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Wall Paintings in the Church of St. Lawrence, Abbot's Langley.

By E. CLIVE ROUSE.

DURING the autumn and winter of 1932, extensive repairs and restorations were being carried out in the parish church of St. Lawrence, Abbot's Langley. And the interior scaffolding then erected for the repair of the roofs, particularly in the South chapel, afforded an excellent opportunity of inspecting at close quarters the fragments of wall painting known to exist in the church, and briefly mentioned in the Hertfordshire volume of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments,¹ though no precise description, attribution or date are given. They are there set down as "Two bishops." These paintings had, in fact, been known for many years but had attracted no particular attention, and had not been published, while their importance was quite unrecognized.

After a brief examination, the value of the two figure paintings flanking the East window of the South chapel was at once apparent; and there was much evidence of painting in other parts of the building. I therefore approached the Vicar, the Rev. W. V. G. White, who very readily agreed to my proposal that Professor E. W. Tristram should be called in to deal with the paintings.

Under Dr. Tristram's supervision, the two figures on the East wall of the chapel were cleaned and treated with fixative; and the other walls thoroughly explored, and such fragments of paintings as remained after previous scrapings, brushings and whitewashings, were uncovered and similarly carefully preserved. It is to be regretted that after all this work had been done, these interesting survivals of colour decoration, fragmentary though they certainly were, but of great value and interest to the expert eye, were not considered by others worth exhibiting, and all except the two figures have again been whitewashed. So that all the other evidence found by Professor Tristram in 1932 as to the

¹ *R.C.H.M., Herts*, p. 28.

appearance of the church walls and the probable subjects painted, and so painstakingly brought to light by him, must now be sought only in a written description.

The beautiful South chapel at Abbot's Langley, containing much good detail in windows and door, was added to the Norman church early in the fourteenth century, and from the evidence discovered in 1932 it is clear that a complete scheme of painting accompanied the work. The East window, of three lights and fine simple tracery, was the chief feature of the chapel. It would have been filled with contemporary glass, having, probably, the figures of three saints in the lights. Flanking this, and forming an integral part of the original scheme, were life-size figures on each side, probably two, one above the other, painted on the wall. It is the upper two, one on the North and one on the South, that have happily survived, the other two having been destroyed by the insertion of memorial tablets, etc.

The relation between wall painting and glass is not, perhaps, fully realized. There is no doubt that in such fourteenth-century chancels as Chalgrove, Oxon., and Hitcham, Bucks, glass and painting and architecture were complementary to each other, each forming an integral part of the general scheme. It is rarely that both glass and paintings survive together, so that the relation between the two is not always apparent; and the completeness of the medieval artists' schemes of architectural, decorative, and figure treatment is but seldom appreciated. Plate I will show the relation between the painted figures and the East window of the South chapel at Abbot's Langley. The upper figures are equal in height to the tracery in the head of the window, while the lower (perished) would have corresponded to the level of figures in the main lights.

The figure on the North represents St. Thomas of Canterbury, or Thomas à Becket as he is more popularly known (Plate II). The figure is life-size, and represents the Saint as vested in white alb, with traces of an apparel on the front, amice, red chasuble with the pallium upon it, and mitre. His right hand is raised in blessing, and in his left he carries the archiepiscopal cross, or crosier. Red outline is used, with a sparing use of ochre and black. The figure stands on a raised mount.

St. Thomas of Canterbury became almost a national saint, and representations of him are of great frequency. The single figure, however, is more usually met with on rood screens: in wall painting the saint is generally portrayed in the scene of his martyrdom. This instance of a large figure by itself is therefore of added interest. Another example of the single figure of St. Thomas of Canterbury may be seen in the Saint's Chapel at St. Albans, though it is on a smaller scale.

The corresponding figure on the South side (Plate III) represents St. Lawrence, and it is of particular interest since the church is dedicated to him. It was almost certainly the medieval practice to have a prominent representation of the patron saint in each church, either in stained glass, wall painting or carving of some sort; but it is only in rare instances that this survives, except in figures over porches. St. Lawrence is vested as a Deacon, in dalmatic, and possibly amice, bareheaded, with dark nimbus, holding the martyr's palm in his left hand and the symbol of his martyrdom—a gridiron—in his right. Again the saint stands on a mount. Red outline, though much faded to dull brown, is also used, but ochre and black are more in evidence than in the painting of St. Thomas à Becket. Both figures, and more especially the latter, are in a fine artistic tradition, and are characterized by a wonderful sense of line and dignity, and better proportion than in some of their period. There is a lingering feeling of the more formal work of the thirteenth century, especially in the rather stiff folds of the chasuble, and the full decorated manner of the best period, *circa* 1330-1340, is not yet reached. Taking these facts into account, as well as the details of the drawing of certain features, one can therefore date the work with some certainty as not long after 1300. This accords well with the architectural evidence, as in the rudimentary ball-flower ornament on the rear arch of the East window.

These two figures are important artistically as well as archaeologically, and Professor Tristram's careful work has brought out much detail, as well as made the paintings secure—unless someone sees fit to whitewash these also. As to the origin of the artist or school responsible for the work, it is unwise to make any very definite

statement. One cannot overlook the close proximity of St. Albans with its great school of medieval art, and it is also suggestive that Abbot's Langley, both church and manor, was for long in the hands of the Abbot and Convent of that great establishment at St. Albans.² Moreover, the Abbot's Langley paintings have certain features in common with the great figures painted high up on the walls of the Choir at St. Albans (cleaned and preserved in November, 1933). The latter are somewhat earlier in date than the St. Thomas and the St. Lawrence, and are in a fuller range of colour; but the outlines and drawing are much the same in feeling, and another striking resemblance lies in the placing of both sets of figures on mounts at the base. Beyond that, and to say that the work is definitely ecclesiastical in character, it would be unwise to go.

Decorative treatment was applied to the window in the shape of a border of alternate red and white chequers outlining the arch (see Plate I), and doubtless the jambs also received ornament by means of painted masonry pattern diapered with cinquefoils or roses in red.

The latter scheme was certainly applied to parts of the South wall and especially round the two windows. On this wall the principal feature had been a large series of subjects in tiers, the panels being divided by bands of red decorated with white roundels, the whole contemporary with the painting on the East wall. I was fortunate in obtaining an extremely interesting photograph of the paintings on this wall as they appeared when uncovered in about 1905; and this is reproduced (Plate IV) by the courtesy of Mr. Colin Reader, to whom I am also indebted for a note accompanying the photograph. They were noticed at the time, and some trouble was taken to remove the whitewash, but no attempt to identify them or preserve them was made, and they were again brushed and re-whitewashed, making them even more indecipherable. A note on them, written about the end of the last century, is worth quoting as showing the kind of attitude that was adopted towards such things at that period—though incidentally it affords a clue to the subject of the whole series.

² See *Vict. County Hist., Herts*, Vol. II, pp. 326 and 328.



PLATE I.
ABBOTS LANGLEY. E. WALL OF S. CHAPEL, WITH PAINTINGS OF ST. THOMAS OF
CANTERBURY AND ST. LAWRENCE, *c.* 1300.





From a drawing by E. W. Tristram, D.Litt.

PLATE II.

ABBOTS LANGLEY. ST. THOMAS OF CANTERBURY.





From a drawing by E. W. Tristram, D.Litt.

PLATE III.

ABBOTS LANGLEY. ST. LAWRENCE.





Reproduced by kind permission of Colin Reader, Esq.

PLATE IV.

ABBOTS LANGLEY. PAINTINGS ON S. WALL OF S. CHAPEL AS THEY
APPEARED ABOUT 1905.



“ A prominent feature of these frescoes . . . is the presence of many pairs of donkey's ears. These being indistinct, offer themselves no definite explanation of their being, but (by way of interpolation) exist in imagination as appendages to heads which look down in fraternal greeting upon all who would attempt to delineate with any degree of accuracy the frescoes in their present condition.”

It is much to be deplored that matters were left thus, for there is no doubt that the subjects could easily have been identified. Indeed, they may even be so to-day with the aid of the photograph. One has only to think of scenes in the Bible, or episodes in the lives of Saints, in which a donkey appears more than once, to arrive at the solution of the whole series and the identification of certainly four, and possibly five, of the individual panels. Ruling out the story of Balaam and the ass (a rare subject, and one where so many repetitions are extremely unlikely), we see at once that the only possible reading of the subjects is an extensive series portraying the Life of Christ, a very usual feature in wall painting, including the Nativity (asses in the stable); the journey of the Wise Men (on donkeys, as at Blackbourton, Oxon.); the Flight into Egypt (also at Blackbourton, Croughton, Northants, and in numerous other examples); and the Entry into Jerusalem—all scenes in which donkeys occur—to which might be added the Adoration of the Magi or the Shepherds, where donkeys in the stable might again appear in the background.

Bearing this in mind, one can almost identify the top right hand panel in Plate IV as the Flight into Egypt; while the one immediately below appears to be the Magi, the preceding subject to that having probably been the Nativity. as a small piece of diaper (red on a yellow ground) used almost exclusively in the painted representation of cushions, bed or couch pillows, etc., in the fourteenth century, was uncovered in 1932 in this position.

Along the whole wall below the window sill a dado band of ornament was painted, below which was a representation of drapery hanging in folds from it. The scheme must have been an elaborate and impressive one, and it is most unfortunate that so little was left, and

even more so that what was recovered has since been defaced.

The remains of painting in other parts of the church were interesting as showing that a complete decorative scheme had existed: but they were too fragmentary to make any coherent explanation possible. In the chancel, on the North wall, was uncovered part of a black letter text, late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, having the word, "Holy, Holy, Holy." Another text (framed) was above the memorial tablet in the South aisle, East of the South door, showing that the injunctions for defacing the "popish ymyges" and for "sentencing" the church were duly carried out at the Reformation and later. A fragmentary painting was found just East of the North door in the North aisle. This could not be identified with any certainty, but from its position and general outline one may hazard the guess that it was a St. Christopher. *The Victoria County History* (Herts, Vol. II, 327) mentions traces of some of the paintings already described, and also quotes references to "paintings or images of St. Katherine, the Holy Trinity and the Blessed Mary" contained in wills of the 15th century. But no trace of such subjects has appeared. The font retains evidence of colouring in a wide range of tints, and there is no doubt that it was originally painted; but the existing pigment is probably not medieval, but a more recent repainting.

I am much indebted to Professor Tristram for kind permission to reproduce his drawings of the St. Thomas and the St. Lawrence.