



THE CREATION OF PANDORA BY SIR JAMES THORNHILL, WOLLATON HALL

Chroma Conservation were approached to assess the condition of the ceiling in the South State Staircase at Wollaton Hall in Nottingham in 2022 and in 2024 (working with the conservation architects Purcell) their conservation treatment began. Upon completion, as a result of their efforts, in June 2025 this incredible building qualified to be removed from Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register.

Built in the 1580s, Wollaton Hall has been home to industrialists, barons and even Batman, where the house was used in the Dark Knight Trilogy of films by Christopher Nolan. Wollaton Hall is a classic prodigy house dubbed "the architectural sensation of its age".

Built between 1580 and 1588 for Sir Francis Willoughby (who was not a courtier but paid for it with the proceeds of coal mining) and was designed by the Elizabethan architect, Robert Smythson, who had by then completed Longleat in Wiltshire and was to go on to design Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire.

The general plan of Wollaton is similar to these, and was widely adopted for other houses, but the exuberant decoration of Wollaton is distinctive, and it's possible that Willoughby played some part in creating it. The style is an advanced Elizabethan with early Jacobean elements, some even say it's Fantasy Gothic.

Photograph by Andy Marshall

The ceiling was painted around 1700 by Sir James Thornhill, England's greatest Baroque decorative artist. Thornhill famously went on to decorate the Painted Hall of the Royal Naval Hospital in Greenwich, started in 1707, and the dome inside St. Paul's Cathedral in 1715, but his career started at Wollaton Hall.

The ceiling painting depicts The Creation of Pandora who, according to Greek mythology, was the first mortal woman, formed out of clay by the gods.

The Titan Prometheus was once assigned the task of creating mankind. He was later unhappy with the mean lot imposed on them by the gods and so stole fire from heaven. This angered Zeus and he commanded the other gods to create the first woman Pandora, endowing her with beauty and cunning. He then had her delivered to Prometheus' foolish younger brother Epimethius as a bride. Zeus gave Pandora a storage jar (*pithos*) as a wedding gift which she opened, releasing the swarm of

evil spirits trapped within. These would forever after plague mankind, only Hope remained behind, a single blessing to ease mankind's suffering...

Chroma Conservation's work at Wollaton Hall was carried out in two phases. The first took place during the summer of 2024 and included a structural assessment of the ceiling and a plan for remediation lead by our senior stone and plaster conservator, Paul Wooles. An area either side of a large stepped crack fracture running South to North and its associated branched cracking on the interior painted side of the ceiling was mapped onto the exterior and following the erection of a temporary roofed scaffold the corresponding section of leaded roof was removed to allow access to clean considerable building debris and detritus.

Upon inspection the roof timbers were found to be in reasonably good condition and with no signs of biological or historical infestation. However, certain supporting timbers had failed due to splitting along the natural grain.

During the 19th century large diameter threaded bolts were used to stabilise this principal ceiling beam which had caused cracking in the painted surface. It is thought that extra damage was created to the interior plaster surface and cornice by the tensioning of these bolts.

The ceiling fractures were reinforced with resin and 3 mm threaded stainless steel fixings and suspended from stainless steel straps running perpendicular to the ceiling joists.

The cracks on the painted surface were then filled to allow monitoring of any movement over the coming months before the commencement of the second phase, the interior conservation treatment.

The second phase of interior works was a full conservation treatment of the ceiling and cornice and was carried out by Chroma's team of talented conservators and artists between March and June of 2025.

With over 320 years being subject to the ravages of time, neglect, dirt deposition, damage by water ingress and some previously inappropriate restoration treatments The Creation of Pandora ceiling and the finely painted grisailles and gilded trompe l'oeil cornice frieze was put on the Natural England At Risk Register.

The East elevation cornice had suffered from roof and internal drain leaks and had received a skim of inappropriate modern gypsum plaster over the damaged surface. However, the problem was never resolved, the roof continued to leak with the modern plaster repair becoming unstable.

The entire length of cornice was displaying salt efflorescence which meant it had to be stripped and allowed to dry after having been trapped by the non breathing gypsum repairs.

This entire length of cornice was repaired to allow the recreation of the decorative scheme, depicting faces or masks of men and women surrounded by a repeating Acanthus leaf motif and the intriguing double Green Man



Photograph by Andy Marshall

image in each corner, to simulate the cleaned and conserved original North, South and West cornice elevations.

The top and bottom roundel mouldings of the entire cornice were also re gilded with 23.5 carat gold leaf. Paint research confirmed that these were originally gilded and that the top flat mouldings and bottom spoon mouldings were painted with an off white/green shade.

The ceiling and cornice had many patches of unsympathetic retouching and indiscriminate overpainting in an attempt to disguise the extensive damage caused by the cracks and leaks. These and the many thick layers of heavily discoloured oil varnish were removed after

Photograph by Andy Marshall

carrying out trials using chemical swabs to help establish the most efficient and least invasive approach to uncover the original Thornhill masterpiece.

After weeks of conservation cleaning and consolidating and fixing of detached paint layers an isolation varnish coat was applied to serve as a reversible barrier to protect the original ceiling and cornice painted decoration.

Following this the conservators applied filler to the remaining cracks and repairs in the plaster surface before beginning the task of retouching the many paint losses and in painting of areas which required more extensive sympathetic reintegration along the crack line caused by the movement of the principal beam and water ingress





Photograph by Andy Marshall

which gathered in this dropped section running approximately one metre parallel to the East wall. The conserved ceiling was varnished with a modern non yellowing solvent based system.

The end result is quite remarkable and has lifted the oppressive veil of dark yellow brown aged wax varnish, revealing a very pleasing clarity of colour and form, as conceived by the master painter himself. The Creation of Pandora can now be fully appreciated for generations to come.



*Photographs on this page by Marta Sledz
courtesy of Chroma Conservation*

