

# Greenland Fishery Building, Bridge St, King's Lynn, Norfolk

## Condition Report on the Wall Paintings

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**1: Introduction**

Greenland Fisheries Building, Bridge St, King's Lynn, Norfolk, built 1605 for John Atkins merchant and member of the ruling urban elite, retains some of the most important and high quality secular wall paintings in Norfolk. These paintings, consisting of the story of Dives and Lazarus in Heaven and Hell, an imitation overmantel (which includes female figures representing Fides and Spes), painted panelling and a strapwork design on the second floor, will be the focus of the report. However, other decoration survives and is all too easily forgotten because it is much plainer and simpler in style and concept. This includes a painted mullion window (stairwell, south end), red painted timbers (ground floor, south end) and a fireplace with imitation ashlar and ruddling (attic floor, north end).

Analysis (by Catherine Hassall) has been carried out to establish the nature of the surface coatings and the range of pigments employed in the original schemes. It has confirmed that there are two surface coatings - one varnish, one wax - both discoloured. Analysis has also shown an extensive and expensive range of pigments, unlike most other secular wall painting in the region.

I inspected the paintings at the request of Philip Orchard (Architect, Whitworth Co-Partnership) on behalf of the King's Lynn Preservation Trust on 16<sup>th</sup> May and 30<sup>th</sup> June 2006. Only a condition survey has been commissioned, thus a more detailed discussion of the subjects and sequencing will have to wait until an updated building survey is available.

**2: Description of the Painted Schemes**

The following account uses the description by Monica Bardswell with some additional information where appropriate.<sup>1</sup> Bardswell's article is attached in Appendix 3 and should be referred to for a transcription of the texts. Watercolours by Henry Baines, 1864,<sup>2</sup> are included (plates 36-39) which for the most part, are accurately drawn. They provide crucial information for sections of painting now lost, in particular one scheme which seems to depict a woodland/hunting scene(?) Traces of trees on the timber of the first floor west wall may be all that remains of this scene.

The schemes incorporate moralising and biblical texts. The subject schemes are located on the south wall over the door, on the return and over the fireplace. Fragments of painting remain on the west wall timber. Painted panelling and texts survive on the east wall round the window. These schemes are all located in the south end of the building (see Appendix 1).

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<sup>1</sup> M Bardswell, *King's Lynn, Greenland Fisheries Building*, Norfolk Archaeology, Vol. 31, 1957, 198-9.

<sup>2</sup> Reproduced by kind permission of King's Lynn Museum.

*2.1: Dives and Lazarus in Heaven and Hell (Plates 9-15)*

The parable of Dives and Lazarus in Heaven and Hell, Luke 16 v. 16-31 teaches that riches on earth have to be paid for in eternity while the poor will enjoy their reward in heaven.<sup>3</sup>

Dives and Lazarus in Heaven and Hell are depicted over the door and on the return wall to the fireplace. Only part of an inscription remains insitu, fortunately this was transcribed in the C19th (Appendix 3). Dives is cast naked into the flames of Hell by devils; on the return wall are the remains of a devil. The 1864 watercolour shows two devils and a female (or a youth?) figure in the flames of Hell (plates 39). Another Baines watercolour shows the complete scene over the door. Dives and some of the devils survive, as well as fragments of Abraham and an angel but in the watercolour, Lazarus is shown seated on the knee of Abraham in the top left corner with half angels flying around. A clouded border separates Dives from Lazarus.

*2.2: The Imitation Overmantel (Plates 1-8)*

‘Over the fireplace is painted an elaborate architectural composition containing, under painted arches, the figures, three-quarter length, of Faith (Fides) holding a cross and a book, and Hope (Spes) with a falcon on her right hand and the upper part of an anchor in her left hand, whilst above and between the latter, is a small figure of Justice, with her scales. To either side is a seated angel. Above the figure of Faith is the Royal Arms of James I and JR, whilst about Hope is the Prince of Wales’ feathers surrounded by a rayed border, and HP [actually, HF P] for Henry [Frederick] Prince of Wales, son of James I. At the bottom of the painting in the centre are the initials of John Atkin, who built the house.’<sup>4</sup> The brick fireplace is covered with household paints. The bricks would have been ruddled and pencilled originally.

*2.3: Painted Panelling (Plates 16-24)*

Panelling of vertical boards painted to look like stile and rail panelling survives on the east wall. The painted panels consist of a central raised boss surrounded by a strapwork design similar to the one used on the scheme on the attic floor. An inserted timber board towards the south end, below the window, is dated 1676 (plate 20). A text from Psalms 16 v.11 runs along the top of the wall, with another text below the blocked clerestory window (plate 16). The initials for John Atkins are visible on the window reveal (plate 18).

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<sup>3</sup> J Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, Bungay, 1974, revised ed. 1989, 105

<sup>4</sup> Bardswell, op. cit., 198-9.

#### *2.4: Painted Timber on the West Wall (Plates 25-26)*

The only painted decoration visible on the west wall is the painted timber, with a blue architectural framing motif at the north end; the rest is covered with tops of trees.

#### *2.5: Strapwork Decoration (Plates 27-29)*

A section of painted decoration, in poor condition, survives on the south wall of the attic room, to the left of the fireplace. Although it appears almost monochrome now, analysis shows that it was richly coloured originally. It appears to be an architectural composition consisting of an arch between columns. Strapwork decoration within the arch echoes the design used on the panelling in the room below (plate 28). The fireplace is blocked, but imitation quoins are clearly visible at its left side (plate 27). Bardswell records that this scheme contained the date 1612, but was lost following bomb damage.<sup>5</sup>

#### *2.6: Decoration Elsewhere (Plates 31-35)*

- Exposed timbers in the ground floor room below the painted room retain evidence to show that they were painted red at least twice (plate 31). Other timbers on the ground floor retain traces of red. These will be C17th decoration and must not be stripped.
- The mullions of the stair window were painted with white limewashes or distempers, the saddlebars were painted red (plates 32-33). This was probably a common treatment but the evidence rarely survives. The window must not be stripped.
- The fireplace at the north end of the attic floor retains ruddle on the brickwork and imitation ashlar quoins, at present covered with household paints (plates 34-35).

#### *2.7: Discussion*

Although built about 1605 (there was a date stone on the northeast corner of the gable). It seems likely that the paintings were carried out slightly later. It has been suggested that the roof was raised to provide attic accommodation<sup>6</sup> and the fireplaces altered at the same time. If this is the case then the paintings are likely to be associated with that building alteration.

The presence of the Stuart Royal Arms with the initials JR for James (1603-1625) places the scheme into the first quarter of the C17th. The Prince of Wales feathers with the initials HF P for Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales indicate that the painting is unlikely to be after 1612, the year Henry died. The strapwork decoration in the attic floor was dated

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<sup>5</sup> Bardswell, op.cit., 189.

<sup>6</sup> P Richards, *King's Lynn*, Chichester, 1997, 10.

1612. Vanessa Parker suggests that the panelling was inserted c.1654 but the source of the information is unclear.<sup>7</sup> Sections of the panelling have clearly been rearranged – boards at the lower left side are out of order (plate 19), but the general arrangement of the texts and the surviving panelling fits around original architectural features. The similarity of the strapwork design on the panelling and the decoration on the attic floor above might suggest that they were carried out at the same time. The analysis shows a number of similarities in technique and pigments between the panelling, the subject paintings and the strapwork which suggests that they were conceived as an ensemble. Differences in technique can probably be ascribed to a different hand. The subject paintings are technically sophisticated, using pigments mixtures and an expensive range of pigments. The panelling technically is much simpler but it is repetitive decorative work and uses, for instance, a cheaper blue, indigo instead of the more expensive azurite on the subject paintings. The initials JA indicate that the work was carried out for John Atkins who died in 1617. If this interpretation proves to be correct,<sup>8</sup> then the schemes can be quite tightly dated to 1612; this would also date the building alterations.

### 3: Summary of the Analysis

Further information can be found in appendix 2. The analysis was carried out by Catherine Hassall and the following information is largely derived from her report.

Analysis has shown an expensive range of pigments and two surface coatings, one varnish, the other wax. The analysis has also enabled the paintings to be linked technically suggesting that they were probably all carried out at about the same date but not necessarily by the same hand.

#### 3.1: *Overmantel and Dives and Lazarus*

These are by the same painter and have the same priming, ground and pigments.

##### Priming

A clear organic medium, probably oil, followed by a layer of lead white in the same medium.

##### Ground

A pure lead white ground. In some samples it looks like two coats but in others it was clearly one.

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<sup>7</sup> Parker cites the Bardswell article for information on the paintings and panelling but the source of the c.1654 date is unclear. V Parker, *The Making of King's Lynn*, London, 1971, 96 and note 18, 109.

<sup>8</sup> Some revision may be necessary once a more up to date building survey is carried out.

### Pigments (samples 1-16)

Pigments include, pure red lead, lead white, azurite and lead white, vermilion, pure finely ground charcoal black, a grey mixture of charcoal black and lead white, an orange mixture of vermilion, lead tin yellow and a red lake. A glazed green, consisting of an opaque undercoat of partially dissolved verdigris mixed with lead white, followed by a dark glaze of fully dissolved verdigris in an oil medium. The distinctive feature of this combination is that a little lead white was added to the glaze layer. Brown iron oxides and a little black were also used. A curious dark? brown mixture of lead white, charcoal black and red lead. The layer may have darkened, but most of the lead white and red particles have retained their colour. A flesh tone of lead white, vermilion and finely ground charcoal black was also used.

### 3.2: Chimney Lintel (sample 18)

This had several different schemes including a dull, yellow/brown iron oxide; an undercoat of pure red iron oxide with a pure red lead top coat; a layer of limewash, or distemper tinted with yellow iron oxide; a black scheme of pure carbon black over a dark grey undercoat of carbon black and lead white; two coats of off-white or stone coloured oil paint, both of them based on mixtures of lead white and iron oxides.

### 3.3: Painted Panelling (samples 19-25)

#### Ground

A coat of pure lead white oil paint

#### Paint Layers

The whole panel was painted a solid pale blue. The red and yellow details were painted next, and the dark blue applied last. The blue in all the samples was a mixture of lead white and indigo. The yellow was pure lead tin yellow and the red, pure vermilion. The dark green of the stile was a glazed copper green. Like the greens used on the figurative paintings it consisted of partially dissolved verdigris. Small particles of lead white were suspended in the glaze layer.

### 3.4: Painted Timber on the West Wall (samples 26,27)

This had a primer/ground of pure lead white oil paint, like the panelling.

#### Paint Layers

The green must have been applied first, as it occurs in both samples. It consists of a single layer of partially dissolved verdigris mixed with lead white. In sample 26, a lump of lead tin yellow can be seen but this was probably picked up accidentally. The blue in sample 26 consists of a thin layer of indigo and lead white. In most fragments it is over the green of the trees but in others, it is onto the lead white ground.

A later scheme of white limewash followed by a layer of red ochre.

*3.5: Strapwork Scheme (samples 28-31)*

Like the wall paintings on the ground floor, several preparatory layers were involved, but the materials and techniques were different.

Priming

1: A coat of red iron oxide mixed with a few particles of lead white; 2: lead white mixed with some of the same red iron oxide; 3: lead white plus a little yellow ochre.

Ground

Pure lead white

Paint Layers

Vermilion over pure lead tin yellow; glazed copper green. As on the first floor wall paintings, the green consisted of an opaque undercoat of partially dissolved verdigris mixed with lead white, followed by a glaze of fully dissolved verdigris, containing a few particles of lead white; pure vermilion.

*3.6: Ground Floor Ceiling Beams*

Two layers of red.

*3.7: Surface Coatings*

1: A clear varnish layer, now discoloured to a dark brown.  
2: A thick waxy layer which has picked up a lot of dirt.

### 3.8: Techniques and Materials Compared

Main Differences in Materials	Main Similarities in Materials
The attic strapwork was primed differently to the first floor walls. The plaster was elaborately prepared, but instead of oil-rich lead white used for Dives and Lazarus and the overmantel, it was given two coats of red ochre mixed with lead white	The glazed green used on the overmantel and Dives and Lazarus is very similar to the glazed green used on the painted panelling and on the strapwork scheme. The dark green on the west wall timber is less close in appearance.
Azurite was used for the figurative paintings, while indigo was used for the panelling schemes and the painted timber on the west wall	A plain lead white oil ground was used for the painted panelling and on the west wall timber
Complex mixtures were used on the overmantel and the Dives and Lazarus painting, whereas single pigments were used for the colours on the other paintings	Indigo was used on the painted panelling and on the west wall timber
	The lead tin yellow found on the painted panelling and the strapwork scheme has a distinctively strong yellow colour. A paler version of the pigment is more common

## 4: Condition Survey

The schemes are carried on a variety of supports – timber, brick and lime plaster and lath and plaster. Loss has occurred since the C19th when Henry Baines recorded the paintings. Monica Bardswell conserved the paintings in 1952 when she ‘cleaned and preserved’ them.<sup>9</sup> It seems likely that she was responsible for one (the wax) of the surface coatings but probably not both. The repairs, for instance, appear to be toned to match a dirty surface.

One of the most immediate problems is visibility. The surface coatings on all the paintings have darkened and discoloured so much that it is extremely difficult to read them. Furthermore, the original colour is distorted by the discoloured surface coatings so that ‘Spes’ dress, for example, appears green but is, in fact, blue. Cleaning tests show that the paintings would be transformed if cleaned and their ‘readability’ improved immeasurably. Closer inspection shows that there are additional problems associated with the coatings which are of more immediate concern. Flaking is evident on Dives and Lazarus, the overmantel and the strapwork scheme. With ‘Dives’ and the overmantel, the problem is localised; the strapwork scheme, however, is in worse condition with flaking across the painting, as evidenced by the small white areas of loss (plates 28&29).

### 4.1: Dives and Lazarus

The lath and plaster support is generally sound, despite cracks and old, inappropriate fills. The bulging plaster on the return wall is, at present, stable. One crack will need securing

<sup>9</sup> Bardswell, *Greenland Fisheries*, 198

on the devil on the return wall (plates 13&14), and although the repairs are ‘unsightly’ they are, at present, stable. They will need monitoring during building work.

The worst areas of flaking and blistering can be seen on the top right of the devil painting on the return wall (plate 14) and the bottom left of ‘Dives’ over the door (plate 11)

The whole surface is pitted with key marks for a later plaster. Old retouchings have now discoloured.

#### *4.2: The Overmantel*

The support is brick with lime plaster. The plaster is generally adhering well to the brick. There is some localised movement associated with a diagonal crack through the middle of the scheme. The surface is pitted with keymarks for a later plaster. The plaster losses have been irregularly filled and the whole effect is ‘puddled’. More recent mechanical damage has occurred above the right pediment, perhaps caused by a ladder (? Plate 6).

Localised areas of flaking and blistering occur on the sleeve of ‘Spes’, for instance, and in the bottom right corner (plates 7&8). Flecks of white show that there is flaking and loss elsewhere in the painting.

#### *4.3: Painted Panelling*

The panelling has clearly been arranged, evidenced by the mismatched panels at the left side. Some of the panels are slightly loose and early repairs include a board, dated 1676. This board appears to retain a decorative scheme under the overpaint.

Old worm damage can be seen at the bottom edge, partially behind modern skirting. Localised blistering paint occurs in this area. Otherwise, the paint is generally stable but has suffered from mechanical damage in the past. As with the other schemes, the whole surface is covered by dirty, discoloured surface coatings.

#### *4.4: The Strapwork*

Bardswell describes the condition of the paintings:

‘...Only a small part of this design remained. The wall plaster was in very poor condition and falling away in powder, it was found possible, however, to preserve sufficient to show the nature of the decoration. After the bombing, and before the face of the plaster fell away, the date 1612 could be traced in the centre of the design’.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bardswell, *Greenland Fisheries*, 199

This painting was clearly in the worst condition in the 1950s and it is the one which is most unstable now. The problem is the surface coating which is flaking and pulling the paint away at the same time. There is clear evidence of loss across the painting (plates 27-29). However, removing or thinning the coating will be problematic because the paint and plaster surface was in such poor condition when the coatings were applied.

### **5: Treatment Proposals**

The essential work is to stabilise the paintings. This will include fixing all areas of flaking paint, securing detaching areas of plaster and filling cracks where necessary.

Methods and materials are likely to include:

- An acrylic dispersion such as Plextol B500, or Primal AC33 diluted in water, to readhere flaking paint. The dilution will be established following tests on site.
- Detaching areas of plaster can be secured with a grout of lime putty and washed sieved sharp sand, injected behind the plaster.
- A mortar of lime putty and washed sieved sand to fill the cracks where necessary.

Although not essential now, it may become necessary to remove the surface coatings if the rate of flaking increases. It would be worth considering cleaning the paintings, especially those on the first floor. Cleaning needs to be carried out in two processes, the first to remove the wax coating the second to remove the varnish coating. The results would be spectacular. It may, however, not be possible to remove the surface coatings from the strapwork scheme and further tests are required to establish, if possible, appropriate methods and materials for removing/thinning the surface coating in this area.

If the paintings are cleaned, then old repairs will need to be removed and replaced with a mortar of lime putty and washed sieved sharp sand. New repairs should be toned to blend with the background colour. Reconstruction of missing areas of design is not envisaged at this stage.

### **6: Conclusion**

The schemes in The Greenland Fisheries Building are undoubtedly some of the most important secular wall paintings in the region. That they can be associated with a patron, John Atkins adds to their interest. Their appearance would certainly be improved with cleaning and conservation and this should be considered at a future date. Essential work, however, is to stabilise the paintings.

Andrea Kirkham



**Plate 1**

*Top left: view of the wall paintings*

**Plate 2**

*Top right: view of the overmantel*



**Plate 3**

*Far left: detail of Fides*



**Plate 4**

*Left: detail of Spes*

*(All photos © A Kirkham 2006)*



**Plate 5**

*Above: detail of top left corner  
(All photos © A Kirkham 2006)*



**Plate 6**

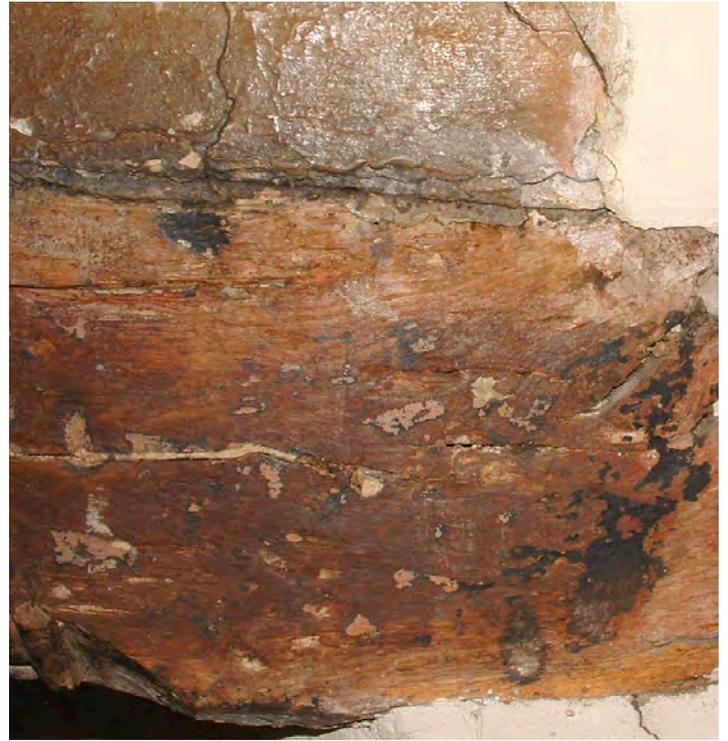
*Above: detail of top right corner*



**Plate 7**

*Above:* detail of bottom right corner and cleaning tests

*(All photos © A Kirkham 2006)*



**Plate 8**

*Above:* detail of chimney lintel



**Plate 9**

*Above left:* view of Dives and Lazarus



**Plate 10**

*Above right:* detail of Dives and Lazarus

*(All photos © A Kirkham 2006)*



**Plate 11**

*Above:* detail bottom left corner



**Plate 12**

*Above:* detail, cleaning tests (All photos © A Kirkham 2006)



**Plate 13**

*Above:* view of a devil?



**Plate 14**

*Middle right:* detail of plate 13



**Plate 15**

*Bottom right:* detail of plate 13

(All photos © A Kirkham 2006)



**Plates 16&17**

*Left and above: views of the painted panelling  
(All photos © A Kirkham 2006)*



**Plate 18**

*Middle left: detail of initials*

**Plate 19**

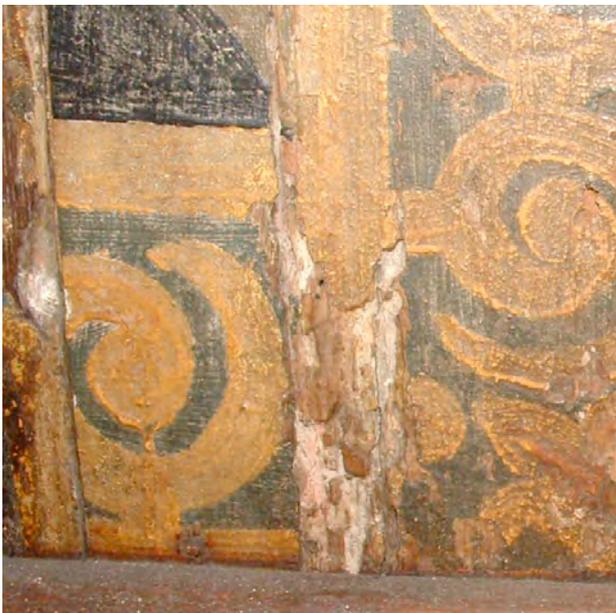
*Middle: detail of panelling*

**Plate 20**

*Middle right: inserted timber*

**Plate 21**

*Left: detail of damaged painted timber  
(All photos © A Kirkham 2006)*





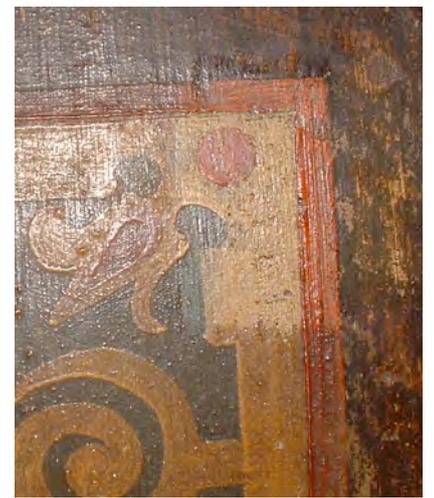
**Plate 22**

*Top left:* detail of a painted panel with a raised, faceted boss



**Plates 23&24**

*Top middle and right:* detail of cleaning tests



**Plate 25**

*Left:* view of the painted timber opposite the window



**Plate 26**

*Below:* detail of plate 25  
(All photos © A Kirkham 2006)





**Plate 27**

*Left: view of the painting and blocked fireplace*

**Plate 28**

*Middle left: view of the strapwork decoration*

**Plate 29**

*Middle right: detail of plate 28*

*(All photos © A Kirkham 2006)*



**Plate 30**

*Left: exterior view*

*(Photo © A Kirkham 2006)*



**Plate 31**

*Left: view of the painted ceiling timbers, ground floor room  
(Photo © A Kirkham 2006)*



**Plate 32**

*Far left: view of the stair window*



**Plate 33**

*Left: detail of plate 32*



**Plate 34**

*Far left: view of the attic floor, north end of the building*



**Plate 35**

*Left: detail of the fire-place*

*(All photos © A Kirkham 2006)*



**Plates 36-39**

Watercolours by Henry Baines, 1864  
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