

13 St Austin's Lane, Harwich, Essex

Painted Decoration

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1: INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

This report has been carried out as part of the Harwich Architectural Survey, a Lottery Funded project. It has been hit by an unforeseen event, the Covid19 Crisis of 2020. Fortunately, the surveying for this building was carried out long before any restrictions. Following the first architectural visit with Brenda and Elphin Watkin, Richard Oxborrow and team members, it was apparent that substantial fragments of early painted decoration survived on the ground floor. A second visit was carried out to take paint samples for analysis. We are extremely grateful to the owner for granting access and agreeing the sampling.

The purpose of the sampling was two-fold:

- 1) to identify the pigments and materials
- 2) to sequence the schemes if possible, enhancing the buildings report already provided by Brenda and Elphin Watkin

This type of scheme falls into a broad category which I have labeled plain schemes for ease of reference. Paint analysis is essential for this type of scheme. Not only does it identify the pigments employed, it almost invariably reveals a more complex sequence of schemes than is immediately visible. In terms of typology, it is associated with the parlour chamber scheme in 14 St Austin St and Christopher Jones House on Kings Head St. These form an important group of a particular type of scheme that is typically neglected and often destroyed during building work.

Paint samples were taken by Andrea Kirkham and sent to Catherine Hassall for analysis.

2: SUMMARY DESCRIPTION AND RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

The samples were taken from three ground floor spaces consisting of a passage that divides the dining (east bay) and living rooms (west bay). All the surviving paint is in the ground floor rooms. Nothing is visible on the first floor, if it ever existed. While not possible to date precisely, schemes such as these in a domestic context typically date from the late C16th onwards. Closer dating is suggested by the moulded corbel bracket against the central storey post which has a possible early C17th date.

There are problems associated with past paint stripping. Although some areas show rich sequences of paint, others have been more thoroughly stripped. Nevertheless, there is enough to hint at changing 'taste' and 'fashion' over a long period, with the earliest coherent scheme in occurring in the early C17th. The material is only available from the ceiling, rail and the inserted chimney lintel. There is no information from the studs.

The number of schemes identified on the corbel does not necessarily correlate with other areas. It may have been painted more often, or the paint survives better because it is harder to strip.

List of Samples

Sample No	Location & Description
D1	Corbel, dark red on black on red
D2	Corbel, dark red on black on red
D3	Corbel, white on ?red
D4	Corbel, dark red, on black on red
D5	Mid rail, black on red
D6	Mid rail, black on red
D7	Corbel side, white on dark red
D8	Corbel side, white on dark red
D9	Mid rail, rear end by window
D10	Ceiling beam, black, then white?
D11	Ceiling beam, looks like brown on top of dark red?
D12	Ceiling beam, red ochre or reddish brown? on black
D13	Ceiling beam, blue, on reddish brown on black
D14	Ceiling beam, yellow/brown? on black, under blue
D15	Ceiling beam, blue on black
D16	Chimney lintel, green
D17	Chimney lintel, black
D18	Chimney lintel, possibly white ground for the green?
D19	Chimney lintel, brown on black
D20	Chimney lintel, brown on black
D21	Dining room, ceiling beam, red lead, possibly traces of dark red
D22	Dining room, ceiling beam, grey on dark red, on red lead
D23	Dining room, ceiling beam, grey on dark red, on red lead

3: SELECTED DISCUSSION OF THE SCHEMES

Table 1 is an attempt to sequence the schemes schematically. It will be noted that not all the schemes from the lintel and the dining room ceiling beam are included – only those that can be linked to colours found elsewhere.

3.1: Red Lead: Earliest paint scheme, early C17th(?)

The earliest paint scheme is bright orange-red lead on the ceiling timbers and on the corbel. The corbel seems to be clean wood, where as the rail and ceiling beam are dirty with a dark brown varnish. It confirms that the corbel is a new addition. The next red, of red ochre is

more likely to be an independent scheme rather than an upper layer for the red lead. Either is possible but the red lead appears to be a coherent layer and the later scraping explains why little of the red ochre survives.

Red lead used to paint timbers (and usually seen with white infill panels) is found in middling houses in the late C16th and early C17th. The reason for placing it in the early C17th is associated with alterations highlighted by Brenda and Elphin Watkin. The moulded corbel is thought to be an early C17th installation and it seems to have been new as the red is applied to clean wood.

3.2: Black (Mid C17th?)

Black occurs in many Essex houses, with numerous examples recorded in Maldon and district. Dating in and around Maldon for the black schemes is typically early to mid C17th and this seems a likely date range here. A recent example identified in Ipswich appears to be mid-late C17th.

All that survives in St Austin's Lane are scraps of black but the fact they are occurring on the corbel and the ceiling beam of the western bay (now living room) before the current partition suggests that black was probably a theme in this room. Black was not picked up in the samples from the rail but this might be an accident of sampling (to be confirmed).

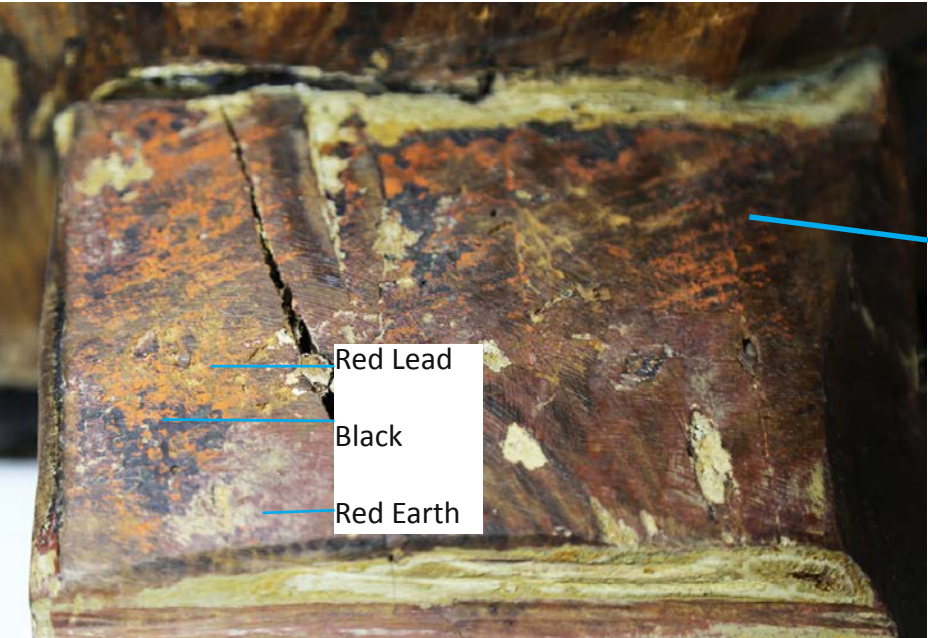
More problematic is the black on the chimney lintel. The chimney lintel is reused and the black identified on the lintel does not directly cross reference with the blacks elsewhere. There are hints of shapes and paint edges and it is tempting to speculate that the black (and the green?) are part of some other decorative scheme, unrelated to its current location.

3.3: Dull yellow/brown layer (late C17th?)

Much more convincing is the dull yellow/brown layer found on the corbel, the ceiling beam (living room) and on the chimney lintel. The lintel must have been in place for this scheme, which is likely to be late C17th. Brown (also with an earlier sequence of black layers) has been identified recently in a merchant's house in Maldon.

3.4: Blue Scheme(s) (c.1830?)

Remains of blue are visible on the ceiling beam in the living room. It is likely that this blue is associated with the creation of the room in its current configuration. The blue component of the paint is Prussian blue invented in the early C18th. It is suggested by Catherine Hassall that as the pigments are still hand ground they are unlikely to be later than the early C19th. A possible interpretation is that this blue scheme is associated with the re-fronting of the building c.1830.

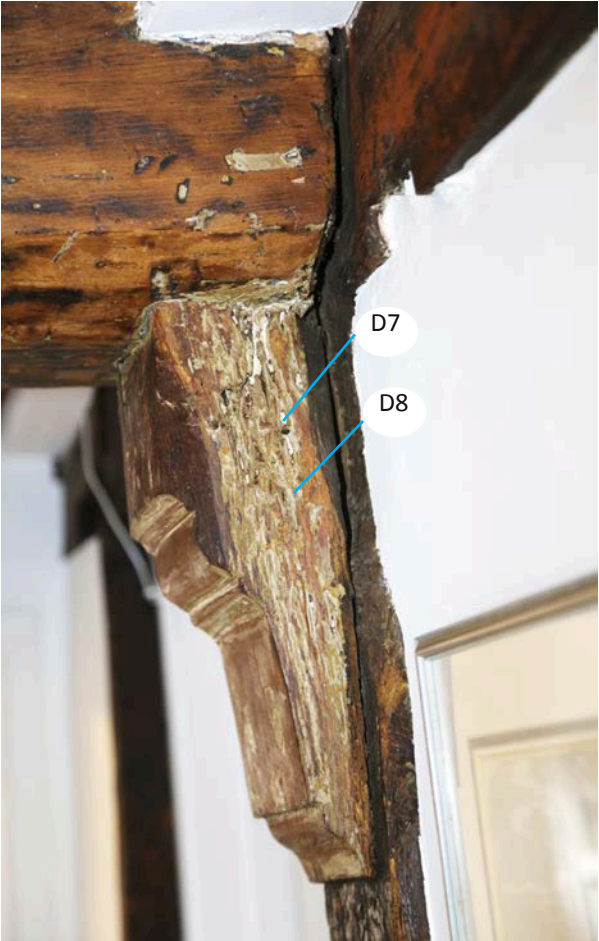
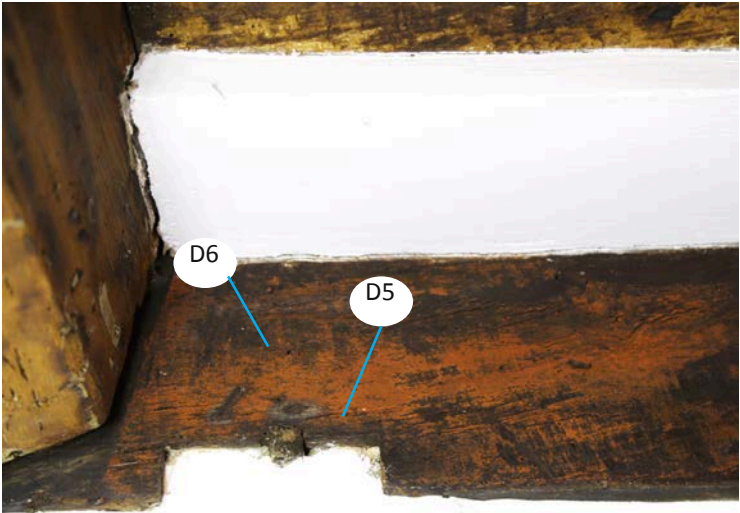
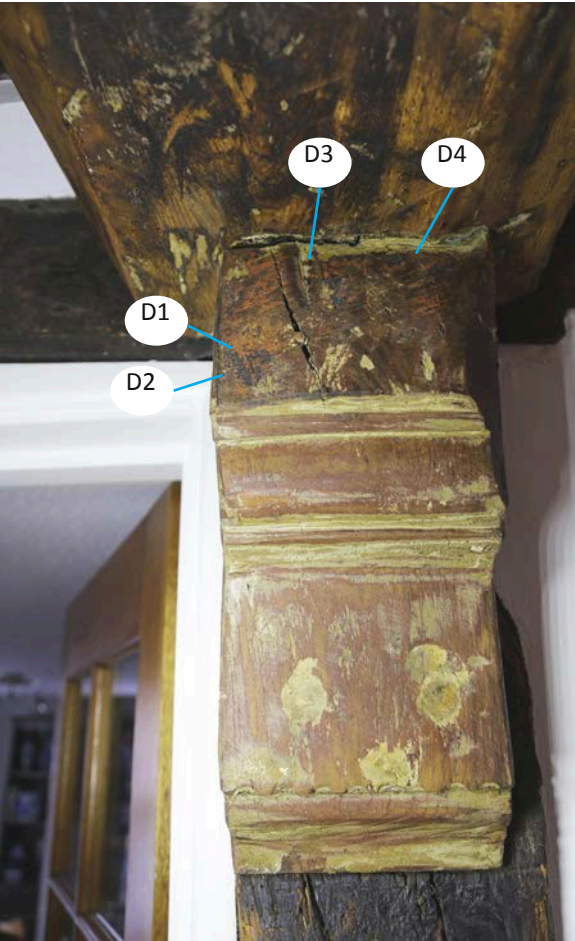


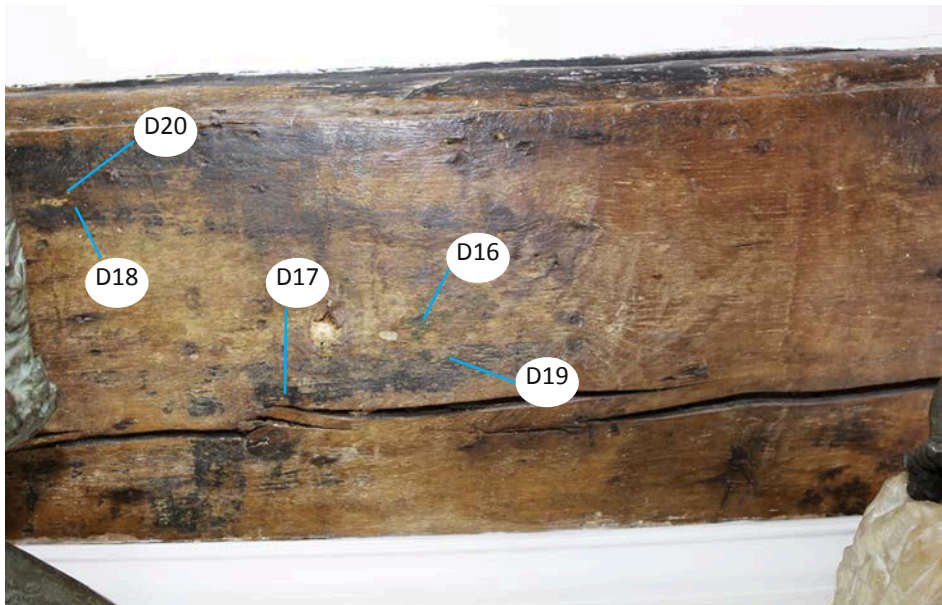


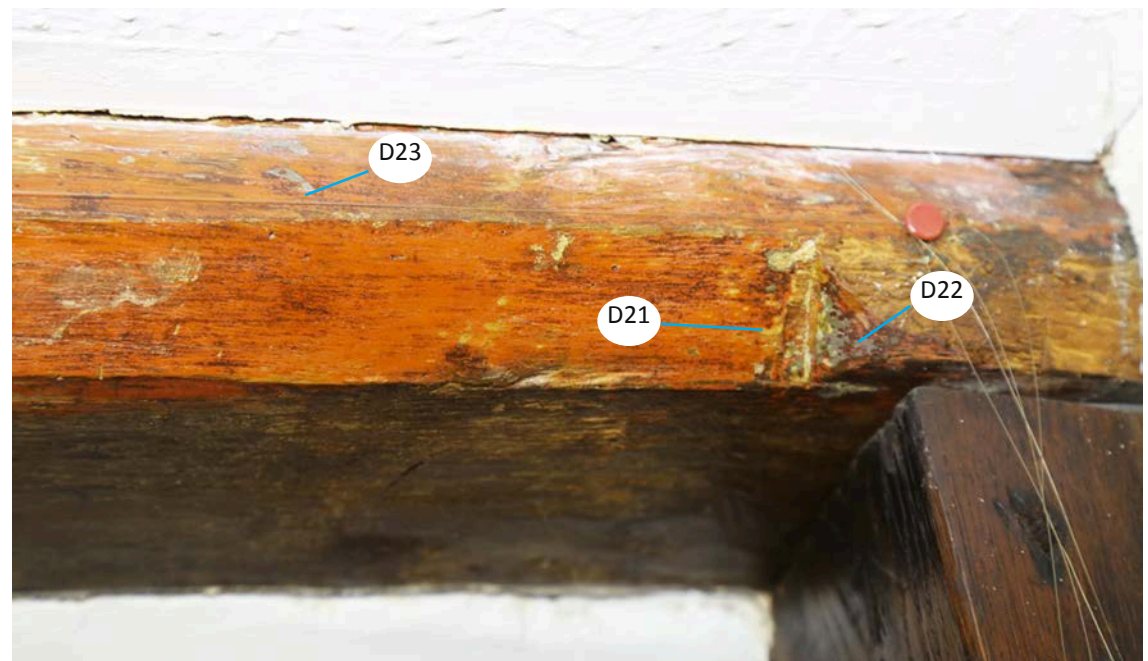


Red (red lead)









13, ST AUSTIN'S LANE,
Harwich, Essex

Twenty three paint samples taken by Andrea Kirkham as marked on photographs in her report

D1-4 corbel – red on black on red
D5-6 mid rail – black on red
D7-8 corbel side – white on dark red
D9 mid rail, rear end by window
D10-15 ceiling beam
D16-20 chimney lintel
D21-23 dining room ceiling beam

Examination procedure

The samples were examined under low magnification and then the pieces were mounted in cold-setting polyester resin to be cut and polished as cross-sections. Material from the coloured layers was dispersed on glass slides and the pigments identified using a polarising light microscope.

CORBEL, RAIL AND BEAM

Earliest layers

The wood appears originally to have been unpainted.

In samples from the corbel, the red lead, which is the first paint, is sitting on bare wood that appears to be clean [Sample 1, p.5], but in samples from the rail and the ceiling beam, the red lead is over dirt and a dark brown varnish [Sample 13, p.7].

Red first scheme

A layer of red lead was found in Samples 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 8 from the corbel, and in Samples 5, 6 and 9 from the rail. The red contains lumps of lead white, which is what one would expect in pigment made before the introduction of industrial furnaces.

On top of the red lead in Samples 2, 4, 7 and 8 the cross-sections show a layer of pure red iron oxide of good quality, i.e. with small and regular particle size, an even colour and few inclusions [Sample 2, p.5]. It was not found in samples taken from the rail, but here the layers appear to have been more thoroughly scraped off, and it may simply have been lost.

It is not possible to tell if the red iron oxide layer is a second red scheme, or a top coat for the red lead.

Later layers on the Corbel and Ceiling Beam

[No later layers were found in samples from the Rail]

- 2 Black based on carbon black of plant origin followed the earlier red[s]. It was found in Samples 2, 4, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15.

The black may have coincided with an episode of repairs or re-plastering because in Sample 4 [p.5] we can see the black followed by a layer of plaster followed by a second coat of black.

- 3 A dull yellow/brown layer based on iron oxide. In some fragments it appears to have a darker, more brownish top coat, but this may just be staining. It was found in Samples 3 and 4 from the corbel, and in samples 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 from the ceiling beam. In Sample 14, there is a layer of limewash between the black and this dull yellow, but in all the other the yellow is sitting directly on the black.

- 4 Dark red. A paint based on pure red iron oxide was only found only on the corbel, in Samples 2, 3, 4 and 8.

- 5 White house paint. Found only in Samples 2 and 3 from the corbel

- 6 Early paint layers must have been partly cleaned off at this point, because the sixth paint scheme in some fragments can be seen sitting on the scraped remains of the red lead [see Sample 7, p.6].

A white undercoat was applied, followed by a buff top coat and then a light brown varnish. This does not look like a graining scheme, but was probably intended to look like a 'wood colour'.

The varnished buff scheme was found in Samples 3, 7 and 8 from the Corbel, and in Samples 13 and 15 from the Ceiling Beam.

- 7 Yellow paint based on ochre and a small amount of lead white was found in Samples 3 and 7 from the Corbel.

- 8-10 Three lots of off-white paint based on lead white were found over the yellow in Sample 7 from the Corbel. The ceiling beam may not have been painted during this period.

- 11-12 Two lots of blue over grey undercoats. The blue in both of these schemes was a mixture of Prussian blue and lead white. These were found in Samples 13 and 15 from the Ceiling Beam [see p.7].

LINTEL

Earliest layers

The earliest layers found in the samples were white and off-white limewashes [or distempers].

Later layers

The limewashes were followed by a varnish layer and then a black scheme [Sample 19, p.9]. In some fragments, such as Sample 17 [p.9], there is a very thin white limewash layer under the black.

The black layer is thinner than the layer seen on beam, and the particle size of the carbon black pigment is much smaller, but this may just be due to the way it was brushed on.

On top of the black in Samples 19 and 20 is the dull yellow/brown used throughout the room. Used on the corbel in Samples 3 & 4, and in all samples from the beam apart from Sample 10.

It is not clear if the green in Sample 16 [p.8] pre-dates or post-dates the yellow/brown. The green in Sample 16 is over at least three lots of limewash [or distemper]. The pigment is verditer, and as it was mixed with chalk it was probably a type of distemper.

A coat of clear varnish has been applied at some point. It was found in all samples, but can be seen most clearly in Sample 19 [p.9].

DINING ROOM BEAM

Earliest layers

A coat of red lead, which looks the same as the red lead used in the Living Room was found in all three samples. In Sample 23 [p.11] the cross-section shows it sitting on clean wood, but in Sample 21 [p.10] it is over a thin coat of fine white plaster or white limewash.

Later layers

A coat of dark red/brown paint was applied over the red lead. It was laid on in two layers with an umber undercoat and a red/brown iron oxide top coat. The layers can be most clearly seen in Sample 22 [p.11].

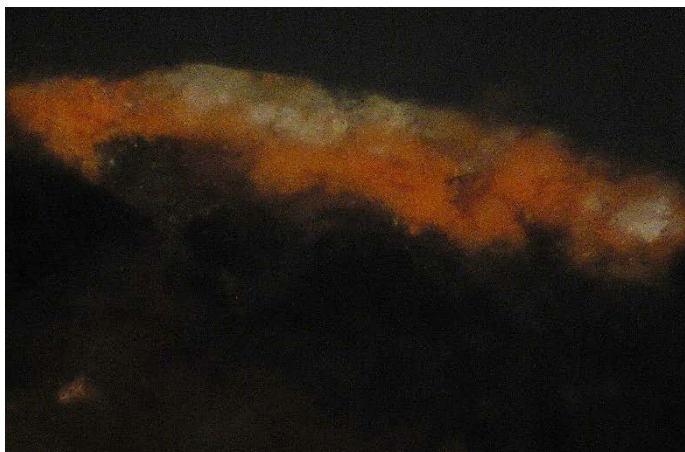
In Samples 22 and 23, the red/brown was followed by a light grey oil paint mixed from lead white and carbon black. The pigments are hand-ground, so this is no later than the early nineteenth century.

Two coats of clear varnish have been applied at some point to the beam.

SAMPLE 1

Corbel

The first layer on the wood is red lead.

**SAMPLE 2**

Corbel

buff-coloured oil
paint based on lead white

two lots of red iron
oxide. Above and
below the black

no dirt visible between the
red lead and the first red
iron oxide

**SAMPLE 4**

Corbel

red iron oxide
yellow/brown iron oxide

The black is above and below
a layer of plaster



red iron oxide
over red lead

SAMPLE 7

Corbel side

Fragment (i)

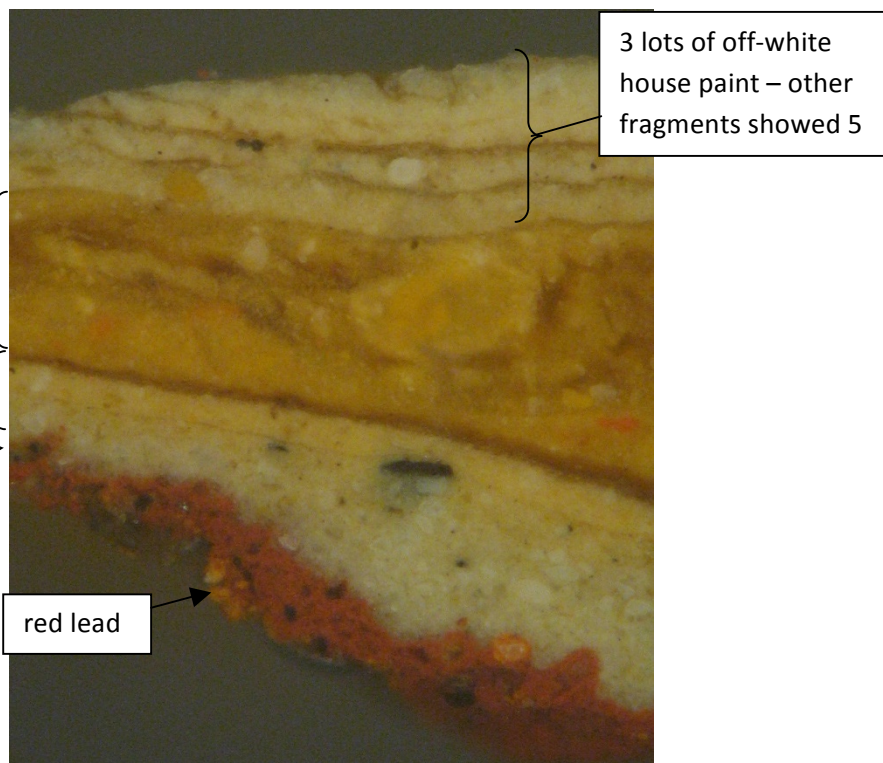
Paint layers only

yellow paint contains some
lead white as well as ochre
so could be oil paint.

buff paint with varnish

layers missing [see sample 4]

red iron oxide

Fragment (ii)

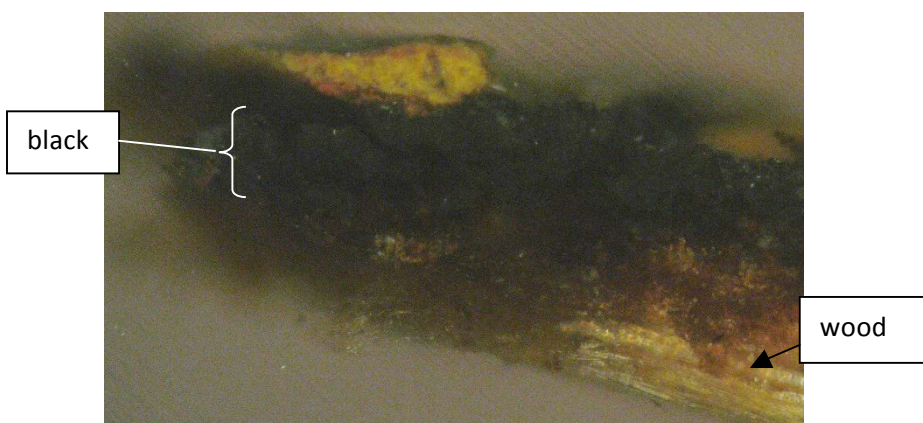
wood and first layers

layers must have been scraped off
when the varnished buff was
applied.

**SAMPLE 11**

Ceiling beam

yellow/brown over red,
over black over varnish

Detail of the yellow/brown

It may have had a darker
top coat



Sample 12 was the same

SAMPLE 13

Ceiling beam – blue

Fragment (i)

The varnish laid over the buff scheme appears to have soaked down between earlier layers

black



varnished buff

yellow/brown

Fragment (ii)

showing two lot of blue over grey

light brown varnish has worked its way down



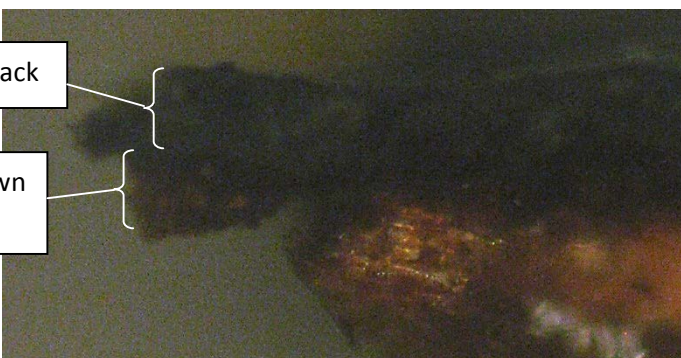
varnished buff

Fragment (iii)

with wood and black layer

black

very dark brown varnish



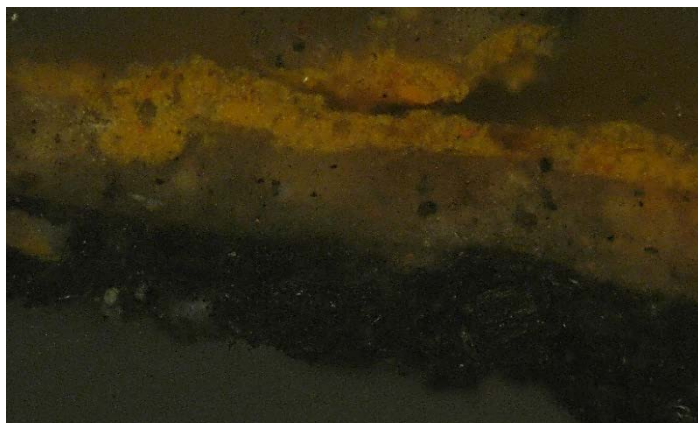
Left end of section, lit from behind to show the varnish



SAMPLE 14

Ceiling beam

A layer of limewash or distemper between the black and the yellow/brown

**SAMPLE 16**

Chimney lintel – green

layers of white distemper, or limewash, with green on the top

Detail of the green

The layer is chalk and verditer



SAMPLE 17

Chimney lintel

No green visible over the black.
White limewash under the black

**SAMPLE 18**

Chimney lintel

Two lots of limewash

**SAMPLE 19**

Chimney lintel – brown on black

yellow/brown →

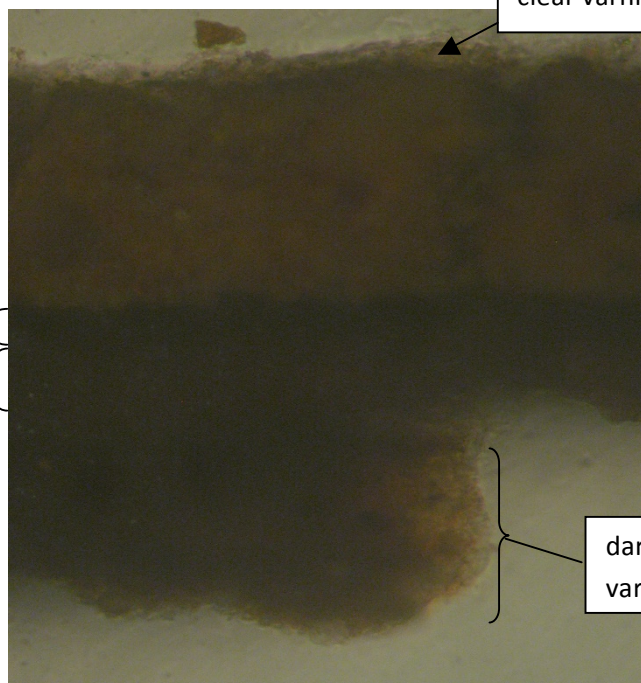


Right end of section, lit from
behind to show varnish layer
under the black and the varnish
layer over the yellow/brown.

clear varnish

black —

?limewash as in Sample 17 —

 dark brown
varnish


SAMPLE 20

Chimney lintel – brown on black

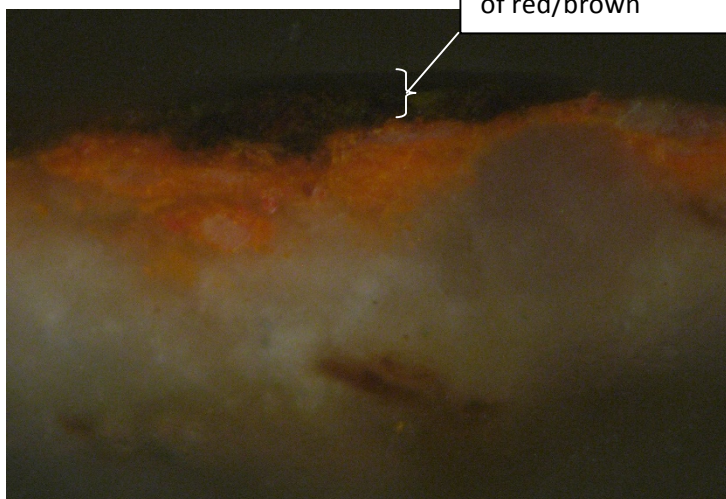
yellow/brown →
black →
earlier limewashes {

**SAMPLE 21**

Dining Room ceiling beam

Red lead over plaster or
limewash

varnish over remains
of red/brown



SAMPLE 22

Dining Room ceiling beam.

Fragment (i)

red/brown
over dark
brown
undercoat

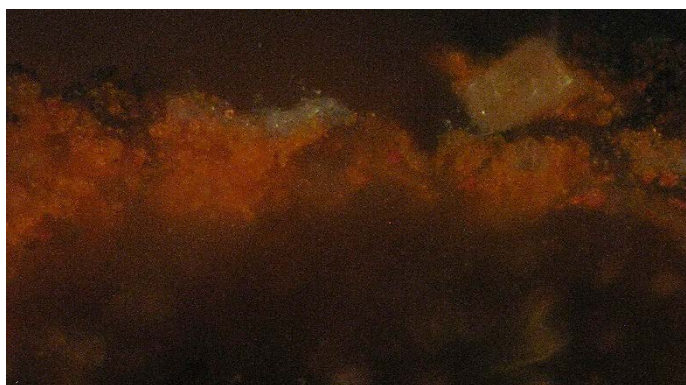
Detail of the left end of the section

2 lots of clear varnish {

Fragment (ii)

wood & first layer



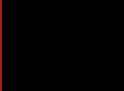


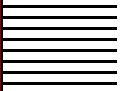


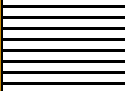
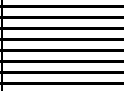
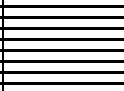
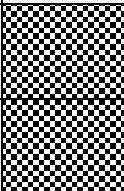
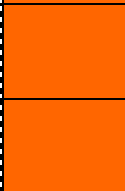
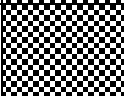

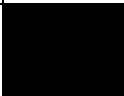
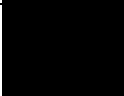




the red lead sitting on clean wood

**SAMPLE 23**

Dining Room ceiling beam



Table 1: Sequencing the Paint Schemes

Paint Layer		1	1.2	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	19	10	11	12
Corbel	Bare wood													
Rail														
Beam (now in passage)														
Living ceiling beam									Poss unptd	Poss unptd	Poss unptd	Poss unptd	Prussian blue	Prussian blue
Fireplace lintel				Black ?same ?										
Dining ceiling beam	(Nb i)													

Notes

- (Nb i): 3 samples showed cleaned wood under the red lead; I was on plaster on clean wood
- Missing layers, probably stripped before scheme 6 on the corbel
- Prussian blue, not before the early C18th and the context here is probably no later than the early C19th. May be contemporary with the brick front