

MURAL PAINTINGS at ASHMANSWORTH CHURCH

by Charles E Keyser, M.A., F.S.A.

The church at Ashmansworth has been so much altered by various "churchwarden" restorations, that on the exterior very little of the early structure remains. Within however, less damage has been done, and consequently during the recent repairs, much that is of interest has been brought to light. In the year 1887, some preliminary scraping was carried out by Mr. Walter Money on the walls of the chancel, and other paintings of early character were subsequently found beneath the whitewash. On the east splay of the easternmost window on the north side is a scroll pattern in red, and on the next splay a saint kneeling in adoration before another male or female figure. Between this and the western Norman window on the north side are faint traces of another figure, alleged to represent St. Anne. (When first disclosed in 1887, says Mr. Money, this figure was very perfect, including the work in hand, and Mr. Blandford Fletcher, the well known artist who was with me, felt there could be no question as to the personage of the subject. This also applies to the Annunciation.) These paintings are mentioned in the Transactions of the Newbury District Field Club, vol. iv., p 192, and are assigned to the early part of the 12th century, but the scroll does not appear to be earlier than the 13th century. (A short notice of them also appears in the Archaeological Journal, vol liii., (2nd series, iii) p.172.

During the year 1899, when the church was being more systematically repaired, under the able guidance of Mr. J.T.Micklethwaite, F.S.A., more discoveries were made, the most interesting being on the east wall of the nave, on, at each side of, and above, the chancel arch. On the arch, which is of plain Norman character, and the wall above it, is a trellis pattern in red formed by intersecting lines, and traces of two tiers of subjects divided by a barrier enclosing a scroll pattern in red can still be made out as the remaining portion of the original scheme of decoration. There has been another border above, but this has now been mixed up with a later subject. On the lower side have been four scenes within medallions, two on each side of the arch. The groundwork between is coloured a deep red, but the various figures are simply portrayed in outline. The first subject on the north side has been obliterated, but was probably either the Last Supper or the Crucifixion. Within the next medallion is represented the Harrowing of Hell, or the descent of Our Lord into Limbus. He is depicted on the north side as a tall figure with bare feet, trampling on the prostrate form of a large demon, while some small figures kneel both in front and behind Him. The jaws of Hell are delineated by a semi-circular band of yellow lines on the south side. Part of a border with roses of a later period has been painted over the lower portion of this picture. Within the next medallion on the south side of the chancel arch, is the centre of what looks like the back of a large chair or bedstead, but is more probably intended for a tomb, and at least four figures standing by it with upraised hands.

Can this be the subject of The Resurrection, as portrayed by the presence of the Marys at the Sepulchre? Between this, and the next medallion, is depicted a church, with a curious cupola or low spire, and red lines marking the pitch of the roof. Within the medallion under a semi-circular headed arch are several nimbed figures, only the upper portions visible, and a large white dove with outspread wings hovering above them. This no doubt represents the Descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, a subject which it is believed is not elsewhere represented in Mural Painting in England. The various figures in this series are about three feet in height. In the tier above are several large figures, apparently all nimbed. Those over the chancel arch are very faint, and mainly covered by the Royal Arms within a garter; which have been printed on canvas

and painted. It seems probable that here was the lower part of the subject of the Doom, or Christ in Majesty, the upper portion being now concealed beneath the later paintings. The date of this earlier series is probably in the late 12th century.

On the upper part of the wall are the fragmentary remains of a late 15th century Representation of the Doom. Hurrying towards the north are the lower limbs of several nude figures, another in a shroud, two others rising from tombs, part of the wing of a demon and several other fragments being discernable in the north and central portions of the picture. In the top corner on the south side is a very large demon with a long tail, above several figures with clasped hands, and perhaps traces of flames. The upper central portion with the portraiture of Christ in Judgement has entirely disappeared. The colours used are grey and dark green, and the treatment seems very similar to that in the painting of the same subject recently discovered at Ford church, Sussex.

On the north wall of the nave are traces of a continuation of the earlier painting, and a 17th century version of the Lord's Prayer. Between two debased windows on this side is part of a large figure in olive green vestment and rich red under garment. The lower part of the subject is destroyed, but the right arm and hand are shown holding up the dress. The upper part is somewhat confused, but traces of a small nimbed head, and the folds of the garment of the smaller figure can be made out. There is an inscription on a scroll above, and another small scroll close to the hand. Some remains of red colouring still further complicate the subject which is, however, undoubtedly the familiar portraiture of St. Christopher executed at the same period as the later painting of the Doom over the Chancel Arch. On the south nave wall are portions of 17th century texts, and traces of subjects, probably of the 15th century period. There are the outlines of three consecration crosses, two on the south and one on the north wall. The wall-plate above the St. Christopher has been decorated with the barber pole pattern.

There can be no doubt that as we so often find in small out of the way churches, so at Ashmansworth, a very extensive scheme of mural decoration has been carried out at at least three different periods. It is unfortunate that it has been impossible to obtain more satisfactory results from the labour which has been expended in clearing off the whitewash, more especially with regard to the earliest series, which appear to have been of unusual interest, and different to any other examples of this period, which have yet been discovered.