



Eavesdropper

The Newsletter of the Suffolk Historic Buildings Group

No. 62 Winter 2020



BEDFIELD HALL

A HOUSE WITH A LASTING HISTORIC DECORATIVE LEGACY

17th century ceilings and hearth revelations in a Suffolk house

During 1982 and 1983 a number of decorative features associated with several ceilings and hearths inside Bedfield Hall were uncovered, having been hidden for three centuries. These produced some unique or unusual evidence for changing tastes in early-17th-century decoration.

In the east wing, which was newly built in 1630, are two embellished ceilings in the parlour and parlour chamber. The ground floor room had little damage except that the moulded features were covered with several layers of thick distemper. The ceiling in the room above was more problematic. Several sections had fallen to the floor, caused by rain leaking through the roof.

THE PARLOUR CHAMBER

The damaged ceiling of the parlour chamber was secured and repaired and the distemper was washed off with damp sponges. The appearance of the simple moulded features was immediately noticeably improved. A fresh mix of distemper, using size and chalk, was applied to the two main areas of ceiling on either side of the plaster-covered central bridging beam to give unity to the repaired sections. Any distemper applied over the decorative mouldings of the underside of this main supporting beam would unnecessarily dull the sharpness of these raised decorative features. Because there was no perceivable difference in colour between the fresh distemper paint and the original surface of the plaster, it was decided that this central feature should be left unpainted; the greater benefit being the retention of the sharpness of the moulded plasterwork (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Parlour chamber, 1630: detail of the unpainted mouldings on the underside of the plastered bridging beam.

A good first-hand account of the methods used by the craftsmen who created plain and moulded ceilings in the latter part of the 16th century and later is given by the Revd William Harrison (1534-93), whose observations were published in 1577-87. Of plaster, Harrison wrote:

In plastering likewise of our fairest houses over our heads, we use to lay first a layer or two of white mortar tempered with hair, upon laths, which are nailed one by another, and finally cover all with the aforesaid plaster, which beside the delectable whiteness of the stuff itself is laid on so evenly and smoothly as nothing in my judgment can be done with more exactness. (William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. Georges Edelen, published New York 1994, pp. 196-7).

The central strip of unpainted plasterwork is shown off to good effect by the two horizontal bands of clerestory windows along the two outer walls (fig. 2). Too high to be viewed out of, these bands of glass on the east and south walls illuminate and detail the ceiling and its mouldings from first light to mid afternoon.



Fig. 2: Parlour chamber: the ceiling mouldings enhanced by clerestory windows.

THE NEW FORM OF PAINTED WALLS PREVALENT IN THE 17TH CENTURY

This ceiling was planned to go with a scheme of red-painted studs (fig. 3). Whereas in all the other painted rooms (eight in all) the wall studs were painted with black pigment, to which chalk was added to create various shades of grey/black, here the red is used to distinguish the room as one of higher importance. The effect of a 'classical' inspired room was created by adding simple capitols and base mouldings above a painted base-board parallel to the floor. The date, 1630, is too early for this to have been the result of Inigo Jones's influence, but these 'columned' rooms seem to have taken their inspiration from the adapted



Fig. 3: Parlour chamber: the red-painted studs with a nod towards classical columns. Also the brick hearth enhanced by penciling against imitation 'stone' quoining and a corner porch added. This entry position was adapted from the original plan so as to give privacy between the rooms and cut down on draughts from the stairs outside.

classical orders widely used in Norman architecture and subsequently developed through the late medieval period. The Normans had captured territory in which there were many surviving classical ruins, and some complete standing buildings survived in France itself.

THE PARLOUR

A different solution was required in the parlour below. The bridging beam is joined into the outer mid rail, into which the mullions of the central window are directly secured, so the lower surface of plaster is much closer to, and level with, the top of the window (fig. 4). Perhaps because an embellished decorative pattern would look

too heavy in that position, the plasterer had scored out a joined box pattern into the drying plaster; black size-based paint then followed on, filling in between the lines (fig. 5). Colour rarely plays any part in the enrichment on most vernacular ceilings and where it does occur it is usually there as a link to the walls. In this room the walls were panelled from the start.



Fig. 5: The parlour, a section of the restored carbon-painted design; approximately 65% is original.

Tradition has it that the panelling from Bedfield Hall was removed in the 19th century to go into one of the Henniker properties, and was destroyed in a fire. The Henniker family owned several houses with lands in the vicinity, and Bedfield Hall was one of them. The most likely recipient for the panelling would have been Thornham Hall, where the Hennikers were making considerable changes throughout the 19th century. Panelling is mentioned several times in this building. It caught fire in November 1954 and fire was reported



Fig. 4: The parlour, 1630. Note the closer proximity between the plastered bridging beam and the underside of window opening. Close stud work originally covered and 'wind sealed.'

as 'spreading along the wooden panelling'. This is not definitive proof, but it fits the legend.

The painted pattern on the bridging beam is one that can be found replicated in patterns used for panelling, so there could be a connection. However, some contemporary panelling which survives from the internal corner portal does not follow that design (fig. 6). This surviving section around the entrance faces into the room on the north side, so it may have been deliberately made different because this was a less important room.



Fig. 6: Back parlour room. The 1630 paneled portal has a larger 19th c door than the original. The width of the upper cornice is indicated by a change in the timber colour. Originally this was set off by a plastered ceiling with painted studs on both sides. One of four old food hooks is shown, positioned over the 19th century stairs to a cellar. This was probably taken from the old kitchen ceiling.

Again, the clerestory lights in the parlour along two walls help to reflect light from the ceiling into the room during the first half of the day. The south clerestory lights were blocked by the 19th century, in both rooms described. It should be noted that where such bands of high-up lights are present in 17th century buildings, but no plaster ceiling exists, this could be an indication that the plaster has been stripped out.

The exceptions are in 16th-century houses, as in nearby Otley Hall. In the hall itself is a fine, heavily moulded beamed ceiling dating from 1511, which is much darker by comparison. Although by contemporary standards sufficient windows were provided, by the last quarter of the 16th century, when the original builder's grandson took up residence in the lower floor, he added additional clerestory windows. The extra light helps to define the mouldings and lift the gloom. A darker ceiling like this one certainly helps us to understand Harrison's remarks on seeing the transformation by reflected white plaster, when he referred to 'the delectable whiteness of the stuff itself'.

THE NEW KITCHEN OF 1620

The east kitchen wing of the house was built from timber felled in 1619, so a 1620 build seems most likely. This is the year that Thomas Dunston bought the property and confirmed his ownership by branding his initials on the kitchen lintel (fig. 13). Here there are two ceilings which were painted. The more unusual of the two is the plaster ceiling of the new kitchen. It is painted with a dark colour which has not yet been analysed, but could be black pigment to mirror the colour of the wall studs. This is most unusual, for most ceilings were white-plastered and subsequently given fresh coats of distemper due to blackening by smoke escaping from the hearths. Here the paint is deliberate and one needs to ask why. The proof is because the central bridging beam reduced its girth through shrinkage in the decade that followed. Two strips of plaster were used to infill the gap between the two surfaces on either side of the reduced beam. (fig. 7). These were never painted.



Fig. 13: St Nicholas church, Bedford. The inscribed 'Belgium black' ledger stone marking the grave of Thomas Dunston in 1658 and his personal brand stamp he applied to the new Kitchen hearth beam in 1620.

The reason for this unique dark ceiling appears to be as a foil for some specific placed geometric patterns distributed around 12 hooks used to suspend foodstuffs for drying and preserving (fig. 8). A similar practice was witnessed in 1980s in the mountainous region of southern Spain, where air-cured hams were a speciality and suspended with herbs. In the half of the room beside the corner entrance where a preparation table may have stood, individual circles and arcs are positioned



Fig. 7: Kitchen, 1620. A gap between the painted plaster and bridging beam was caused by the timber shrinkage of the beam. This has historic unpainted infill plaster, proving the painted plaster was intentional and original.

between the hooks, with two larger clusters marking the outer zone. In the other half of the room, with evidence for former food-storing shelves on the walls, the circular patterns are more varied.

The twelve food hooks were all taken out, and left deep holes where they had been hammered into each of three joists. There are four hooks of the correct date that were reused in the area beside and above a new cellar constructed in the first half of the 19th century at the back of the eastern wing (fig. 6). It seems likely these are from the kitchen, for a new alternative 19th-century

kitchen was created in part of the former brewhouse at the back of this western wing. Once the hooks had been removed, this original painted and marked ceiling of 1620 was deliberately covered with thick obscuring limewash.

A NOTE ABOUT LIMEWASH FINISHES

It should be said that there is a misconception about using limewash as a traditional paint finish in timber-framed houses. Limewash comes into its own in and on stone and rubble-built walls, particularly in churches, where a higher moisture content made distemper a poor alternative. Limewash also tends to harden with age and is much more difficult to remove than distemper. This ceiling was no exception and in the room above, with a painted hearth that will be described next, this obscuring finish on the brickwork was a real challenge never conquered.

COLOUR FOR THE STUDWORK IN THE KITCHEN

The unrestored painted timber is most clearly seen here. On either side of the south and west windows are areas where the painter had to work around fixed shutter rails. With these long gone, clear evidence is left of their former position (fig. 9). The shutters were provided because this was the only room to have some part of both windows without glass to provide more ventilation to the cooking hearth. All other rooms had, and have, clear evidence for either rebated mullions to receive leaded lights, or pins on older reused mullions that show glass had been added in the 17th century.

THE KITCHEN CHAMBER AND TWO REMAINING MYSTERIES

The painted studs replicate the colour used in the room below, but with two additions. These are the extra quarter circles added top and bottom, which echo the treatment in the parlour, painted 10 years later, and create the illusion of a columned room (fig. 10). The other detailing is the additional quarter circles painted on the ceiling at either end of the painted bridging beam and in the corners. Having stated that paint on ceilings was not common, this is the third ceiling in one building that include some painted additions, albeit simple in concept.

The paint on these studs was renewed in 1983 because they had been stained in the 20th century: this needed to be cleaned off first. However there were clues to show that this intended scheme had existed. Some of the quarter

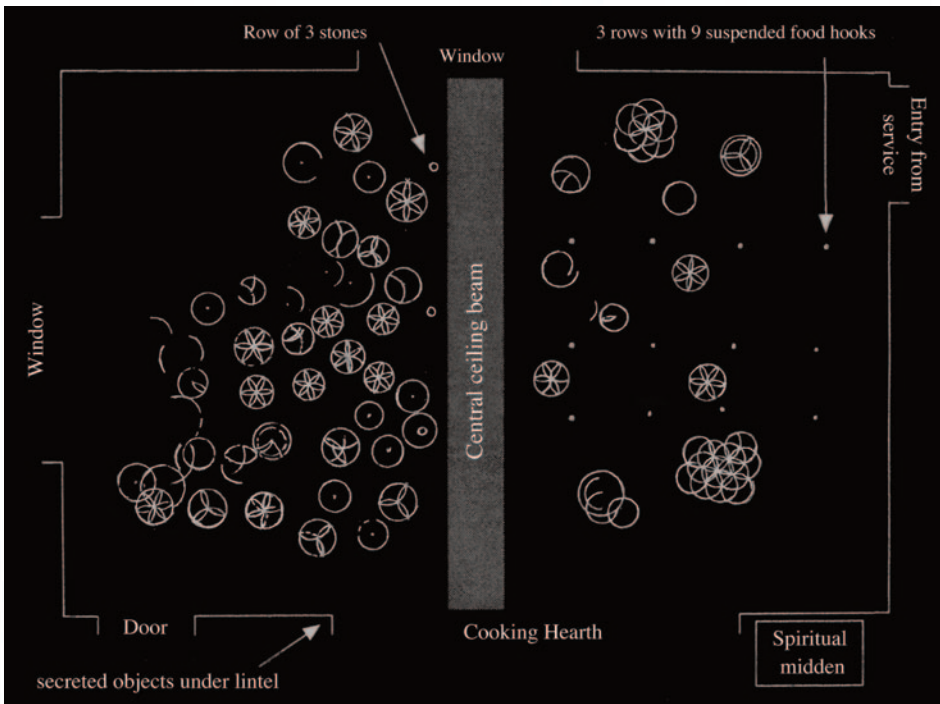


Fig. 8: Kitchen. The plan showing the distribution of compass-made symbols scribed through the dark-painted surface and the position of holes left where the hooks formerly were positioned.

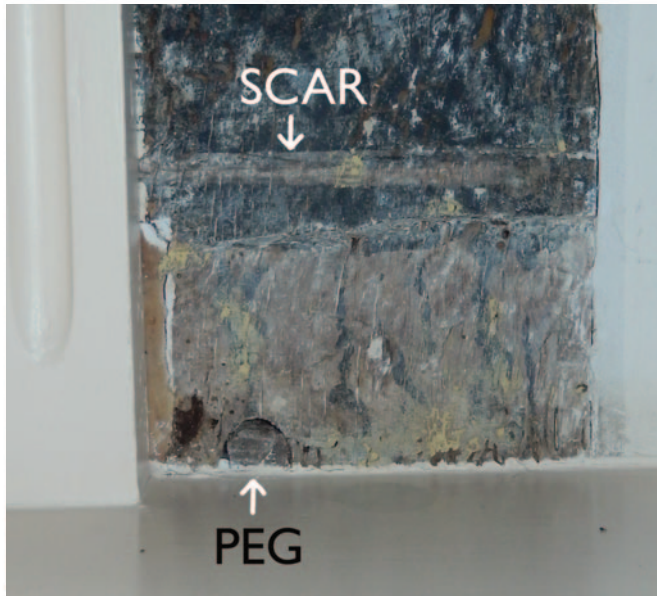


Fig. 9: Kitchen. One of the eight fixing points where the former shutter rails were secured. This lower position shows the paint drips that went behind the pegged and clamped rail.

circles on the infill were transparent, and when original wall panels are still in place the evidence can be detected because it was the standard contemporary practice to paint either side of each stud with the same coloured vertical line. This was to widen the effect of the studs, and in some cases to straighten up the vertical lines if the timber had uneven edges. Two other clues were found. When the painted base-board was formed the builder scribed a horizontal line along the panels as a guide about 5 inches up from the floor. Another common practice in the 17th century was to fill any open holes or flaws in the timber with plaster plugs; this include plaster over sunken pegs (fig. 11). Although the colour had gone from the surrounding timber, the colour survives much better on the plaster because of its porosity. Once the size has lost its strength in the paint mixture, the old colour flakes off the timber more readily.

Another reason for the recreation of the scheme is centered around the room's principal feature, the painted hearth (fig. 10). The wall and hearth decoration was made in the early 17th century, when there was less desire to use the more elaborate imitation textile designs of the previous century. Here the upper section has been squared

up with scribing lines to imitate tiles, and the painter has worked very quickly across the drying plaster with red pigment to create the illusion of terracotta tiles (fig. 12).



Fig. 11: The 1630 former 'room between the doors' has a plastered-covered peg hole that retains the original grey colour. The studs are painted to match, but the original oil-bound black pigment on the mullions was to give the illusion of dark stone.



Fig. 10: Kitchen chamber 1620. The painted studs with additions make rudimentary columns, adjacent to the painted hearth. Faux 'Belgium black' on the arch imitates marble and the red paint above over the squared-up plaster imitates terracotta tiles.



Fig. 12: Kitchen chamber. Wide brush marks shows the speed the painter needed to work on barely dried plaster.

The black-coloured area below is sectioned with lines scribed into the plaster to resemble joined stone slabs, but not any old stone. This painted scheme is right up to date, or even ahead of it, because it exactly imitates 'Belgium Black' marble, a carboniferous limestone traditionally from around Tournai. It was imported into England as ballast to be used for ledger floor slabs. The letter cutters, whose workshops these were destined for, were usually located around the entry ports like Ipswich. Although some similar marble had been used in the previous centuries, notably for the tops of aristocratic tomb chests, this idea for floor ledger slabs only started around 1625 and was so popular for those who could afford it that it stayed in fashion until 1854. An intramural burial, as opposed to one outside the walls of the church, was reserved mainly for people of rank, and because of the additional expenses for the deep brick box constructions below would cost in today's money more than £25,000. Thomas Dunston, who commissioned this hearth and its decorative effects, chose to be buried under such a 'Belgium Black' ledger in 1657 (fig 13). It should be remembered also that black was not just a colour associated with mourning and death. Black clothing was worn by the very wealthy, because the mordant used to fix this dye on textiles rotted the fabric quite rapidly. So wearing black was an outward sign of prosperity. Queen Elizabeth I declared that black with white was her favourite colour. The conclusion is that black pigment used here was influenced by but also had connotations beyond church associations.

This raises two questions. How did this painter pick up on this idea so soon, and possibly even before its first noted use for ledger stones in 1625 to which it so closely relates, and where did he get his technique from? As mentioned below, this hearth was covered with a very hard layer of encrusted limewash that required strong chemicals and a scalpel to remove it. It was so stubborn that the cleaning was given up on the size-based painted ruddle wash over the lower brickwork. Whether by accident or design, the technique adopted by this painter for the upper part was done in the manner of

a fresco. So the paint here was applied to a thin layer of smooth wet plaster and is properly bound into the plastered surface. Once cleaned it required no further fixative. From my research no evidence has been found elsewhere in England for such an interior feature at this date. So was this an accident or a deliberate technique by someone trained in Italy? It seems too successful to be a first-time fluke.

The usual method for English wall decoration using size or casein as a binder is known as 'a secco'. This describes a technique where the pigment is applied wet over a dry surface. This applies to most of the colour used all over this house in the early 17th century, the exception being the surviving 1630 window mullions, where a grey-black oil paint was used to give a stone-like appearance and be more weather proof (fig. 11). By using such a pleasant, but dominant colour on this hearth, the linked black colour of the wall studs unites the room in a very satisfactory manner.

THE ATTIC CHAMBER ABOVE THE KITCHEN WING

A miniature version of this 'Black Belgium' lintel is also to be seen on the smaller hearth above in the attic chamber and was done using the same technique (fig. 14). It has not survived as completely, with numerous areas of missing paint in varying sizes that have come away, so this now presents a less complete design. The upper face is left unpainted except for the addition of a conjoined VV. This symbol is significant and was intended to give protection to this upper area. But why spend money on decoration at this roof level in this or any similar house?

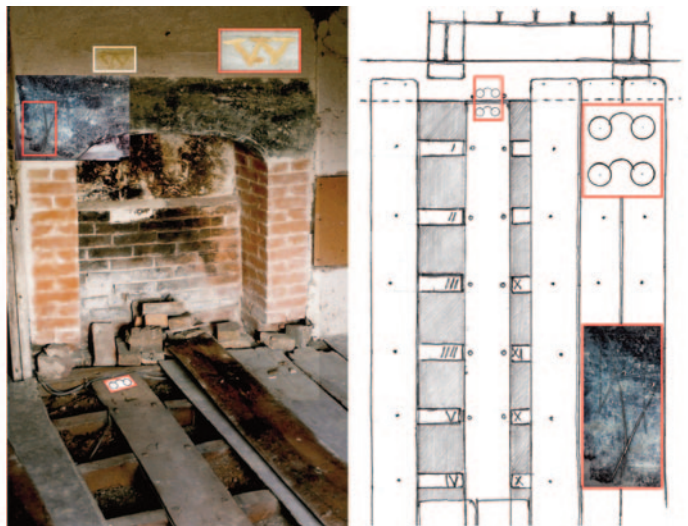


Fig. 14: Attic chamber hearth area over the kitchen chamber 1620. A smaller hearth with 'Belgium black' painted arch with details shown of symbols both hidden and displayed.

A ROOM WITH A SPECIAL VIEW

There is an assumption that when upper roof rooms are used for anything other than storage, they were for servants. Except for aristocratic houses, servants were not expected to inhabit such spaces until the later 18th century at the earliest, and in most rural houses they

were certainly not used like this until the 19th century.

A 38-year study of numerous roof rooms has made me certain that they were used as upper viewing rooms. Occasionally heated when the season required, these were spaces where guests could be brought up to observe extensive views. Often they had windows on two sides of the roof; sometimes more. For this room at Bedford there exists a 1620 framed aperture in the gable wall for a larger viewing window predating the early-19th-century one in place now.

THE PAINTED TREATMENT OF THE BRICKWORK IN THIS ROOM AND OTHER HEARTHTHS THROUGHOUT THE HOUSE

As expected, the brickwork shows the same residual painted evidence as elsewhere in the house. There are five hearths in this wing, and four of them have ruddled brickwork, but without any pencil lines. One of the five hearths was found too mutilated so it was covered over in 1982. Three of the four 1630 painted hearths in the eastern parlour wing and Hall area are penciled (fig. 15); this is not a specific age-related fashion but the choice of the builder. It is just that some builders painted the pencil lines and others did not.

It was from the discovery that all the hearths in this house displayed the original painted surfaces that the first paper was published to describe this technique as being original. Furthermore it should be expected to find that all historic brickwork, both internal and external, was or had been colour washed.

At the time of the first publication the name given to the finishing process with white or black lines to define the joints was not known. Pencilling, as this was described in the royal accounts, became understood by its historic name for the first time. This led to a Winston Churchill Fellowship award, which allowed for travel and research in six other European countries to prove



Fig. 15: The Hall of 1422. The ruddled and penciled hearth of 1630 replaced another 25 years older to change the circulation area on the North side of the chimney. An exposed chamfer-joisted ceiling was in place during the 1570s and was plastered over during the 1630 improvements.

that most, if not all, masonry before evenly-made bricks could be guaranteed in later 17th century England would be finished in this way. The earliest examples of such improvements were found on the 3rd century walls of the Roman Theatre in Ostia Antica.

POSTSCRIPT

On reflection, it has been a remarkable journey over the time spent in this house to discover the many historic decorative aspects, previously hidden until the early 1980s, that have led to some revelations with both national and international implications. One of the strangest was standing among some excavated archaeological remains of a demolished building on the eastern seaboard of the USA with a party of VAG members in 1984. The structure was being described by an American building historian, who pointed out that the brick walling buried beneath ground level showed this evidence for such a contemporary painted finish in America and then hearing the author's name being credited for this discovery.

Timothy Easton

