

Trades Hall

Honour Boards and Tablets, Melbourne



Introduction

Trades Hall is a historically significant building and one of the world's oldest trade union establishments. Serving as the home of trade unionism in Victoria since 1874, it is linked to the history of the Australian Labour Party and events of national significance. Trades Hall holds considerable historical, social, and architectural importance for the state of Victoria.

In the 1990s, the eastern wall of the Victoria Street entrance hall underwent a conservation treatment to restore an early paint scheme with partially gilded honour boards.

Between February and April 2025, ICS carefully removed the top layers of overpaint to reveal the underlying early decorative scheme and associated honour boards and tablets. In May 2025, ICS was tasked with a final clean and surface coating to protect the historic Honour Boards and Tablets for generations to come.



The Challenges

- A conservative approach was chosen to counter the restoration undertaken on the eastern wall opposite, where it is believed a significant amount was overpainted. Records, unfortunately, do not detail exactly what was undertaken on the eastern wall. Therefore, it was decided that on the western and southern walls, the original condition of the honour boards would be left.
- The conservation of the honour boards and tablets was part of a larger refurbishment happening throughout Trades Hall. Since the honour boards and tablets were located in the entrance hall, a main walkway for other trades during the project, it was necessary to adapt the access and work environment to minimise disruption to ongoing work.
- While it was known that there were honour boards present, the exact locations and total number were initially unclear. This uncertainty required ongoing investigations to identify the different layers of paint in order to uncover the honour boards, all while adhering to a strict deadline within the parameters set by the larger refurbishment project.



Treatment



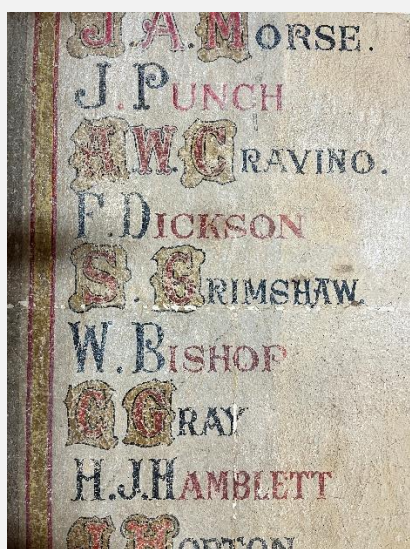
Step 1: Targeted paint removal was conducted to reveal the original decorative scheme beneath successive layers of overpaint on the western and southern walls of the entrance hall. A gelled solvent effectively softened the paint layers for removal.



Step 2: The penultimate paint layer on both walls, directly covering the original decorative scheme, was removed with a water: ethanol poultice, allowing a slow and controlled penetration to soften the overpaint.



Step 3: Consolidation was undertaken, and losses and existing failing plaster fills were carefully reduced, and new tinted fills were applied to match the surrounding colour, improving the overall appearance and consistency of the surfaces.



Step 4: The honour boards and tablets were carefully cleaned.



Step 5: A protective coating of Paraloid B72 (Matt finish) was applied to consolidate further.



Step 6: A final surface coating of Laropal A81 (Matt finish) was applied to even sheen and texture.



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The Results



The honour boards and tablets on the western and eastern walls after completion of treatment:

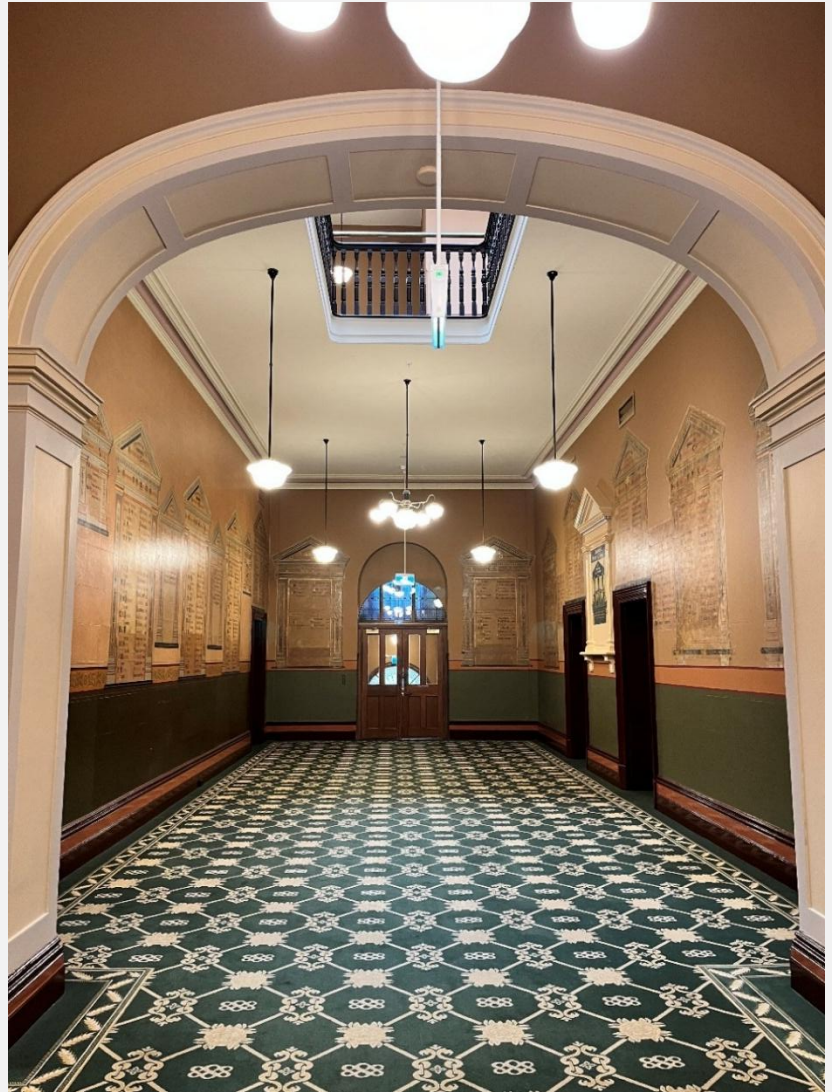
The results have been transformative: the once-muted walls, painted in a uniform cream colour, now reveal their original layered decorative scheme, creating visual and historical continuity throughout the entrance hall. The conservation work has safeguarded the honour boards and commemorative panels for future generations, allowing their inscriptions and gilded details to be legible once more. This project exemplifies treatment innovation through the targeted use of solvent gels, ensuring precise overpaint removal without compromising original layers. Collaboration was central to its success, as it brought together architects and builders. Importantly, the project has generated continued public interest in Trades Hall, with the conservation outcomes celebrated by stakeholders and contributing to the ongoing revitalisation of this landmark building.



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The Outcome

The ICS Melbourne team, led by Eden Christian, Senior Conservator & Team Leader, ensured that Trades Hall's Honour Boards and Tablets artistry, history and social legacy are preserved for future generations. Through innovative solvent-gel paint removal and a sensitive approach, the original decorative scheme was revealed, transforming the space into a cohesive heritage interior.



Testimonial

'As the project manager for the restoration on behalf of Victorian Trades Hall and Literary Institute, I can testify to the great satisfaction felt by all at the building in the work performed by ICS. The conservation of the murals was carried out with a high degree of professionalism and integrity, employing techniques that produced a higher quality finish than we expected.'

Dr Colin Long, Victorian Trades Hall and Literary Institute

Learn more about our Fine Arts and Built Heritage department and how we can help you overcome complex conservation issues and bring your heritage project to life.



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