

Elizabethan wall paintings

Decorative wall paintings are frequently found in houses of this period, of both prosperous and more middle-class status. It is thought that they were a cheaper alternative to woven or embroidered wall-hangings.

Such paintings would probably have been made by local craftsmen, such as plasterers, rather than by travelling specialist painters. They would have used cheap, locally available **pigments**, such as the red ochre from Headington which forms the background of this painting.

The **designs** would also have been inspired from local sources, or reproduced from pattern books. They could include religious symbols and texts, traditional and architectural decorative patterns or typical Renaissance 'grotesque' designs.

The paint, based on limewash, would be applied over plaster, timber, brick or linen cloth. It was not waterproof, and the colour pigments would have been unstable. As a result, these paintings were not long-lasting, but would have been **painted over** with a new design when required. This makes any survivals all the more precious.

Where to see more

There was another wall painting of a similar design in 3 Cornmarket itself, in what is thought to have been John Tattleton's private chamber. This room was discovered, and demolished, in 1934, but a fragment of the painting can still be seen at the Museum of Oxford in St Aldate's.

Two other painted rooms, of very different designs, can also be seen in the former Cross Inn, now Pizza Express, in the Golden Cross (visit in the afternoons).



Also of interest

Medieval Merchant's House
26A East St Helen Street, Abingdon

This beautiful 15th century merchant's house, owned by Oxford Preservation Trust, is open to the public by appointment. Its many original features include windows and decorated fireplaces, and a stunning 16th century wall painting. Testimony to Abingdon's thriving medieval trade, the house is also remarkable for the 17th century doublet (currently on loan) which was found concealed in the roof during restoration work.

For more information or to book a visit, contact the Trust by ringing 01865 242918.

Oxford Preservation Trust

The Trust was one of the first local amenity societies in the country and is now Oxford's largest. It works to preserve and improve the architectural heritage of Oxford and its green setting, and with a particular interest in Oxford's Green Belt and Conservation Areas. Founded in 1926, it now owns and protects over 500 acres of land, together with a number of listed buildings, with a policy of public access wherever practicable.

Oxford Preservation Trust warmly welcomes new members, who receive newsletters and a programme of talks, walks, guided tours and other activities. If you would like to know more about our work please contact us at the address below.



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OXFORD
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The Painted Room

3 Cornmarket Street
Oxford

*An Elizabethan treasure
in the heart of modern Oxford*



On busy Cornmarket Street, in the commercial centre of Oxford, concealed by an eighteenth-century façade, lies one of Oxford's more secret historical treasures. Within the preserved remains of a sixteenth-century house is a remarkable example of Elizabethan vernacular wall painting, in the 'Painted Room'.

3 Cornmarket Street

The earliest building recorded on this site was established in about 1260, as part of Osney Abbey. The property of New College from around 1400, it was passed on to the City of Oxford in 1921. For much of that 500-year history, the house was an Inn, known over the years as Pate's Inn, Somenour's Inn, the Bull Inn and Crown Tavern.



Tenants and guests

The building was also known for a time as Tattleton's house, after its tenant, **John Tattleton**, a tailor and local dignitary, who lived there from 1564 to 1581. It is during that period that the wall paintings were executed, as indicated by the initials 'IT', found in one of the rooms. The Painted Room itself is thought to have been the principal chamber, reserved for important guests.

It is such a guest who is responsible for the house's other claim to fame. A later tenant, John Davenant, vintner and mayor of Oxford, was a close friend of **William Shakespeare**, and is believed to have entertained him at the Crown Tavern. Shakespeare would spend the night in the Painted Room when travelling between London and Stratford-upon-Avon. An annual Shakespeare commemoration ceremony was held from 1938 to mark this connection, although the tradition has now been abandoned.

More recent tenants of the house have included the Hookham firm of tailors and the Oxford Preservation Trust.

A treasure uncovered

The wall paintings were discovered in 1927, by E.W. Attwood of Hookham's, when considering alterations to the room. The walls had been covered over with oak panelling in the seventeenth century, and with later changes in occupancy and taste the panelling itself was covered in a dozen layers of canvas and wallpaper. It is this constant renewal by successive tenants over four centuries which has enabled the paintings to be both preserved and eventually rediscovered.

The wall painting

The painting remains on two walls of the room in a continuous design, applied over plaster and timber. It is still protected on the north side by the later panelling, re-set on a rail. The east side also contains the fireplace, with elements of an earlier design. The painting, although well preserved, has been extensively and visibly restored in places. It is made up of three sections: a frieze, the main design, and a skirting band at the base of the wall.

At the top, running along the two walls, is a **biblically inspired inscription** set in a frieze, whose remains read:

'And last of thi rest be thou / Gods servante for that hold I best / In the mornyng earlye / Serve god devoutlye / Feare god above allthyng (...).'

Religious or moralising texts were commonly included as part of decorative wall paintings in the sixteenth century. They would have been a way for the householder to ensure the moral rectitude of his household, or simply to assert his position to visitors as a good Protestant.



The main part of the decorative painting consists of an interlacing **trellis pattern**, which encloses designs of flowers and fruit against a terracotta coloured background.



The plants illustrated on the painting - Canterbury bells, windflowers, roses, passion-flowers and grapes - are species which would have been common in sixteenth century England. More and more plants were being introduced at that time, and the natural world was becoming an influential source of inspiration for decorative work in architecture and interior design.

At the bottom of the painting is a **skirting band** featuring a design of apples and pears with leaves. This part of the painting is of a different style, and was added later, although its precise date is unknown.



There is also evidence of an earlier decorative scheme above the **fireplace**, where the sacred monogram 'IHS' can be discerned. This symbol is an abbreviation of the name 'Jesus' in Greek, and may date from the 1550s.