

# McNeilage Conservation

Stone      Plaster      Wall paintings

*Weeks Farm, Talaton, Exeter, Devon, EX5 2RG*

*Tel/Fax: 01404 822076*

*M: 07779634186*

*VAT Reg No 736 7680 95*

*Email: ruthtorq@sosi.net*

*Torquill and Ruth McNeilage AMUKIC*

## **All Hallows Church, Ringmore, Devon**

**Survey of the Wall Painting on the West Face of the  
Chancel arch  
and polychrome on the pulpit and screen**

**October 2003**

## 1. Introduction

McNeilage conservation was requested by the architect Andrew Wood to undertake an examination and condition survey of the wall painting. The purpose of this survey was to assess the historical significance of the painting and also to examine the condition and if necessary put forward proposals for its conservation. A brief examination was also made of the pulpit and screen. These report details the findings made on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September.

## 2. Description and History

### 2.1 *The Building*

Ringmore church retains its original 13<sup>th</sup> century structure. Improvements were made in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and the tower was added.

### 2.2 *The Wall Painting.*

The wall painting beginning at the springing line of the arch covers the whole of the east wall of the nave. The painting is most unusual and original in design. It consists of a repeat scalloped diaper pattern containing a stylised plant form within. Thin palm like leaves support a large central flower design. The flower also has some resemblance to the eye of a peacock's tail, also a symbol of Christ's resurrection<sup>1</sup>.

The painting was first uncovered in the 1890's by the then incumbent, Rev. Francis Hingeston Randolph. He has recorded that at this time there were fragments of painting on the other walls; a St. Christopher on the north wall and a crucifixion on the south wall. Unfortunately these were lost.

David Park of the Coutauld Institute has described the painting as probably 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> Century and thought it was probably meant as a backdrop for the rood. There are fills in the wall in the position where a rood sculpture would have been fixed. Other examples of painted backdrops to a rood can be found at Llantwit Major (Glamorgan) and at Compton (Surrey).

## 3. Survey of the wall painting

A detailed examination of the surface was undertaken with the aid of a magnified head lens and a hand held 15X magnifier (Loop). Access was obtained from a tower put up on the lower north side.

### 2.3 *Previous intervention*

The Rev Hingeston Randolph said that very little touching up was needed' to restore the painting to 'its original beauty'. A detailed examination of the surface on the north side however revealed very little of the original painting has survived and there are at least

<sup>1</sup> Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art.

three different periods of retouching in this area. It is possible that more original paint has survived in the upper and central area of the wall. The earliest retouching has been applied to most of the wall and one would assume that this was the work of Randolph. Areas of original paint have generally been conserved and were not painted over. Later retouchings are confined to the lowest area of painting on the north and south side of the arch and are probably associated with the damaging affects of moisture infiltration.

On the lower north side, the surface retains more overlying limewash layers. An investigation beneath these layers revealed that some earlier decoration still survives beneath. The small areas uncovered both showed a black line at the edge of a red area. Although only small sections were exposed the similarity to the existing pattern would suggest that part of the painting was never actually uncovered.

The stones of the arch have been exposed. It seems probably that Randolph undertook this in keeping with the fashion of the time. The painted border at the lower edge of the painting was applied at the same time in order to give a neat finish. It covers the edge of the plaster where it has been cut away. The design also matches that used on the pulpit and the screen which were also decorated at this time. The medieval plaster would have continued down to the edge of the arch. In some places one can see where the original design continues behind the border.

Some later fills have been applied at the lower edge of the painting, in the position where the rood fixing would be and also a couple on the south side (see photos). The pattern has been retouched over these areas.

Pencil lines for marking out the design can be seen by some of the leaves and around the edge of the border. It seems likely that these were probably put on by Randolph.

#### **2.4 *Technique of execution.***

The plaster supporting the painting consists of a lime and sand mortar. The sand is well graded with some quite large aggregate, up to 3mm. The plaster seems to be the first application on the wall and therefore must be quite early. There are at least two limewash layers beneath the present scheme, which was applied onto a very uneven and possibly already decayed surface. The decoration was painted using the lime technique with pigments in limewater applied onto a limewash layer.

#### *Pigment Analysis (see appendix)*

Three samples were sent for pigment analysis. The results are inconclusive but indicate that some of the earlier scheme may still be obscured beneath layers of limewash. Two samples of red were taken. One from an area of decoration uncovered during this visit and one from an area thought to be retouched by Randolph. Both reds are iron oxide. The earlier one is less pure i.e. a mix of red and yellow ochre. A sample taken from an area of black paint has revealed that it is actually discoloured vermilion. The red in this sample is thought to be later.

## 2.5 Condition

### *Plaster*

The plaster is very well bound and generally appears to be in good condition. There are some cracks down the south side near the wall, which were probably associated with some previous structural movements.

### *Paint Layer*

The examination of the painted surface was limited to the lower north side. Much of the original painted surface is missing and the surface is quite pitted with grains of sand showing through.

Most of the painted surface apart from the lowest 1.5 metres appears to be in a good condition and the paint is not flaking. If one looks higher up the wall however there are many places where only a negative image of the palm leaf design remains, suggesting that some paint loss has occurred.

On the lower north side there is some serious delamination of the limewash layers from the bottom of the painting up to approx. 1.5metres. The lower south side also appears to have suffered from the same weakening of the paint layer. In many places the limewash is pulling away from the surface. The earliest limewash layers in this area have become very hard, an indication that there has been some moisture infiltration causing the limewash to form a calcareous crust. Although there are no salts on the surface, the delamination of the limewash layers must have been caused by some salt action initiated by the ingress of moisture in this area of wall. The hard render on the surrounding walls is probably the main cause of the damage to the painting. The moisture is being forced up the wall and the painted surface is at present acting as a sacrificial layer for the release of the salts.

The painting has further been disfigured by the small pieces of render that have splashed onto the surface down both the north and south edges.

## 3. Screen and Pulpit

Both the screen and pulpit are 19<sup>th</sup> century and thought to be of Flemish or Dutch origin. They were installed by Rev. Randolph and are reputed to have been decorated by him. The decoration shows a remarkable resemblance to the later border at the bottom of the painting so this seems quite probable. The figures of saints at the base of the screen are actually prints that have been coloured and gilded and stuck onto the wood. They are covered with a rather discoloured brown varnish. The figure on the cross is painted on tin.

Both the screen and pulpit are painted and gilded with similar colours to those in the wall painting. The paint is a strong oil and has suffered very little damage.

## 4. Recommendations

### 4.1 *Outline of conservation policy*

The present examination was limited by access to only one part of the wall. It is however apparent that the wall painting has deteriorated, particularly in the lower part of the wall. The more recent retouching in this area indicates that this decay has continued since the time that the paintings were first uncovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reason for this decay must be assessed and if possible steps taken to reverse the process. The presence of the hard render on the walls must be a major factor. Once this has been dealt with the paint layers will need to be consolidated and fixed. The plaster generally appeared to be in a good condition apart from few lacunae and cracks. Once the scaffolding is in place for the conservation work it would be appropriate to use the opportunity to undertake a more thorough investigation of the stratigraphy of the painted schemes. It may also be worth considering uncovering the area of original painting on the lower north side that at present is rather disfigured by the later retouching.

### 4.2 *Treatment proposals*

#### 4.2.1. *Removal of part of adjacent render*

It would seem sensible to remove some of the render in the immediate vicinity of the lower area of the painting and insert a softer more sympathetic lime plaster, which may act as a sacrificial barrier between the render and the wall painting.

#### 4.2.2. *Removal of surface dirt and accretions*

For areas of painting with unstable paint or ground layers, the preliminary removal of surface dust accretions will be limited to the gentle use of soft brushes with a vacuum cleaner nozzle held at a safe distance. Wishab sponges and de-ionised water, applied on cotton wool swabs rolled across the surface will be used for removing further ingrained dirt. The splashes of hard render on the surface can be removed mechanically with a scalpel.

#### 4.2.3. *Re-attachment of the paint and ground layer*

Flaking paint and ground can be reattached using an acrylic dispersion such as primal AXC33. The use of lime can be problematic because of the risk of creating a surface bloom. The adhesive can be injected behind the flakes. The treated area is then pushed back into place with a small pad of cotton wool which will also absorb any excess.

#### 4.2.4. *Fills*

Any loose edges or cracks will be filled with a lime mortar made up of lime putty and fine sharp washed sand at a ratio of 1:3.

#### 4.2.5. *Grouting*

From the areas examined it should not be necessary to undertake any grouting. If however any serious voids are found further up the wall the following procedure will be applied: A grout made up of finely sieved feebly hydraulic lime (NHL2) and chalk

powder at a ratio of 1:2 will be injected between the interfaces where the voids have formed. If necessary presses will be put up to hold the plaster in position until the grout has set. The voids are first prewetted with IMS (Industrial Methylated Spirit.)

*4.2.6. Further uncovering of the original painting and removal of inappropriate retouching*

It would be advisable to remove some of the more garish retouching on the lower north side of the painting. The retouching is water based and therefore should be fairly easy to remove. A further investigation can be carried out to ascertain the extent of the area of painting that has been left uncovered and whether it would be viable to uncover it.

*4.2.7. Presentation*

Any new repairs will be toned in with appropriate coloured limewashes. White losses in the paint layer can be toned down using 'dirty' watercolour washes (aqua sporca).

*4.2.8. Further analysis of the pigments and stratigraphy of the paint layers*

While the work is in progress it will be possible to make a more thorough assessment of the extent of the original decoration and to undertake some more detailed analysis of the pigments.

*4.2.9. Documentation*

All the work will be fully recorded with graphic and photographic documentation. An illustrated report will be produced at the end of the project.

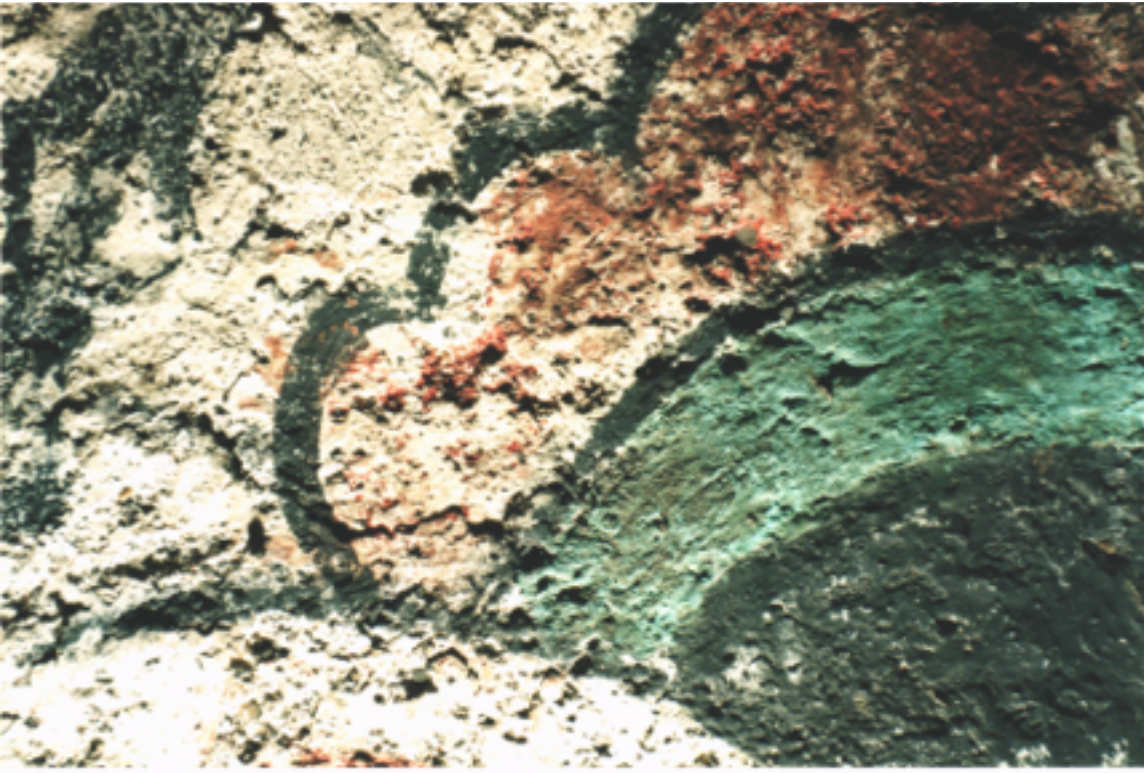
<b>5. Estimate</b>
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Conservation of the wall painting as stated above	£2950
VAT @ 17.5%	£516
<b>Total invoice</b>	<b>£3466</b>

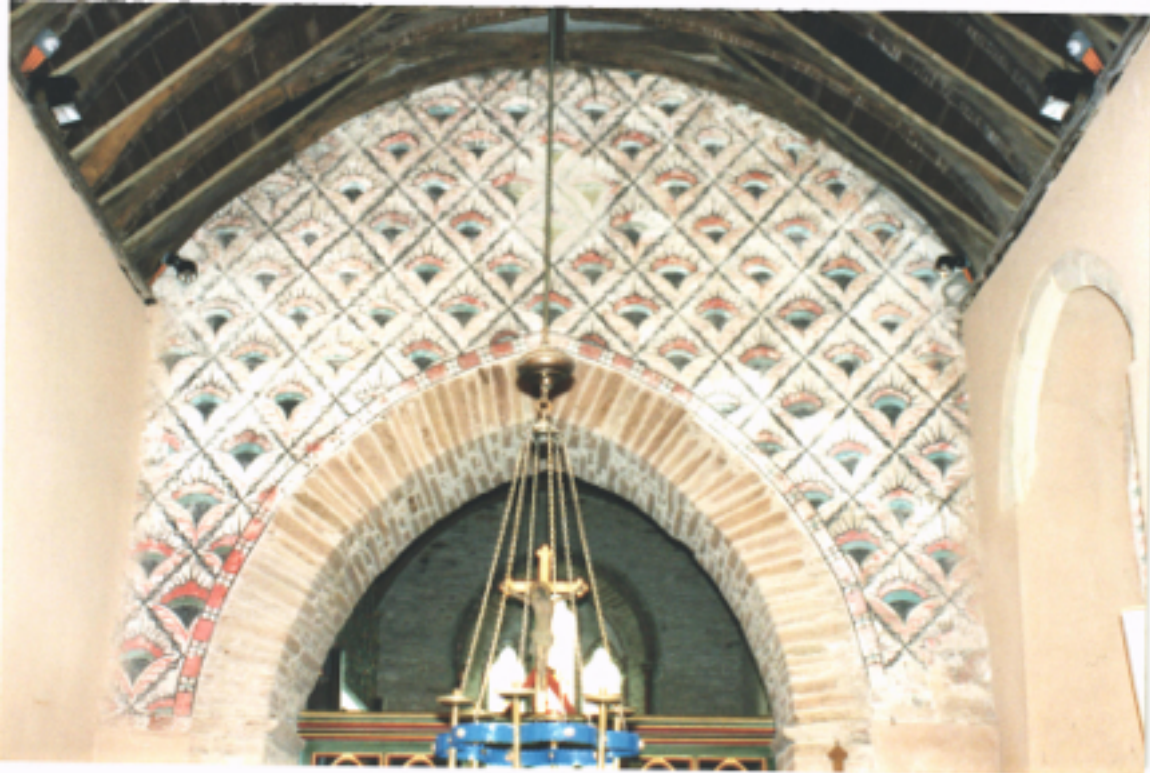
This quotation does not include the cost of scaffolding

## 6. List of plates

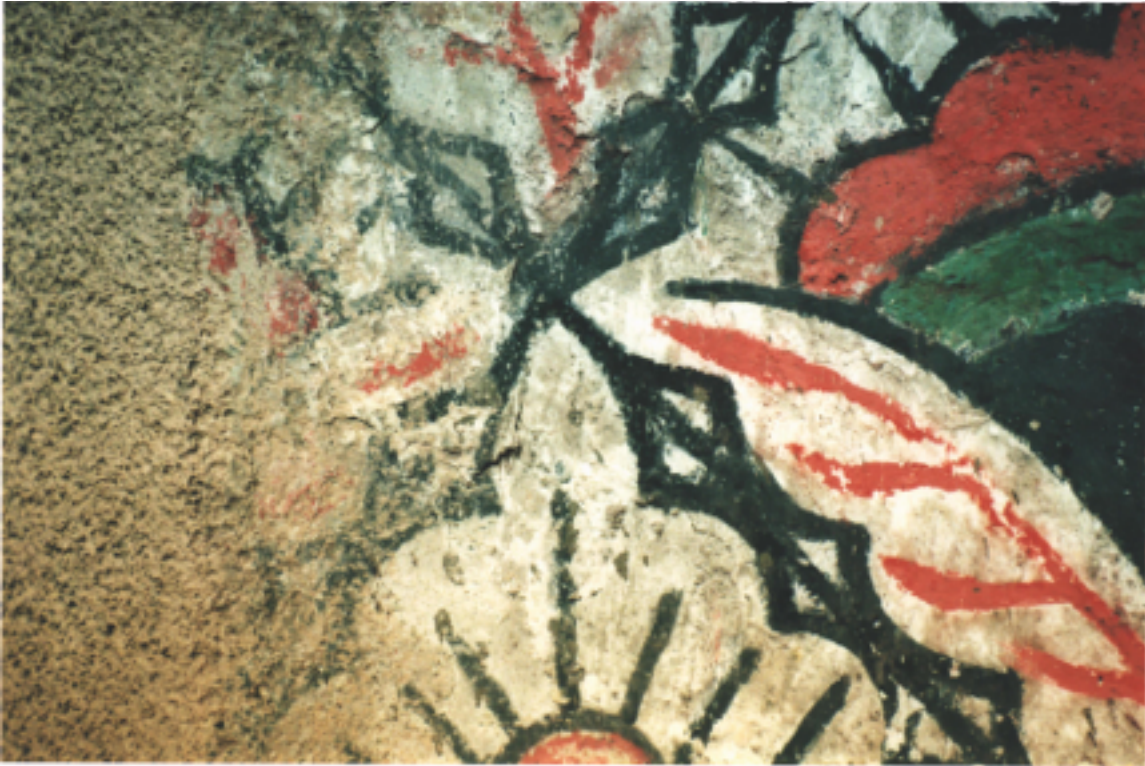
1. View of chancel arch. Note the later fills at the centre, bottom centre and lower south side where there were probably fixings for the attachment of the rood. The much more vivid retouching on the lower north side is also visible.
2. Detail showing area of original decoration exposed beneath the later retouching.
3. Splashes of render on the wall painting
4. Paint losses on the lower south side.
5. Detail showing the decayed and pitted surface.
6. Detail showing retouching on the leaves by Randolph.
7. Detail showing the earlier decoration continuing beneath the later border.
8. Detail showing the negative image of the leaves left after paint loss.
9. Pulpit
10. Screen
11. Detail of coloured prints that have been stuck on and varnished



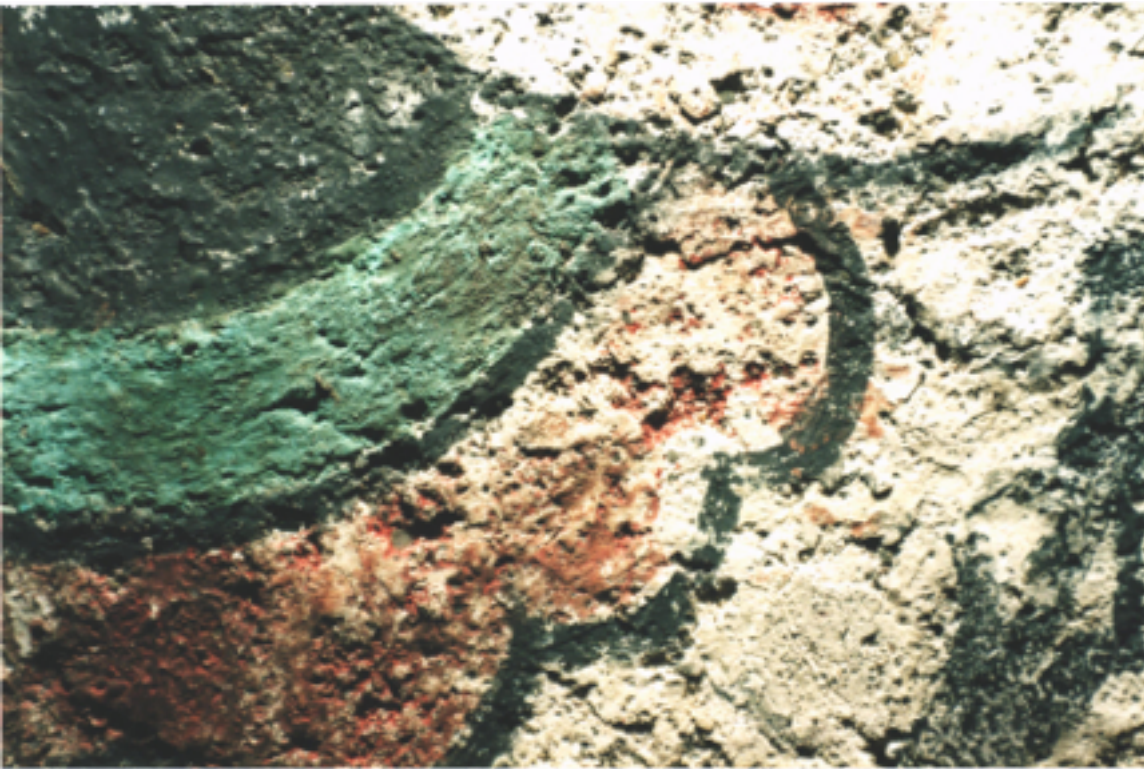


























**ALL HALLOWS,**  
Ringmore, Devon

Three paint samples taken by Ruth McNeilage

- 1 Red, thought to be original decoration
- 2 Red from an earlier layer
- 3 'Black' paint - probably later retouching

Examination

The fragments were examined under low magnification, then mounted as cross-sections. The reds from the three samples were compared using a polarising light microscope.

**Sample 1**

Two reds are visible in the section.

The most recent decoration consists of a fairly thick layer of pure, dark red iron oxide laid on a white limewash ground.

A thin skim of an earlier red iron oxide can be seen further down the section, separated from the most recent decoration by two coats of white limewash.

**Sample 2**

The most recent red is absent from these fragments, but the earlier scheme is visible in all of them, trapped between layers of white limewash.

In most of the fragments the trapped red consists of a thin line of red ochre particles, but in one there is a pocket of the red, where it can be seen to be a mixture of both red and yellow pigment, i.e. less pure than the dark red of the more recent scheme.

**Sample 3**

The black is a discoloured vermilion resting on a white limewash ground. Only the upper surface of the red has blackened, the rest of the layer is unchanged.

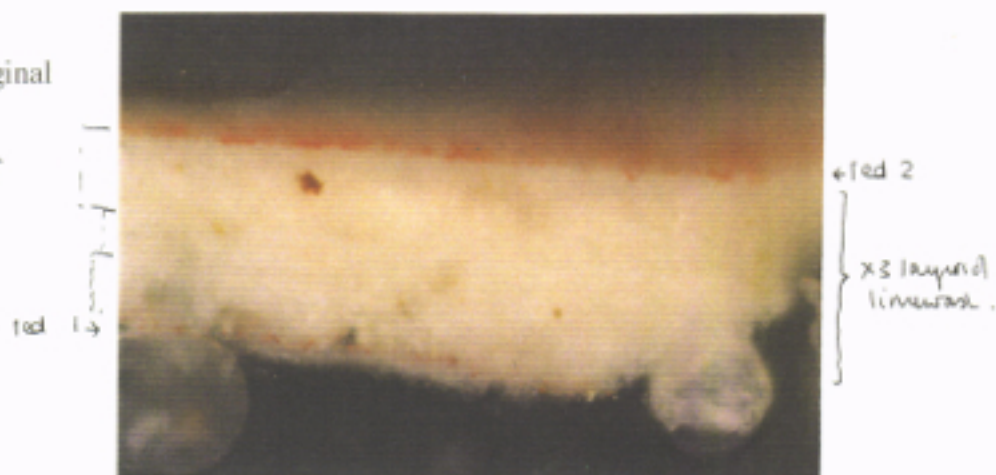
Under the limewash ground is another white limewash, but no evidence of earlier coloured paint schemes.

**SAMPLE 1**

Red, thought to be original decoration.

Showing two layers of red.

[x200]



Detail of the top red

[x500]



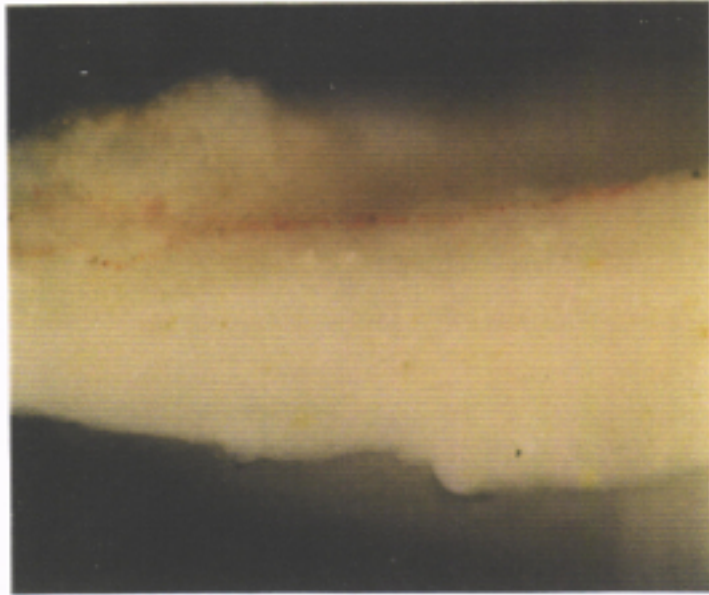
Detail of the bottom red

[x500]



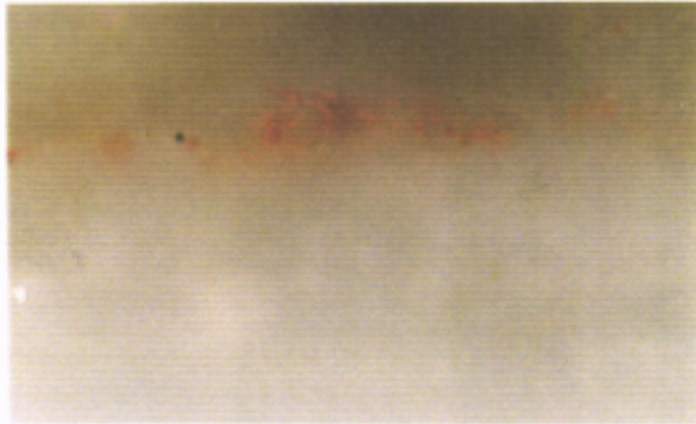
**SAMPLE 2 (i)**  
Red from an earlier layer

[x200]



Detail of the red

[x500]



Another fragment

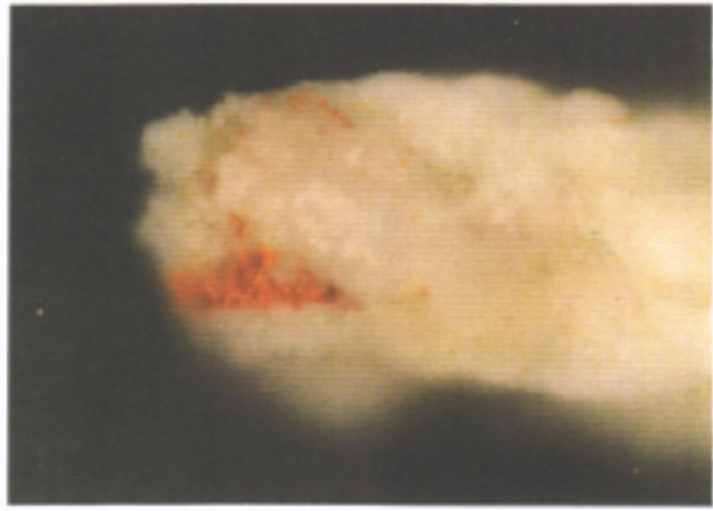
[x500]



**SAMPLE 2 (ii)** - another fragment

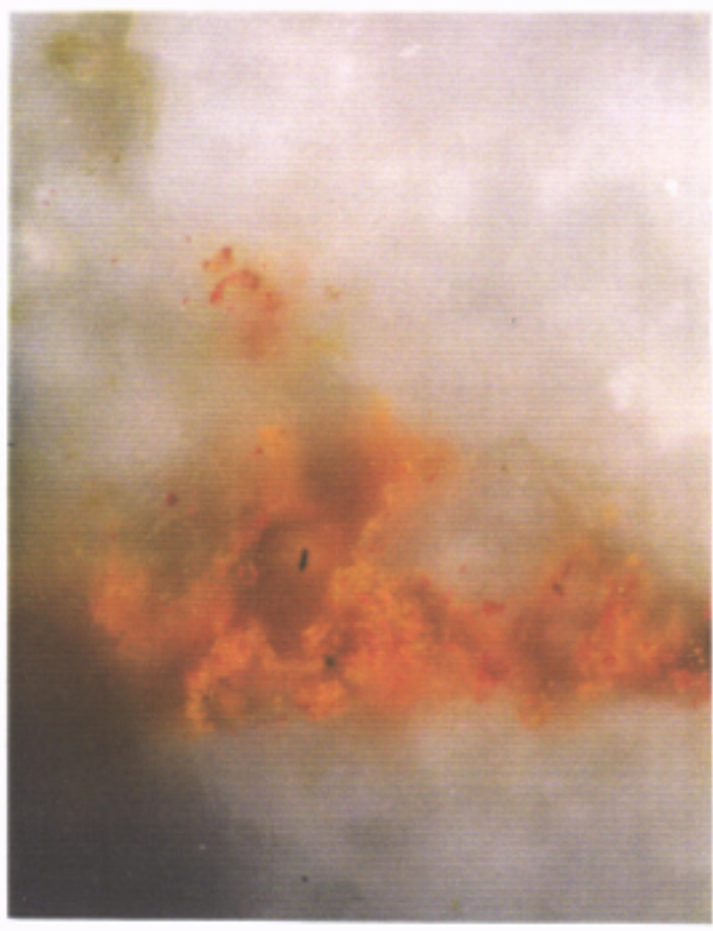
Red from an earlier layer

[x200]



Yellow as well as red particles in the iron oxide

[x500]

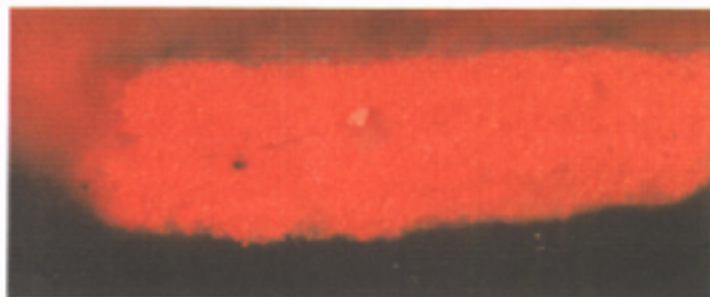


**SAMPLE 3**

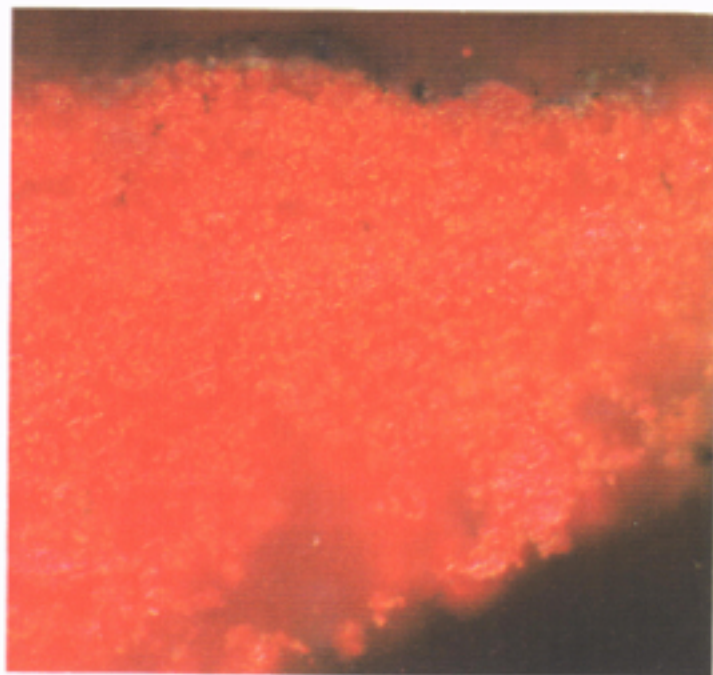
'Black' paint - probably later retouching

Pure vermilion

[x200]



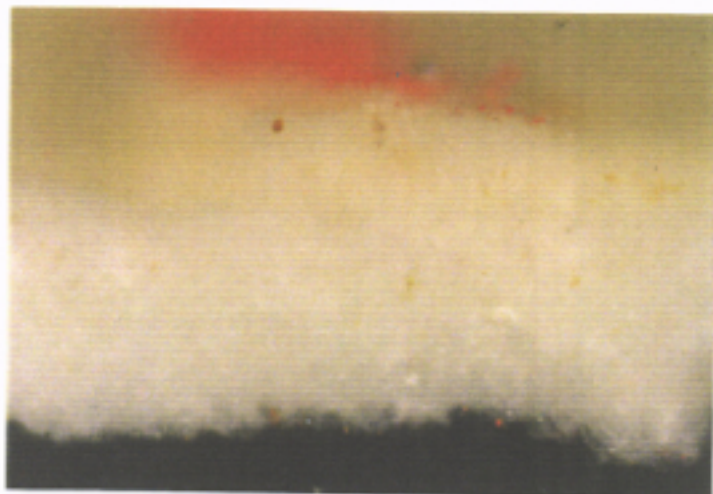
[x500]



← blackened surface.

Two layers of limewash & trace of vermilion

[x200]



x2  
limewash

The paint is richly bound, which is probably why only the surface has blackened.

[x500]

