

Colour in Dore Abbey

Colour in the Abbey now is discreet. There are lovely seasonal flowers, clerical vestments and the attractive tapestry kneelers and pew cushions (worked in 1997), all seemingly enhanced by the quiet grey stonework. The beautiful altar candles provide a superb ambience for various Church Services. This is how we envisage the way our Medieval Churches and glorious Cathedrals should look....but it is not the way they actually did look in former times and to previous generations of worshippers and visitors.

Recently English Heritage has completed the ambitious project of recreating the interior of the Great Tower of Dover Castle. The rooms now appear as they would have done in preparation for the visit of the Count of Flanders to King Henry II in 1184 - photographs are on their website. This 83 feet (25.3m) high, square tower with walls 21 feet (6.5m) thick in places, was designed by Maurice the Engineer as a powerfully visible symbol of the King's authority and prestige. Modern visitors can touch the furniture, see the kitchens, walk around the hall and guestroom, enjoy live fires (unusual for many children) and even take part in re-enactments that can include the 'King' himself. This is not the first time re-decoration has been carried out but usually it has been on a small scale. Stately homes have their own faded grandeur but at Erddig (the National Trust property near Wrexham) visitors can see the kitchens as they would have looked in the 19th century and you can be welcomed by actors portraying the servants.

The semi-fortified Tudor manor of Llancaiach Fawr (on the B4254 road between Nelson and Gelligaer, about 2 ½ miles from the A470) has been restored with replica furniture to show its appearance in 1645 and the 'servants' will speak to you as if you are visiting when the owner Colonel Pritchard was away raising forces for the Royalist cause! The Elizabethan town house of Plas Mawr, in Conwy, built 1576-1585 by Robert Wynn, has been painstakingly restored by CADW to show elaborately decorated painted plaster ceilings and walls and is fully furnished. Most of these sites have the recreated period gardens which can also be seen at Kenilworth Castle, Hampton Court and, nearer to us, at Tretower Court. Raglan Castle may have its garden setting restored. For lovers of Shakespeare attending a performance (as I recently did of *Henry VIII*) at the Globe Theatre, reconstructed near to the original site in London, is a dream-come-true! There are other examples but these mark a new trend towards redecoration on a larger scale with the aim of allowing the visitor to step-back-in-time and 'experience' life in the past.

By accepting our historical structures as a palette of greys, it can come as a shock when the colour is re-introduced. Visiting the Church of Llangattock Lingoed (near Abergavenny) is an experience as the stonework has recently been limewashed and glows an unexpected white. A short distance away is White Castle and here too there were once limewashed walls, traces of which can be seen on the surviving stone. We are used to seeing historical buildings as the Victorians considered authentic, forgetting that often the painter was paid more than the sculptor in the Medieval period. Forgetting too that limewashing helped to protect stonework, helped to keep a structure dry and ensured that it was clearly visible in the landscape, an important prestige point for a Castle, Cathedral or a Church.

However, once seen, limewashing can be readily accepted. What is less easy

to accept are the colours of interiors as, to eyes unused to these, they can seem garishly bright, though over time paint would have faded. As a result Medieval wall paintings in Churches were often re-painted and layers of pictures can occasionally be detected. Kempley Church (near Much Marcle) has retained superb paintings; see also Byford Church (Herefordshire). Walls, and pillars, could also be given a geometrical treatment as in the great Norman (or Romanesque) Durham Cathedral, built 1093-c.1133, where geometrical designs were sculpted into the pillar stonework before being painted. Dore Abbey has surviving paintwork showing red lines simulating stones, and chevrons on the shafts. It also has a wealth of beautifully sculpted capitals on the pillars, none of which is exactly alike. Most are stylised foliage, for the Cistercians were superb gardeners, and all were once painted and gilded.

In addition, Dore had coloured tiles. Behind the present site of the pulpit the pillar capital has been cut showing the position of at least one chantry chapel. Dore had many of these and each was adorned with tiles showing the coats-of-arms pertaining to the person commemorated. Some of these tiles were collected by Roland Paul and resited in the chancel, which, incidentally, helped to preserve them as there they are not regularly walked upon. Gerald Sitsilt, buried in the Abbey in the 13th century, had his coat-of-arms on his tomb; his son was a monk at Dore and Gerald's descendant was Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth I's great minister and cousin of Blanche Parry. The two knights' effigies still in the Abbey, were originally painted with their arms clearly displayed on their shields. In the Visitation of South Wales and Herefordshire made in 1531, just before the Dissolution of the Monasteries, Dore is recorded as having stained glass in the windows. Some of this was rare Cistercian grisaille, which were beautifully designed foliate patterns. Dore still has 'the best collection of mid 14th Century Cistercian glass in Britain' (Joe Hillaby, page 203, in *A Definitive History of Dore Abbey*, edited Ron Shoesmith & Ruth E. Richardson). However, the 1531 Visitation also describes thirty devices, or heraldic badges of benefactors set in the windows. Raglan Castle's glorious hall window was similarly adorned.

The Cistercians were originally an austere order with the General Chapter decreeing an absence of ornate colour. St Bernard of Clairvaux wrote against excessive richness in materials or decoration. Cistercian manuscript were superbly designed, displaying inventiveness and even humour, but they were not illuminated as gold leaf was considered frivolous. However, colour was used in the Churches under their control, such as at Bacton Church, and as time passed more colour came to be used in the Abbey too. The wonderfully carved bosses were set high in the chancel roof and they were painted, indeed they had to be to be clearly seen from below. When Thomas Blashill discovered part of the rood screen in the 19th century, it still retained bright polychromy and gilding.

In the reign of Edward VI, 1547-1553, injunctions required the removal of images, paintings and anything pertaining to 'idolatry' from Churches. Most Churches removed 'offending' objects and simply limewashed their walls, which actually preserved paintings underneath. Even some parts of rood screens were saved as at Weobley Church, and most notably at St. Margarets due here to being difficult of access. In the 1630s Lord Scudamore decided to renovate Dore Abbey as a Laudian Church (see Dore Article 34). The walls were once more painted but this time with a few pictures, and many more texts which described the activities in the relevant part of the Church. Reading

these can show where the Sunday School was held, where the font was sited, and the skeleton leaning on his shovel marks the way to the cemetery. Lord Scudamore also

commissioned a carved oak screen surmounted by the coats-of-arms of himself, King Charles I and William Laud Archbishop of Canterbury. The sovereign's arms had to be displayed by law. Later, in 1701-1710, the Musicians' Gallery was installed, necessitating some texts being re-written at a higher level.

When the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain visited Dore Abbey in September 2010 the members used binoculars to view this screen and asked if it had been painted. As a result Philip Wilcocks, our Churchwarden, examined it, noticing blue paint, and as he moved his torch I caught the gleam of gilding! We then examined the Gallery and again found gilding. So, not only was the austere Medieval Abbey coloured, so too was the Laudian Church. This appears to be a new, though not unexpected, discovery about Laudian Churches. Colour gives us a completely new prism through which to view our wonderful historical buildings.

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