

ABSTRACT

SIR JOHN CASS DEPARTMENT OF
DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY

**W G Rogers and the Restoration of
the Great House Carvings:
Did he Help or Hinder their Survival?**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation poses the question: Did W G Rogers, the Victorian restorer, help or hinder the survival of the great house carvings, particularly those of Grinling Gibbons, into the twenty-first century? The question was set in response to two trains of thought; earlier writers such as Charles Latham and H Avray Tipping who believed his work was invaluable in saving many carvings from extinction and recent experts in the field of wood-carving such as David Esterly the author of *Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving*, and David Luard, Conservator of the Grinling Gibbons' at Hampton Court and Windsor Castle, who feel that his work was 'blighted'.

By comparing the methods and materials used by Rogers with methods used firstly by his contemporaries, and then by conservators of the early and late twentieth century, and finally by examining the condition of the carvings today through recent condition reports; the conclusion is reached that, on the whole, he did save many carvings from extinction. However, this answer can only be made on the grounds that modern ethics and principles cannot be applied to nineteenth century standards, and also that much of Rogers' good work was through raising the public profile of the carvings, rather than through actual hands-on restoration.

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INTRODUCTION



This dissertation is about William Gibbs Rogers (1792-1875) who, along with Edward Wyatt was one of the leading figures in the nineteenth century decorative woodcarving revival. He was also, however, a restorer and preserver of woodcarvings, and it is this side of his work that will be examined. It had been the original intention that the dissertation title would be *W G Rogers and the Grinling Gibbons Carvings* and then to proceed by answering the question: *Did W G Rogers help or hinder their survival?*

Fig 1: W G Rogers 1792-1875
(Reproduced with the kind permission of Joyce Stephenson)

This question has been posed in response to two schools of thought; those who believed that his work undoubtedly saved many carvings from extinction, such as H Avray Tipping¹ and Charles Latham²; and those who now feel that his intervention caused irreparable damage to the carvings, for example David Esterly³ and David Luard⁴.

As research progressed, what also became evident is that even Rogers, the acclaimed expert of his time on Grinling Gibbons, was often inaccurate in his attribution. The question will still be answered but, because of this, will no longer be within the confines of the name of Grinling Gibbons.

¹ Tipping, Avray, *Grinling Gibbons and the Woodwork of his Age: 1648-1720* (London: Country Life Library of Architectural Monographs, Hudson & Kearns Ltd, 1914)

² Latham, Charles, *In English Homes: The Internal Character, furniture and Adornments of some of the Most Notable Houses of England, Historically depicted from Photographs taken by Charles Latham* (London: Country Life, 1904)

³ Esterly, David, *Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum Publication, 1998)

⁴ David Luard of Luard Conservation

The material has been approached and presented from a conservation perspective, beginning with the condition of the carvings and then moving on to their treatment. Rogers' role as a collector and surveyor of Grinling Gibbons carvings has also been examined, because this is felt to be an integral part of his work as a restorer.

During research it became evident that biographical material on Rogers was scarce and much of what does exist comes from articles written in journals of his day such as The Art Journal and Art Union. In these, deferential descriptions of his work such as 'exquisite specimens restored all but miraculously by Mr W G Rogers'¹ regularly appeared. Added to this, the profuseness of the language used: 'He found his darling chisellings in all stages of decay'² leaves it open to speculation that there were few journalistic codes of practice at the time. None of these articles made known their authors, therefore it must be suspected that at least some were *promotional puffs*. Mr Rogers would undoubtedly have been a great advocate of the World Wide Web today. He exploited the new media of journals for the masses to its full; for example, in 1856 placing an advertisement in The Art Journal announcing that the carvings he had restored at Belton House would be on display at Messrs Boore and Roe, 54 The Strand.³

Probably a more reliable source of material comes in the form of papers or reports that Rogers presented, such as the talk he gave to The Royal Institute of British Architects in 1866⁴. But, even here, it should be remembered that it was in his interest to promote his methods of working in the best possible light. Indeed, he was a member of the Commission appointed by the Committee of the Council for Education to look into the causes and treatment of decay in wood-carving.

Research, because of the quantity of material surrounding it, has also gravitated towards the archives of one house in particular, Belton in Lincolnshire. Built by the Brownlow family between 1684 and 1688, Belton House remained in their ownership until it was passed to the National Trust in 1984. For many years it was thought (through family tradition) to have been built by Sir Christopher Wren, but Wren rarely designed country houses and it is now thought much more likely to have been designed by William Winde, built by William Stanton and based

¹ *Anonymous, Grinling Gibbons' Carvings - Restored by W G Rogers, Cutting from W G Rogers' scrapbook (Possibly from The Art Journal, 1856?)*

² *Anonymous, The Carvings of Gibbons and their Preservation, The Atheneum, 31 May 1856, p. 688*

³ *Anonymous, Notice in The Art Journal, II, 1856 (London: George Virtue) p.194*

⁴ *Rogers, W G, Remarks upon Grinling Gibbons, as made to the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and A J B Beresford-Hope, Esq., M.P., in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, in November, 1863, Proceedings of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Session 1866-67, pp. 179-186.*

on Clarendon House in Piccadilly. This house is first and foremost endowed with some important wood-carvings, a few of which are possibly attributable to Grinling Gibbons and illustrates well the unfolding story of fads, fashions and changes in fortune. But most importantly it was here that Rogers carried out his best-documented restoration project.

W G Rogers was a larger-than-life character, a great orator and an influential figure who worked not only for many of the British nobility but also the royal family, and in a period when class represented taste he was a difficult person to criticise. He appears to have basked in his own glory and his house at 13 Church Street, Soho became a favourite rendezvous for patrons and lovers of art, as well as for artists. References to him in books written shortly after his death, for example Latham¹ and Avray Tipping², undoubtedly took their material from the same few sources mentioned above and still appear to be caught up in his infectious enthusiasm. For these reasons it is easy to become swept along and it is the aim of this dissertation to look again at Rogers, working at the forefront of Victorian restoration, and try to redress the balance by answering the question: Did he help or hinder these great carvings' survival?

¹ Latham, Charles, *In English Homes: The Internal Character, furniture and Adornments of some of the Most Notable Houses of England, Historically depicted from Photographs taken by Charles Latham* (London: Country Life, 1904)

² Tipping, Avray, *Grinling Gibbons and the Woodwork of his Age: 1648-1720* (London: Country Life Library of Architectural Monographs, Hudson & Kearns Ltd, 1914)

1. THE CONDITION IN WHICH W G ROGERS FOUND THE GREAT HOUSE CARVINGS

In 1856 an article published in the *Art Journal*¹ reported:-

Mr Rogers, having been professionally employed to direct the preservation of the carvings by Gibbons, at Belton House, has very properly stated the result of his investigation and experience before the Royal Institute of British Architects and has accompanied his remarks with a startling revelation as to the state of nearly all the carvings of the period of Charles II, James II and Queen Anne in this country. These magnificent remains are so rapidly perishing, that if immediate means be not taken for their preservation they must soon cease to exist.

Why these carvings were in such a poor state of repair (and again, it should be remembered that it was in Rogers' interests to paint such a pessimistic scene) is a many-faceted issue and needs to be examined.

In the first instance, for the purposes of historical accuracy, identifying what was and was not a Grinling Gibbons poses considerable problems. It is easy now for historians to proclaim that a carving was *not* the work of Grinling Gibbons because there were no records to prove that Gibbons had worked at a particular address. However, conversely, the great land owners were a multi-resident class with town houses, shooting lodges, country estates etc. and regularly disposed of or acquired property, moving the contents from one to another. This is evident at Belton House where, in 1715, Viscount Tyrconnel shut up his London house due to 'self-imposed economies' and with this, his collection of old masters found their way down to Belton². Unusually, an inventory of the Arlington House of 1738 describes hanging in the passage 'a fine piece of carving in a panel by Gibbons'³. It is very possible this carving also eventually found its way down to Belton, and with little reference to house carvings in inventories, who is to say that a carving completed by Gibbons at one address, was not then moved elsewhere later in its life?

Each great house owner now desires to be the guardian of a Grinling Gibbons, but when Gibbons was at the apex of his profession (approximately 1675 to 1700) few were fortunate enough to be able to acquire one. Although it is easy to imagine that Gibbons, as Master Carver to the Crown, would simply have been too expensive for many landed gentry, this

¹ *Anonymous, The Art Journal, II, 1856, p.85*

From an article referring to a paper that Rogers presented to RIBA on the subject of Belton House

² *Tinniswood, Adrian, Belton House (London: The National Trust, 1999) pp. 16-18*

³ *Westwood, Rosalind, Archive Research: Room History. File in the estate office at Belton House*

appears not to have been the case. In 1688 Edmund Carpenter, the house carver at Belton, was paid £25 and £26 respectively for two 'very rich chimney peeces'¹; whereas in comparison, ten years later Gibbons presented an estimate for £25, £28 and £30 for three overmantles at Hampton Court². It seems then, more to do with availability. In a time when trends were spread by parochial craftsmen borrowing patterns from the workshops in the cities, many house owners desirous to keep up with fashion would have resorted to employing talented local craftsmen to replicate the great carvers' works. Pride may have meant they were not always entirely honest about their origins.

At the time of their conception, and for a long time afterwards, many of these carvings were seen not as individual creations or artworks, but as forming part of a decorative scheme and were as much an integral part of a room's fixtures and fittings as the wallpaper or panelling. As such they normally do not even appear in many typical household inventories. Certainly, at Belton House the carvings were not listed in any inventory until as late as 1984 when the house was sold to the National Trust. The organisational structure at Hampton Court illustrates this well where, until the 1980s, all the Grinling Gibbons carvings came under the remit of the Fabrics and Buildings Department rather than the Royal Collections.

By the time W G Rogers was active these carvings ranged from one hundred and fifty to two hundred years old. Carvings, as part of the fixtures and fittings of a house, were treated as such. Because of their decorative nature they were the victims of fads and fashions and the whims of the generations of families who occupied these great houses. As rooms evolved, so the carvings were stripped, gilded, re-painted, heavily varnished, added to, reduced, re-positioned or even removed entirely. They were also subjected to the regular rigours of housekeeping - dusted, polished and occasionally given a coating of linseed oil. David Luard writes of the Grinling Gibbons' at Hampton Court 'We had been told that there was a tendency in the distant past to give the woodwork in the Palace a coat of linseed oil when a State visit was imminent'³. If bits fell or were knocked off, which they frequently must have been, the house carpenter fixed them back on to the best of his ability.

¹ Westwood, Rosalind, *Archive Research: Room History*. File in the estate office at Belton House: This appears in a bill for carvings in the Red Drawing room.

² Esterly, David, *Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum Publication, 1998) p. 122

³ Luard, David, *The Conservation of the Grinling Gibbons Overmantel in the Queen's Closet at Hampton Court Palace*. *Conservation News*, 65, March 1998. p. 31

Conditions in country houses were not ideal for wood-carvings - they were often dark and damp and towards the end of the nineteenth century frequently run down through dwindling family fortunes. It was common practice to shut up rooms or indeed, the whole house, for months at a time. As late as 1929 Belton suffered bad damage from burst pipes during the severe winter. Leaking water saturated the nursery, the boudoir and the tapestry room.¹ Lighting by candles, oil or gas and heating by open fires all took their toll. Gibbons had left his carvings the pale creamy colour of natural lime-wood, but by the end of the eighteenth century tobacco, coal smoke and a hundred years of exposure to dust and dirt had turned the wood to a medium or dark brown.²

And finally, it should also be taken into account when looking at the causes of deterioration, that until the advent of Grinling Gibbons, oak had been the traditional carving wood in England. As a material it was durable, hard and high in natural preservatives such as tannins, making it an unpalatable wood for pests. Gibbons introduced the use of lime-wood from the continent because, although a hard wood its light-weight and fine grain meant it was 'excellent under the tool' as Avray Tipping observed. But he continued 'it is also a favourite wood with the worm, and the worm has ever been the most dreaded enemy of his work'³. In addition, the practice of applying layers of wood glued together, so providing a sandwich of protein (the nourishment the wood-worm is seeking), must have heralded the advent of fast food for wood-feeding creatures.

In summary, wood-worm does not thrive in dry, hard wood. They enjoy soft, proteinous material and, like most pests, prefer high humidity and poor light. Added to this the fact that, for many years the carvings were simply not the subject of much attention and, indeed, when Rogers first began to work on them, were decidedly unfashionable, undoubtedly resulted in their poor condition and the demise of many.

¹ Westwood, Rosalind, *Archive Research: Room History*. File in the estate office at Belton House

² Esterly, David, *Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum Publication, 1998), p.12

³ Tipping, Avray, *Grinling Gibbons and the Woodwork of his Age: 1648-1720* (London: Country Life Library of Architectural Monographs, Hudson & Kearns Ltd, 1914), p.196

2. THE AGE THAT COULD NOT CREATE, RESTORES¹

When discussing W G Rogers' restoration work, the difficulties over attribution becomes clear. Rogers believed that he was selectively working on the carvings of Grinling Gibbons, and believed this because he was an acknowledged expert on the carver, having spent many years studying and copying his work. His method of identification relied partly on the theory that Gibbons had hybridised the acanthus leaf into highly decorative 'whorls', making them his signature, the fluidity of which no other carver had mastered or dared to copy. The problem with this theory was that other carvers did include these acanthus whorls in their carvings², and certainly Edmund Carpenter used them on the right-hand carving in the Marble Hall at Belton. Out of the two acclaimed restoration projects that Rogers carried out on the carvings of Gibbons, at Belton in 1855 and at Chatsworth in 1865; he almost certainly misidentified the carvers at Chatsworth because Esterly has provided convincing evidence that Gibbons never worked there³. Even in Rogers' day, this much-heralded work caused some complaint from the local populous of Derbyshire; as a letter published in *The Builder* on the 18th November 1865 illustrates:

Mr Rogers ascribes all these carvings to Gibbons. Is he aware that, although all the accounts for the expenditure of the building are preserved, the name of Gibbons scarcely appears in connection with the works, and that locally the greater part of the carving is supposed to have been executed by Samuel Watson, of Derbyshire, whose epitaph in Heanor Church, referring to the work at Chatsworth, we recently printed?⁴

It seems Mr Rogers could be accused of being slightly myopic when it suited him; he was certainly aware of the necessity for supporting documentation and the pitfalls of misidentifying Gibbons' carvings, because he remarked at the lecture he gave to the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1866 that 'It is satisfactory to have documents to refer to, in these inquiries, as his name is frequently associated with works which he never could have seen, and which would have disgraced it.'⁵

¹ Anonymous, *The Carvings of Gibbons and their Preservation*, *The Atheneum*, 31 May 1856, p.688

The opening line of an article describing W G Roger's restoration work at Belton

² Anonymous, *Country Homes and Gardens, Old and New: Belton House, Lincolnshire, a seat of the Earl Brownlow*, *Country Life Illustrated*, XXX, 26 August 1911, p.313

³ Esterly, David, *Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum Publication, 1998), p.104.

⁴ Anonymous, *The Carvings at Chatsworth*, *The Builder*, November 18, 1865

From a cutting pasted into a scrapbook belonging to W G Rogers

⁵ Rogers, W G, *Remarks Upon Grinlin Gibbons, as made to the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and A J B Beresford-Hope, Esq., M.P., in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, in November, 1863, Proceedings of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Session 1866-67, p.3*

It is not clear from surviving documents, just how many and what carvings Rogers worked on at Belton, nor how many he believed to be by Gibbons. Today, there are three strong contenders for the title of Grinling Gibbons; in the Marble Hall the left of two fine overmantles; in the Saloon, the carved overmantle at the west end of the room and in the Chapel Gallery a cluster of carvings over the fireplace¹.

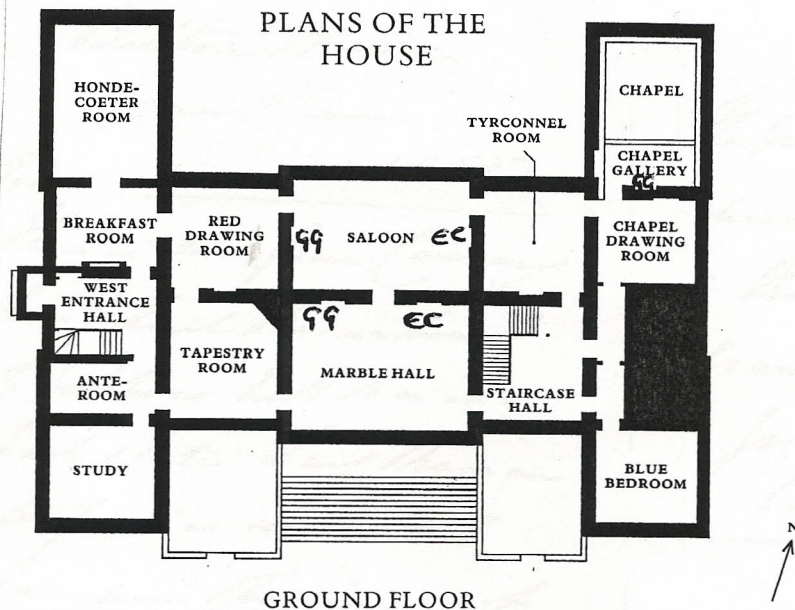


Fig 2: The Ground floor plan of Belton House, showing the current position of the carvings. (Tinniswood)

Of the remaining very beautiful carvings in the house, nearly all have supporting documents in the form of bills, now in the archives², linking them directly to the work of Edmund Carpenter and installed soon after the house was completed in 1688. Although most of the carvings have since been moved from the rooms for which

they were intended, descriptions in these bills can still identify them. For example, the right-hand carving in the Marble Hall was originally installed in the With Drawing Room to the Great Parlor (now the Red Drawing Room) and can be identified from the description in the bill: 'don with varieties of fish and sheals'³. As mentioned earlier, the Brownlow family, were certainly the owners of one Gibbons carving when resident at Arlington House and this is generally believed to be the left-hand carving in the Marble Hall. In the Saloon the overmantel at the east end remains in its intended position. In 1688 it was described by Edmund Carpenter as 'ffor a chimney peece in the greate Parlor wth fruit and flowers agreed to be don att 18-00-00'⁴.

- 1 Tinniswood, Adrian, *Belton House* (London: The National Trust, 1999), p.13
In the *Belton House* guide these are described as being much bolder and more finely executed, and certainly show close affinities with Gibbons' authenticated work.
- 2 The records of Belton House contain irreparable gaps. Many were lost during an estate "clear-out" in the 1960s. Others, which were felt to be of a historical interest, were sold by the Brownlow family at auction when the house was passed to the National Trust. The remainder now form the Brownlow Papers at Lincolnshire County Records Office. An invaluable source of information is a file in the Estate Office at Belton which holds a typed manuscript of a room by room history of the house and it's contents.
- 3 Westwood, Rosalind, *Archive Research: Room History*. File in the estate office at Belton House.
- 4 As 3 above.

Again, the much richer overmantel at the west end of the room is not mentioned. This illustrates the periodic re-arrangement of the carvings and is confirmed by photographs of the carvings in the Chapel Gallery taken first in 1903, then in 1911 and finally today (See Figs 5 to 7).

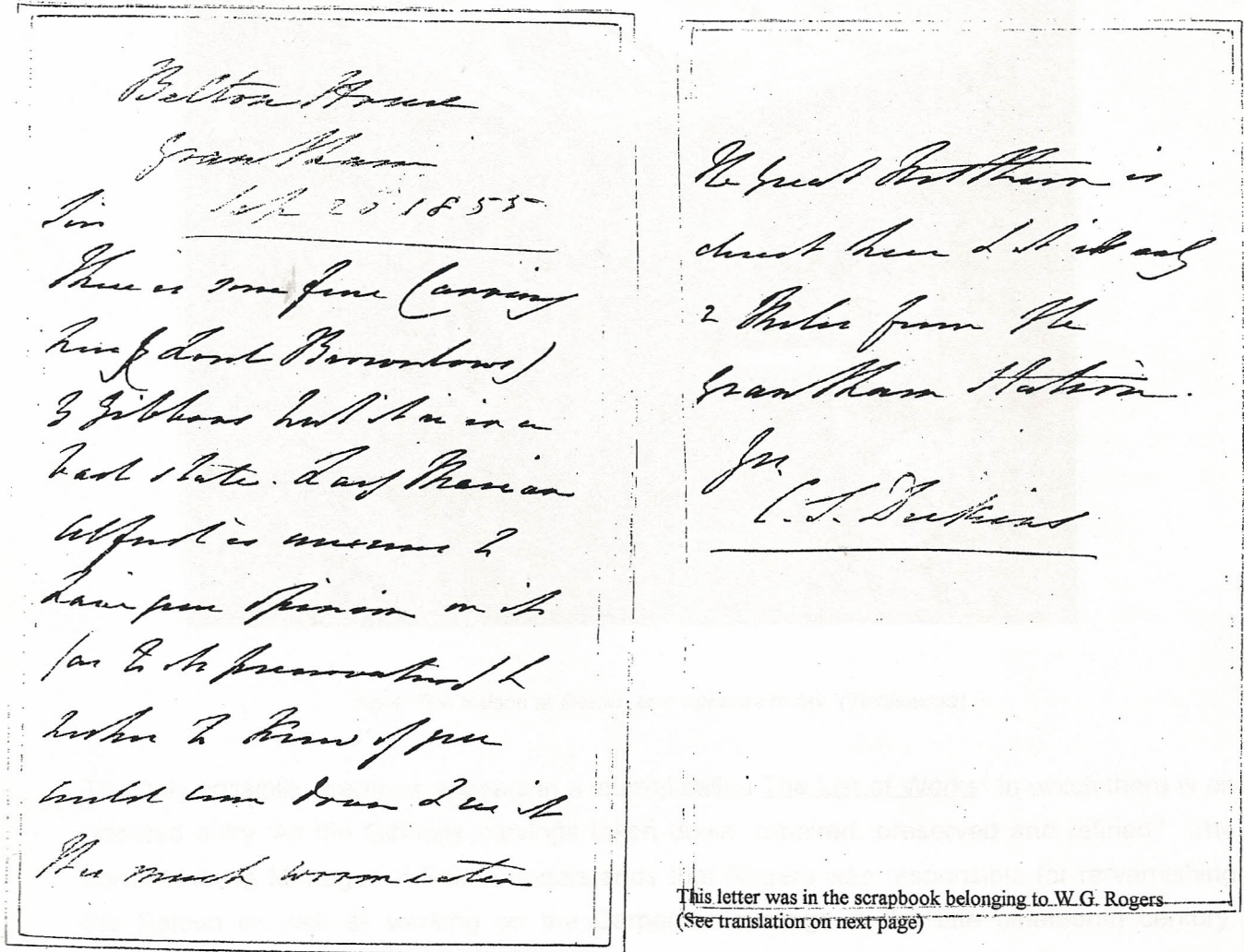


Fig 3: Copy of a letter from C T Dickens, Secretary to Lady Marion Alford, sent to Mr Rogers from Belton House on 26 September 1865 (See Appendix i for transcript) (Reproduced with the kind permission of Joyce Stephenson).

W G Rogers was introduced to Belton House in 1855 when he received a letter from C T Dickens, the secretary to Lady Marion Alford¹. This invited him, on behalf of Lady Alford, to visit Belton to inspect the carvings by Gibbons which she describes as being in a 'bad state'.

¹ Dickens, C T, Letter from Lady Marion Alford's Secretary, Belton House, 22 September 1855 (See Appendix i): Viscount and Lady Alford were not owners of Belton, but holding it in trust until Adelbert Wellington Brownlow Cust, the 3rd Earl Brownlow, came of age.

How Rogers responded to this letter is not clear, nor the entire extent of the advice or work that he undertook. Records of his direct involvement at Belton are few in the Brownlow Papers held by Lincolnshire Archives.



Fig 4: The Saloon at Belton, as it appears today. (Tinniswood)

The only possible reference appears in a journal called *The List of Works*¹ in which there is an undated entry 'All the Gibbons carvings taken down, repaired, preserved and refined.' The current House Manager of Belton understands that Rogers was responsible for re-varnishing the Saloon as well as working on the Carpenter carvings in the late nineteenth century. Certainly, in 1869 four large pictures in this room were trimmed down by two inches to fit into the new panelling scheme which the Third Earl commissioned². This was probably done to

¹ Lincolnshire County Council Archives, *The Brownlow Papers*, letter from Adrian Wilkinson dated 8 March 2001:- The archivist at Lincolnshire carried out a search in the Brownlow papers for references to Rogers or Grinling Gibbons. In his letter he writes 'The only reference I can find to the work undertaken on the Gibbons carvings is contained in a volume that lists all the repairs and refurbishments undertaken at Belton House between 1853 and 1863. The volume referred to is *The List of Works*, kept by William Lowe'. The period of 1853 to 1863 ties in with the period when the estate was managed by the Alford. There is a gap in the Belton House ledgers between 1856 and 1869 and the accounts for 1855 do not contain any entries for payments made to Rogers.

² Tinniswood, Adrian, *Belton House* (London: The National Trust, 1999), p.45.

allow sufficient room for the new appliques of tumbling putti between the pictures which are ascribed to Rogers¹.



Fig 5: Photograph of the carvings in the Chapel Gallery at Belton, believed to be by Gibbons, showing the arrangement of the Gibbons carvings in 1903. (Country Life Picture Library)

It seems then, from the above information, that Rogers may have made more than one visit to Belton. Initially to restore the carvings (which ones are not clear); and then perhaps invited to return later to carry out re-varnishing and install some of his own work in the Saloon.

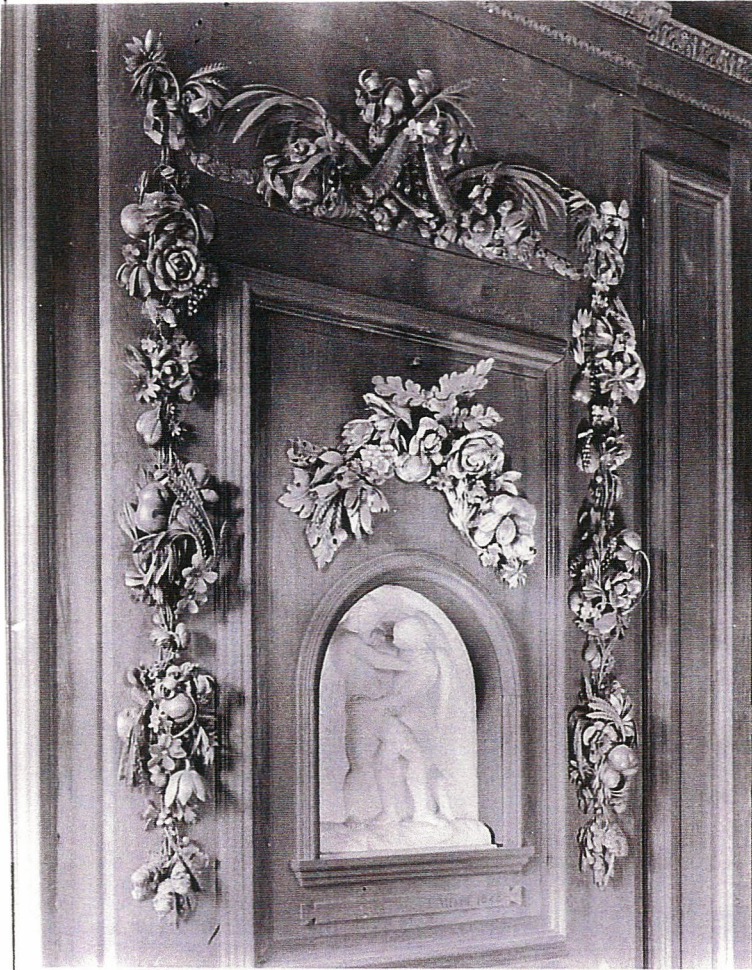
Much of the material written about the restoration work at Belton comes from publicity and reviews printed in 1856, shortly after its completion. Quite how there was such a flurry of journalistic activity is not clear, but

certainly Mr Rogers curated a small exhibition at No 54 Strand in the premises of Messrs. Boore and Roe from 21st to 23rd April 1856², in which he displayed his finished work and, judging by the number of articles following it, was much attended by the press.

¹ Tinniswood, Adrian, *Belton House* (London: The National Trust, 1999), p.48

² Anonymous, *Grinling Gibbons' Carvings - Restored by W G Rogers*, *The Art Journal*, 1856, p.194

Fig 6: Photograph showing the arrangement of the carvings in the Chapel Gallery in 1911. There is now a small marble relief in place of the picture and an additional V-shaped carving (Country Life Picture Library)



In the light of this when Rogers, in response to Lady Alford's summons, arrived at Belton in 1855, the condition in which he found the carvings and how he treated them is more than well documented. Probably, however, the most reliable source of information is the report he presented, some nine years later, to the 'working group' formed upon the request of the Committee of Council for Education to investigate 'causes of decay in wood carvings, with the view to preserving the valuable decorative examples, being public property, now in the South Kensington Museum'. The conclusions of this report were recorded in detail in the minutes of 31 March 1864¹.

¹ *Anonymous, Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the Causes of Decay in Wood Carvings and the Means of Preventing and Remedying the effects of such Decay, South Kensington Museum (London). The minutes read:*

This gentleman reports that the first step he took was to have the various pieces photographed, as a means of recording the position of each detail of the ornamentation, &c. The whole of the works were in a serious state of decay, portions being completely honey-combed by the worm. In order to destroy or prevent any future development of the insect within the wood, Mr Rogers caused the whole to be saturated with a strong solution of Corrosive Sublimate in water. The colour of the wood, however, suffered so seriously by the action of the mercury, that it was found necessary to adopt some means of restoring the original tint. This was affected by Ammonia in the first instance and subsequently by a slight treatment with Muriatic Acid. After this, the interior of the wood was injected with vegetable gum and gelatine, in order to fill up the worm holes and strengthen the fabric of the carvings. A varnish of resin, dissolved in spirits of wine, was afterwards spread on the surface, and then the dismembered pieces were put together in conformity with the photographs taken as records, prior to the work of restoration having been commenced.

What Mr Rogers undoubtedly found were carvings whose structural integrity was severely threatened by years of unchecked damage by wood-worm (the larvae of the beetle *Anobium Punctatum*). Indeed, in pure 'Rogers' style he displayed specimens of carved fruit etc by Gibbons taken from various sources, at the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1856; some of which he had sawn in two to reveal the interior honeycombed by wood-worm.¹



Fig 7: Photograph showing the arrangement of the carvings believed to be by Gibbons in the Chapel Gallery today. The carvings remain in the same position, but the marble relief has been replaced. (Tinniswood)

What Rogers also apparently found was a thick white bloom covering these carvings. It is not clear what this was, perhaps fungus or mildew feeding on the build-up of old frass on the surfaces of the carvings from the wood-worm. It was certainly described as such by *The Art Journal* in 1856². However, David Luard³ believes that this was no mildew but an intended application of a lightening agent, perhaps lime water, painted on a few years after the carvings were made in order to counteract the inevitable oxidation

and darkening of the lime-wood. He also believes that in some cases Gibbons may have applied this himself.

¹ Anonymous, *Grinling Gibbons' Carvings - Restored by W G Rogers*, *The Art Journal*, 1856, p.85.

² The article, cited above reads:-

'This mildew, covering the surface of the fruit, flowers and dead game, is a vegetable thrown off from the decaying interior, and must ultimately, if left to accumulate, destroy the skin or rind which holds together the outward form only, the interior being nothing but skeleton fibre powdered with dust and unable to resist the slightest pressure.'

³ David Luard of Luard Conservation.



Fig 8: The top section of the overmantle attributed to Grinling Gibbons from the Saloon at Belton House (see Fig 11 for complete carving). Photographed and removed by W G Rogers for restoration. (Reproduced with kind permission of Joyce Stephenson)

Fig 9 (below): A carving, which Rogers has labelled as 'Over door panel, dining room'. However, this now forms the top section of the left-hand carving in the Marble Hall, attributed to Grinling Gibbons. (Reproduced with kind permission of Joyce Stephenson)

Whatever Rogers' apparent failings, he was clearly undertaking a carefully recorded preservation treatment of the carvings. In a well-documented set of procedures he first photographed the carvings as a detailed point of reference (and it should be remembered that in 1855 photography was still very much in its infancy). He then took them down, dismantled them and it would appear that he somehow transported the pieces back to London to work on, if only because the newly restored work was put on display at The Strand.

The separate pieces were each treated with an insecticide/ fungicide by saturation in a corrosive sublimate. This had the unfortunate effect of severely discolouring the wood. It is not said how, but in a draft report Rogers sent to Lady Egerton at Chatsworth in 1866 (See Appendix ii), he strongly reprimanded against its use,



writing: 'One of the people proposed to wash the walls with the chloride of mercury I had brought with me, if that had been attempted, in a short [?time - word omitted] the metal would come out as if the maids had been using the black lead brush to the walls.'¹ In other words it had a fairly dramatic darkening effect on the colour of the lime-wood. In an attempt to return the wood to its original paleness he bleached it, first with ammonia and then with muriatic acid which, not surprisingly, seems to have worked to some extent, although David Luard suggests that the wood was permanently darkened². Next Rogers carried out extensive consolidation of the fragile structures by injecting the wood with a mixture of vegetable gum and gelatine, and finally covered the pieces in a protective coating of resin dissolved in spirits of wine. One source reports that this was done to protect the gelatine from the action of heat, and more specifically refers to the use of rosin³. Finally, Rogers laid out and labelled the conserved

sections and photographed them, before reassembling⁴.



Fig 10: Photograph taken by Rogers of two carved pendants removed from the Chapel Gallery at Belton for restoration. (Reproduced with kind permission of Joyce Stephenson).

Work at Belton did not end here. In order to monitor the continuing condition of the carvings following their preservation; seven years later at the request of the Commission to Enquire into the Causes of Decay, Mr Rogers wrote a letter to the Hon. Edward Cust at Belton. In this letter he asked if the House Clerk of the Works, Mr G A Lowe,

could make known to him the current condition of the carvings. Mr Lowe enthusiastically replied that they were strong and clean, with no evidence of wood-worm.⁵ (See Appendix iii).

¹ Rogers, W G, *Draft Report on the Cedar Walls of the Chapel, Chatsworth, sent to Lady Louisa Egerton on 6 July 1866.*

² David Luard of Luard Conservation

³ Anonymous, *The Carvings of Gibbons and their Preservation, The Athenaeum, 31 May 1856, p.688*

⁴ Copies of surviving photographs provided by Joyce Stephenson, a direct descendant of Rogers. Mrs Stephenson took the photographs at a Rogers family reunion, at which another family member brought along a scrapbook which had belonged to W G Rogers and apparently contained many such photographs. Sadly it was not possible to contact this source.

⁵ Anonymous, *Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the Causes of Decay in Wood Carvings and the Means of Preventing and Remedying the effects of such Decay, South Kensington Museum (London).*

This seven year check-up was probably to monitor the impact of the chemicals used by Rogers on the wood as Note 1 at the end of the minutes comments that no previous experiments as to the effect of saturation in a solution of Corrosive Sublimate in water has been made¹. These follow-up visits act as a valuable measure of Rogers' work. A further, completely independent visit was made to the carvings in 1914 (now some sixty years later) by Avray Tipping of Country Life, when he remarked that they were in excellent condition and appearance².



Fig 11: Photograph taken in 1911 of the Grinling Gibbons overmantle, now restored by Rogers, in the Saloon (Country Life Library)

¹ Anonymous, *Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the Causes of Decay in Wood Carvings and the Means of Preventing and Remedying the effects of such Decay*, South Kensington Museum (London).

² Tipping, Avray, *Grinling Gibbons and the Woodwork of his Age: 1648-1720* (London: Country Life Library of Architectural Monographs, Hudson & Kearns Ltd, 1914), p.198

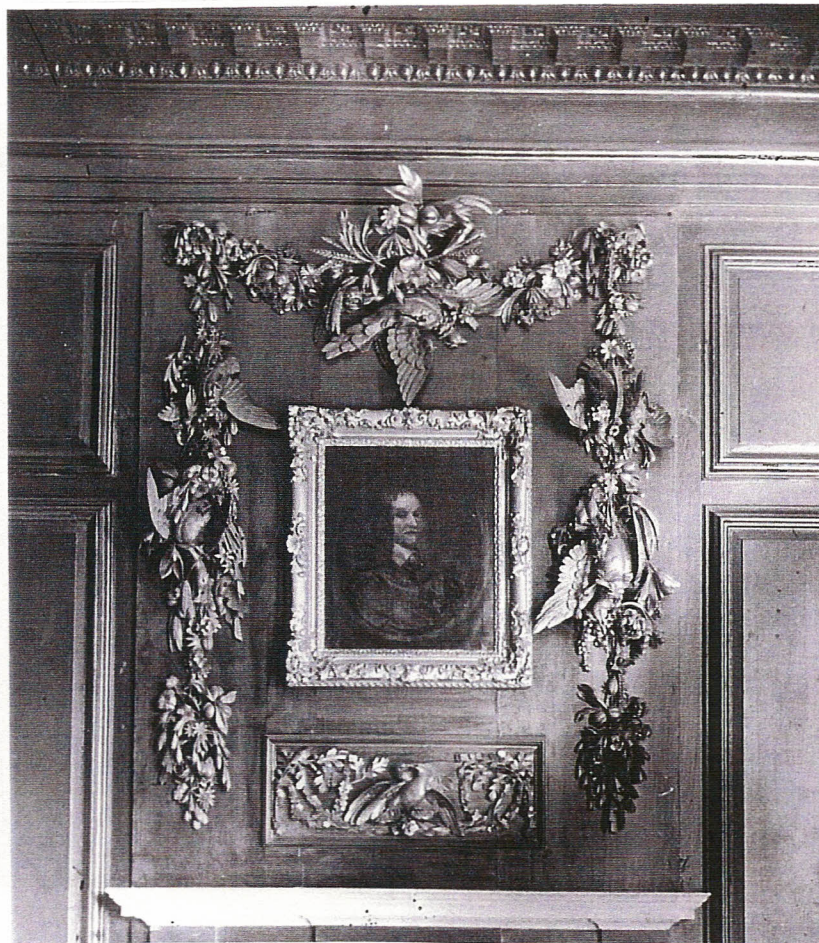
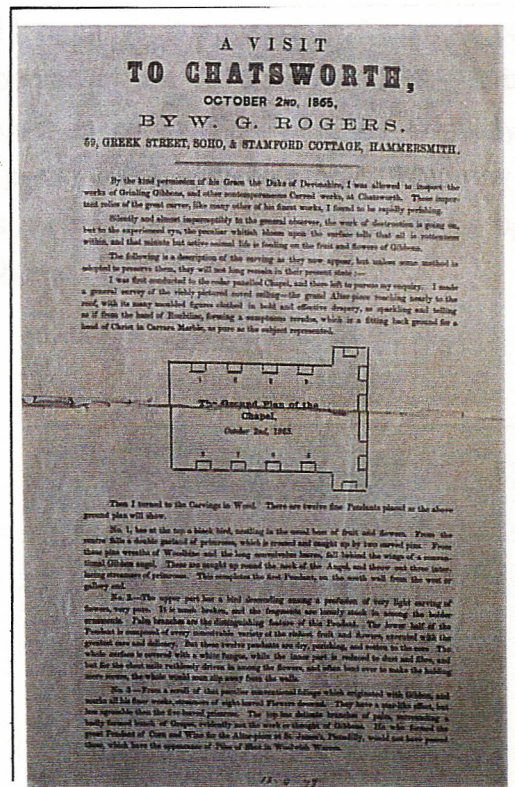


Fig 12: Photograph taken in 1911 of the left-hand carved overmantle in the Marble Hall at Belton, believed to be by Grinling Gibbons (Compare the top crest of birds with that of Fig.9)
(Country Life Library)

It is not only at Belton that Rogers worked. He certainly carried out extensive restorations for another important client, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, at Chatsworth House. They had requested that Mr Rogers submit a report on the condition of the carvings in the Cedar Chapel¹. He writes as follows:

All twelve pendants are dry, perishing and rotten to the core. The whole surface is covered with a white fungus, while the inner part is reduced to dust and fibre, and but for the clout nails ruthlessly driven in among the flowers, and often bent over to make the holding more secure, the whole would soon slip away from the walls.

¹ Rogers, W G, *A Visit to Chatsworth to Inspect the Carvings of Grinling Gibbons on October 2, 1865*. By Permission of His Grace the Duke of Devonshire (London: F Wyatt, 1865)
A copy of the detailed survey he undertook on the twelve carved pendants, which he believed to be by Grinling Gibbons, is held at the National Art Library.



The Devonshires accepted the findings in his report and Mr Rogers removed, dismantled and treated the carvings. Again photographs survive of this work and are held at the Devonshire Collection Archives at Chatsworth¹ (see Fig 15).

Fig 13: The report printed by W G Rogers on the condition of the carvings in the Cedar Chapel at Chatsworth. (National Art Library)

None of the above, however, alludes to what in particular David Esterly refers to as his practice of 'cannibalism'², which would suggest that Rogers removed parts of one carving to add to another. There is certainly a reference to him replacing missing sections of carvings at Belton with carving of his own in The Atheneum³. However, this is very different and could be seen as part of the normal process of restoration, a process which still continues today. As his evidence Esterly specifically uses the anecdote of the Cullen panel (see Fig 14), the whereabouts of which is now unknown, so the argument cannot be proven one way or the other⁴.

¹ The Devonshire Collection, Archives, Chatsworth House

² Esterly, David, *Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum Publication, 1998), p.11:-

Esterly describes Rogers as producing 'ponderous Gibbonsian compositions of his own, sometimes filling these out with elements he had cannibalised from 17th-century carvings'

³ Anonymous, *The Carvings of Gibbons and their Preservation, The Atheneum, 31 May 1856*

'Sometimes a bird's wing, sometimes a branch of flowers, occasionally, through the rough blow of a servant, a whole group of objects had tumbled to the ground and been swept into oblivion ... [These he] restored here and there, but only where indispensable, with new work.'

⁴ Esterly, David, *Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum Publication, 1998), pp.150-152

The sole surviving evidence is a black and white photograph of the panel possibly taken in 1914 because it appears in Tipping's book¹. It was recorded that when the panel was inspected in the 1970's by the V&A, it bore Rogers' signature on the back. This, Esterly argues, in conjunction with the ungainly additions to the panel proves that Rogers had tampered with it at some stage. This may be so, but it could equally be argued that the panel was a complete pastiche or copy made by Rogers in his quest for perfecting the carvings of Gibbons.



Fig 14: The only known image of the Cullen Panel taken c.1914. According to Esterly this shows a Gibbons carving heavily adulterated by Rogers. (Avray Tipping)

Esterly also uses the carvings at Belton to illustrate his argument: 'Rogers happily added his own carving to seventeenth century compositions, for example, in the overmantel with fishes in the Marble Hall' he writes, 'where I think there is a record of Rogers adding groupings of fish to lengthen the side drops'². Although it is not known for sure if Rogers restored the right-hand carving in the Marble Hall by Edmund Carpenter, there is certainly evidence that he extended it to accommodate a painting, by adding a second set of fish to each side³, and this has several times been given as proof not only of his ethical dishonesty, but also of

his poor carving ability; and certainly the fish lack the fluidity of their partners above. It would also appear, examining the photographs that Rogers took (see Figs 8 to 10), and taking into account the wording in the List of Works, that Rogers may not only have moved entire groups of carvings, but within these groups rearranged sections.

¹ Tipping, Avray, *Grinling Gibbons and the Woodwork of his Age: 1648-1720* (London: Country Life Library of Architectural Monographs, Hudson & Kearns Ltd, 1914)

² An e-mail received from David Esterly on 16 April 2001.

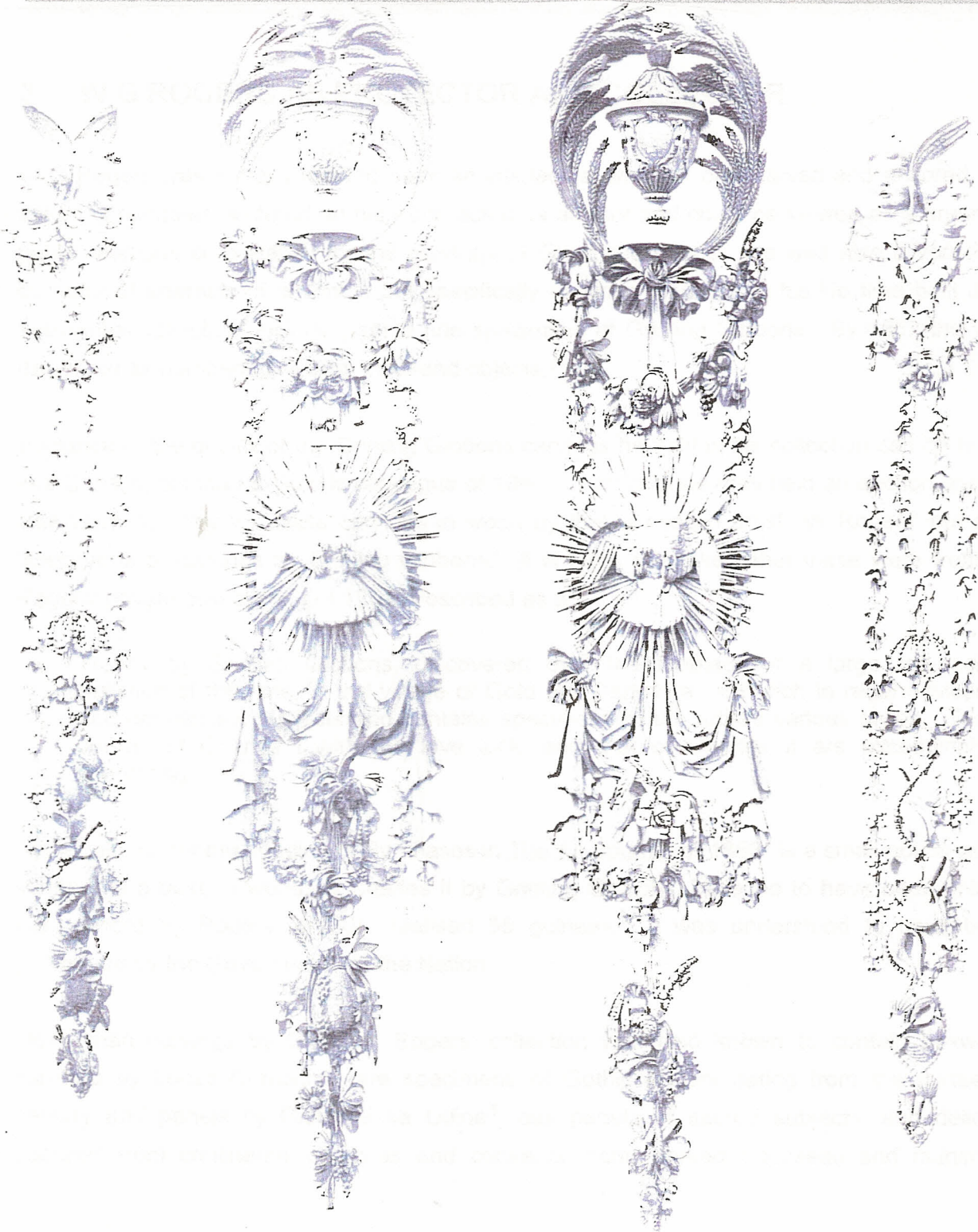
³ Paul Hatfield, House Manager, Belton, meeting on 16 March 2001.

In defence of these activities it must be remembered, however, that Rogers was working as a private restorer for a valued client. The groups of carvings were considered part of the interior decorations of the hall, designed to frame pictures and add interest to panels and, for whatever reason, they no longer fitted. It could also be argued that Rogers intended, for ethical reasons, that his additions should not be an exact match in either quality or style to the fish above.

The work that Rogers carried out at Belton certainly left the carvings in a stronger state. In appearance there is more concern. David Luard¹ feels that Rogers permanently disfigured the carvings through his use of mercuric chloride, and certainly from an article in The Art Journal of 1856 this appears to be the case. Describing Gibbons' carvings as 'hard, solid; shining with all the gloss of their first polish, but dark with the mellow darkness of age'² is not the image of the pale, natural lime-wood that Gibbons is argued to have intended.

¹ David, Luard, meeting on 19 May 2001.

² Anonymous, *Grinling Gibbons' Carvings - Restored by W G Rogers, Cutting from Rogers' scrapbook (Poss. The Art Journal, 1856?)*



*The Golden Carvings in the Chapel of the
Chatsworth Chapel, Chatsworth
restored by W G Rogers*

Fig 15: Photographs taken by W G Rogers in 1865(?) of the pendant carvings in the Chapel at Chatsworth during restoration. (Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of the Duke of Devonshire and the Chatsworth Settlement Trust).

3. W G ROGERS AS PROTECTOR AND COLLECTOR

W G Rogers was a many-faceted man; an intellectual who not only carved and restored, but sat on committees, lectured on his work, acted as advisor and could be viewed as a one-man public relations consultancy for the carvings of Grinling Gibbons. He was also a voracious collector of artefacts of all kinds, but specifically carvings, and during his life time built up a substantial collection, including some fine specimens of Grinling Gibbons. By 1852 this was described as numbering several thousand objects.¹

Evidence of the quality of the Grinling Gibbons carvings he held in his collection can be found in a Christie, Manson & Woods catalogue of 1861². On 26 June they held an auction and for sale were not only 'exquisite carvings in wood by that unrivalled artist, Mr Rogers' but also 'specimens of carvings by Grinling Gibbons.' It is more than likely that these were from Mr Rogers' private collection. Lot 120 is described as a:

Trophy by Grinling Gibbons, discovered over the fireplace of a large red-brick mansion of the time, in the village of Gold Hill, Berkshire; it is rich in regal devices and emblematic subjects and contains specimens of the artist's various styles. The portrait of Charles I with the love lock, and that of Charles II are exceedingly interesting.

And again, under the heading of Purchases in The Art Journal of 1856³ is a small notice which states that a bust, in wood, of Charles II by Grinling Gibbons, believed to have been sold to Lord Orford by Rogers for 20/-, realised 55 guineas. It was understood to have been purchased by the Government for the Nation.

Other than carvings by Gibbons, Rogers' collection was also known to contain boxwood carvings by Lucas Cranach⁴; rare specimens of Gothic tracery dating from the thirteenth century and panels by Giovanni da Udine⁵; oak panels of sacred subjects, and delicate traceries from continental churches and convents; richly carved trousseau and muniment

¹ *Exhibition of Industry of All Nations, The Works of William Gibbs Rogers of 10, Carlisle Street, Soho. Pamphlet for the Fine Arts Court, Class 30 (London: T Pettitt, 1862), p.3*

² *Auction Catalogue for Christie, Manson & Wood, Exquisite Carvings in Wood by Mr Rogers; Also Specimens of Carvings by Grinling Gibbons (London: 1861)*

³ *Anonymous, Grinling Gibbons' Carvings - Restored by W G Rogers', The Art Journal, 1856, p.259*

⁴ *Rogers, William Gibbs, Carver to Her Majesty Queen Victoria, 10 Carlisle Street, Soho. Pamphlet for the Fine Arts Court, Class 30, (London: T Pettitt, 1862)*

⁵ *Anonymous, The Art Union, 57, 1 Sep 1843, p.248.*

chests from Italy; terra-cotta groups from Spain; birds by Demontreuil, and boys by Fiamingo, as well as Limoges enamels and specimens of wrought iron-work¹.

Undoubtedly encouraged by his connections at the South Kensington Museum and the Committee for Education on which he sat, Mr Rogers began a survey of the condition of the Grinling Gibbons carvings of England. He was certainly well underway with this by 31 March 1864² and by then it encompassed the Wrennian Churches of London; the Halls of the various Guilds and the private mansions of the wealthy citizens of the seventeenth century.³

Probably one of the most reliable sources of information on this survey is contained in a talk he gave to the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1866⁴. In this he describes his visits to inspect Gibbons' carvings at The Library, Trinity College, Cambridge; St Paul's Cathedral; Cashiobury Park; Lyme Hall; Melrose Abbey; All Souls Library, Oxford; The Chapel, Trinity College, Oxford; Winchester Cathedral; Kirklington Park, near Oxford; Queen's College, Oxford; Blenheim Palace; the Mansion of Lord Glengall, London. Apart from the ever present threat of wood-worm, Rogers found most concerning the trend for coating the carvings in a thick layer of oily brown varnish (See Figs 16 and 17). This he reported as being especially bad at Trinity College Library, Cambridge; the chapel of Trinity College, Oxford and Cashiobury Park, the appearance of the carvings at this house he found particularly disturbing⁵.

¹ Anonymous, Obituary: William Gibbs Rogers, *The Art Journal*, XIV, 1875, p.204

² Anonymous, Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the Causes of Decay in Wood Carvings and the Means of Preventing and Remedying the effects of such Decay, South Kensington Museum (London).

³ It has not been possible to establish for the purpose of this dissertation whether Rogers actually completed the survey, or whether a copy of it survives. It is probable that if it does still exist, it is contained within the huge archive of the South Kensington Museum, now part of the National Art Library. Certainly, it has not been individually catalogued under the name of Rogers.

⁴ Rogers, W G, Remarks Upon Grinlin Gibbons, as made to the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and A J B Beresford-Hope, Esq., M.P., in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, in November, 1863, *Proceedings of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, Session 1866-67, p.1

⁵ As 3 above, p.3

Rogers says: 'It was not until November 1865, that I was able to make a second visit to Cashiobury, after a lapse of more than thirty years, when I found that all this charming work had been covered over, and loaded with a thick brown paint and heavy varnish; all the delicate feathering of the birds and veining of the leafage were effaced, smothered up and vanished; and what repairs had been made, were wrought in plaster or composition.'

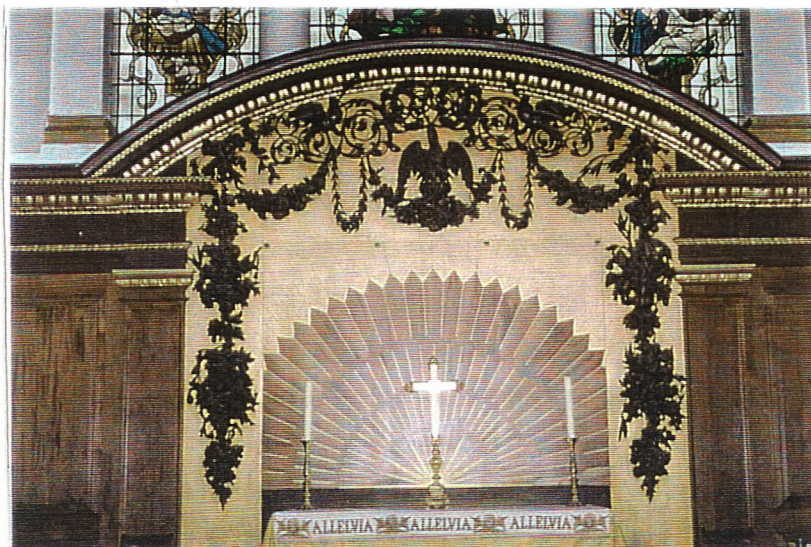


Fig 16: The reredos by Grinling Gibbons at St James, Piccadilly. In the late nineteenth century the dark background was gilded and the lime-wood painted a chocolate brown, so throwing the entire composition into reverse. (Photograph: David Luard)

Fig 17 (Below): A detail of a lily from the St James reredos, showing the heavy coating of dark paint. (Photograph: David Luard)

Whilst carrying out his surveys, Rogers also undertook work of an advisory nature. The following advertisement appears on the back cover of the Industry of Nations pamphlet:-



W G Rogers will most cheerfully reply to any question on the subject of Carvings by Gibbons, and will inspect it, if at all within the range of his proposed journeys. Any information respecting the existence of Gibbon Work, in the Churches or Mansions of England, will be thankfully received.¹

A survey of the Chatsworth House carvings, for example, led to Rogers publishing a report on the condition of the carvings² and this resulted not only in being offered the contract of restoring the carvings in the Chapel, but being asked to return later to supervise their re-installation and to advise on a method of revarnishing the cedar panelled walls³. (See Appendix ii for a copy of the draft

¹ Anonymous, *Report of the Commission appointed to enquire into the Causes of Decay in Wood Carvings and the Means of Preventing and Remedying the effects of such Decay*, South Kensington Museum (London).

² Rogers, W G, *A Visit to Chatsworth to Inspect the Carvings of Grinling Gibbons on October 2, 1865*. By Permission of His Grace the Duke of Devonshire (London: F Wyatt, 1865)

³ Rogers, W G, *Draft Report on the Cedar Walls of the Chapel, Chatsworth* (Transcribed by Ralph Swayd Esq), 6 July 1866.

report). At the lecture Rogers gave to RIBA in 1866, there was a lengthy questions and answers session at the end, in which Fellows of the Institute sought his advice on a number of wood-related issues: Mr O'Hansard would be glad if Mr Rogers would favour them with his experience with regard to the method of cleaning carvings blackened by paint, for example; or Mr Hiscocks should be glad to be informed whether Mr Rogers found that the ravages of the worm were greater in deal wood than in lime wood, etc.¹

Finally Rogers was a tireless campaigner for the preservation of Grinling Gibbons' carvings, keeping his work as their protector constantly in the public eye through his talks, reports, contacts, newspaper articles and the general flamboyancy of his character.

The question has to be asked, however, do all these activities make good bed-fellows? Morally, can someone act as both protector and collector, without self-interest intervening? And the answer probably has to be No. It could be construed that Rogers used his apparently philanthropic search and inspection of Gibbons' carvings to note the whereabouts of possible acquisitions for his collection. For example, how the trophy sold by Christies in 1861 was 'discovered' would be interesting to know.

Putting these aspersions aside, however, many of the objects in Rogers' collection eventually found their way into the collections of the South Kensington Museum², so whatever his motives and methods in amassing his vast collection during his lifetime it was, ultimately, for the benefit of the Nation.

¹ Rogers, W G, *Remarks Upon Grinling Gibbons, as made to the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and A J B Beresford-Hope, Esq., M.P., in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, in November, 1863, Proceedings of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Session 1866-67, p.6*

² Anonymous, *Obituary: William Gibbs Rogers, The Art Journal, XIV, 1875, p.204*

4. LOOKING AT THE WORK OF W G ROGERS TODAY

To substantiate the argument about the quality of the work that Rogers undertook, it will be useful to carry out a critical assessment of his methods and materials, not only from the perspectives of modern conservation, but also by comparisons with other restoration work of his time and later.

The chemicals that Rogers used are well-documented and on the whole easy to translate into modern scientific terminology.

As an insecticidal treatment to kill off the wood-worm, Rogers first immersed the carvings in corrosive sublimate. This is actually Mercuric Chloride (HgCl_2), an extremely toxic compound normally used as a fungicide¹. Having found that the mercury stained the wood, he resorted to bleaching out the colour, firstly with ammonia and then, when this failed with Muriatic Acid. This is hydrochloric acid (HCl), a solution of hydrogen chloride gas in water, which is a poisonous and pungent liquid². Although this sounds drastic, bleaching is still carried out by conservators today but critically, the bleach is always neutralised after treatment. David Luard wrote about the restoration work he carried out at Hampton Court : 'as a last resort and because the discolouration was so distracting we tried bleaching the affected wood. This had the desired effect.'³.

A useful comparison with Rogers' wood-worm treatment is the work that was undertaken by Henry Crace in 1856 on badly worm-eaten carvings at the Mercer's Hall in London⁴. Crace treated the wood-worm by boring holes in the back of the carvings, and then soaking them in a solution of linseed oil, beeswax, turpentine, litharge and large quantities of camphor and red lead. Possibly the ingredients are slightly less toxic than those used by Rogers, but his method of application by boring holes is certainly more intrusive. What this also does not reveal is that some while later the red lead and oil appeared on the surface as an unsightly and toxic film. And again at Petworth House in Sussex, slightly earlier than Rogers, the house carver Jonathan Ritson painted the carvings with a heavy coat of lime in an attempt to return them to their original light colour⁵ (See Fig 18).

¹ Parker, Sybil (Ed), *Dictionary of Chemistry* (USA: McGraw-Hill, 1997), p.239

² As 1 above, p.239

³ Luard, David, *The Conservation of the Grinling Gibbons Overmantel in the Queen's Closet at Hampton Court Palace. Conservation News*, 65, March 1998, p.31

⁴ Inray, Jean, *Excerpt from typed manuscript, Archives, Mercer's Company, London (undated)*, p.5

⁵ Tipping, Avray, *Grinling Gibbons and the Woodwork of his Age: 1648-1720* (London: Country Life Library of Architectural Monographs, Hudson & Kearns Ltd, 1914), p.195



Fig 18: A photograph, c.1914, showing a detail of a carving at Petworth, still covered in white lime applied by Jonathan Ritson in the early nineteenth century. (Avray Tipping)

Many of these substances would be considered undesirable in conservation treatments today, not only from the aspect of health and safety, but for the residues left behind. Horie writes that corrosive sublimate would remain as a toxic impurity and contaminant¹. However, as late as 1923, Alexander Scott at the British Museum was recommending immersing ancient wood figures in dilute mercuric chloride; and again in 1934, Plenderleith discusses the use of corrosive sublimate as a fungicide, though by then, it has to be said, he was describing it as a virulent

poison to be used only 'when all else fails'². For worm-eaten artefacts Plenderleith recommended sterilisation by heating the object to 60-70°C for at least an hour.³

To consolidate the fragile wood, Rogers used a mixture of vegetable gum and gelatine, applying it by injection, presumably using the beetle flight holes as points of entry. The vegetable gum he used may have been Gum Arabic or Gum Tragacanth. Both are natural polysaccharide gums and are soluble in water. Gum Arabic is certainly an excellent protective colloid, and for this reason it has often been used to stabilise emulsions or dispersions and as a thickening agent. Interestingly, Horie notes that its molecules can be cross-linked by, among other substances, gelatine⁴. It is doubtful, however, that Rogers was aware of the significance of this. Gum Arabic is still in regular use as a binding medium in water-colours and as an adhesive⁵.

¹ Horie, C V, *Materials for Conservation* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997), p143

² Plenderleith, H J, *The Preservation of Antiquities* (London: The Museum's Association, 1934), p.2

³ As 1 above, p.2

⁴ Horie, C V, *Materials for Conservation* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997), p.141

⁵ Masschelein-Kleiner, L, *Ancient Binding Media, Varnishes and Adhesives* (Rome: ICCROM, 1995) p.49

Gelatine is a collagen-based proteinous substance, a purified form of animal glue. The molecular configuration of gelatine allows it to pass easily and reversibly from a viscous solution to a firm state by simple cooling¹. It is applied in a warm water solution, and sets first by cooling and then by evaporation, resulting in substantial shrinkage. This is an advantage when consolidating flaking paint, for example, in that it pulls down the paint layer as it shrinks, but for wood this effect would have no real benefit. Gelatine solutions were widely used for consolidation and adhesion, and still are, but they are prone to biodegradation from mould growth, moisture and acidic or alkaline conditions. Traditionally they were often laced with corrosive sublimate as a fungicide, so the fact that this was already present in the wood may have helped preserve the gelatine.

Although Rogers' method is questionable from many standpoints (stability, reversibility etc); it is open to debate whether it is any more or less damaging than Alexander Scott's recommended method of strengthening ancient wooden artefacts with a celluloid solution (Cellulose Nitrate) - which was quickly realised to be a highly unstable material; or Plenderleith's practice of consolidating worm-eaten wood with Bakelite varnish, the advantage being, he writes, that this could be done before the sterilisation process of heating so that on baking, the artefact became tough and durable². The problems with Bakelite need little elaboration. By 1956, twenty years later, Plenderleith recommends immersion in a hot wax/resin bath as a consolidation method for wooden artefacts. Now, conservators have an entirely new family of consolidants, P(EMA/MA)s. David Luard, for example, consolidated the Gibbons carvings at Hampton court with a 5% solution of Paraloid B72 in Xylene³. Some now question the use of Paraloid because of the solvents required in its uses, but this simply illustrates the continuing evolution of the conservation profession.

Looking at the protective varnish that Rogers applied, this was made from resin dissolved in spirits of wine. Traditionally, the term 'spirit' was applied to any distilled volatile liquid⁴, so a distillate of wine would have been an alcohol of some description. It is not clear what resin he used - possibly shellac or mastic as both of these will dissolve in alcohol and both have disadvantages. Shellac forms films that are sensitive to water and that bloom in a humid environment. The films are shiny and adhesive, but become insoluble and darken with age⁵. Mastic films tend to be brittle and, because of this, were increasingly replaced by Dammar

¹ Masschelein-Kleiner, L, *Ancient Binding Media, Varnishes and Adhesives* (Rome: ICCROM, 1995) p.57

² Plenderleith, H J, *The Preservation of Antiquities* (London: The Museum's Association, 1934.) p.3

³ Luard, David, *The Conservation of the Grinling Gibbons Overmantel in the Queen's Closet at Hampton Court Palace*. *Conservation News*, 65, March 1998.

⁴ Gettens, R J and Stout, G L, *Painting Materials: A Short Encyclopaedia* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966) p.211

⁵ Masschelein-Kleiner, L, *Ancient Binding Media, Varnishes and Adhesives* (Rome: ICCROM, 1995) p.78

from the early nineteenth century, or alternatively mixed with drying oils¹. As Dammar does not dissolve in alcohol and as Rogers does not mention drying oil, it is less likely that he used this. An outstanding advantage of shellac, if he used this, is that it has been used for many years as a coating for wood and has, therefore, been thoroughly tried and tested.

Rogers' practice of replacing missing parts of carvings with inferior additions of his own has been touched upon previously. It is wrong, however, to cast aspersions without having considered whether this is any less ethical than, for example, the additions Tony Webb has been applying, as Master Carver to St Pauls during the restoration of the Grinling Gibbons'. He writes that new pieces were only added when supporting evidence was available from old photographs or where there was an identical pair or repeated pattern². Similarly, David Luard replaced missing sections of the carvings at Hampton Court during their restoration.³

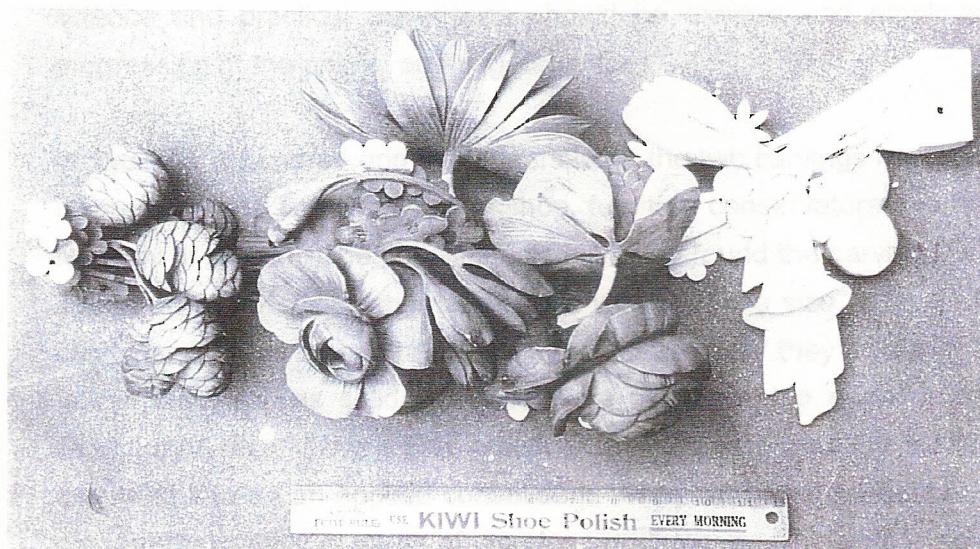


Fig 19: Work in progress on the restoration of the Grinling Gibbons' at St Pauls in 1998. Tony Webb replaces missing sections from the carvings with new lime-wood. (V&A Conservation Journal)

This is what was written about Rogers' work in 1856: 'Here and there of course a chipped-off fragment has to be supplied, but this only when such an addition is perceived to be absolutely necessary for the sake of completeness ... the addition is effected by the restorer with a wonderfully reverential regard for the obvious design of the broken masterpiece'⁴.

- ¹ Gettens, R J and Stout, G L, *Painting Materials: A Short Encyclopaedia* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966,) p.68
- ² Webb, Tony, *50 Years of Following in Grinling Gibbons' Tool Cuts*, V&A Conservation Journal, October 1998, p.8
- ³ Luard, David, *The Conservation of the Grinling Gibbons Overmantel in the Queen's Closet at Hampton Court Palace*. Conservation News, 65, March 1998, p.
- ⁴ Anonymous, *Grinling Gibbons' Carvings - Restored by W G Rogers, Cutting from Rogers' scrapbook* (Poss. The Art Journal, 1856?)

In summary, ethically, there are many areas in his restoration work where Rogers could be held to account; the experimental nature of his treatments with no apparent pre-testing; the lack of neutralising or removing harmful substances from work; the lack of preventative measures - wood-worm, for example, was obviously rife in the country houses. But, the reason for making the comparisons above is to illustrate that Rogers' restoration work was not necessarily any better or worse than other treatments of his day or later (often carried out by far more illustrious institutions such as the British Museum); and in one aspect it was less reprehensible, because he at least documented what he did.

Rogers maintained that to preserve was not necessarily to restore, and that restoration was sometimes worse than neglect. In 1856 he was quoted as saying 'Wherever a festoon or frieze or drop or truss by Gibbons exists, it demands, as public heir-loom, that chemical science and practical experience should be exerted and employed upon it to arrest the progression of the animal and vegetable foes'¹.

In 1987/88, a hundred and thirty years later, the two carvings in the Marble Hall at Belton were cleaned by The Tankerdale Workshop, furniture conservators and restorers (See Appendix iv for copy of report). The condition in which they found the carvings is interesting. What at first appeared to be a varnish was in fact a water-soluble size, a layer of thin animal glue. 'The carvings must have been totally immersed in this glue' they write in their report 'and the surplus left to drain off, as solidified drips were found on the ends of some pieces.'² This they describe as resembling a pale brown glue which was masking the lime-wood colour and they assumed it to be an applied consolidant. They also found a second type of residual coating, present particularly in areas of wood-worm damage. This was a gelatinous type of gum, and they concluded that this was applied as an initial consolidant to areas of heavy damage, before the entire carving was coated in glue. Whilst they were cleaning they found that a putty-like substance had been used during previous restoration to assemble the sections. They were able to clean all surfaces by softening the size with water and then brushing or scrapping it off.

Considering the carvings at Belton have been subjected to what Esterly described as Rogers' 'blighted touch', they have survived remarkably well. The wood had not been irreparably darkened, the gelatinous substance (possibly melting or degrading gelatine) was completely reversible and removed with water and the resin seems to have largely disappeared.

¹ .Anonymous, *Grinling Gibbons' Carvings - Restored by W G Rogers', The Art Journal, 1856, p.85*

² Hartley, John and Routh, Hugh, *Belton House, Marble Hall: Limewood Carvings in the Style of Grinling Gibbons and Edmund Carpenter: Report on Methods used in Cleaning and Conservation, 1987/88.*

Tankerdale also found no evidence of live or recent wood-worm. The left-hand carving in the Marble Hall at Belton, with its pale unfinished lime-wood, is now considered by Esterly himself to be the most faithful surviving example to the original tonal effect of Gibbons' carvings¹.

Fig 20: The Marble Hall at Belton today, showing the right-hand Carpenter carving. Note the slight marks on the top two panels to each side, further evidence of carvings having been removed.
(Tinniswood)



¹ Esterly, David, *Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum Publication, 1998), p.97

CONCLUSION

To answer the question: Did W G Rogers help or hinder the survival of these great house carvings, certain points need to be taken into consideration.

With the privilege of hindsight, plus modern techniques and ethics, there has been recent criticism of Rogers' work. But twenty-first century standards should not and cannot be applied to the nineteenth century. In his day Rogers would appear to have been working with the best equipment and materials and the backing of such illustrious organisations as the South Kensington Museum and the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Rogers undoubtedly did some disastrous things, but no more disastrous than later treatments. The concept of conservation, that the original object is intrinsically interesting and worth preserving, is relatively new, and for many years the techniques that could be applied were limited by the materials available. The basic range included starch pastes, plant gums and resins, protein binders of glue or albumin, beeswax and fats. These natural products were the staple for the repair of objects until the late nineteenth century, and they are still widely used. Traditional materials were applied in a traditional manner, frequently with no evaluation of their merits or consequences. As such, conservators have often used products whose suitability was untested¹ and publication of these treatments, plus assessments of their effects and reversal methods was rare. All this stands as testimony to the fact that conservation is a constantly evolving profession.

Esterly, as Rogers' main critic, is first and foremost an academic and wood-carver. He is not a conservator. He is also a purist whose beliefs surrounding the visual integrity of the carvings are somewhat idealistic and often impractical. Upon questioning, however, his unswerving opinion of Rogers seem to have mellowed. He writes:

I confess that I'm of two minds about Rogers, regretting his cavalier restoration practices but at the same time feeling that some of Gibbons' carving was in such a state when he got to it that almost anything to hold it together for another few generations may have been worth doing. And Rogers' remarks on the Trinity Library carvings are an important source. I have trouble reconciling some of his comments about the desirable surface appearance of Gibbons' carvings with his rather aggressive treatment in practice.²

¹ Horie, C.V, *Materials for Conservation* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1997) p.20.v

² Esterly, David, e-mail <esterly@ntcnet.com> (16 April 2001).

It seems that the final answer should be yes. Rogers undoubtedly prevented many carvings from crumbling away completely from attack by wood-worm. But perhaps of greater value was the publicity he bestowed upon these carvings, so raising their profile and bringing them out of a long period in the doldrums. Whatever he may be accused of, Rogers remained faithful to the vision of Grinling Gibbons at a time when fashion was dictating that carvings should be heavy, dark and shining.

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BL	British Library	CH	Chatsworth House Archives
CL	Country Life Picture Library	LA	Lincolnshire Archives
LC	Luard Conservation	LGU	London Guildhall University Library
NAL	National Art Library	NTC	National Trust Conservation Dept
NTPL	National Trust Picture Library	PE	Paul Ellis
RIBA	Royal Institute of British Architects Library and Archives	WGRP	William Gibbs Rogers papers
		NTRO	National Trust Regional Office

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Appendix i)

Transcript of hand-written letter from C T Dickens

Belton House
Grantham
Sep 22, 1855

Sir,

There is some fine carving here (Lord Brownlow's) by Gibbons but it is in a bad state. Lady Marion Alford is anxious to have your opinion on it as to its preservation, and wishes to know if you could come down to see it. It is much worm eaten.

The Great Northern is direct here and it is only 2 miles from the Grantham Station.

Yours
C T Dickens

The [? woman] Chapel Chatsworth
with Mr Cottingham

at a meeting by appointment on the
28 of June to see the finish of the fixing
of the carved work in the chapel, we had
a running conversation as to the
rearranging of the carvings, when it
was proposed that I should write down
the result of my own experience in
these matters, so that other opinions
might be taken before finally
deciding, as it was apprehended [underlined in red]
that varnishing would not only
darken the walls too much, but
would also destroy the sweet
scent of the cedar —

on the carving being removed

Draft of a Report on the cedar walls
of the Chapel Chatsworth
sent to this house July 6 1866
and to Lady Louisa Egerton

by W G Rogers —————

several experiments were tried,
when I first discovered that all
the cedar wood has been
thickly varnished with spirit
varnish, and was most likely
oiled first, it was further
evident by the stain marks
on the wood, that it had been
prepared in this way before
the carvings had been fixed
up. Therefore the privilege
was reserved for me to draw
out the pins, and remove
the fastenings of the old
carvers of the time -

I found the varnish was
completely polished and the
dead gum rub'd off in a

[underlined in red]

2

white powder - was to
remove this thick coating
without injury to the
fine cedar was the first
consideration - we know
an alkali would effectually
answer, but that would
raise the grain of the wood
and dye it a disagreeable
red colour, something like
the Tannin [sic] stain which is
[?]ousing out of the oak paneling
and staining ^{the} white [?] fungus on
the carvings in the state rooms
to the disagreeable Brown Red
which disfigures all this very
beautiful work —

3

I therefore proposed to use spirits of wine, which won't mix with the gum in its decay'd state, and wash away the accumulated dirt of centuries, this plan was adopted, and liberally used to the extent of 16 gallons, which brought away large quantities of dark matter - it is now left perfectly clean, having been scraped and dug out'd with great care by the workmen of the house —

no safe judgment could be found for the future treatment of the walls until the bright

[underlined in red]

[" " "]

gold coloured carving had been fix'd - and now the cloudy stain on the larger panels, and the dry deadness of the old cedar looks woody and unsatisfactory, such is the sickly paleness of walls generally, and particularly in the gallery when seen from the steps of the Altar that the outline of the masses of flower work in the alcove can hardly be made out, and the rich box wood colour looks black and confused for want of a darker and more decided back ground to throw them up —

at the time of the erection the
Pineal cedar (few such in the wood)
was more pink and bright, and
the linetree carving was a
light creamy brown - when
then it was considered proper
to varnish the cedar, first for
artistic effect to bring out
the colour, and especially to
preserve and protect a wood
so tender and delicate as
the cedar — and — that
all this has been removed, the
naked wood is exposed to the
influence of heat - and damp
quite unprotected, — the
consequences I may anticipate
will be that a little damp may
open the surface grain, of
dust will sink in and cling to it

[underlined in red]

6

soon destroying what of the
colour is left, even the constant
dusting down will be dangerous
to a wood so delicate as cedar
unless protected with a
shield of varnish —
with all these considerations
the only safe and proper
treatment will be to give
it a coat of clear fine
linseed oil, and that
before the changing atmos-
-phere has affected the
surface (which is at
present so pure and soft)
- and then to give it a
coat of thin spirit varnish

[parentheses only added
in red]

7

and if that does not look solid, to give it another I say thin, as a stout coat may float unevenly —

This proposed plan will bring out the rich colors of the wood as in the specimen I did on pilaster No 7 — on no account to permit the wood to be tampered with by using trowel or a sise, it will undo all the great good which has been done, and prevent any newishing good to be done in the future.

8

11 I mention this to prevent mischief as one of the people proposed to wash the walls with some of the chloride of Mercury I had brought with me, if that had been attempted, in a short [? time - word omitted] the metal would [underlined in red]

come out as if the Raids had been using the black lead wash to the walls —

Strangers to the nature of the materials used and their effect should not be trusted —

W. G. Rogers

July 28 - 1866

Ralph Snowd Esq

Transcript of copy letter from G A Lowe, Belton

Belton, 27th March 1863

Sir,

In answer to yours of the 25th inst., received this morning, I am glad to inform you there is never any appearance of worm dust from the very beautiful carvings, by Gibbon, since you preserved it some years back. The house-joiner, who has the dusting of it, says he has never seen the slightest sign of any worm dust whenever he has cleaned them, but before the carving was preserved it used to lay thick on the chimney shelves and below.

I have examined the whole this morning and find it quite clean and strong to the touch, and from the general appearance, I should say there is not one live worm in the whole of the carving; but before it was preserved by you, no doubt from the various parts broken, there must have been thousands. It is a very good thing the destruction is stopped, so that such a beautiful pieces of work may be left for years to come.

I remain, Sir,

Yours very truly,

(signed) G A LOWE

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MARBLE HALL

Limewood Carvings in the style of
Grinling Gibbons and Edmund Carpenter

* * * * *

REPORT ON METHODS USED IN CLEANING AND CONSERVATION

This report follows our original proposals for cleaning the carvings and the completion of the conservation work.

Introduction

Our first proposals were made after a comparatively limited trial cleaning of the carvings. Subsequently we discovered different techniques in cleaning, and that the surfaces were not quite as we had assumed.

What had initially appeared to be varnish was in fact mostly a water soluble size and the only areas that were covered with an oil based varnish were a few highlights and the groups of fish on either side of the right hand overmantel.

The water soluble size appeared to be of two different types. Firstly, the coating over the whole surface was a layer of thin animal glue. The carvings must have been totally immersed in this glue and the surplus left to drain off, as solidified drips were found on the ends of some pieces. This pale brown glue coating had the effect of masking the variations in surface colour of the limewood and was also used, we assume, as a consolidant. The other water soluble substance that we found was a gelatinous type of gum. This was in the woodworm damaged sections and was presumably used as a consolidant to strengthen these weak areas, before the final coating.

After the initial stages of cleaning it was found that there were a lot of paint splashes and overbrushings left by many previous hall decorators. These areas had been previously hidden by over-painting with brown paint.

Method used to clean and conserve carvings

After unpacking, the superficial dirt and dust was removed from the surface by the use of a vacuum cleaner and soft brush for the loose dust and by swabbing with white spirit for the greasy soot deposits. The surface finish remaining was mostly water soluble.

After trials, we found that with care, the old size could be removed with water and that the adverse effects were minimal. Some glued joints did come apart and some of the larger sections did swell slightly; but with care taken not to saturate the wood and with controlled drying, we concluded that this was the best method of cleaning the surface.

Dry stripping was also tried. This involved the physical removal of the glue size with scrapers and blades. Although quite effective on smooth accessible surfaces it was difficult to remove the size in areas where the grain was adverse of the carving intricate. This method however was found to be the most practical for the removal of paint deposits.

After the initial cleaning we then mist sprayed the surface with water from a garden sprayer which softened the size. Following this, various brushes including small soft toothbrushes were used to remove the film, rinsing with fresh water as necessary. It was found that the smooth areas cleaned up quite easily but the rougher undercut and less accessible areas were quite stubborn. Some of these deposits could be removed manually whilst the surface was still damp; but as it dried out, there was still a lot of size and dirt engrained in the wood. Further manual cleaning did remove this but was extremely time consuming especially in the intricate areas. This was the method that we used to start with, but we soon wondered if there could be any quicker and more efficient technique.

We thought that there could be some piece of dental equipment that might help and after contacting various dentists and dental suppliers we heard of the "Dentsply/Cavitron" "Prophy Jet" unit. This dental instrument is used to remove plaque and stains from teeth, but has also been used for some years in the conservation and cleaning of metal and stonework. It is described as an airpolishing unit and consists of a control box, a foot control, and a handpiece. The handpiece sprays a controlled jet of water, with a mixture of air and a variable amount of very fine bicarbonate of soda. This spray is quite gentle but should be used with care on delicate surfaces. We had the machine on trial and were so encouraged by the results that we bought one.

The results that we achieved with this unit were very good, giving a much cleaner finish than could possibly have been obtained by manual cleaning. We were initially wary of its

abrasive power, but found that by regulating the powder to a minimum and by spraying obliquely to the surface the wood was undamaged. It was only used in areas that were difficult to reach with a brush.

After all the cleaning with water, the sections were rinsed to remove all the loose deposits of size and any bicarbonate of soda that remained. They were then dried carefully and thoroughly.

Inevitably during the cleaning, a lot of old repairs and scotch glued joints came apart, and we had dismantled some of the larger sections into smaller components for ease of cleaning. This left us with hundreds of pieces, so great care had to be taken to record where each piece came from.

As the pieces dried, uncleaned areas that had been missed became apparent. These were cleaned manually at the same time as the paint deposits were removed.

Once the wood was dry we then reassembled the carvings, regluing with hot scotch glue and low viscosity epoxy resin where appropriate. The scotch glue was used for joints that may need to be dismantled in the future, and the epoxy resin for breaks and delicate assemblies that needed strength.

Some of the sections were badly eaten by woodworm leaving them quite frail. We found that consolidating these with "Xylamon" woodworm consolidant darkened the surface and so with the other worries of using such resins we only used it on a few of the frailest areas.

We found that after cleaning, the woodworm flight holes stood out as black spots against the pale limewood. This looked very unsightly so we decided to fill these holes to blend with their surroundings. To fill them, we made very small dowels of limewood which were trimmed to the size of the woodworm holes, pushed into the holes with a spot of blue and cut flush with the surface. This was obviously time consuming but helped immensely with the finished visual appearance of the carvings.

During previous restorations a lot of a putty-like substance was used in the assembly of the compositions. This was left, as it was part of the structure. There are also many pieces that have been lost from the carvings over the years and these we did not replace. The only pieces of new limewood that we did use were in places where it was necessary for structural purposes. Reassembly was greatly aided by the photographs taken before dismantling.

The surface colour of each section varies slightly. This is due to the differing ages of the pieces, from previous restorations

and replacements. We did not attempt to change the colour and think that this slight variation gives depth and relief to the carvings.

After the cleaning work was completed, the moisture content of the wood was checked and the highest reading was about 14%. We shall check the levels again in a few months time.

No active woodworm was found in the carvings, but as a precaution the backs of the carvings were treated with Rentokil woodworm fluid.

Returning Carvings to Belton

After the completion of the conservation work, the carvings were returned to the house and rehung on the wall in the exact positions that they were originally. They were fastened with brass screws through the holes of the original fixings. The shiny brass heads of the screws were touched in with acrylic paint to match the limewood.

Summary

Every section of the carvings was photographed in detail before and after the conservation work. These photographs (transparencies) show clearly the variations of the surface finish and their condition. Although it was obvious that these carvings had been cleaned and restored many times over the centuries, we were aware that there might still be traces of some original finish in the interstices; we did not find any during cleaning and therefore assume that they were originally left as bare wood.

We have therefore left the surface as bare wood with no finish. We shall monitor any dust and dirt deposits in the future, and assume that these will be easily removed with a soft brush and vacuum cleaner.

This brief report follows what was a time-consuming, but very satisfying project (about 1,750 man hours). We could have spent much longer cleaning the details of the carvings but were restricted by time and budget. We think, however, that the final appearance is very satisfactory and should remain so for many years to come.

John Hartley


Hugh Routh