

## ASHMANSWORTH

### CONSERVATION OF WALL PAINTINGS IN THE CHURCH.

#### GENERAL

The work of full uncovering, cleaning and consolidating the wall paintings in Ashmansworth Church, plaster repairs and limewashing of older repairs is now complete and has been skilfully carried out by my assistant, Miss Ann Ballantyne.

It may be useful to have a summary of the results and objects of the work.

First, it should be understood that while no spectacular visual effect has been achieved, the conservation was a vital necessity for the survival and understanding of the paintings. They are now secure and much more readable, and previously unknown or wrongly identified subjects have been found in the chancel. Moreover, by the careful use of toning limewash, the appearance of the whole building has been unified and greatly improved. There has been no repainting or touching-up, the best being made of every fragment that survived. The only device permitted has been to emphasise the outlines of some of the figures by applying a more solid background in toned limewash.

#### CHANCEL

Opportunity was taken to investigate all the walls of the chancel. Fragments of colour were encountered in several places, but only on the North wall and in the splays of the North-East early window was any painting found that was worth preservation.

On the centre section of wall there had been a head exposed, wrongly touched-up, framed, and wrongly identified as St. Cecilia. Full uncovering of this wall showed that the head belonged in fact to the Virgin in an Annunciation scene, the Angel and the Dove being found to the West.

To the West of this was found the remains of a Martyrdom of St. Thomas of Canterbury, the Priest Grim holding the Archbishop's staff, and the head of the Saint, with fragments of the four Knights.

In the splays of the window are two scenes in the Life of St. Nicholas, together with ornamental scrollwork. On the East splay are remains of a ship and an interceding figure. This might either be the shipwreck, or the loss of the golden cup as at Aldermaston. In the West splay is clearly the restoration of the cup, with good detail. All these paintings are early to mid 14<sup>th</sup> century.

#### NAVE

(a) The most important area of the nave is the East wall, over and flanking the chancel arch. Here there are, or were, paintings of four different dates - three medieval and one post-Reformation. The earliest, or basic scheme, is of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, between double-line borders filled with elaborate scroll-work. The main theme seems to have been a Life of Christ or Passion Cycle. Tristram was in error I believe in thinking that there had been a Doom above, of this early date. The upper zone, almost entirely perished, must have been concerned with events leading up to, and perhaps including the Crucifixion. Three scenes in the lower zone can be identified with reasonable certainty, though the exact sequence is a little difficult to determine. On the North (left) side the first scene is too fragmentary to identify, but might have been the entombment. The next is clear and shows the Descent into Hell. Christ stands on the left, trampling on a demon, and holding the Vexillum (cross-staff and banner) in His right hand. With His left hand He reaches over to take Adam and Eve by

the hand, who are shown in the front of a group of souls at the mouth of Hell - this is the standard composition.

To the South (right) of the chancel arch are two scenes, the first may well be the Marys and some Apostles at the tomb; while the other is clearly Pentecost, the group of Apostles looking up at the Dove, which appears at the top of the roundel.

The centre of the wall is shown on an early drawing to have had a trellis pattern of which nothing remains. Occupying the middle now is all that is left of what must have been a fine representation of the Stuart Royal Arms. All that now survives is the arms within the garter with just the paws of the lion and the hooves of the Unicorn supporters at the sides.

At the lower left-hand side is some ornamental painting of 5- or 6-foils in a light red, overlying the early subjects and probably 14th century.

The whole of the upper part of the wall had been covered by a very large and elaborately-detailed representation of the Doom or Last Judgment, of 15<sup>th</sup> century date, carried on a very friable, thin layer of limewash. Of this only isolated fragments remain, mostly parts of figures in the General Resurrection and Procession of the Saved to the heavenly Jerusalem (North side) and a few damned souls and fragments of demons in Hell on the South.

(b) North Wall. Evidence was found of the continuation of the 13<sup>th</sup> century painting between borders: but so little remained that only a small section at the East end was left uncovered, just to establish the historical sequence. This had been covered with limewash, and possibly later medieval paintings. But the main survival is of the 16th and 17th century texts in elaborate frames with which the medieval work was obliterated after the Reformation.

Part of an elaborate St. Christopher of the same late date as the Doom (late 15th century) survives near the blocked North door. And in the blocking of the door itself are remains of another text and frame.

(c) The South wall, much broken up by later structural alterations, again yielded evidence of painting of the early period, overlaid by later medieval work, and finally covered by a series of texts and frames. No subject could be identified: and the wall was tidied as far as possible and the remains of the various periods cleaned and left as historical evidence of the changing schemes and fashions of taste and religious thought over several centuries.

(d) Finally mention should be made of the four surviving Consecration Crosses (out of an original set of 12 in the interior of the building). The plaster was repaired and consolidated, and the Crosses left exposed in the final limewashing. (Several of these interesting survivals at Padworth, Berkshire, were quite recently destroyed in re-plastering).

Signed:

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Dated:

28th January, 1975.

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