



Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester
Results of Architectural Paint
Research

28/10/2025

Project Summary

Project	Paint analysis at Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester
Nature of Project	Architectural Paint Research to selected exterior railings to inform redecoration as part of renovation of the boundary wall.
List Entry Number	1246569
Listing Date:	03-Oct-1974
Listing ID	Grade II
National grid reference	SJ 84868 95969
Address of building	Whitworth Gallery Oxford Road Manchester
Name and Address of Conservator	Hirst Conservation Limited Laughton, Sleaford Lincolnshire NG34 0HE
Name and Address of Client:	M C Construction 6 Oldfield Road Salford M5 4WB
Date of Site visit	September 2025
Author(s) and Date of Investigative Report	Charlotte Owen
Methods Employed	Cross sectional analysis; microchemical spot tests.

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Fine Art Conservators and Historic Building Consultants
Registered Office: Laughton Hall Farmhouse, Laughton, Sleaford Lincolnshire NG34 0HE
Company No. 09797372 England - VAT Registration No: 425 6915 39*

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1. Scope of Research

This report discusses the results of architectural paint research to the railings to the boundary wall to the south elevation of The Whitworth Art Gallery, Oxford Road, Manchester. The research was undertaken at the request of Quadriga Limited, Manchester through its site agent M C Construction.

The aim of this programme of research is to understand the nature of applied decoration to the railings as part of the renovation works to the wall.

Sampling was undertaken by Charlotte Owen of Hirst Conservation in September 2025 with safe access provided by the contractor.

No independent archive research has been undertaken as part of this study. Any information or archival images contained in the report has been obtained through limited internet searches. All details are listed in the bibliography in section 9.

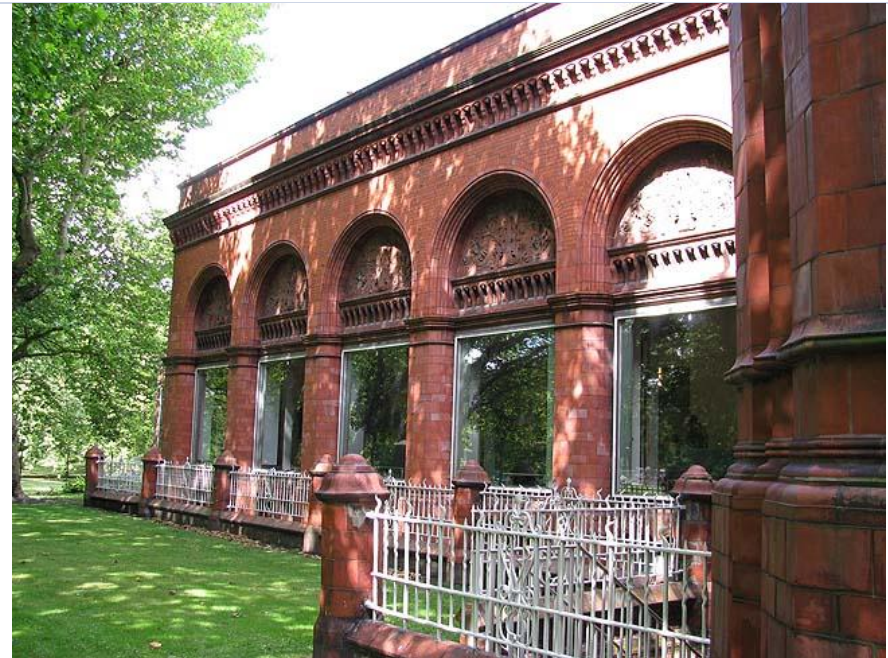


Figure 1: south elevation of gallery showing railings before the gallery extension c.2016 (Manchester History, 2010)

2. Definitions of the Aims of the Project, Discussions of the Research Strategy and Details of the Methodology

2.1. Aims and Objectives of Paint Sampling

The aims of architectural paint research are:

- To understand the original design intention, where possible.
- To inform the development of a coherent colour palette for redecoration.
- To inform the ongoing conservation and maintenance of the site

2.2. Collection of Paint Samples

Samples were taken using mechanical means using a small chisel and hammer or scalpel, given individual reference codes and the sample sites recorded photographically and diagrammatically (these are illustrated in Section 6).

2.3. Microscopic Assessment of Samples

The samples were mounted in clear casting resin and polished to provide a cross section through the paint layers. Assessment at 50x, 100x & 200x magnification in incidental light allowed the layer structure to be assessed. The majority of the sample images have been assessed in darkfield mode with additional analysis and image capture undertaken at 500x magnification in brightfield mode. In addition, fluorescence microscopy was employed to identify the basic stratigraphy of paint schemes and to establish basic composition of paint films.¹

Assessment of samples in incidental light and UV fluorescence allows each scheme to be identified though dirt films, 'oiling out' layers, fading of upper surfaces of films and variations in fluorescence properties.

2.4. Micro-chemical Analysis of Paint Films

Further investigation of key layers was achieved by stain test and simple chemical techniques (Plesters, 1956)² This was undertaken in order to understand the basic composition of the layers.

¹ Microscope used was a Nikon Eclipse LV150NL stand with LV-UEP12 Universal EpiFL-Illuminator 2. Visible & UV light was produced by CoolLED pE-300 Ultra pE-300-UT-D-SB-27E-30(3200k). UV-2A FL Filter cube, Excitation wavelength range: 390-490nm, Splitting mirror :510nm, Absorption wavelength: 515nm

² Plesters, Joyce. Cross-sections and chemical analysis of paint samples *Studies in Conservation*, (Volume 02, pp 110-157, 1956)

Assessment for lead content was undertaken on samples in the laboratory. Analysis was limited to microchemical 'Spot' tests using dilute sodium sulphide (Na_2S).

2.5. Advanced Analysis

No advanced analysis has been included in the scope of works.

2.6. In-situ Investigation

Where employed, colour readings are taken using a handheld colour measurement tool³ and are adjusted slightly by eye to take into account the yellowing and greying of paint films over time

Any intention to recreate colour schemes should make use of colour swatches or test panels prior to final colour scheme selection as any historic colours applied at different periods will have been seen when the colour of surrounding masonry was likely to be different from the existing appearance. Therefore, the choice of colour schemes should take into account the colour changes to the building to ensure an appropriate colour palette is selected.

³ NCS Colour Scan 2.0, which can give colour translation details in LRV D65 10°, CIE Lab D65 10°, RGB D65 2°, Adobe RGB D65 2° and CMYK Euro. Cites the nearest NCS colour reference and can also indicate sheen/gloss.

3. History and Context

3.1. Archive material

No independent archive research has been commissioned as part of these works and all material herein contained has been provided by the client / their agent or through appraisal on material available through internet searches. Should any further information be provided then Hirst Conservation reserves the right to reappraise the findings of the survey and make appropriate revisions to the results.

The following section contains information associated with the development of the museum to provide context to the findings of the analysis. The information is not intended as an archive study and where errors are noted, the authors accept this material is for context only to discuss chronological changes to the building in relation to the changes in paint media found in the samples.

The details of any documents or web sources are listed in Section 9 – Bibliography.

3.2. Brief History of Building

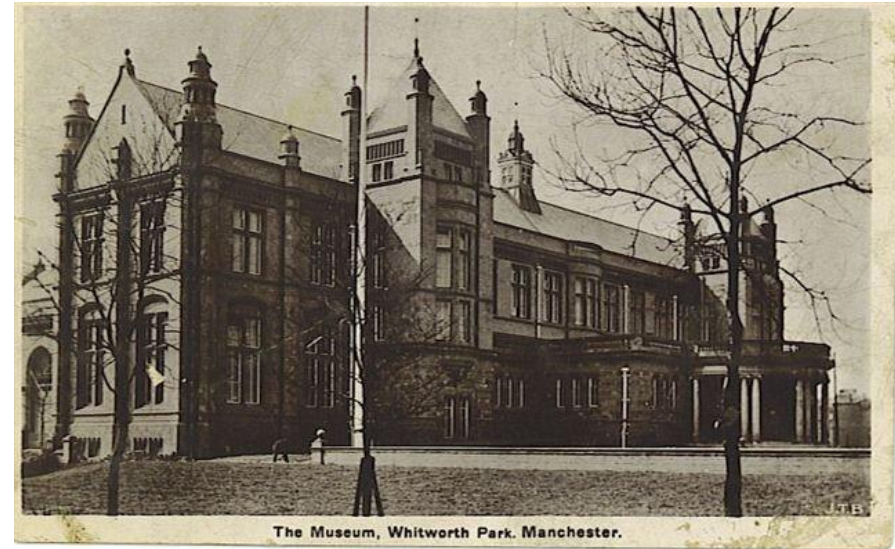


Figure 2: The 1908 frontage of The Museum Whitworth Park, Manchester (Friends of Whitworth Park, 2014)

Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester



Figure 3: site of Whitworth Park in 1848 (Friends of Whitworth Park, 2014)



Figure 4: Plan of Whitworth Park in 1907 (Friends of Whitworth Park, 2014) with approximate location where railings are located.



Figure 5: 2006 plan of the park showing loss of paths and features (Friends of Whitworth Park, 2014)



Figure 6: Vision 2016 from the 2011-15 Park Management Plan (Friends of Whitworth Park, 2014)



Figure 7: the extension c.2016 with the railings and boundary wall (Manchester History, 2010)

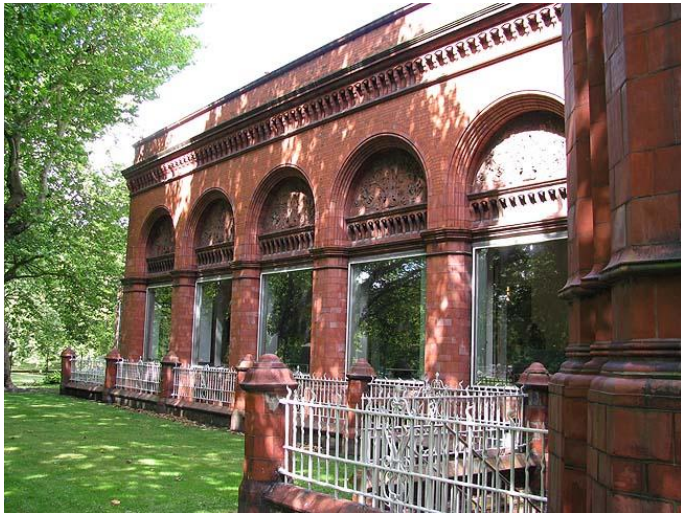


Figure 8: Detail of the museum before the extension (pre 2014) (Manchester History, 2010)

The limited archive information surrounding the development of this area of the park and gallery makes little reference to the insertion of a parapet wall or the addition of railings. The 1907 plan of Whitworth Park shown in Figure 4 might suggest that the railings were not yet a feature as house had not yet been modified. Friends of Whitworth Park note that the rear of Grove House was demolished to make way for new galleries between 1892 – 1898. The park was subsequently leased to the council 1904 with the Whitworth Institute retaining Grove House and approximately 2 acres of land, it is possible that the retaining wall and railing erected therefore sometime between 1892 – 1904 but this covers a number of years.

However, there is also mention of the erection of a fence to demark the park managed by the council and the institute, this appears to have erected c.1910 though the date is not specified exactly. These railings were later removed in 2009.

Evidence would therefore suggest that the railings were installed sometime between 1892 and 1910 which is an 18-year period. It would be interesting to narrow this down slightly. An aerial photograph shown in the Friends of Whitworth Park shows the gallery and park in 1926 and the footprint of the building would suggest the railings have been installed by this point.

Date	Event
1884	Death of Edmund Crompton-Potter – Grove House, Rusholme House and Potters Field for sale
1887	Death of Sir Joseph Whitworth – Whitworth Trust purchased Crompton-Potter lands Demolition of Rusholme House
1890	Whitworth Institute opened Whitworth Park
1891	Architectural competition to rebuild Grove House as an art gallery
1892-98	Rear of Grove House demolished to make way for new galleries
1904	Park was leased to council for 999 years Terms of lease included erection of boundary fence
1908	Grove house demolished and Whitworth Institute completed
1950s	Post war impact of housing changes resulted in losses of structures within the park (bandstand etc)
1958	Gallery acquired by university Remodelling of the interior including inserting large windows into wall of south gallery
1968	Remodelled interior formally opened
2004	Proposals agreed for extension to the gallery
2005	Friends of Whitworth Park formed
2006	Improvements to fencing, gates and cycle path resurfacing as part of revitalisation of the park.
2009	Gallery fence removed to reconnect the gallery to the park
2010	New fence and gates erected to Oxford Road perimeter
2013	Gallery closed for building extension
2025	External wall repair work

Table 1: summary of relevant history

4. Railings

4.1.1. Overview

At the time of the site visit the railings and parapet wall were partially dismantled with two sections of railing to the west and eastern side of the south elevation accessible.

The railings are currently painted a pale grey colour and the condition of the existing paint finishes is poor as illustrated in the image below.



Figure 9: example of the poor condition of the paint finish to the railings as seen during site survey

Evidence of a darker paint finish was noted to areas of failing paint and further fractures and delamination was noted.



Figure 10: evidence of underlying darker grey paint finish

Whilst there were some areas where the underlying metal substrate was exposed due to the loss of coatings, this appeared to be minimal therefore the paint finishes are continuing to protect the metal substrate, albeit in a lesser capacity.

Some damage / loss was noted to the section of railing to the west end of the parapet wall with loss or deformed sections of enrichment recorded.

The railings appear to have been fixed into the base of the parapet wall with lead casings with brackets set into the pillars to support vertical stability.

Four samples were taken from different sections of the western end of the railings.

A section of the railing was also still in situ to the eastern end of the parapet wall, adjacent to the staircase that is understood to form part of the fire escape installed c.1980s (not verified).



Figure 11: image of the east end railings with later fire escape behind

To the eastern end of the retaining wall is a second run of railings of the same design, as can be seen in Figure 11. A number of samples were taken from different facets to this area of railings and also included a limited number from the fire access railing inserted behind. These railings are plain in design but painted in the same colour as the decorative railings to the wall.

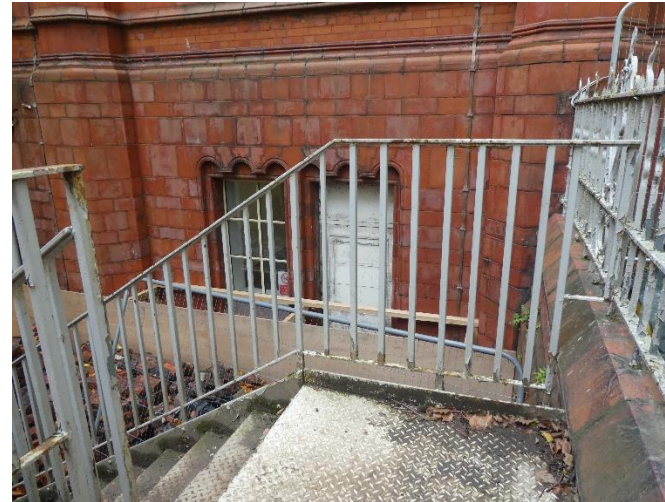


Figure 12: detail of the fire escape staircase railings added behind the parapet wall.

4.1.2. Discussion of results

Initial site inspection of sample location sites suggested that there was evidence of a red underlying paint scheme suggesting that the railings may have been painted in a similar colour to the building. However, this was not apparent from the sample analysis where photomicrographs revealed the use of a number of green colour schemes before changing to black prior to the adoption of a grey colour scheme.

There are seven initial green colour schemes to the railings with a slight variation noted between some of the schemes. The earliest scheme would suggest the use of Invisible Green made popular in the nineteenth century by Humphrey Repton. The colour was used to railings and gates in public parks as it allowed the features to blend into the appearance of

the vegetation and not in contrast to it. Invisible green is made from using Prussian Blue and Chrome Yellow. There are three schemes of a dark, dull green seen to the sample as indicated in the photomicrograph in Figure 13. Microchemical spot tests confirmed the presence of lead but did not confirm the presence of Chrome Yellow in these initial paint films.

These darker initial schemes were followed by a brighter green topcoat applied over a grey undercoat as indicated by the green arrow (right). This paint film indicated the presence of Chrome Yellow during microchemical stain tests where a reaction was also seen to two other schemes in this sample confirming the likely use of Invisible or Brunswick Green. Further tests would be required to determine the exact composition of the initial dark green schemes. These earlier topcoats were slightly affected by a dilute alkali solution but not with sufficient enough reaction to determine the combination of pigments use.

Following the initial, repeated use of green colour scheme to the railings, most of which were applied in lead paints the is a chance to the use of black. This is only seen in one scheme and, when combined with the changes in paint media when viewed under UV light, would suggest the use of modern paint film such as oil alkyd-based paint. Such paints were only commercially available from the 1950s, this change in colour may therefore also coincide with the taking over the gallery by the university following the changing use of the park.

Following the single black colour scheme, the railings have repeatedly been painted a grey colour as can be seen in the upper section of the photomicrograph shown in Figure 13.

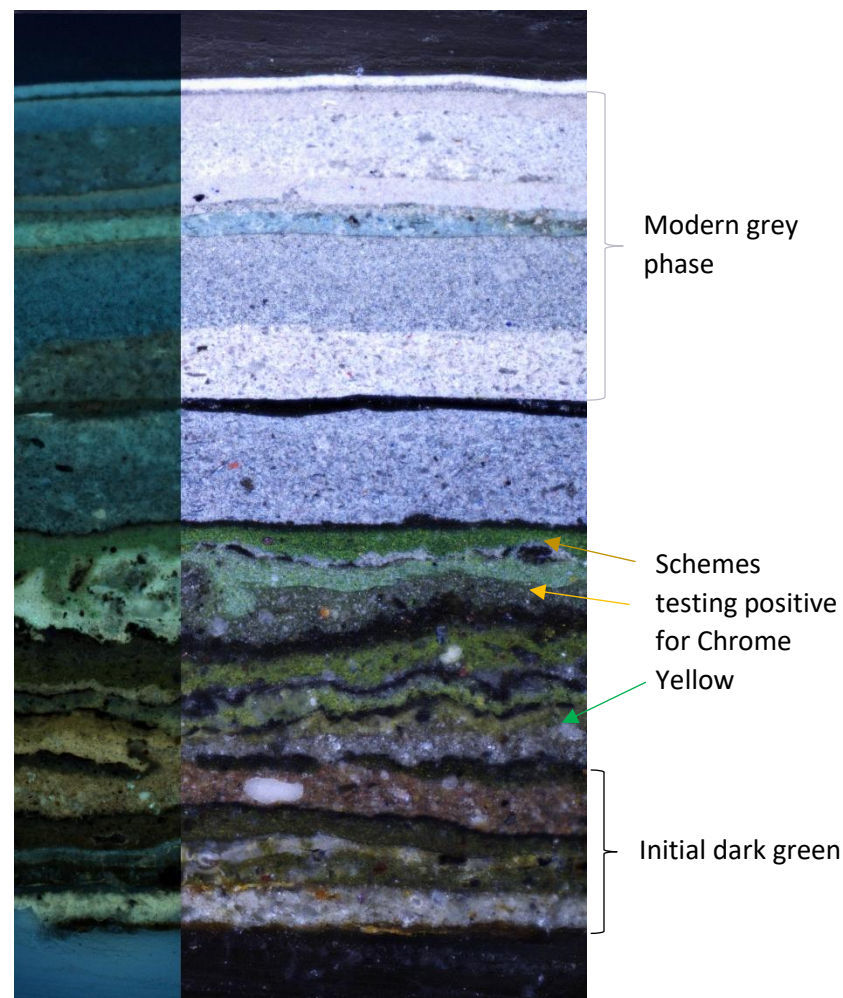


Figure 13: sample 01B (200x mag) with inset UV image

The sample taken from the fire exit access staircase can be seen over the page and also shows the repeated use of a grey colour. The two

red/orange paint films are primers and a silver metallic paint will also act as a primer. There is no lead detected in these paint films.

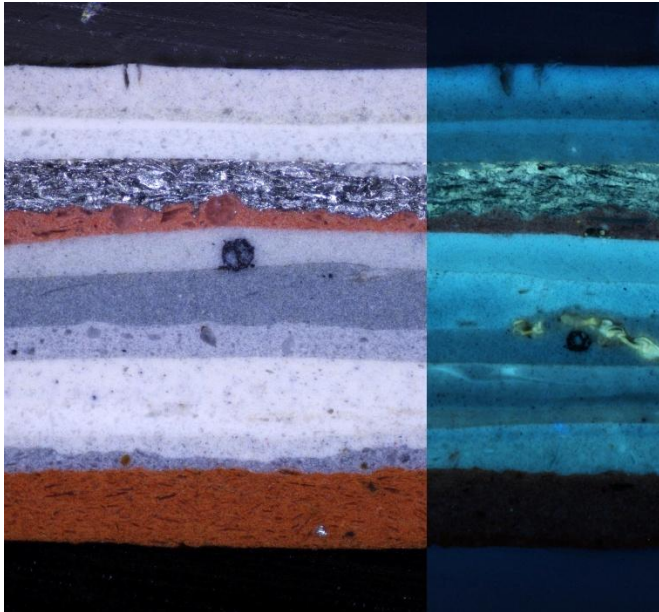


Figure 14: Sample 09A (200x mag) with inset UV image

A comparison of sample 09 from the new section of railing to a sample from an older section shows the correlation between the paint films. What this comparison shows is that there is likely to have been a loss of some schemes perhaps through the failure of the paint and rubbing to a sound surface prior to redecoration. It is not known when the fire exit staircase railings were installed. The lack of later paint films in sample 08 doesn't suggest this section was not painted since the railings were installed but merely that some upper paint films are missing.

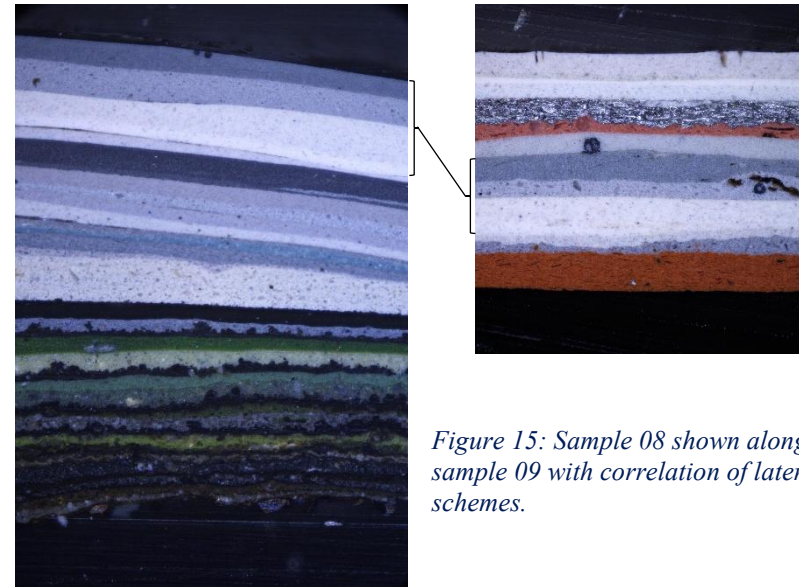


Figure 15: Sample 08 shown alongside sample 09 with correlation of later schemes.

A sample taken from the eastern end of the railings contained further evidence to suggest that the railings were initially painted green and not red/terracotta to match the wall with a red lead pigmented paint film seen beneath the grey preparatory coat in sample 05 (overleaf).



Figure 16: Sample 05B (200x mag) showing use of red lead primer beneath the grey undercoat.

If the railings were installed between 1892 and 1910 this would roughly make them 133 years old, as a maximum. The initial treatment would suggest repeated use of green over a 58-year period, roughly redecoration every 8 years or so. This would not be unreasonable also given the likely gap around the two World Wars when redecoration was likely to be less significant, especially with Manchester being a major city subject to attack during the Blitz.

Following the Second World War there appears to be seven schemes of decoration including the one black colour. This would suggest redecoration approximately every 10 years, although the archive review would suggest that the years between 1950s – 2005 were a struggle for the park with loss of original features such as the bandstand and pond. It would therefore not be unreasonable to suggest that this was not a focus of maintenance both the park and gallery managers.

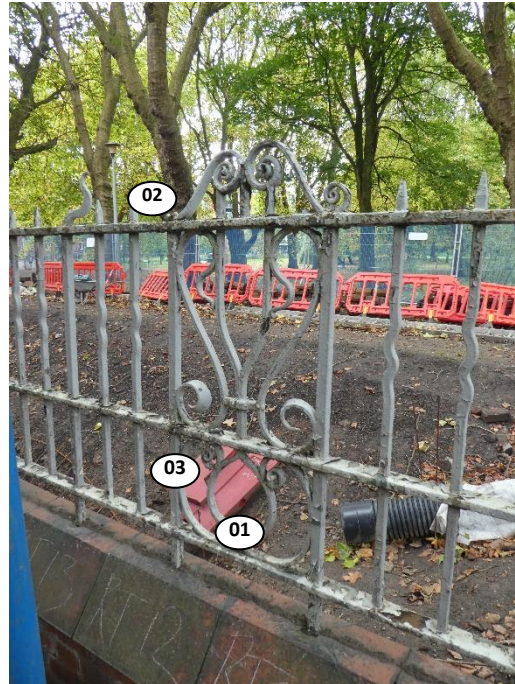
4.1.3. Recorded Schemes

Following a review of the results and discussion with the client a suitable fragment of unmounted sample was mounted in the laboratory to enable mechanical exposure of the paint layers to allow for the recording of the earliest paint schemes. These exposure windows are small and generally seen under artificial light therefore some colour adjustment is undertaken to account for the natural aging of historic paint films.

The recorded colour references are shown in section 7.3 Colour Tests Prior to Redecoration along with a basic colour presentation of the railings.

5. Sample Locations

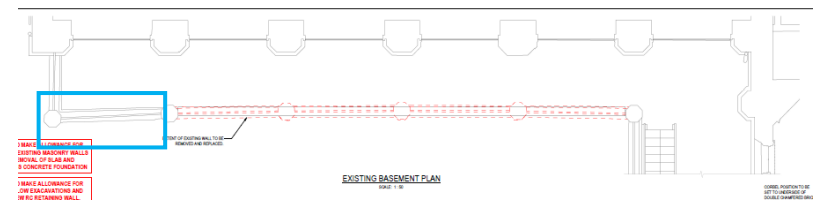
5.1. South elevation: west



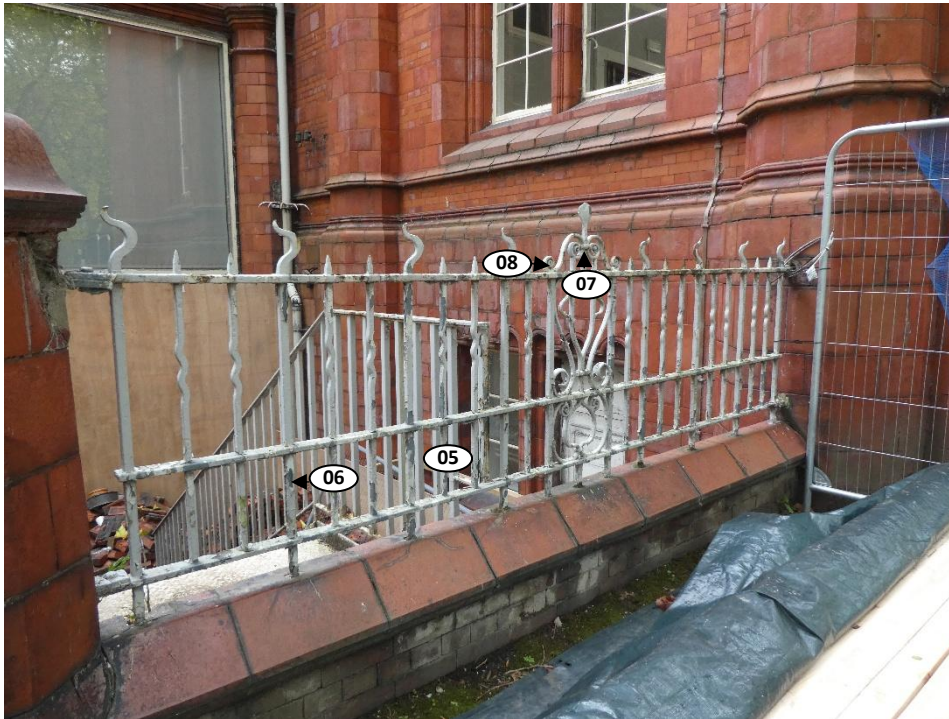
Sample locations:

- 01 – southwest, long length of railing, base of enrichment
- 02 – southwest, long length of railing, top of enrichment, scroll
- 03 – southwest, long length of railing, lower section of enrichment, bracket junction
- 04 – southwest, long length of railing, base of dog bar

Items in bold have been selected for analysis



5.2. South elevation: east

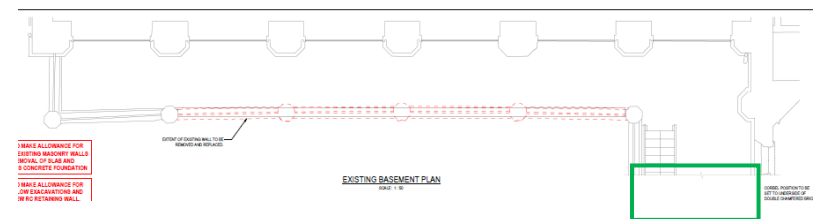


Sample locations:

- 05 – southeast short length of railing, dog bar, twisted**
- 06 – southeast short length of railing, dog bar, primary**
- 07 – southeast short length of railing, enrichment, upper, bracket**
- 08 – southeast short length of railing, enrichment, scroll**

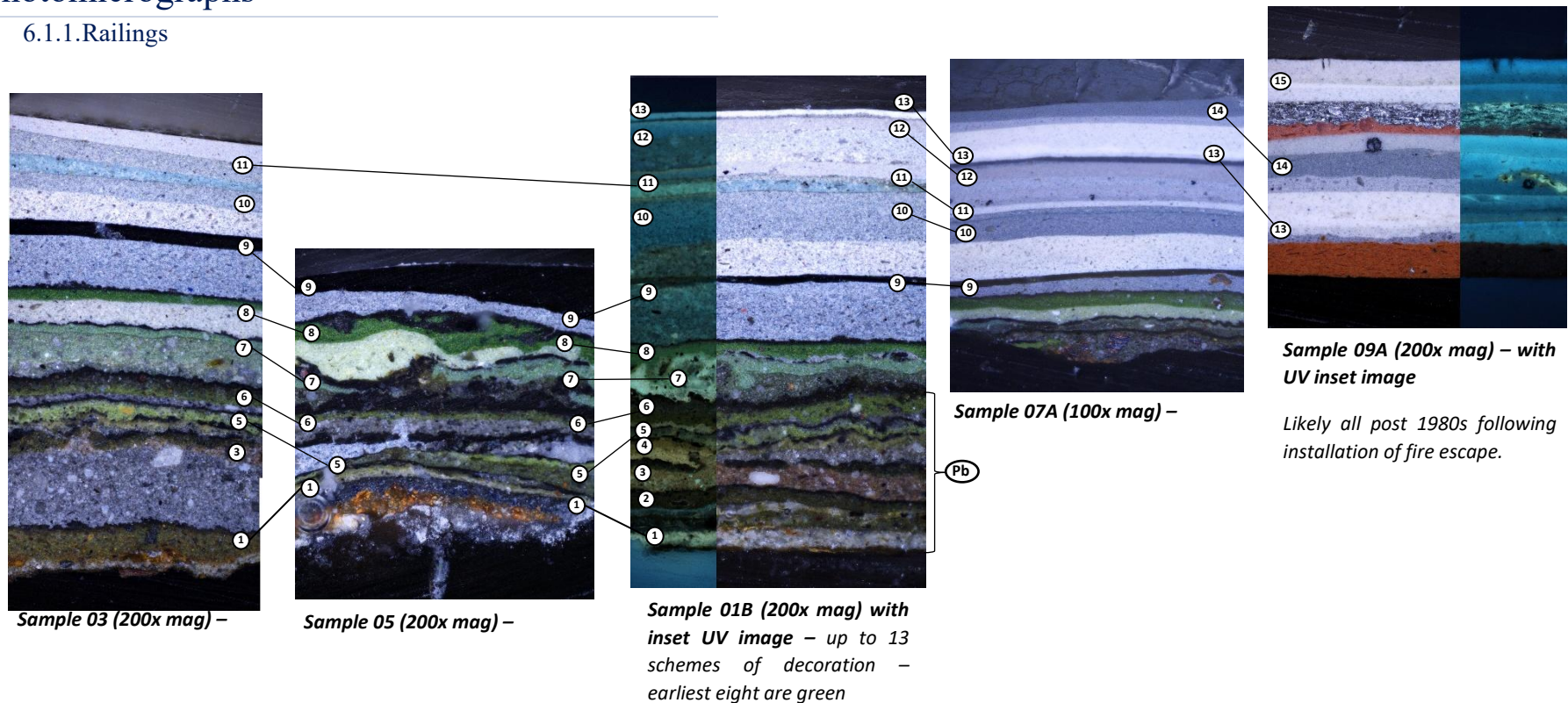
- 09 – southeast railings to staircase, vertical dog bar (straight)**

Items in bold have been selected for analysis



6. Photomicrographs

6.1.1. Railings



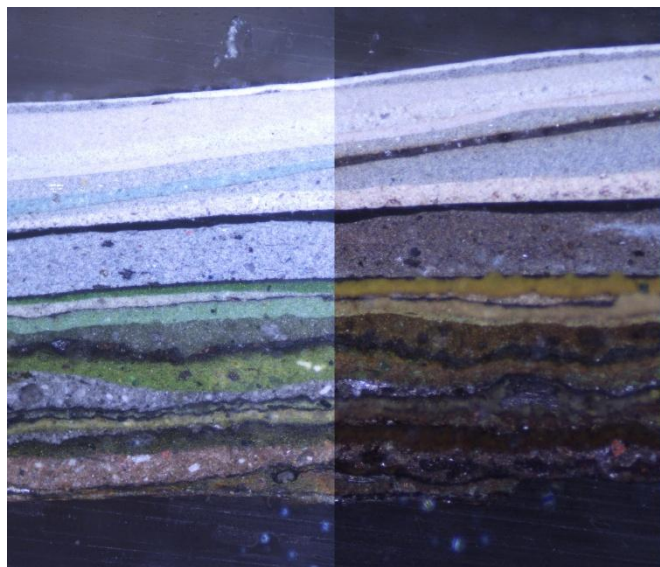
Initial observations:

- Evidence in the region of 15 schemes of decoration with the earliest schemes applied in shades of green (schemes 01 – 08), the earliest of which have been applied in lead-based oil paints (Pb).
- Colour schemes then change from approximately scheme 9 to shades of grey, it is likely that given the changes in paint media that this will correspond to the period after the Second World War / post 1950s.
- The set of railings installed in the 1980s following the installation of the fire exit indicates in the region of three phases of decoration have been applied since this period. Due to the observed failure of the paint films in-situ then there is some disparity between the samples associated with this degradation.

Key

- ① Number of scheme(s)
- Links decorative scheme
- Pb Lead-based oil paint scheme(s)
- S Substrate

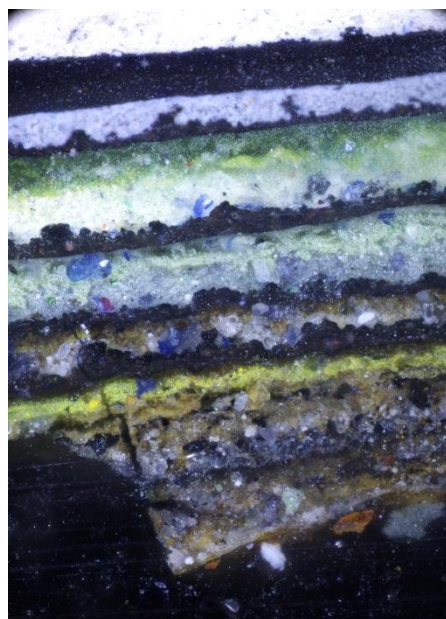
6.1.2. Microchemical stain tests:



Sample 01: railings, western end

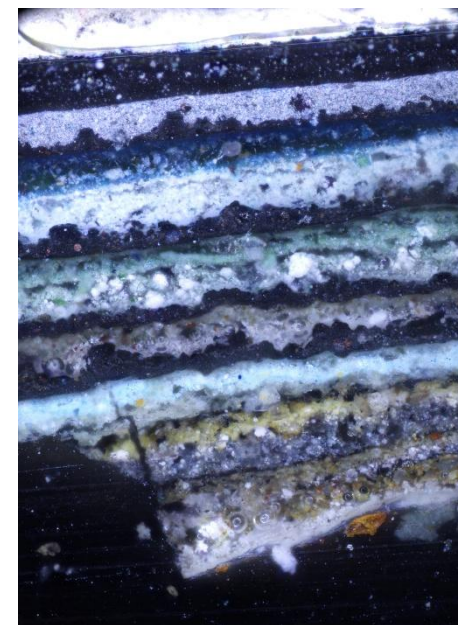
*Pretest image (left) following test for lead (right).
Positive reaction shows as darkening of paint films to black/brown.*

Change from green to yellow also confirms presence of lead based pigment.



Sample 08- east elevation railing.

Following application of alkali solution.



Sample 08 – east elevation railing:
following application of acidic solution.

These spot tests are used to aid likely identification of pigments to understand chronological development of a paint.

The tests indicate the presence of lead chromate-based pigments in the green paint films, this indicates the paint films must post-date the development of lead chromate in the early nineteenth century.

7. Recommendations

7.1. Appropriate Redecoration Strategy

A number of areas contained failing paint films and all areas of flaking paint should be removed prior to redecoration. Whilst every effort should be made to retain paint archaeology suitable preparation is required to ensure appropriate bonding of the paint films, especially given the elevated nature of the facets and any future access limitations.

If it is possible to retain some paint archaeology prior to redecoration following removal of failing paint films, this ensures physical evidence is retained should any existing research be lost.

It would be beneficial for location of retained schemes to be marked onto drawings to ensure these areas can be identified in future should any further research or analysis be required.

7.2. Health & Safety

A proportion of paint films were found to contain lead which is toxic. Where paint removal is to be undertaken, methods should ensure safe working practice. Therefore, dry removal should be avoided to prevent the creation of air-borne, lead-containing dust, unless suitable extraction with a HEPA filter can be in place. The use of a heat gun should also not be used without the operative wearing suitable PPE and appropriate Hot Works permits in place. Any waste material from the use of paint strippers should be disposed of according to lead contaminated waste regulations.

Positive identification of paints with a high lead content: Where original architectural features are still extant, early paint films were identified as lead oil paints and tested strongly positive for lead. Most of these are encapsulated by later, non-lead paint films though there is localised failing. Those working in close proximity to these facets need to follow guidelines for working with lead contaminated waste and wear suitable PPE at all times.

7.3. Colour Tests Prior to Redecoration

It is strongly advised to undertake trial panels viewed in-situ prior to the final specification for colour where there is an interest in recreating the design intention of the original architect.

Any intention to recreate an earlier colour palette should take into consideration the changes in any surrounding buildings or landscape and associated patina since construction. Schemes that were applied in the 19th / early 20th century may have considered the colour of stonework, the appearance of which, will most likely have altered in the intervening years. Therefore exposed “original” colours may need to be adjusted accordingly.



NCS S 6020-G50Y –

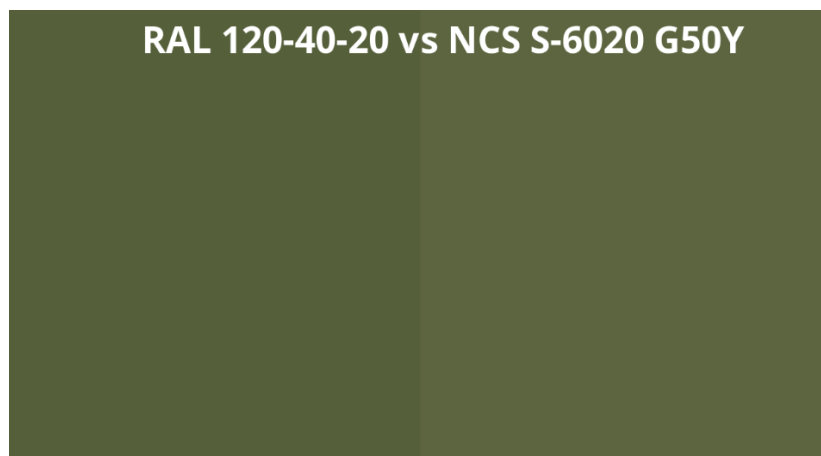


Figure 17: basic digital representation of the railings in earliest green

RAL Classic:	RAL Design
RAL 6025 (Fern Green) 	RAL 120 40 20 (Cactus Green) 
RAL 6003 	RAL 110 40 30 (Gardner Green) 
RAL 6013 (lighter) 	RAL 110 40 20 (Antique Green) 
Later scheme of green appears similar to: NCS S6030-G10Y 	RAL Design – RAL 160 30 25 

Table 2: Suggested alternative RAL Colour references

The below images show comparison of NCS and RAL colour references side by side.



More options paint options can be found at:

<https://hextoral.com/hex-color/5e6445/natural-color-system/>

8. Glossary of Terms

Cross-section: a sample, mounted in clear resin, polished to exposure all the paint films for microscopic examination.

Decorative scheme: an intended finished appearance of a space.

Dirt layer: a layer of dust or debris sandwiched between decorative schemes. Often seen in exterior paint samples where paint films were applied before the Clean Air Act (1956) and surfaces were not heavily prepared before the application of the new paint film. Dirt films can also be seen in samples from areas of heavy carbon deposits such as interiors where open fires, gas lighting etc. were employed. Dirt films can be indicative of long periods of time between schemes of decoration.

Oil Paint: Dry, finely-ground pigment which is made into a paste with an oil, such as linseed, poppy or walnut. The paste may then be diluted with more oil and/or a spirit such as turpentine or white spirit.

Lead oil paints: Lead paint is a traditional paint type, with a basic composition of oil (usually linseed, oil type varies according to paint use), lead white paste or pigment, and other pigmentation. The translucency of white lead oil paint increases with age by virtue of saponification of basic lead white with oil, forming lead linoleates. This represents a graceful alteration of the paint, leading to a more yellowed tone with time.

Gilding: an application of gold or metallic leaf applied to a surface as part of a decorative scheme. Oil or water gilding can be used and exterior oil gilding can include double gilding for a more durable finish.

Paint sample: the physical sample of paint. The sample should include all paint films and a small section of substrate where possible.

Paint film: a single application of paint, a number of paint layers make up a decorative scheme.

Paint scheme: a combination of a number of paint layers to form the intended scheme of decoration e.g. primer, undercoat and topcoats.

Photomicrograph: an image of a cross-section taken through the microscope.

Primer: a preparatory film applied beneath an undercoat, can be applied as a continual film or as a spot primer where the underlying or existing coatings need additional preparation prior to the application of a new scheme of decoration.

Synthetic resin, oleo-resinous: Alkyd resins were developed in the 20th century and are based on a synthetic resin. They quickly replaced oil paints, gaining great popularity after WWII, and provided a high gloss paint which was easier to work than traditional oil. They were available as gloss or matt, the gloss and eggshell having a particularly 'plastic' appearance.

Substrate: the underlying material upon which the paint film has been applied.

Topcoat: One or more applications of the final paint colour of a scheme. A topcoat can be used to pick out an architectural facet or have a number of paint layers to make up a polychrome or stencilled scheme.

Undercoat: a preparatory paint film(s) applied to a surface prior to the application of a topcoat or varnish film. An undercoat can be built up in several layers.

9. Bibliography

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10. Official List Entry

Heritage Category:	Listed Building
Grade:	II
List Entry Number:	1246569
Date first listed:	03-Oct-1974
List Entry Name:	WHITWORTH GALLERY
Statutory Address 1:	WHITWORTH GALLERY, OXFORD ROAD

The scope of legal protection for listed buildings

Location	
Statutory Address:	WHITWORTH GALLERY, OXFORD ROAD
The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.	
District:	Manchester (Metropolitan Authority)
Parish:	Non Civil Parish
National Grid Reference:	SJ 84868 95969
Details	
MANCHESTER	

SJ89NW OXFORD ROAD, Chorlton-On-Medlock 698-1/4/615 (West side)
03/10/74 Whitworth Gallery

GV II

Art gallery. c.1895-1900, by J.W.Beaumont; altered. Red brick with bands and dressings of matching terracotta, green slate roofs. Roughly rectangular plan with 2 towers and a large porch projecting to the front plus short wings to left and rear. Free Jacobean style. Two storeys over basements, 1:1:9:1:2 windows; with semi-octagonal pilasters to the corners finished as short Baroque turrets with colonnades, plinth, 1st-

floor sill-band, stylised corbel tables, moulded cornice, and parapet. The 9-bay main range has a projected ground floor with cornice and balustraded parapet which sweep out over a large semi-circular porch with a screen of paired stone Ionic columns and stone frieze, mounted on 4 semicircular steps; round-headed windows to the curved wall in this porch, small 3-light windows to the straight sides of the projection; cross-windows at 1st floor except the centre which has a slightly bowed 6-light transomed window with a balustrade in the parapet (flanked by raised gold lettering "WHITWORTH" "GALLERIES"). The towers flanking the main range have tiered canted oriel windows and low top stages with corner pinnacles and pyramidal roofs. The end bay to the left and the 2 bays to the right have cross-windows to both floors, the lower larger and set in segmental-headed recesses. All windows have small-paned glazing. Small white lantern on roof ridge, with pedimented faces.

Listing NGR: SJ8486895969

(Historic England, 2025)

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Head Office
Laughton, Sleaford,
Lincolnshire NG340HE

Tel: 01529 497449
hirst@hirst-conservation.com
www.hirst-conservation.com