

ST. JAMES'S CHURCH, ASHMANSWORTH, HANTS

CONSERVATION OF THE WALL PAINTINGS

The first stage of the work on the conservation of the wall paintings in Ashmansworth Church was completed in the autumn of 1973. This consisted in the investigation of the chancel walls and resulted in the full uncovering and conservation of a considerable area of wall painting. This has led, under the skilful hands of my assistant, Miss Ann Ballantyne, to several most interesting discoveries.

All the paintings are on the North wall. The West window and surrounding area revealed no traces of painting. But the central section of walling was found to have had two subjects. These are distressingly fragmentary, but enough survives to render their identification beyond doubt. On the Western part was represented the Martyrdom of St. Thomas of Canterbury (Thomas à Becket). The heads of the three murderous knights survive, and traces of their shields. The saint kneels (before an altar, which has perished), his hands in prayer, and looking upwards. On the right stands a priest (identified by his tonsure), the faithful Chaplain Grimm, holding the Archbishop's Cross staff. The cult of St. Thomas, after his martyrdom in 1170, became enormous, and he became almost a national Saint.

To the right of this, formerly only partly uncovered, wrongly painted up, framed and identified as St. Cecilia, is the Annunciation. The angel, with yellow wings, and holding a scroll, is on the left, the Virgin, one hand raised, is on the right, and behind her head is the Dove of the Holy Spirit.

Both these paintings are probably 14th century.

In the splays of the more Easterly window, two most interesting scenes have been revealed. On the West, a tall figure stands behind a small boy (and perhaps other small figures) who kneels and shows a large cup that he holds to a tall layman on the right, who raises his hands in wonder and astonishment.

This is undoubtedly a scene in the legend of St. Nicholas (to whom the Church used to be dedicated). It represents the Story of a nobleman who besought St. Nicholas's good offices that he might have a son. When the request was granted, the overjoyed nobleman said he would present a golden cup. But when it was made, it was so beautiful that he decided to keep it himself, and have another of equal value made. For this piece of deception and covetousness the Saint felt the man should be punished; and on a sea voyage the boy, holding the cup, fell overboard and was drowned and the cup lost. After suitable contrition and repentance, the boy was restored to life by the Saint and the cup recovered. The painting in the window-splay at Ashmansworth shows the Saint standing behind the boy, who kneels, holding the cup and showing it to the nobleman, his father, who raises his hands in astonishment, wonder and adoration. On the opposite splay is either the ship in which the incident occurred, or else another scene from the Life of St. Nicholas in which he calmed a tempest and saved the mariners in a ship from shipwreck - hence he became the patron Saint of sailors - and of children on account of another exploit in which three boys murdered to provide a banquet in a famine land by a wicked innkeeper, were miraculously rescued and restored to life by Saint Nicholas.

Above the ship, whose mast stays and pendants alone remain, is a charming piece of scrollwork whose nature suggests a date somewhat earlier than the Annunciation painting, say late 13th century. Parts of these paintings were known to Keyser in the 19th century, before being covered up again, and were given totally wrong identifications. And the present full uncovering and minute investigation shows how dangerous it is to jump to a conclusion on insufficient evidence. The recent work has added a valuable chapter to the story of the successive series of paintings with which our ancestors covered the Church in order not simply to decorate it, but to illustrate the Bible Story, the Lives of the Saints and Christian Morality to a congregation which was without books, and was in any event illiterate.

Signed:

E. CLIVE ROUSE, M.B.E., MA., F.S.A.

Dated: 6th November 1973.

Oakfield,
North Park,
Gerards Cross
Bucks