

Factsheet

Kew Palace Historic Paint Discoveries

In 2005 three fascinating and rare archaeological discoveries were made at Kew Palace. Traces of 17th century paint decoration were discovered hidden beneath layers of historic paint in the Kings Library and in the attics. Each find represents an important insight into a London interior of the period, and tells us more about the people who inhabited this Jacobean house.

The Kings Library

- The current decoration of the room consists of a mixture of small, 17th century panels, with a distinctive and decorated panelled overmantel, flanked by arches with green men's heads, and later, 18th century modifications. Two distinct schemes were discovered in this room.
- Removal of a 1960s fitted bookcase revealed extensive areas of painted panelling (probably covered over at an early date during modifications). This panelling was originally painted with a theatrical scheme of brown with yellow ochre pigments applied in swirls, together with scallop shells, all set off with radiating diagonal lines.
- Detailed paint analysis commissioned to investigate whether the whole room had once been treated in this way revealed the overmantel had a few coats of even earlier paint.
- A more subtle effect was discovered on the tablets and strapwork, painted to resemble black marble and stone, with a figurative scheme painted in the panels. Hidden beneath no less than twenty-four successive coats of paint was a female depicted wearing classical dress. Only a small area has been revealed to date, but further research may identify who she is and possibly what the rest of the scheme consists of.
- The discovery of these paint effects transformed our knowledge of the room. We now know that the small panels came first, probably painted ochre with gilding applied. This gilding was later obliterated by the surviving yellow and

brown scheme, which was changed again when the overmantel was installed, and the rest of the room appears to have been painted a stone colour.

- In 1730 more sober Georgian colours hid these earlier paint schemes.
- Date-wise the painted lady could be dated stylistically to the 1670s (tentatively), but she is likely to be slightly earlier, because the overmantel style is more likely to be 1640s. The jury is still out on this one as more research needs to be undertaken.
- These finds reveal a house that was ostentatiously decorated, and was changed frequently. This room formed the common parlour of the original Jacobean house, which means that the Dining Room and Breakfast Room (the Hall and Parlour of the early house) were probably also very expensively decorated, as they were more important rooms. It also tells us that there was a lot of rich decoration in the interiors.

The Attic

- The wall painting in the attic lay as a ghostly outline for many years. Low light levels and few visitors to this floor of the palace meant it was never spotted until recently, when it was discovered by accident.
- A vertical crack in a nearby wall (just centimetres from the hidden pain scheme) required repair which involved removing some 1730s skirting which revealed a much better preserved part of the scheme at floor level.
- The 17th century was a golden heyday for highly decorated staircases. It was customary for house owners to paint a mirror image of the balustrade, on the opposing wall, to make the whole stair appear more expensive and substantial than it really was. At Kew, like many other houses, the original staircase rose into the attic, where the servants, or possibly the children of the family had their bedrooms.
- Later, a new, Georgian stair was taken only to the second floor, and it became the job of a secondary stair to give access to the roof. When the Jacobean staircase was removed in 1731 and the existing flight installed, the original painted scheme was just whitewashed over and disappeared. However, because the attics were used so infrequently, and hardly ever decorated, they only had a few coats of limewash over them. The decay of the underlying oil paint over time formed the ghostly image which we eventually spotted.

- An extensive programme of paint stabilisation and uncovering of this scheme was commissioned. Great care was required as the original pigments were not painted on to a stable ground, but on lime which makes the scheme very fragile. This work revealed a beautiful staircase form, with a tall, 2 metre high newel, highly decorated and a thickly moulded handrail over turned vase balusters. The whole scheme was even given a fictive shadowing, to appear three-dimensional.
- Paint analysis revealed several schemes:
 - The first showed that the stair had a turned ball finial, and was grained to look like oak. It was also gilded in places.
 - Probably in the 1660s or '70s, the stair was modified, and made more elaborate with the addition of vases on the top, spouting fruits and flowers. The whole thing was also repainted to look like stone – in effect a more expensive appearance.
- Although several such staircases survive, we have very little evidence like this discovered at Kew about how they were modified, painted or gilded (most of this evidence having been scraped off surviving examples).

The King's Library paint will be left exposed and given some interpretation. The staircase wall painting lies in the attic, a floor not open to the general public. It will also be the subject of a published article.