

To scrape or not to scrape? Plaster, stucco and Victorian church restorers in Leicestershire

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Nineteenth-century restorers transformed the appearance of all but a handful of churches in Leicestershire. Box-pews and galleries were ejected and open benches and choir stalls put in; plaster ceilings were removed in favour of open timber roofs; brick floors were replaced by coloured tiles; stained glass appeared in countless windows. Wherever possible things were made to look medieval (or what was supposed to be medieval). All these matters, and several more besides, are well known: much was written about them at the time and they have been frequently discussed by later writers on the activities of the Gothic Revival. One further dramatic feature of nineteenth-century change is the removal of rendering on church walls. Despite its obvious aesthetic and archaeological importance, this attracted remarkably little theoretical discussion at the time and still less since. This paper aims to help redress the balance as far as Leicestershire (including Rutland) is concerned. The terms ‘plaster’, ‘stucco’ and ‘rendering’ are all used. ‘Plaster’ generally refers to internal wall covering with a fine texture but ‘stucco’ is a term that was used very loosely in the nineteenth-century literature (having nothing to do here with its frequent meaning of ornamental plasterwork). ‘Rendering’ is a term I have not encountered in contemporary writings but I use it here for internal work with a lightly rough texture.

Internal plasterwork

It no longer seems odd to enter a church and find the stonework in the fabric exposed. This attitude is due entirely to the sheer number of cases brought about by the Victorians—both in new churches and, more importantly for this discussion, in old ones. Pre-Victorian churches were, almost without exception, plastered internally. A few medieval walls, such as in the fourteenth-century chancel at Claybrooke, may have lacked plaster but this was rare and only occurred where high-quality ashlar was involved. Certainly rubble and semi-dressed fabrics were never meant to be seen. From Pugin and his followers, the Ecclesiologists, there arose a belief in the ‘truthful’ expression of materials and, it seems, the associated desire to expose them to view. Materials should appear to be what they are—stone should appear to be stone, brick should be seen as brick. Stern condemnation was heaped upon the Georgian love of stucco and this would have dramatic effects when any medieval churches chanced to have any external rendering left, as we shall see later. Inside churches, the restoration movement aimed to recreate medieval dignity and this, not surprisingly, led to a desire to remove the layers of whitewash that had accumulated on walls and dressed stone alike over the previous two or three centuries.

Practically any restoration scheme with medievalist ambitions in the half century after 1840 required the exposing of dressed stonework on piers, arches, doorways, fonts and other architectural features. The concept was often extended to removing plaster from wall

fabrics and leaving them bare. Although one can speculate about Puginian truthfulness as the likely motive, it is extraordinary that contemporary sources seem silent on the matter and I have found no references to the practice in theoretical writings or the local literature until disapproving ones start to appear about 1870. Another factor might have been money. Old wall plaster was sometimes found to be in a very poor condition and removal was said to be needed. At Owston the faculty of 1860 specifies replastering but at Henry Goddard's ensuing restoration the stonework was bared (LRO DE 1266/11). Perhaps lack of funds led to this change of heart but since the masonry would have had to be carefully cleaned and repointed it is hard to believe there would have been a major cost difference.

Victorian church restorers and their patrons favoured the idea of 'dim religious light'—'a church *should be dimly lighted*' said the *Ecclesiologist* (2 (1843), p.75; original emphasis). Plaster removal certainly helped this aim and may have been a further factor in support of a basic belief that building materials were to be seen and not concealed. Both national and local architects alike adopted the idea or did not take sufficient steps to prevent its being carried out, including major figures like J. L. Pearson. The plaster was removed at Burley-on-the-Hill (Rutland) which he restored in 1869–70 and later at Mowsley in a dismal restoration of 1882–83. At the latter he produced a strange, barn-like quality in an apparently deliberate attempt to create a primitive effect. The plaster at South Luffenham (Rutland) was removed during G. E. Street's restoration of 1861. G. G. Scott also appears to have condoned the procedure at Croxton Kerrial in 1866–68. Plaster removal had obvious value in revealing archaeological detail and a very early example of its recommendation for this purpose was at Leicester, St Mary de Castro, by the Leicester architect, William Flint, in 1844 (LRO CM1/4, 197). The aesthetic effects varied substantially. In the case of restorations by Joseph Goddard, the result at Lowesby (1868) is not unattractive since pleasing honey-coloured ironstone is exposed, but, further west, the story is very different. At Cossington (1864–65) poor, drab rubble is revealed and at Ibstock (1884–85) a cold, lifeless interior arises from the exposure of the grey sandstone. From an archaeological point of view there were advantages in that the structure could be more easily read but this was outweighed by an immense loss of medieval and later wall paintings.

The practice continued past 1900 but began in Leicestershire in the 1840s at St Mary de Castro in 1844–46, Coston in 1846 (restored by Weightman and Hadfield of Sheffield), and, probably, at Measham in 1842. The statistics for the 390 or so churches existing in 1840, and for which dates of removal can be securely or probably assigned, are as follows (they include places where only section of the church, e.g. the chancel, has been stripped):

1840–49	3
1850–59	5
1860–69	27
1870–79	16
1880–89	15
1890–99	11
1900–14	4
Post–1914	3
Date uncertain	19

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It is clear that the practice was at its height in the 1860s. This was the time when the restoration was most active in the county but at no stage was it entirely out of favour.

The fact that it waned after the '60s and '70s is partly because there were fewer and fewer churches in need of substantial restoration, and the 'restoration is conservation' lobby gained ground. Yet as late as 1917 the Rev. A. H. Snowden was allowed to remark in the *Transactions of the Rutland Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 'what an improvement it would be if Ketton might be stripped of the plaster, which hides the stone work, and the stones well pointed inside' (15 (1917), p.56).

On the opposite side, Scott's own son, George Gilbert Jr in a paper to the Lincoln Diocesan Architectural Society, which was published in the *Architect*, strongly attacked plaster removal (10 (1873), p.38). He roundly condemned both the archaeological and visual effects. 'Numbers of fine old churches,' he said, 'have been stripped internally, and reduced to a nakedness compared with which Puritan whitewash is decency'. Speaking in Lincolnshire he cited Heckington, but had he been addressing a Leicestershire audience he would have had no trouble in finding a local example; he went on:

It is scarcely credible that in the restoration of this church . . . rough rubble has been stripped of its plaster, the remains of old decorations entirely obliterated, and the church now presents the strange anomaly of an exterior of finely wrought ashlar work, and an interior of the roughest random work, the irregularities of which are ingeniously brought out by very pronounced pointing. If such is the treatment which a church, known to every architect, and admitted to be one of the typical buildings of the [Decorated] style, has undergone, we cannot wonder that humbler buildings have shared the same sad fate. I believe in most cases it is not the architect but the client who is to blame, and it is on this account that I . . . protest against a process which has . . . been applied against my will to some churches for whose repair I have been in other respects responsible.

Yet his own father, however much he protested his devotion to 'conservative' restoration, must be implicated in the plaster removal at Grantham in 1866–68, as this was a church that he particularly loved, visited and where he took a personal interest in the restoration. In 1866 a £225 contract was entered into to remove the wall plaster from the western part of the church (*Grantham Journal*, 3 Nov. 1866). G. G. Scott the elder was responsible for bare walling in the parts of St Mary de Castro that he rebuilt. Another architect who spoke out against it was C. Hodgson Fowler who told the Leeds Architectural Society in 1882 that 'whatever they did they should not bare and point their rubble walls and leave them like a barn' (*Building News*, 42 (1882), p.198). Such words echo the tenets of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), founded by William Morris in 1877, to help stem the tide of over-intensive restoration. Our own Society adopted such principles and on a visit to Sproxton in the '90s regretted the plaster removal (*AASRP*, 22 (1893–94), p.51); this must have taken place during Henry Woodyer's restoration in 1882–83. SPAB vehemently opposed plaster removal and its archives record protests at Leicester, St Nicholas, in 1903 and at Gaddesby (chancel) in 1892. At the latter the vicar ruefully recorded 'I think the scraping of the walls a mistake and the Bishop of Peterborough agrees with me.' Too late!

The exponents of plaster removal did not abandon other ways of handling wall surfaces. This is to be seen in the work of the Goddards between 1862 and 1899 and in that of William Smith between 1863 and 1896. The figures are as follows for the churches they restored (where reasonable indications of the original intentions are available):

	Goddards	Smith
Nos. of churches where plaster was removed	11	1
Nos. of churches with natural-coloured rendering	1	3
Nos. of churches with plaster and whitening	12	6

The cult of the drab

An early aim of the revived medievalism in church building and restoration was colour. There should be stained glass and the surfaces of walls and architectural features should glow in the suffused dim religious light. Colour was expensive and few churches aspired to the ideal; Leicestershire, for example, is poorly provided with Victorian decorative schemes. If colour was too expensive, many restorers appear to have adopted what, on the face of it, is the very opposite course—a sombre wall colouration, but which at least enhanced the dim, holy atmosphere. The expedient was, on removing the old plaster, to replace it by natural coloured rendering. It is possible that colour decoration was intended for a later date, but for this there is no local evidence. I am unaware of any writings on the theory of introducing natural coloured rendering.

Major architects as well as minor ones adopted the practice. Examples are William Butterfield at Ashwell in 1851, Pearson at Exton (Rutland) in 1852–54 and Scott at Theddingworth in 1857–58. The fashion did not last so long as the willingness to remove plaster and the last Leicestershire case was probably at Prestwold in 1890 where Sir A. W. Blomfield was responsible. The dating can be summarised for restored churches as follows:

1840–49	0
1850–59	4
1860–69	6
1870–79	3
1880–89	2
1890–99	1
1900–14	0
Uncertain date	7
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'The war against stucco'

The Ecclesiologists were unanimous in their condemnation of external stucco. The fact that it had been commonplace on medieval churches in no way mitigated their dislike of it. It was probably more frequent before the Reformation than they would have liked to admit. Stucco was certainly used as a protection against the weather and often survives for this purpose in western Britain on the sides of churches facing the prevailing wind.

The Golden Age of stucco was undoubtedly the late Georgian era. In Leicestershire it was applied to the exteriors of the remodelled churches of Cotesbach (1812), Isley Walton (1819), and Newton Harcourt (1834–35). It concealed cheap brick walling and, apart from Cotesbach in the last few years, has not been removed for this reason. It was also applied to the outside walls of Barkby church in 1826 (ICBS), and knocked off them again in 1864, by which time fashions had altered markedly (*AASRP*, 7 (1863–64), p.cxxv). At Barkestone it was put on the south side and on the north face of the clerestory in 1832, no doubt to impress Archdeacon Bonney, who noted at his 1832 Visitation, 'all this has been done for my Inspection' (LRO 245'50/5, 11). In all, thirty churches in Leicestershire are known to have had external stucco but this figure is, no doubt, a considerable understatement (this number includes the other surviving examples at Belgrave, Bitteswell, Caldecott (Rutland), Markfield, Tugby and Welham).

Much effort was expended in the Victorian period in ridding churches of the offending

stucco. This Society was vigorous in its denunciation. At Oadby, it reported as late as 1862, ‘The churchwardens have had the bad taste and will learn the eventual bad economy of daubing the walls [of the south aisle] with stucco’ (*AASRP*, 6 (1861–62), p.cxlv). Matters were righted two years later for the stucco ‘has been knocked off, [and] the walls properly pointed’ (*AASRP*, 7 (1863–64), p.cxxv). 1864 was a good year for the anti-stucco party because the Society, pleased with its success at Oadby, joyously reported victory at nearby Burton Overy—‘The war against stucco had broken out here’, it said (*AASRP*, 7 (1863–64), p.cxxvi). Such activity was standard during restorations and it is probable that, as with the removal of box-pews, it was often not mentioned. There is no record of the loss of stucco at most of the thirty churches mentioned above. At Willoughby Waterleys there is a rare case of exterior stucco removal being specified in the faculty for the 1874–75 restoration (NRO ML 1116, 708).

The removal of pre-Victorian brickwork

‘We abhor brick as a mean material’ wrote the *Ecclesiologist* (3 (1844), p.87). By 1850 brick was being used for the fabric of the Society’s model church of All Saints, Margaret Street, London, but as far as the average parish church was concerned until the end of the century, restoration schemes aimed to remove what was regarded as an unseemly material. It had been used for fabric repairs, window surrounds, arches and floors. Typical work of this kind does survive occasionally, for example, at Keyham (linings to the windows), Leicester, St Nicholas (patching in the south aisle, probably 1829–30), Worthington (east end), and Sutton Cheney (the awkward top of the tower). Brick had often been used to block tower arches (a rare survival is at Horninghold). Much cheap, insensitive brickwork has gone and all that is known about most of it comes from scattered documentary references.

Postscript

Since writing the above I have visited Overseal church (now in Derbyshire, but when built in 1840–41 in Leicestershire). This is a remarkably early instance of the exposure of bare stone internally, in this case, large blocks of red sandstone, quarried locally at Grange Farm, Netherseal. It is carefully cut and narrow-jointed. The church is a chapel of ease to Netherseal where the rector and lord of the manor was Sir Nigel Gresley, who came to Netherseal in 1830 from Oxford, aged 25. The architect was Thomas Johnson of Lichfield (1794–1865) who was no doubt working very closely with Sir Nigel. Architecturally the church is typical of the ‘lancet churches’ of the 1830s, but the wall treatment, stained glass by William Wailes and, most remarkably, a stone altar look forward. It is believed that Gresley had High Church connections but how these influenced his thinking is not established. What is clear, however, is that Overseal has one of the earliest Victorian examples of a bare stone church interior. I am grateful to the Rev. William Bates for details about the church.

Abbreviations

<i>AASRP</i>	<i>Associated Architectural Societies’ Reports and Papers</i>
ICBS	Incorporated Church Building Society
NRO	Northamptonshire Record Office