

Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> January saw the first of the lectures the Trust has organised as part of the 2014 Centenary celebrations for Rochester Old Bridge.



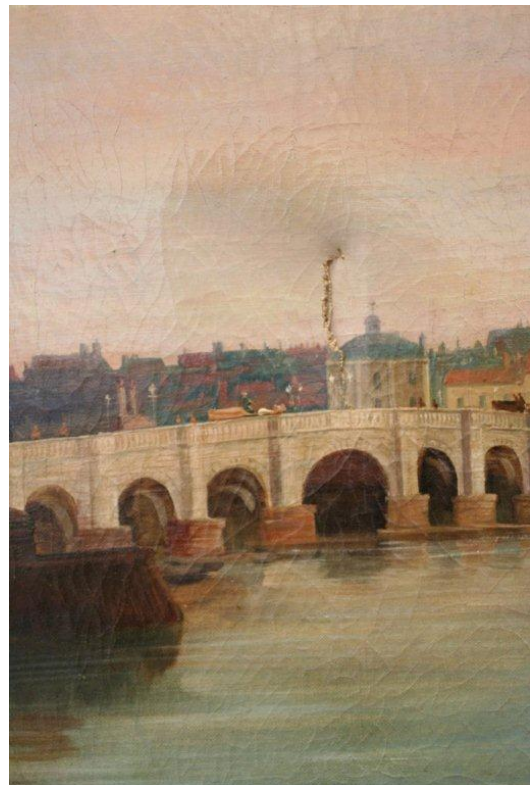
Sarah Cove, the Trust's conservator of oil paintings, gave a lecture titled "Restoring the Bridge" in which she described how the varied collection of paintings has been cleaned, repaired and preserved for the future. Sarah is an accredited freelance conservator who trained at the Courtauld Institute and worked for the V&A and National Portrait Gallery before setting up her own studio.

Sarah began by telling the capacity audience, assembled in the medieval bridge chapel, about her first commission for the Trust in 2006. A large 19<sup>th</sup> century oil painting had suffered a tear when a step ladder had fallen onto the canvas.

When she examined the painting, Sarah found that the canvas was in a generally poor state and there were other repairs needed to the paint as a result of water damage before the painting came into the Trust's collection.

One of the first steps in the repair process was to replace the lining of the painting. Sarah explained that the lining is a second layer of canvas, or other suitable fabric such as sailcloth, which was traditionally glued to the reverse of a painted canvas to give support to a painting. The Trust's damaged painting needed re-lining to support the main canvas and prevent any further damage to the paint.

Sarah showed photographs to illustrate the process of using a scalpel to carefully remove the old glue which fixed the original lining to the reverse. A new lining was then attached using a technique called vacuum lining which had been developed at the Courtauld Institute about 30 years ago. Using apparatus made of such simple tools as some garden hose, two sink plungers, plastic sheeting and a vacuum pump, a new lining was attached to the painting without the use of glue.



Sarah went on to explain the process of cleaning oil paintings, telling the audience that some old paint and varnish can be soluble in saliva while in other cases very strong chemical solvents are needed. She contrasted the care which is used by reputable modern conservators with the cleaning techniques of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, when lime paste and a pumice stone were often used to remove dirt, often with dire consequences for the original paint below.

By reference to the conservation of another painting in the collection, a late 17<sup>th</sup> century depiction of the medieval Rochester Bridge, Sarah described the impact of the composition of some early paints. At that time, a cobalt blue pigment known as smalt was often used for areas of sky and water. Although this would have begun as a bright, ultra-marine pigment, after several centuries, the colour fades to a muddy grey. Unfortunately this discolouration encouraged some 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century restorers to repaint areas of sky in particular with modern paints and this had been the case with the Trust's painting.



Next the special challenges of restoring paintings on wooden boards were discussed. Sarah showed the work she had done on a very unusual 16<sup>th</sup> century painting on an oak panel depicting Nebuchadnezzar. The panel had, at some time in the past, been fixed into an inappropriate wooden cradle and frame which had prevented the panel from expanding and contracting. As a result some cracks had formed in the panel and caused damage to the paint.



To start the restoration, the panel had been placed in a climate controlled environment and allowed to flatten naturally. The painting was then carefully cleaned. Sarah described a problem which had arisen with the old black paint on this painting. Compared to fast drying lead-white pigment, black paint took a very long time to dry properly and so the pigment makers would include a drying additive in the paint. Unfortunately, over the centuries, the additive tends to crystallise out of the paint until it takes on the appearance of sugar granules on the surface of a picture. When abrasive cleaning was done in the past, these crystals would be rubbed away, leaving tiny white holes in the paint. Sarah explained that she and her assistants had had to spend hundreds of hours laboriously retouching the tiny paint losses.

After the lecture, the audience was invited by the Trust's chief executive, Sue Threader, to explore the building and examine both the paintings which had been described and other works in oil and watercolour in the Trust's collection. This was a fascinating evening and a great start to the programme of centenary lectures.

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