

ASHMANSWORTH, HANTS

REPORT ON REMAINS OF WALL PAINTINGS AND CONDITION OF THE WALLS IN THE CHURCH

I visited Ashmansworth on Friday, 26th February, 1971, and made a careful inspection of the remains of wall painting still visible in the Church, and examined the exterior conditions as well. This was done in the presence of the Vicar, Colonel and Mrs. Hamilton and Brigadier and Mrs. Heathcote. I have pleasure in submitting my report as follows.

GENERAL

The Walls of the Nave (except the West wall) retain evidence of extensive, if not complete, painting of probably four periods - two medieval and two post-Reformation.

(a) The earliest work is of the 13th century and survives mainly on the East wall, over and flanking the chancel arch.

Details of this are well-known and have been recorded in a number of places. The scheme seems to have consisted of scenes in two tiers between scroll borders. The Lower was devoted to a Life of Christ, of which the only recognisable remains are the Harrowing of Hell (North side); and the Holy Women at the Sepulchre (South side). Parts of these are obscured by the tester or sounding board over the pulpit.

Above was the Doom or Last Judgment, itself superseded by a later (15th century) rendering of the same subject. Only fragments of both these remain.

(b) The North wall has evidence of a continuation of this period of painting, but little more than the outline of the decorative borders and a few areas of red ochre pigment survive. Previous authorities do not seem to have noticed this evidence.

There was certainly a later scheme, but the only remains are a battered figure of St. Christopher near the blocked North door. The Saint's right arm and hand grasping a staff, and elaborate drapery in a wide colour-range can be identified.

There are extensive remains of post-Reformation texts, probably of two periods in the 17th century, in elaborate frames with which the medieval work was obliterated.

Drapery, swags, and a lion's mask can be identified. One of these is on the filling of the blocked North door.

In addition there is one and possibly a second consecration cross incised in the plaster, but not retaining any colour (these were part of an original set of 12 inside the building and 12 outside, which were blessed and anointed with Holy Oil by the Bishop at the consecration ceremony).

(c) The same conditions apply on the South Wall, though there is less evidence of the medieval scheme except for 2 scribed consecration crosses, and the texts are in a little less fragmentary condition.

(d) The Chancel is at present covered by a peculiarly unpleasant canary yellow distemper, with evidence of two previous all-over colourwashes beneath. On the North wall an area of painting has been left exposed and most unsuitably surrounded by a black-painted wooden frame of vesica shape. I would not like to date this figure or give an attribution as to its identity. It seems to be a female playing or holding some kind of pipe instrument and is often described as St. Cecilia and is possibly medieval because of the aversion in post-Reformation times to any kind of figure representation.

CONDITION

Some of these paintings have been exposed since 1883, and nearly all since the early years of the present century.

Throughout the Church the paintings are in fragmentary and poor condition. There has evidently been much deterioration in the last fifty years. They do not seem to have had any preservative treatment, such as wax, varnish, shellac or other unsuitable fixative. Nevertheless, some have a rather greasy surface off which water tends to run at first. This may be due to oil heating or lighting in the Church in the past. The earlier pigments have broken down - or rather the size or lime medium has - and tend to be powdery. The later paintings, carried on layers of superimposed limewash, are nearly all tending to flake or peel off.

The North wall in particular has many plaster failures, patches and cracks, and the surface has a heavy bloom of lime salts due to penetration of wet. (The cause and remedy for this will be dealt with later).

RECOMMENDATIONS

How the interior of this Church should be dealt with presents a very difficult problem. For while all the paintings are in fragmentary condition and can never now be made much of, yet the evidence of such extensive decoration of several periods is far too great to be ignored. The paintings must not be written off. For the continual abandonment, destruction or obliteration of fragmentary paintings in recent years has resulted in such cumulative losses that this attitude must be opposed.

If it is accepted that no spectacular improvement or recovery must be expected, nevertheless the paintings can be made very much better in a number of ways. First by the cleaning and consolidation of the paintings themselves; and second by the elimination of blemishes and distracting elements in the surrounding walls. By this, I mean the carrying out of suitable plaster repairs and by limewashing areas where no painting (or little of consequence) exists. In this way attention will be focussed more on the paintings themselves. With such a patchwork to deal with one cannot at this stage lay down any hard and fast rules or areas, but the problem must be solved as one goes along.

The North wall is clearly the greatest problem. An examination of the exterior revealed the cause of the curious conditions inside, where Lime-impregnated water has been penetrating for so long that it has actually crystallised or carbonised to an extreme hardness in places where it has dried out.

The reason is that, in common with nearly all rubble-walled Churches, the exterior was rendered and limewashed. This rendering has now largely perished; it is hollow in many places and the many holes in it, and in the exposed wall surfaces hold moisture which eventually penetrates with the results noticed above. I consider that the rendering should be completely renewed on this side; and all pointing carefully checked and replaced here and elsewhere if necessary. Roof and gutters and above all down-pipes should be frequently checked and cleared. No cement (or little more than a powdering) should be used in the mix which should be of fine, washed, sharp sand and if possible lime putty that has been run for a considerable time from lump lime.

A little later in the year I would like my assistant, Miss Ann Ballantyne to come for, say, a week to carry out some experiments and tests to see what methods would be best employed for the paintings, how long a given area takes and consequently what cost would be involved. This latter I am afraid will not be light, as the work is difficult and delicate and cannot be hurried.

I shall be very pleased to help in any way over this work in the future.

Signed:

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

Dated:

10th March, 1971

Oakfield,
North Park,
Gerrards Cross,
Bucks.