

Paine & Stewart

St. Winefride's Well, Holywell

An assessment of surviving decoration

June 2009

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St Winefride's Well, Holywell: examination to assess original decoration ~ June 2009

1 Introduction and summary

St Winifride's Well, long a major pilgrimage destination and the only shrine to have survived the Reformation, contains a spectacular late-perpendicular Gothic building set into the hillside over the location of the original 7th-century shrine. Of significance is that the stone walls and vault of the internal well-chamber beneath the chapel are covered with the remains of limewash layers which are an interesting testament to the decorative history of the interior. However, due to the semi-external conditions and high moisture levels within the building there has been acute deterioration of the stonework and these later layers for some time and so the remains are now fragmentary and difficult to interpret.

Following instruction from Mike Garner (Garner Southall Partnership) an inspection was therefore made in June 2008 to assess the likelihood of any original painted decoration. However, after careful examination under strong light as well as examination of samples under high magnification unfortunately no evidence for any surviving painting was established (with the exception of one localised area over the entrance arch). There is however evidence for multiple simple colourwash schemes, most notably white with some non-descriptive traces of red and yellow in the gallery area but also throughout the vault generally. Some of the layers are quite thick indicating that they may have been intended as shelter coats to cover ongoing deterioration, or simply cycles of redecoration. However, generally these fragments do not appear to correspond to any coherent decorative scheme and although difficult to date they may well derive from anywhere between the 17th-19th centuries. Nevertheless they are of some interest and should be duly recorded as part of the overall programme of works.

2 History and description of the building

2.1 Summary of the history of the Shrine

The legend of St Winifred dates from the 7th century and as is described by Marks: 'the well at Holywell played a prominent role in her hagiography. The saint was restored to life there after decapitation by a would-be seducer; a spring gushed on the spot where her head fell. In 1138 her body was translated to Shrewsbury Abbey.'¹

However, her cult only gained in popularity from the following century onwards: 'In 1398 St Winifred's feast was ordered to be kept with particular solemnity throughout the Canterbury province and a few years later Archbishop Chichele raised it to the status of a double-feast. The cult was fostered by the Lancastrian dynasty, perhaps in thanksgiving for the victory at Shrewsbury and from which Holywell benefited. In 1427 the Pope granted indulgences to the monks of Basingwerk, who owned the site, for sale to pilgrims. In 1439 Isabella Beauchamp, Countess of Warwick, bequeathed a gown to the image of St Winifred there. The present building replaced the structure which existed at this time [Plates 1- 4]. Like other major pilgrimage sites, Holywell enjoyed royal favour which uniquely extended beyond the Reformation. Successive

¹ Marks, 205.

sovereigns from Henry V to Henry VII visited it; Richard III gave an annuity of 10 marks for a priest to celebrate there. In 1683 Mary of Modena, queen of James II, restored the chapel.²

As Marks continues: 'Both the well-chamber and the upper chapel were begun during Henry VII's reign. Their traditional attribution to the patronage of the king's mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, has been challenged on the grounds that the devices on the roof bosses are associated not with her but with her third husband's family, the Stanleys. They were local and it has been claimed that the chief mover was the king's chamberlain, Sir William Stanley, with some help from Lady Margaret's spouse, Lord Thomas. Sir William's role may well have been played down after his execution in 1495. None the less, the presence of the Beaufort portcullis suggests that Lady Margaret had some involvement here.'³

2.2 *Description of the building*

The present building dates to the late 15th-century⁴ and is built into the hillside on the site of the original 7th-century shrine. It is composed of two floors with the upper chapel being built over the well-chamber which contains a star-shaped basin into which the spring rises [*Plate 5*]. The interior is covered by a fine ornate vault and surrounded by a processional passage. The north side is open with a triple arcade which gives access to the exterior oblong bath.

2.3 *The walls and vault*

The interior is notable for its extensive carved heraldry and decoration, including a pendant boss over the basin depicting episodes from St Winifred's life. It is understood that various stone types have been employed, including Gwespys sandstone, Red Bunter and Portland stones.⁵

The stone walls and vault are covered with the extensive remains of overlying limewash layers. However, these are all highly abraded with varying degrees of loss and present a complex palimpsest of layers. Therefore, it is not immediately apparent whether the minute fragments of pigment constitute any coherent historic painted scheme.

This is especially unfortunate given the very interesting reference to the previous decoration of the well chamber; Parkes, visiting the shrine in July 1800, as part of his tour of the North-West, made the following statement: 'On one side of a wall which supports the roof was painted the legend of the titular saint, now almost defaced: over it is inscribed: *In honorem sanctae Wenefredae A and M*. In an elegant niche formerly stood a statue of the Virgin Mary and in another that of St Winefride's'.⁶ However, unfortunately no evidence for this figurative painting would appear to survive.

² Marks, 205.

³ Marks, 205.

⁴ Burnham, 180.

⁵ Mann Williams, 2008.

⁶ D. Parkes, 'Drawings of remains of antiquity etc.' British Library 21,011, in C.E. Keyser, 313.

3 Examination of the surfaces

The scope of the examination as specified by the Garner Southall Partnership included:

- 1) An assessment of any possible painted decoration.
- 2) The nature of the overlying dirt.
- 3) Examination and assessment of the various layers in cross-section.
- 4) Assessment of the condition of the stonework (to be undertaken by Odgers Conservation).

3.1 *Examination of the surfaces to assess the presence of original painted decoration*

An examination was carried out to assess the likelihood of any surviving historic polychromy. Given that access was available to all areas both the vault and the walls were examined in strong light and in some detail.

The conclusions of the examination are as follows:

- 1) There is one area in the entrance which appears to contain **a distinct decorative scheme** of red and green banding and white painted stars [*Plates 6 and 7*]. However, this area is very localised.
- 2) There are some **fragments of coloured paint** surviving within a number of very small areas of the ceiling. These include:
 - a green earth pigment, to be found within certain areas of a number of bosses [*Plates 8 and 9*];
 - a red pigment (probably a red oxide) distributed in minute proportions across very limited areas of the walls and within some areas of the ribs [*Plates 10 and 11*];
 - patches of a non-specific yellow pigment in areas of the wall in the choir [*Plates 12 and 13*].

However, these isolated fragments of colour do not appear to belong to any sort of coherent scheme of decoration. In addition no evidence was found for the figurative painting referred to by Parkes in 1800 despite a very close examination of the walls in powerful light.

3.2 *Examination of the condition of the internal surfaces, including the nature of the overlying dirt*

- Many of the limewash layers have been thickly applied, indicating that they may have been intended to cover ongoing deterioration, as well as providing a decorative purpose. All areas are subject to varying degrees of **loss** [*Plates 14, 15, 16*]. However, no clear patterns of deterioration are evident, although the very significant level of moisture infiltration around the back wall of the chamber has accounted for some significant damage in this area.

- There is extensive **flaking and powdering** of the limewash layers. This has clearly been caused by the adverse environmental conditions – principally high moisture levels – to which the interior has been continually exposed. However, further deterioration may also have been exacerbated by the action of sulphation caused as a result of air-borne sulphur compounds produced as a by-product of the combustion of fossil fuels throughout the 18th and 19th centuries when significant industrial activity was carried-out in close proximity to the site. The attack of stonework by sulphur dioxide is well documented and a major factor in the dissolution of calcareous stone and its conversion to gypsum crusts, which can then become darkened by other pollutants such as soot which may also have occurred in this instance.
- All areas are extremely dirty and much of the white limewash has therefore become grey as a result. In addition significant deposits of soot particles are present, both overlying and between layers of limewash and darkening the appearance of many areas. Such particles may have arrived on the surface as aerosols via the pollution described above, or as a result of the consistent burning of candles over the centuries.
- As a result of the continual infiltration of water as well as the presumably extremely high levels of humidity there is extensive biodeterioration throughout the chamber, but with a particular concentration toward the rear wall. The resultant surface depositions are both harmful to the underlying substrate, as well as undesirable from an aesthetic perspective.
- All areas are covered with historic graffiti⁷ but also recent vandalism [Plates 17 and 18].

3.3 *Examination of the layers in cross-section [Appendix 1]*

A series of small paint sample were taken from a number of locations across the vault of the ambulatory and choir which were examined at 200x magnification. These support the on-site examination in that they appear to show that all observable pigment does not in fact relate to the original building, but rather to a later period of re-decoration that saw a number of the bosses painted with a plain green earth colour, as well as a red oxide pigment used on the ribs (however, this later colour is potentially problematic as red oxide is frequently used as a preparatory pigment rather than as a colour used in the final paint layer).

In addition, in cross-section the simple alternating scheme of green and red banding within the ribs of the narthex clearly shows multiple underlying white limewash layers. Such evidence strongly suggests that this is a later scheme of decoration, composed of simple repetitive motifs.

The number of limewash layers seems to be typically around six, although the highly fragmentary nature of surviving limewash makes an accurate calculation problematic.

⁷ 'Graffiti attest numerous visitors, including James II and Mary of Modena (on the left of the inner wall of the well basin, just behind the front portion), who came in 1686 to pray for a son; James (the Old Pretender) was born in 1688', Burnham 1995, *ibid* p.180.

3.4 *Summary of condition of the stonework*

The condition of the stone is being assessed by Odgers Conservation but an initial examination of the stonework by David Odgers concluded that the structural arches and columns up to springing level are generally in much better condition than the ribs and webs of the vaulting, which showed significant localised flaking and associated deterioration which worsened towards the apex of the vault. In addition some specific stones subject to deterioration were of very poor quality and the stone of the vaults showed lack of cohesion with visible salt activity.

3.5 *Further issues*

The interior of the building is essentially exposed to external environmental conditions. In addition there is also an ongoing problem with the infiltration of water through the stonework beneath the window on the south side of the main body of the building, which has clearly caused extensive biodeterioration (as mentioned above). It is understood that this window was blocked comparatively recently. Environmental monitoring was therefore initiated by Odgers Conservation, and samples of the stone as well as salt activity also undertaken.

An examination of the structural condition of the vault was also carried out during May 2008 by Mann Williams, civil and structural engineers. It was concluded that the structural condition of the stonework of the crypt ceiling is reasonably stable, 'with defects predominantly related to surface decay'.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

It can therefore be concluded that unfortunately there would appear to be no evidence for any coherent scheme of significant or original decoration, other than the fragmentary remains of a later scheme in the narthex arcade. Nevertheless, all the remains are an interesting testament to the decorative history of the building.

In addition a further component of this examination includes a future strategy for the cleaning and consolidation of the ceiling and walls to address the significant deterioration of the stone and overlying limewash layers.

Obviously a full proposal is dependent on the results of the condition survey of the stonework by Odgers Conservation but the components of such a programme can be assumed to include some of the following interventions and issues:

- a gentle surface cleaning to remove cobwebs and other surface deposits;
- testing of cleaning techniques utilising a range of reagents and supports to attempt to gently remove as far as possible the dirt and other particulates from all surfaces;
- testing of consolidants to stabilise the many localised areas of friable stone;
- assessment and testing of a range of lime repair mortars;
- testing to establish a means of readhereing the many areas of flaking limewash;
- interpretation of the environmental monitoring in order to understand the micro-climate within the interior, and to assess the possibility of implementing passive measures to control the activation of the deterioration;

- testing to assess the possibility of reducing the most visually disruptive graffiti, as well as instigating better means to control this current and active problem.

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References

Burnham, H., *Clwyd and Powys: A Guide to Ancient and Historic Wales*, CADW, London 1995,

Keyser, C.E., *A list of buildings in Great Britain and Ireland having murals and other painted decorations*, London, 1883.

Report by Mann Williams, 'St Winefride's Well Holywell: Crypt ceiling preliminary structural report', June 2008.

Marks, R., *Image and devotion in late medieval England*, Stroud 2004

Parkes, D., 'Drawings of remains of antiquity etc.' British Library 21,011

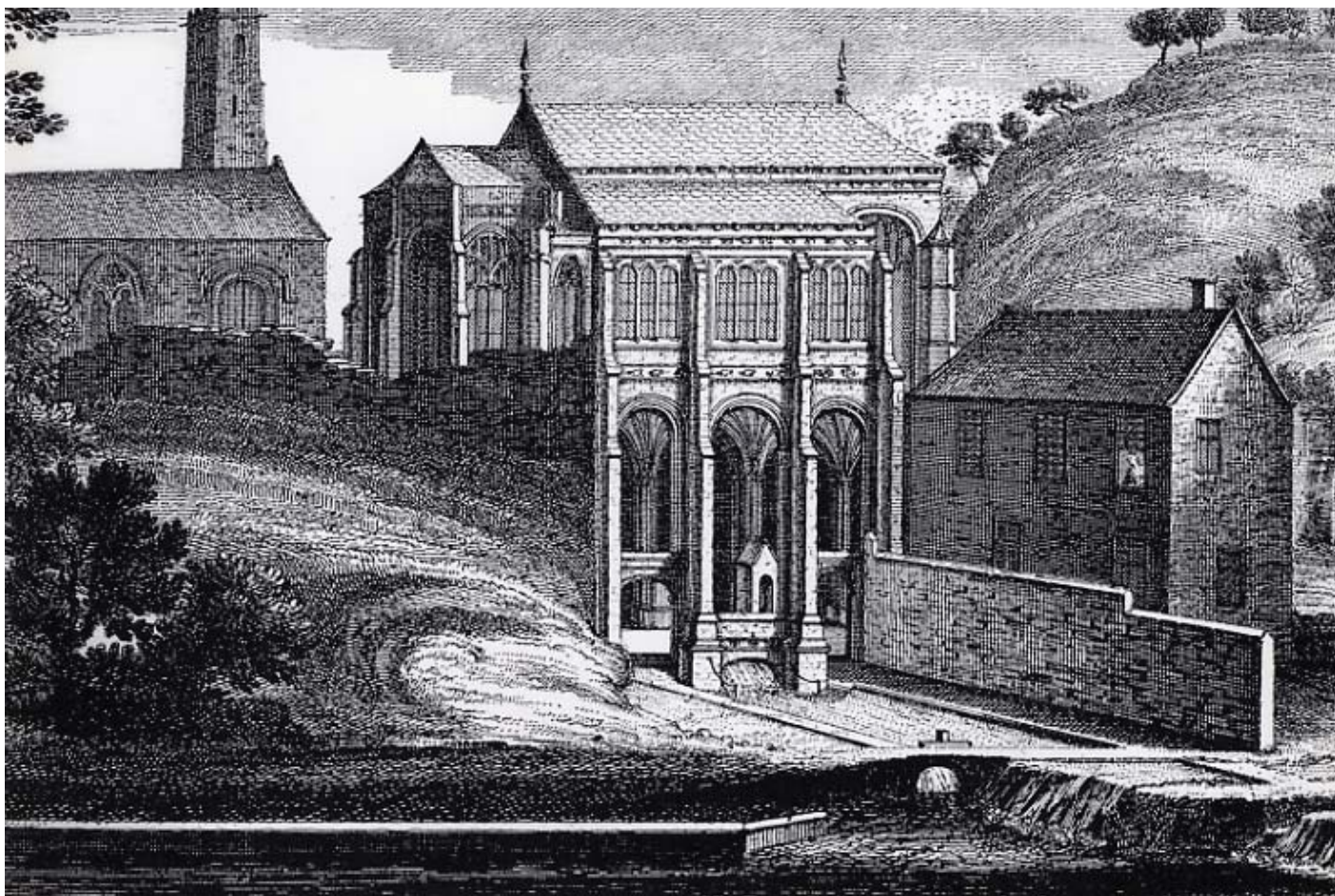


Plate 1 (above). St. Winefride's Well, c. 1742.

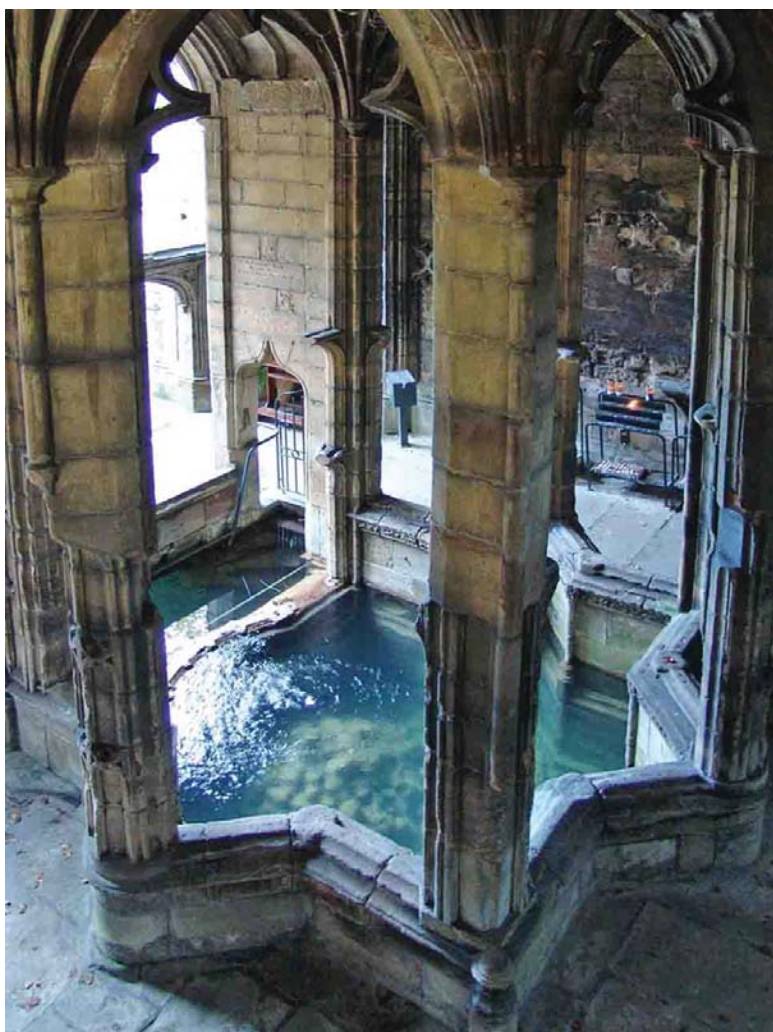


Plate 2 (left). General internal view, present day.



Plate 3 (above). The central boss, showing current condition.



Plate 4 (left). General view showing characteristic condition of vault: flaking limewash layers; disaggregation of stone support; and dust and other surface accretions.

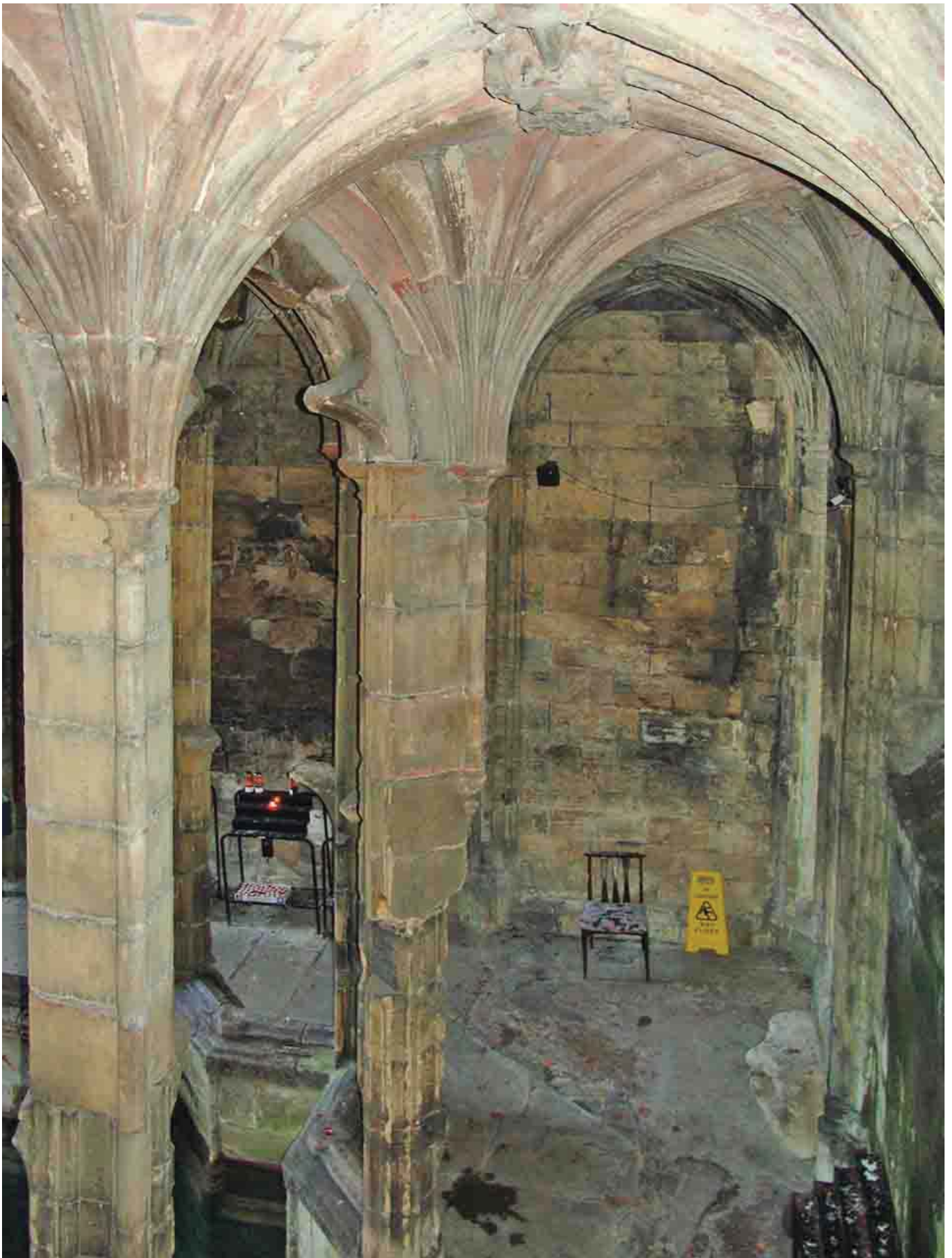


Plate 5 (above). General view to the rear of the chamber, showing current condition: mould resulting from excess moisture infiltration, graffiti and other surface damage as well as extensive surface dust and other accretions.

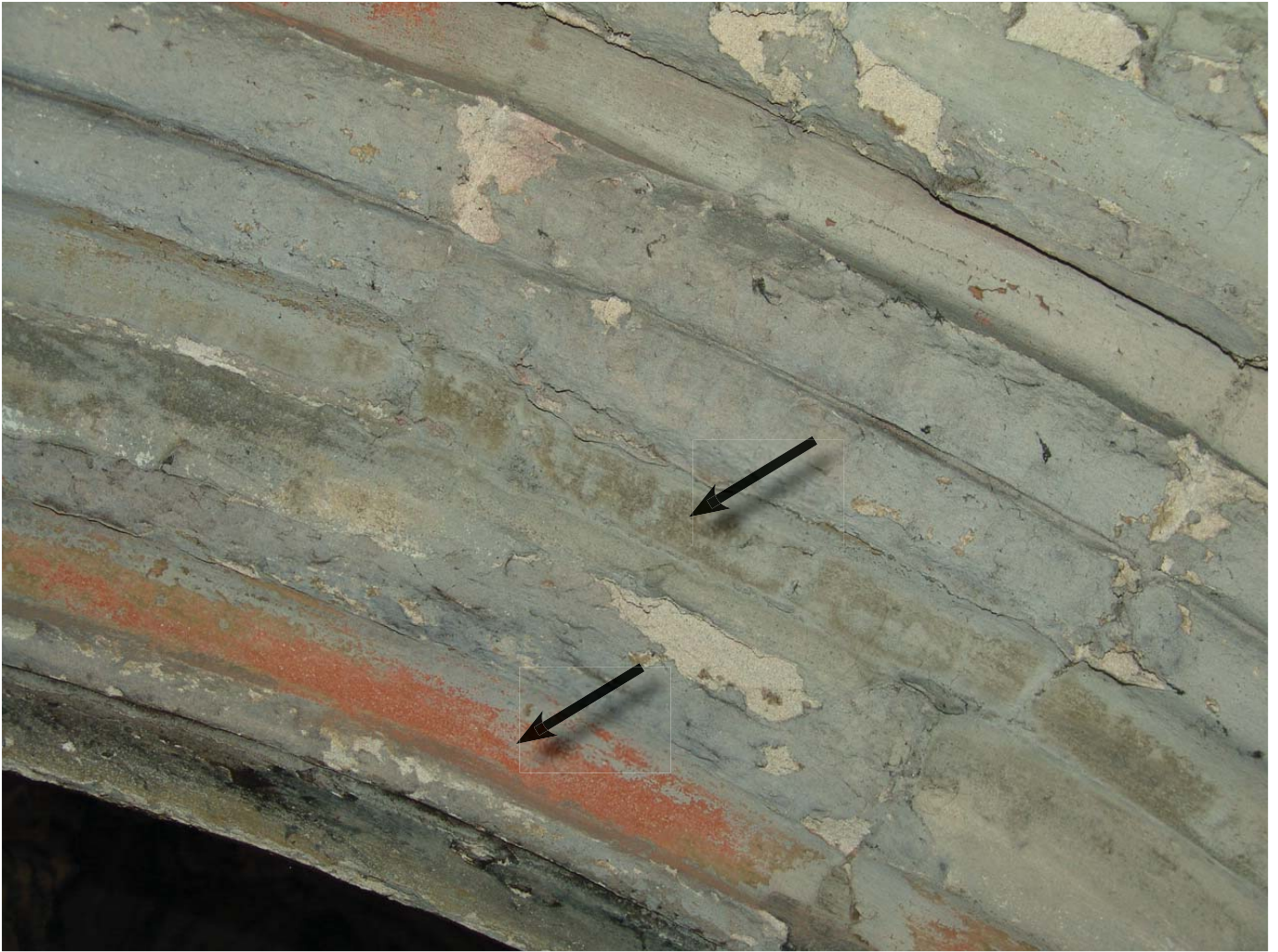


Plate 6 (above). Pigment can be noted defining the ribs of the inner narthex arcade - here red and green. These colours both overlay earlier whitewash layers, but also themselves covered by later decorative coatings now much disfigured by dust and other accretions, that today read as a grey layer.

Plate 7 (below). A star motif within the vault area of the narthex was noted, the date of which is unknown. The inclusion of this rather more elaborate use of colour banding and star motifs accords with the significance of the entry portal into the well itself. No such elaboration was found elsewhere within the vault of either the ambulatory or choir.





Plate 8 (above). Evidence for a green pigment was noted across a number of different areas of the vault - here within boss 63 CB N.

Plate 9 (below). Detail of this pigment occurring within the ribs of the vault.





Plate 10 (above). Red pigment was found in small isolated areas across the vault, although as the cross-section analysis proves this has been applied over a number of white layers, suggesting it is of a later date.

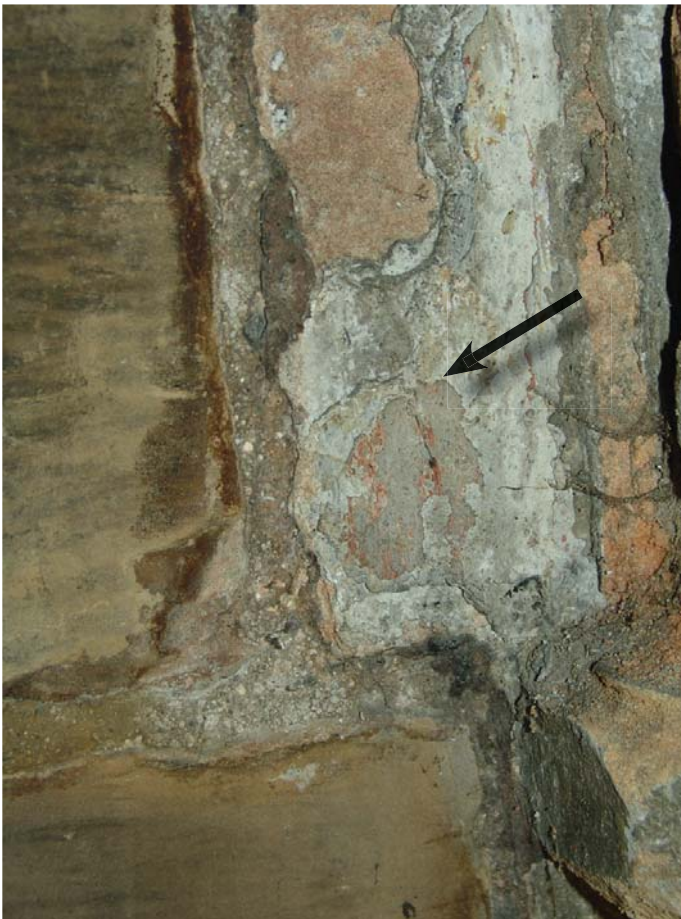


Plate 11 (below). Further example of a red pigment applied over multiple underlying white wash layers.



Plate 12 (above). In the choir, a yellow pigment over red was noted on a wall surface. Since red oxide is known to have been used as a traditional preparatory layer on stone, this could account for its use here, rather than necessarily a separate and specific decorative scheme. Again, the date unknown.

Plate 13 (below). This paint layer was noted within the ribs of the narthex. This paint layer was noted. It is not considered to be of any particular historical merit, but rather represents perhaps the most recent campaign of a whole series of previous re-decorations.





Plate 14 (above). Surface erosion of the stone boss and past overlying paint layers can be noted here.

Plate 15 (left). General view of the vault showing current condition.

Plate 16 (below). Typical example of the palimpsest of multiple applied limewash layers evident across many areas of the vault.



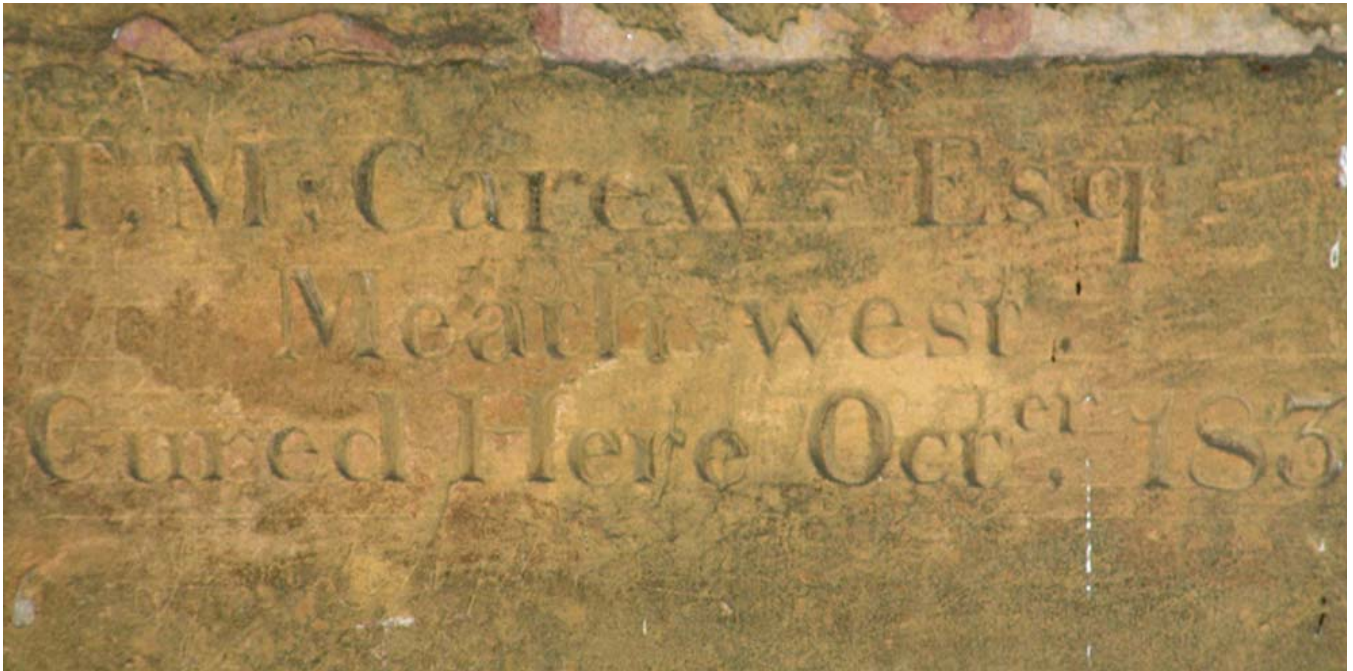


Plate 17 (above). Certain graffiti has a genuine historic interest.

Plate 18 (below). In contrast, much modern graffiti is devoid of any socio-historic interest and is visually disruptive.





Figure 1. Sample site 1. Boss 46 SB



Figure 2. Sample 1. Stratigraphy in cross-section at x 200 magnification shows surface accumulations of microbiological fungal hyphae; soot and dust particles; salt crystals; and up to 6 limewash layers; and stone support.



Figure 3. Sample site 2. Area of south wall of upper choir showing typical distribution of fragmentary limewash layers interleaved between dirt layers.



Figure 4. Sample 2. Overlying limewash layers of varying thickness, interleaved between dirt layers. (x 200 magnification)



Figure 5. Sample 2. In cross-section showing at least 6 limewash layers, interleaved with soot particles; and the stone support. (x 200 magnification).

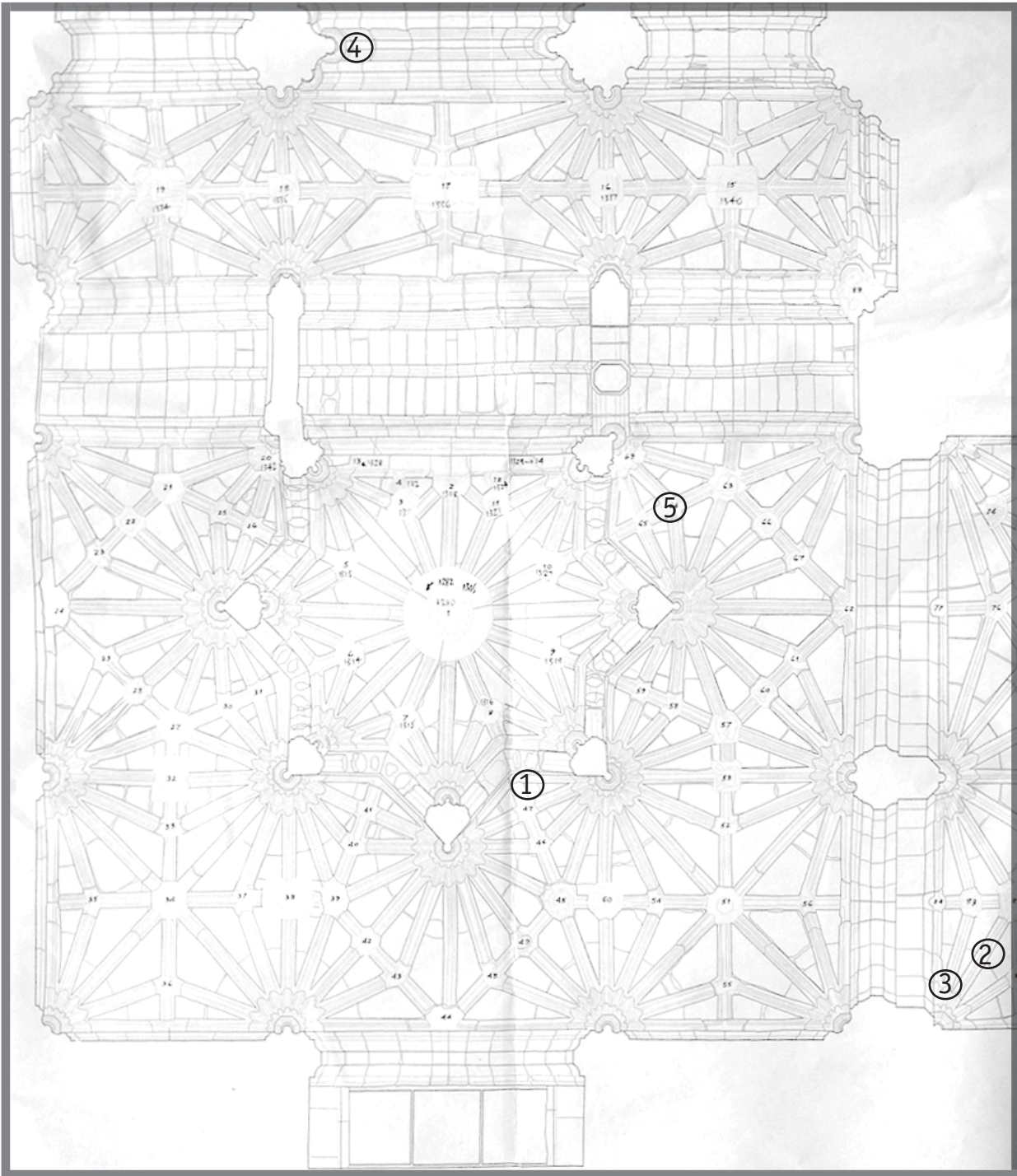


Figure 13. Sample locations within the vault.



Figure 6. Sample site 3. South east corner springing of vault. Fragments of red pigment underlying later limewash layers can be noted. No discernible design could be noted, which is typical for the entire space.



Figure 7. Sample 3. At x 200 magnification this surface aspect reveals soot particles; overlying limewash layer; a red paint layer; and ground.



Figure 8. Sample site 4. West side of the central entry arch. Red and green colouration can be noted within the mouldings of the arch ribs.



Figure 9. Sample 4. At x 200 magnification the multiple paint layers can be noted. The underlying plain limewash layers suggest that the red pigment is not original to the building, but forms part of the later decoration to this entry area.



Figure 10. Sample site 5. Boss 64 SB. Here evidence for the underlying green pigment can be noted, as well as general levels of deposited dirt and other debris.



Figure 11. Sample 5. An overhead projection shows the deposition layer of discoloured lime wash and added pollutants. (x 200 magnification)



Figure 12. Sample 5. This rather concentrated green pigment is likely to be a green earth, a common material in use from the 12th to 19th centuries. (x 200 magnification)