

THE GRAND STAIRS

The Royal Institution, Albemarle Street

ORIGINAL COLOUR SCHEME

It was established earlier that the walls and the joinery were painted with a silvery grey oil paint, the banisters with green and yellow oil paint, and the ceiling with blue and white soft distemper.

Walls & Joinery

This colour was easy to establish. Large samples of the plaster from the side of the stairs, and of painted wood from the frieze at landing level were cleaned down to reveal the original paint. The paint was exposed to sunlight for a fortnight to bleach out the yellowing effect of linseed oil and it was clear at the end of this procedure that exactly the same paint was used for wood as was used for plaster.

Ceiling

The original scheme involved an undercoat of lead white oil paint, followed by a pale blue distemper based on blue verditer and chalk. As the distemper was washed off when it came to redecorate the ceiling, all that was left were tiny remains.

The remains were too small for any copying to be possible. The swatch produced for this report is the correct colour for blue verditer, but it may not be the correct shade. It may have been darker, or it may have been lighter.

Remains of the blue were only found on the main flat bed of the ceiling, next to raised mouldings. The fact that it was not found on the cornice or in the central decorated area of the ceiling, does not mean it was not used on those parts as well

Iron banisters

The ironwork was first primed with a pale grey oil paint, then it was painted green and yellow. The green was a blue/green mixture of Naples yellow and blue verditer, the yellow was Naples yellow.

The cross-sections show that the yellow was painted on first and the green applied second. This will have ensured that the yellow was as bright as possible, being painted over the pale grey and not over the dark green. . It was only on the vertical posts, where only minimal yellow was used, that the green was brushed directly onto the grey.

Matching the green was straightforward, as the dominant pigment was the verditer, and this appears not to have changed. The colour of the green was the same in all the samples examined, and, and the swatch produced here is an accurate representation.

The yellow was much more difficult as it is not clear how much, if at all, it has altered. The colour found on the banisters was quite a warm one, yet the painters seem to have been trying to produce a bright tone. Some of this warm tone is clearly due to the presence of a rich oil medium that has since discoloured, but as Naples yellow can vary from a lemon colour to a warm ochre tone, depending on the conditions of manufacture it is impossible to tell how much to allow for the change.

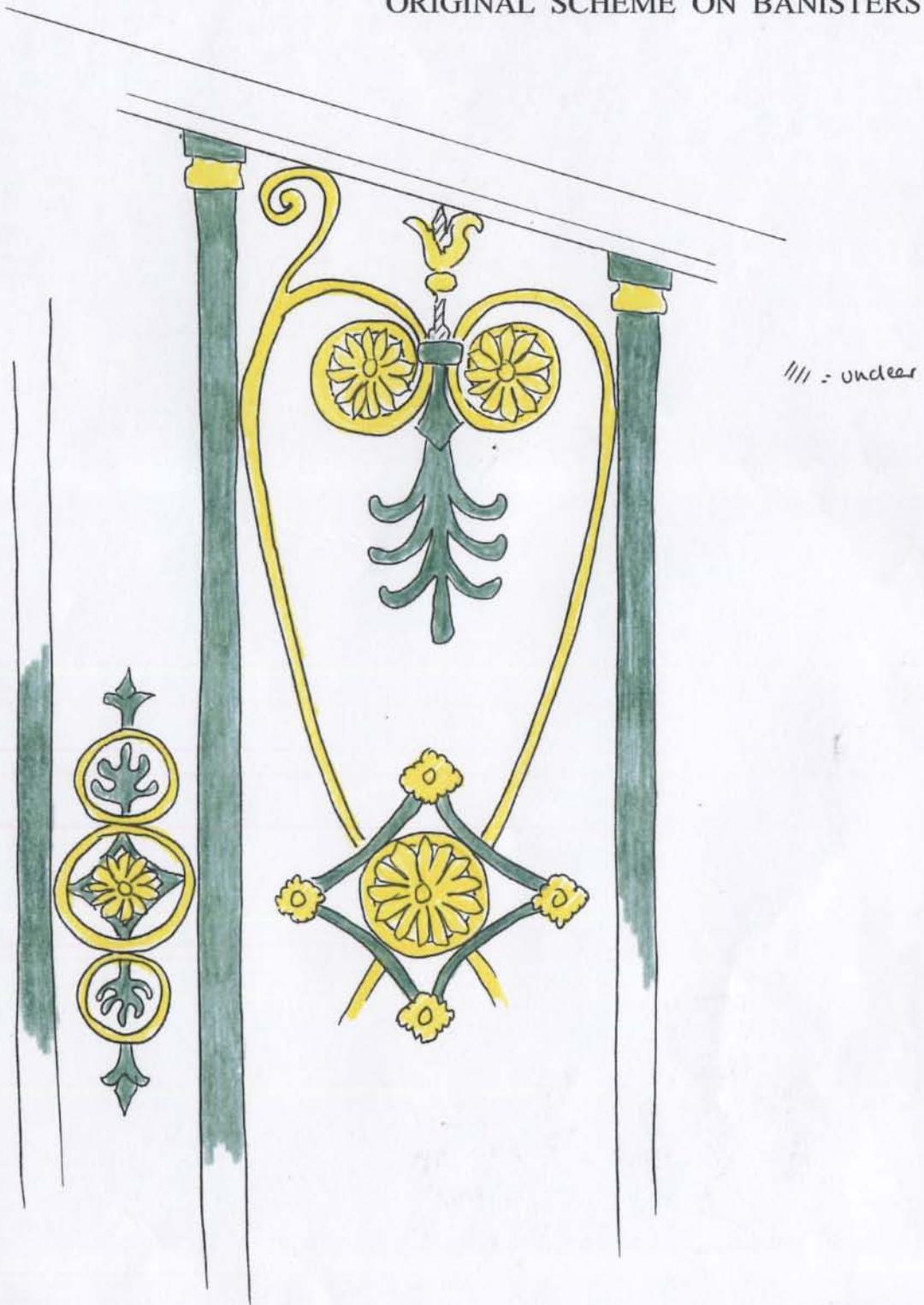
Two shades of Naples yellow are given here, both slightly brighter than what was found on the banisters. The original tone may have been even brighter.

Second scheme on the banisters

The original green and yellow scheme was repeated the second time the Grand Stairs was painted, so it must have been popular.

A brighter tone of Naples yellow was used and a paler tone of Green.

ORIGINAL SCHEME ON BANISTERS



The yellow was painted on first, then the green was painted on top