

Conservator Francesco Rosillini adds the finishing touches to a damaged section of the Heaven Closet ceiling at Bolsover Castle, in which several cherubs are depicted carrying a crucifix.



STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Degraded by damp, drafts and fragmenting plaster over centuries, the theatrical wall paintings commissioned by socialite William Cavendish to dramatise visitors' journeys up to the heavens at Bolsover Castle in Derbyshire are now being rescued to share their stories

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The wall paintings at Bolsover Castle were intended to impress. William Cavendish, one of the richest, best connected noblemen of the courts of James I and then Charles I, had plenty of lavish properties in which to entertain his guests. But when this polymath politician and equestrian really wanted to wow, he would throw open the doors of the Little Castle at Bolsover, his elaborately decorated pleasure palace in Derbyshire.

Today it's the scale and artistry of the paintings that strike you: Hercules wrestling with a lion, a voluptuous Venus, dozens of chubby angels playing musical instruments for a cavorting Christ. But to 17th-century eyes – including Charles I and his queen Henrietta, who favoured Cavendish with a visit in 1634 – these vibrant images would have offered an even richer experience. Packed with classical references, in-jokes and visual curiosities, they tell a story of Cavendish's erudition and influence, reflecting his passions and moral code.

'For Cavendish's guests, the more well-read they were, the more they understood the meaning behind the paintings,' says Eleanor Matthews, curator of collections and interiors. Taking over the building of Bolsover from his father, Sir Charles Cavendish, and working with architect John Smythson, William Cavendish designed the castle's interiors as a 'puzzle, to confuse and to entertain', Matthews explains. The paintings, completed in 1621, were central to that ambition. They led visitors on a theatrical journey up through the building, beginning in the Anteroom on the ground floor and culminating in the Heaven Closet and the Elysium Closet.

Looking up at the stars

This journey took honoured guests past depictions of the ancient bodily humours, the trials of Hercules, the five senses and the Allied Virtues. Mainly copied from European prints of the period, these works are all about the earthly realm, in contrast to the celestial focus of the closets upstairs. Stand in a particular spot by the window in the Heaven Closet and you'll find a cherub gazing straight at you, ready with a garland of red and white to welcome you into heaven. Your Bolsover journey has reached its end.

Or that's the theory at least. When it comes to interpreting the Little Castle's paintings, as with decoding so much historical art, there's a lot of guesswork involved. It's likely that Cavendish's puzzles will continue to hold on to some of their secrets for a long time yet.

However, ensuring the ongoing survival of these superlative paintings is not without its challenges. While Bolsover Castle offers a dramatic context for them, it's hardly the ideal environment for such precious works of art. There are perpetual problems with leaks due to the design of the roof and, because the keep's extremely heavy doors must be propped open to let visitors inside,



Clockwise from above
Painting over the cracks in the Heaven Closet; paintings depicting Hercules' labours on the vaulted ceiling of the Servants' Hall; conservator Francesco Rosillini in the Heaven Closet; mixing paint to retouch the worst affected areas



the building is subject to incredible drafts. These conditions are a challenge for all the paintings in the keep but the wall paintings – those in the Anteroom, the Hall and the Heaven and Elysium closets – are at particularly high risk of degradation.

'It's looking pretty scary,' says Rachel Turnbull from her perch atop a ladder in the Heaven Closet. Torch in hand, English Heritage's senior collections conservator for fine art is inspecting a badly damaged section of mural in which several cherubs groan under the weight of a crucifix. The work is an example of fresco secco wall painting, a technique in which paint is applied to dry, rather than wet plaster. As a result these paintings tend to be more vulnerable than their true fresco cousins – the only thing keeping the oil paint on the wall in fresco secco is a thin layer of varnish.

'Very scary,' agrees Sophie Stewart of wall paintings specialist Paine & Stewart, pointing out an enormous bulge in the plaster, a forest of drip marks and copious flaking on the surface of the painting. The bulge and drips are water



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SAVE OUR STORIES – WALL PAINTINGS APPEAL

How your support is helping us to rescue other precious paintings

We first launched our wall paintings appeal in the October 2019 issue of this magazine.

Following an audit of wall paintings across our sites, those at four properties – Bolsover Castle in Derbyshire, Lullingstone Roman Villa in Kent, Longthorpe Tower in Cambridgeshire and St Mary's Church, Kempeley in Gloucestershire – were identified as being most at risk of serious degradation.

Donors were able to specify which of these wall paintings they wanted to protect, opting either to repair water and environmental damage at Bolsover, fund cleaning and investigation work at Lullingstone, address cracking and

plaster separation at Longthorpe, or undo damage done by previous repairs at St Mary's Church, Kempeley.

The response has been 'incredible', says Rachel Turnbull, senior collections conservator for fine art. At the time of writing the appeal has raised over £135,000.

As a result of your generosity, wall painting conservation work will now also begin in the near future at Lullingstone, Longthorpe and St Mary's Church.

However, there is still much more to do. To donate to the appeal to rescue other precious wall paintings, please go to www.english-heritage.org.uk/wallpaintings.

damage, and the flaking is a result of the inclement conditions. These cherubs are not in a good way.

Turnbull puts away her torch and makes space on the ladder for Francesco Rosillini, whose work we've interrupted. His white coat and surgical gloves create a decidedly medical atmosphere that's at odds with the romance and delicacy of these English Renaissance paintings. The enormous syringe he's brandishing only adds to the effect. Slowly and carefully, through pre-existing cracks in the bulging plaster, Rosillini injects the syringe's contents – a specially mixed grout of lime and trass containing minute glass beads for lightness – into the empty space behind it. Once this grout has dried, the area will be stable and Turnbull will be able to breathe a sigh of relief.

Assessing the risk

It's thanks to the conservator's intervention that this crucial work is now taking place. In 2019 she began a comprehensive audit of the diverse array of wall paintings under English Heritage's care. Over ►



‘Each year, conservators will be sent to safeguard the paintings at most risk’

the course of five years, Turnbull will carry out risk assessments at 76 properties, compiling data in such a way that the charity is able to identify the most vulnerable artworks and allocate scarce resources accordingly. Each year, conservators will then be sent in to safeguard the paintings designated at greatest risk, ensuring the survival of the largest collection of wall paintings in the country.

Every five years the audit will be repeated, explains Turnbull. ‘It’s an ongoing process. Hopefully then you see the causes of damage coming through and you fix those before you have significant deterioration. Ultimately that’s the aim: that you’ve fixed all the existing emergency situations and then you can check every five years. And if you see a problem beginning to emerge you can address the cause, not the outcome.’

Of the 12 properties Turnbull audited in 2019, Bolsover was deemed highest priority for wall painting conservation work, with urgent repairs required to murals in the Hall and Anteroom as

Clockwise from top
Conservators Sophie Stewart and Rachel Turnbull inspect the paintings of Hercules’ labours in the Servants’ Hall; mixing the perfect palette of colours; damp and drafts have taken their toll on the castle’s plasterwork

well as the Heaven Closet. Rosillini will be based at the Little Castle for two weeks, using vinegar to carefully remove the drip marks, injecting conservation-grade adhesive under flaking paintwork to stabilise it, and doing retouches to areas where paint has been subject to blanching or has flaked off entirely.

Wall painting conservation is particularly challenging, says Turnbull, due to the scale of the works, their multi-disciplinary nature and the complexity of intersecting environmental factors. If Turnbull spots a problem with one of the many works on canvas in English Heritage’s collection, she can simply take it off the wall and do the required conservation work in the studio. For wall paintings on the other hand, ‘you need institutional buy-in because you need all the different departments to work together’, she says.

Monitoring the environment

In situations where climate is suspected to be having a negative impact, monitoring systems are installed. ‘The first thing, obviously, if you think there’s a problem with the environment, is to begin to understand it,’ Turnbull explains. Devices monitoring temperature and relative humidity are in place alongside murals. When it comes to potentially making modifications to a property – installing a glass door to stop a draft perhaps or blocking out a window to reduce sun damage – Turnbull requires long-term data to justify her request. Much of the power of art to affect us is down to its ineffability – but safeguarding that art for the future is all about hard facts.

The Little Castle’s historically leaky roof is a case in point. It must be repaired to prevent further water damage to the paintings in the Heaven Closet. However, such a project will be time-consuming and expensive. In the first instance, a detailed feasibility study is underway to avoid repeating the mistakes of past repairs.

But by the time you’re reading this article, the immediate crisis at the Little Castle will have been averted. The drips will be gone, the flaking repaired, the bulging plaster no longer in danger of cracking. As Turnbull continues her epic audit of the wall paintings, criss-crossing the country from property to property, Sophie Stewart and her fellow wall painting specialists will be getting to work on the next ‘at risk’ murals at Lullingstone Roman Villa in Kent, Longthorpe Tower in Cambridgeshire and St Mary’s Church, Kempeley in Gloucestershire.

Make no mistake, there are plenty of hurdles still to overcome, at Bolsover and elsewhere, but Stewart is unequivocal: the new audit is a ‘cause for huge celebration for us wall-painting conservators’. 🚩

🚩 SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

For more details of our appeal and to donate, go to www.english-heritage.org.uk/wallpaintings