and carpets and curtains replaced. Whilst maintaining this east-west distinction, the two sides of the house must also be considered together to ensure that any proposed changes in a given room will sit convincingly with adjacent rooms. This is particularly important when considering the significance of the Regency scheme and its need to sit comfortably alongside the other schemes.

Figure 2: Evidence of imitation graining in the Octagon Room © The National Trust
Advisory Team

Historic interiors are invaluable and multi-faceted repositories of artistic, architectural, decorative and social culture. No single specialism can deal with the conservation of these complex treasure houses, and a balanced, combined approach is crucial if each and every aspect of their conservation and presentation is to be considered as an integral whole. Due to this complexity, a large team of internal and external advisers and specialists provides curatorial, conservation and analytical expertise. Bringing together such a multi-disciplinary project team and working on several interiors in the property simultaneously is a complex task, but has great advantages. The different specialisms throw invaluable and unexpected light from their respective perspectives on the different decorative elements of a room. No one aspect sits alone without influencing another. It is vital to make sure that paint schemes, textiles, carpets and furniture all hang together harmoniously and that the philosophy of approach is consistent, not just in each single room but throughout a whole suite of spaces.

Figure 3: Trial ‘slice’ of proposed scheme in the Octagon Room © The National Trust
The scope of the project is vast and has been set out in a phased programme which currently spans ten years but will probably take at least twelve to complete. Due to this, a dedicated Project Curator and Project Conservator were appointed to draw-up and choreograph the ongoing phased programme. This includes organising and supervising the visits of the internal and external advisers, commissioning extensive surveys and analysis of the decorative history, managing the large budget allocated from the property’s own funds (approximately £150,000.00 each year), and continuing to collate the research and findings that are still emerging as work progresses. All this work is dovetailed into the normal routine of the mansion which is open 6 days a week most of the year and run by a small number of house staff.

In addition, proposals are presented to an external, independent, advisory Panel at regular intervals for comment and guidance. This Panel is also cross-disciplinary, being made up of curators, conservators and experts in the fields of art history, architectural history, and the fine and decorative arts.

Archival and Technical Research
Archival information is used extensively to support the technical research. Attingham is fortunate to have a vast archive and one of the most invaluable documents within it is the 1827 bankruptcy sale catalogue which contains detailed descriptions of all the interiors. Inventories, letters, diaries, photographs, historic publications and oral history are also used as sources of evidence. This information, combined with expert knowledge from various curators and specialists, provided the basis for technical analysis.

Figure 4: The Octagon Room after completion of decorative scheme © The National Trust
Extensive paint analysis and investigation of the decorative schemes was undertaken over several years in all of the main ground-floor rooms of the house, including those which were not intended for redecoration. This was carried out in order to achieve an overall understanding of the appearance of the house in its entirety, rather than looking at spaces in isolation. This meant that any proposals for re-decoration of a room could be drawn up with an understanding of the spaces adjacent to it.

Paint analysis revealed the stratigraphy or the layered history of numerous decorative schemes and the condition, pigments, binding medium and varnishes or glazes in the different layers. However, the interpretation of the results is not always straightforward as a small sample cannot necessarily reveal how the paint was used on a larger scale to create a particular scheme, or the subtle nuances of how the scheme relates to other decorative elements in the room.

For example, in the Octagon Room, the decorative scheme was the work of John Fowler, based loosely on Steuart’s original late 18th century colours for the room of soft greens and creams (Figure 1). Archival documentation described the Regency riot of opulent, bold colours in terms of the textiles in the room: pink, crimson, scarlet and blue. This evidence and some early paint scrapes in the 1980s had led to tantalising rumours of a strong use of black in the paintwork. Paint analysis identified a scheme which appeared to coincide with the findings described above and was dated to the 2nd Lord Berwick’s redecoration (circa 1813). It appeared to include a black and red marbling or veining scheme on the architectural elements of the room. In order to have a clearer understanding of the scheme, a series of small “windows” were opened-up by removing the overlying layers of paint. Despite difficulties in revealing the black/red layer, there was sufficient evidence to indicate that the black layer was a rich, warm black. The red paint layer was comprised of two reds, one being a transparent earth based colour and the other a brighter, opaque red such as red lead or vermilion. They were applied in a painterly fashion in either horizontal or vertical bands depending upon their location, thus confirming the scheme as an imitation of graining, possibly a Rosewood or a fantasy exotic hardwood (Figure 2).

Closer examination of this layer revealed the presence of very small protrusions scattered within the black paint layer. These were possibly due either to the formation of lead soaps which migrate to the surface of the paint layer or the incorporation of a gritty material as part of the ground layer which would enliven the surface of the paint layer. However, discussions with the textile curator who had been examining the archived samples of the original curtain material led to the supposition that the black protrusions may have been a deliberate attempt to echo the stamped pattern of the black velvet ribbon on the curtains. This may also explain the presence of discrete red paint particles within the paint layer as they matched the scarlet of the curtain’s lining. If this is indeed the explanation, it indicates the intricacies of the overall decorative scheme with different elements complementing each other.

In this instance, the combined efforts of various specialists both in terms of knowledge and analytical techniques helped decipher the results of the paint analysis leading to a greater understanding of a particular decorative scheme (Figure 3). These results also clarified the materials and techniques to be employed by the paint specialist in re-creating the decorative scheme (Figure 4).

**Conservation/restoration/re-decoration Approach: The Boudoir**

The Boudoir was intended as the feminine counterpart to the Octagon Room. Whilst the Octagon Room, was decorated in bold, contrasting colours, the Boudoir was pure femininity with a series of circular figurative panels on the theme of Love, surrounded by delicately painted grotesque and arabesque motifs and set against lightly coloured walls (Figure 5). The ornate domed ceiling contained nine roundels showing the life of cupid painted on thin canvas attached to the plaster ceiling. A relatively even layer of dust covered all the decorative...
surfaces obscuring the painted and gilded decorations. The monochrome wall surfaces and architectural elements such as skirting boards, columns and dado rails had been further damaged by wear and tear, discoloured repairs and cracks in the plaster surfaces.

As the scheme was such an important late 18th century survival, a minimal conservation approach was undertaken. This involved surface cleaning, consolidation of surfaces, removal of discoloured over-paint where possible, retouching of paint losses and areas of over-paint, re-gilding of losses and structural repairs to plaster cracks. Paint analysis and cleaning trials informed the cleaning process as there were a variety of paint surfaces: distemper, unvarnished layers of thin oil paint, varnished gilded surfaces and varnished oil paint layers (Figure 6). For surface cleaning of the varnished and unvarnished oil painted surfaces, an initial cleaning using de-ionised water was followed by either a 1% or 2% solution of triammonium citrate in de-ionised water. In areas where the over-paint did not respond to the triammonium citrate solutions, a stronger solution of 1-methoxy-2-pyrrolidone was used or the paint was removed by scalpel. Paint losses, stains and areas of insoluble over-paint were retouched with Lascaux Aquacryl Colors and Lascaux Aquacryl Medium (acrylic resin dispersion) mixed with dry pigments. Plextol B500 (an aqueous acrylic copolymer) was used to consolidate lifting paint and plaster cracks filled with Alabastine prior to retouching.
Due to the variety of surfaces and differing levels of damage in the Boudoir, it was decided to undertake the cleaning in trial stages with an assessment of the overall appearance after each stage. This approach not only enabled the committee to judge the level of cleaning for each aspect of the room but also decide the level of retouching of losses and former repainted areas which could not be removed without damage to underlying surfaces. This was particularly important on the ceiling where dirt was more firmly embedded in the paint surface, sections had been over-painted and the underlying darker paint layer changed the tonal appearance of the top layer. Thus it was important to retain a balance between the ceiling and the lower surfaces so that the room presented a balanced appearance. As the work in the Boudoir coincided with other conservation/restoration work in the Octagon and Sultana Rooms, the committee was also able to continually assess the overall appearance of the rooms in relation to each other.

Figure 6: Cleaning trial on the wall of the Boudoir © The National Trust

The Nash Wallpaper Scheme

In February 2000 a trompe l’oeil decorative wallpaper scheme was discovered in raking light under several layers of later oil paint on the upper flights of the main staircase and on first floor corridors. It dates from 1807, when John Nash was re-modelling the house for the 2nd Lord Berwick. For the past nine years, technical research, paint analysis and trials have combined to build up our understanding of the nature and construction of this deceptively complex scheme. Initially thought to be in oil, due to the confusing presence of lead ‘aggregates’ visible in samples viewed under the microscope, further analysis into the binding medium found it to be a distemper scheme. It is applied on individual sheets of hand-made paper (elephant-size sheets of pre-continuous paper), comprising regular rectangular
chamfered panels which use a combination of dark grey, light grey and white distemper lines to give an illusion of highlight and shadow.

Trials showed that wallpaper conservators were able to successfully remove the five or six layers of oil paint with Nitromors® (active ingredient dichloromethane) to miraculously reveal the original distemper scheme beneath [1]. Some areas responded better than others, and in some areas there was no original paper at all due to historic water ingress and the ravages of time. The survival of the scheme was therefore patchy and its condition varied from wall to wall (Figure 7).

![Specialists assessing an area of the uncovered wallpaper scheme](https://example.com/specialists-assessing-wallpaper-scheme.jpg)

*Figure 7: Specialists assessing an area of the uncovered wallpaper scheme © The National Trust*

Much discussion has taken place regarding the best philosophy of approach to the scheme, ranging from archaeological recovery, to conservation, to recreation. Should visitors be presented with the original scheme which has been uncovered and conserved but in a somewhat abraded state? Or would it be preferable to preserve the archaeology of the original underneath the layers of oil paint and re-create the scheme as new on top? As noted by Mark Sandiford, private Wallpaper Conservator, ‘This decorative scheme is a very rare survival and presents a unique opportunity for the conservation profession. To have the possibility of removing many layers of oil-based over-paint from delicate distemper painted onto any surface is rare; to be able to successfully remove it from distemper painted onto paper is exceptional’.
The presentation of the scheme also had to be considered in terms of its relation to the other spaces around it. The ethical, practical and aesthetic issues have all been weighed in the balance. Paper conservators, wallpaper conservators, paint analysts, paintings conservators, interior decorating advisers, internal and external experts have all been involved in the debate. Trials were held to judge the appearance of various types of paper (hand-made, mould-made and machine-made) and paint (casein distemper: both hand-made and a proprietary paint, and an acrylic emulsion mix).

Given that the scheme incorporated several discreet areas, it was felt that varying approaches could be adopted in the different spaces. This would allow the opportunity of furthering conservation techniques in paint removal and recovery of such distemper schemes, as well as show-casing the skills required to recreate the decoration from scratch. It was felt important that the areas of loss that had to be in-filled with new paper should be completely ‘honest’ and not be artificially ‘distressed’ to make them blend in more with the abraded, uncovered original. Similarly, where the original survived but was imperfect, it should not be ‘titivated’ in order to enhance its appearance. The aim was nevertheless to ensure a harmony between the various areas, relying on the human eye to integrate the whole (Figure 8).

*Figure 8: Area of juxtaposed uncovered and re-created wallpaper © The National Trust*
It was a challenge to find a team with the necessary combination of conservation and specialist painting skills, individuals who would be able to work together, dove-tailing the paper conservation elements with the demanding artistic skills needed for the recreation of the painted distemper elements. All treatment was carried out in situ as, although a studio approach seemed very attractive given the challenges of working on vertical surfaces in stairways and with strong solvents, the difficulty of matching separated treated sheets would have led to too great a compromise in historical integrity.

Although a number of trials had been undertaken to help establish possible methods of approach, it was only through discussions during the selection process and indeed well into the early stages of treatment that it was possible to define detailed methodologies. Differences of opinion and strong debates within the multi-disciplinary team encouraged further research and investigation. As Alasdair Peebles, private Paint Specialist, observed, "it is not until one is materially faced with the visual and technical options that theory and practice are really placed under tension and assumptions challenged". For example, further paint analysis has been undertaken in order to understand the significance of the presence of distemper on the associated joinery which was only revealed once work was underway. This challenged the view that the joinery had originally been grained. Similarly, the jury was out as to how the triangular corner motifs had historically been produced: mass-produced off-site or individually hand-painted? It emerged (literally) as uncovering progressed that they could not all have been mass-produced as they varied in shape according to their precise position within the scheme, and that some had been applied, whilst others, inexplicably, had been painted directly onto the wall. The discovery of not one but three different layers relating to different versions of a trompe l’oeil figure in a niche, a key part of the scheme, prompted quite vehement debate as to the ethics of removing or ‘re-burying’ these layers within the scheme.

Our understanding of the details and idiosyncrasies of the construction of the scheme has thus evolved over time. The methodology of approach had to develop organically to take these and other discoveries into account and as all team members contributed their varying viewpoints and evolving understanding of the scheme to the discussions.

**Conclusion**

*Attingham Re-discovered* is a rare, large-scale conservation project tackling an entire mansion with all the associated complexities and wide-ranging issues. Solid, extensive research and analysis within a clear philosophy of approach allows it to take bold yet rounded conservation decisions which are followed through to the minutest detail. Historical accuracy, the highest standards of presentation and multi-disciplinary teamwork are key.

As the project evolves exciting discoveries continue to be made. It is important to take time to digest these and discuss them in as wide a forum as possible. We need to be open and flexible as they present challenges and stimulate debates which can often lead to changes within our approach. This is a valuable, on-going process which deepens and enriches the understanding of Attingham’s historic interiors.

**Endnote**

[1] Due to the impending discontinuation of the sale of Nitromors®, the National Trust is currently investigating alternatives.

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Materials List

**Lascaux Aquacryl Colors and Lascaux**

_Aquacryl Medium_
- Acrylic resin dispersion
- Lascaux Colour and Restauro
- Barbara Dithelm AG
- Zürichstrasse 42
- CH 8306 Brüttisellen
- Switzerland
- Tel: +41 44 807 4141
- Fax: +41 44 8074140

**Alabastine**
- Fine surface filler containing calcium sulphate, hemihydrate
- ICI Paints
- Wexham Road, Slough
- Berkshire SL2 5DS
- Or any specialist decorators store

**Plextol B500**
- Aqueous dispersion of an ethyl acrylate and methyl methacrylate based copolymer
- ConservationResourcesUKLtd
- Unit 2, Ashville Way
- Off Watlington Road
- Cowley
- Oxfordshire OX4 6TU
- England
- Tel: 01865747755
- Fax: 01865747756
Biographies

Sarah Kay (Project Curator, author for correspondence) studied languages and Fine & Decorative Arts before working for Christie’s Fine Art Auctioneers. She has worked as a Researcher & Curator for the National Trust in England for the last ten years, the last four as a freelance Project Curator, specialising in researching historic interiors and advising on their display, historical accuracy and interpretation. She gained her AMA in 2007 and is currently working for the National Trust on two major, long-term projects in 18th century houses, both with a strong emphasis on engaging the public through conservation-in-action. (The National Trust, Attingham Park, Shrewsbury, Shropshire SY4 4TP, UK sarah.kay@osltd.co.uk www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

Catriona Hughes (Project Conservator) studied Archaeology at the University of Sydney before attaining a Diploma in the Restoration of Antique Ceramics and Glass at West Dean College, England. She worked in a multi-disciplinary conservation studio in Sydney for eight years during which time she attended the 11th International Course on the Technology of Stone Conservation run by ICCROM / UNESCO. She gained a Graduate Diploma in Heritage Conservation at the University of Sydney and has worked in the fields of architectural conservation and collections conservation in private practice and government run departments. She is currently a freelance Project Conservator undertaking work at a variety of National Trust properties in the UK. (The National Trust, Attingham Park, Shrewsbury, Shropshire SY4 4TP, UK catriona.hughes1@btinternet.com)

Andrew Bush (Paper Conservation Advisor) studied Wood Science at the University College of North Wales Bangor after which he trained as a paper conservator at the Camberwell School of Art and Crafts in London. Following ten years working in the Paper Conservation Section at the National Maritime Museum in London he joined the National Trust in 1990 as a preventive conservator. Since 2001 he has been the National Trust’s paper conservator advising on the conservation of their paper related collections throughout 190 properties in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. He is an Accredited Conservator-Restorer. (Andrew Bush, Paper Conservation Adviser, The National Trust, Heelis, Kemble Drive, Swindon, Wiltshire SN2 2NA, UK Andrew.Bush@nationaltrust.org.uk)

Christine Sitwell (Paintings Conservation Adviser) received a Masters of Science in Art Conservation from the University of Delaware/Winterthur Museum, USA and was subsequently awarded a fellowship to work in the Conservation Department of the Tate Gallery, London. She is currently Paintings Conservation Adviser for the National Trust with responsibilities for paintings as well as pained surfaces. (The National Trust, Heelis, Kemble Drive, Swindon, Wiltshire SN2 2NA, UK Christine.Sitwell@nationaltrust.org.uk)