

# Ancient stones revealed on tapestry

The Sheldon Tapestry Map may have the first depiction of the Rollright Stones

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Conservators have uncovered details hidden by four centuries of dirt

The cleaning of an Elizabethan tapestry map has revealed what may be the earliest depiction of the Rollright Stones, a series of Neolithic and Bronze Age megaliths in the English Midlands, says Maggie Wood, the keeper of social history at Warwickshire Museum. What appears to be a small stone circle is now visible in the lower right-hand corner of the Sheldon Tapestry Map of Warwickshire. Other details, including tiny cottages nestled among the trees, are also now visible. The textile was cleaned and conserved in 2011 in preparation for its inclusion in the British Museum's exhibition "Shakespeare: Staging the World" (until 25 November).

The tapestry, along with four other textile maps (one of which is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London), was commissioned in the late 1580s by Ralph Sheldon for his stately home in Long Compton, near the stones. The textile was bought in 1781 by Horace Walpole and passed through various hands before entering the collection of the Warwickshire Museum in the 1960s.

Wet cleaning by the Belgian company De Witt removed four centuries of dirt and dust. The tapestry then returned to the UK for further treatment by Textile Conservation, a company in Bristol. The studio, led by Alison Lister, removed the non-original lining because it was causing tension in the tapestry. A full backing of undyed linen fabric was then applied and all conservation stitching work was carried out through the new backing.

As the textile is a map, the decision was made to reinstate missing areas, particularly the names of the towns. "Much of the brown-black thread had degraded, so a lot of attention was given to conservation stitching, to make the lettering clearer," Lister says. Conservators found pieces of tapestry woven over holes, which suggests that the textile was repaired early in its history, possibly within 50 to 100 years of being made. "It looks as if the tapestry was damaged when it was folded up as there are four similar-sized holes. The quality of the weaving and the matching of the design suggests that the repair could have been done by the original studio," Lister says.