

Note on the Wall Paintings at George Street, St. Albans

By E. CLIVE ROUSE, F.S.A.

THERE are considerable remains of wall painting and other colour decoration in the house, providing useful evidence of the wide use of this form of decoration in domestic buildings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and affording some idea of the schemes employed.

The main ceiling beams in a room on the ground floor retain a good deal of chevron-pattern painting, apparently in red and black: and this work may well belong to an earlier period than the rest of the painting here described, possibly coming within the fifteenth century, and certainly not later than the early sixteenth century. The chevron motif persisted in English decoration from the twelfth century until the sixteenth, so that it is not always easy to fix a precise date on the evidence of the painting alone.

In a room above this, facing George Street, one wall shows extensive evidence of a complete scheme of painting. The lower part of the wall, to a height of just over 5 ft., is set out and painted to represent simple panelling of normal proportions, save that at the top is a half-panel surmounted by a moulded dado-rail. A dark brown or purplish pigment is used, and the details of the wood panelling are completely rendered, with moulded styles and rails, and sunk panels, light and shade being suggested by thicker and thinner lines: even the wooden pegs at the joins are shown. It is uncertain how much shading or solid colour filling was used: but some attempt at this was undoubtedly made, though little now survives. Several schemes of this same idea of painted representations of panelling, treated in different ways, are now recorded; and it affords an interesting sidelight on the house decoration of the period.

Above the panelling little remains but fragments of oblong panels supported by brackets resting on the dado-rail. Three are recorded by Mr. F. W. Reader, but only two were accessible when I last inspected the house.

Mr. Reader considers they were in plain frames and formed a cornice to the whole scheme, though I suggest the possibility of their having been divided by pilasters, or simple architectural ornament, and surmounted by some further frieze or band below the ceiling. The whole is now very fragmentary, and has deteriorated rapidly in the last few years since Mr. Reader made his record. Evidently much more was then visible, and his interpretation is therefore all the more valuable. The oblong panels have a deep yellow or brown ground, and have been filled with texts or inscriptions in black-letter. An attempt was made to decipher these, but the dampness of the wall, and the perished condition of the plaster and pigment, the latter also defaced by white-wash, makes them illegible and does not justify any serious attempt at preservation, even if that were practicable. After treatment it was possible to read a few words, and to get some general idea of the nature of the texts.

There are six lines of lettering in each: and from the fact that each line begins with a capital, one may suppose that they were in verse. They do not appear to be Biblical quotations or texts, though their content is very likely scriptural. Most probably they are the typical sententious effusions of the period. In the centre panel, the first line commences:

“ THE WICKED WORLDE (IN) WHICH
 . . . OF . . . ”

the second:

“ SIN AWAKS . . . M(EN) TO . . . N . . . ”

the third:

“ THE TASTINGE ” (or “ LASTINGE ”)
 “ IOYES . . . OF THESE MEN.”

And so on, only isolated words or parts of them being decipherable in the rest, and in the other panel, “ generations ” being one of them. Parallels to this type of inscription may be quoted from Buckinghamshire and elsewhere, as at Chalfont St. Peter (*Records*

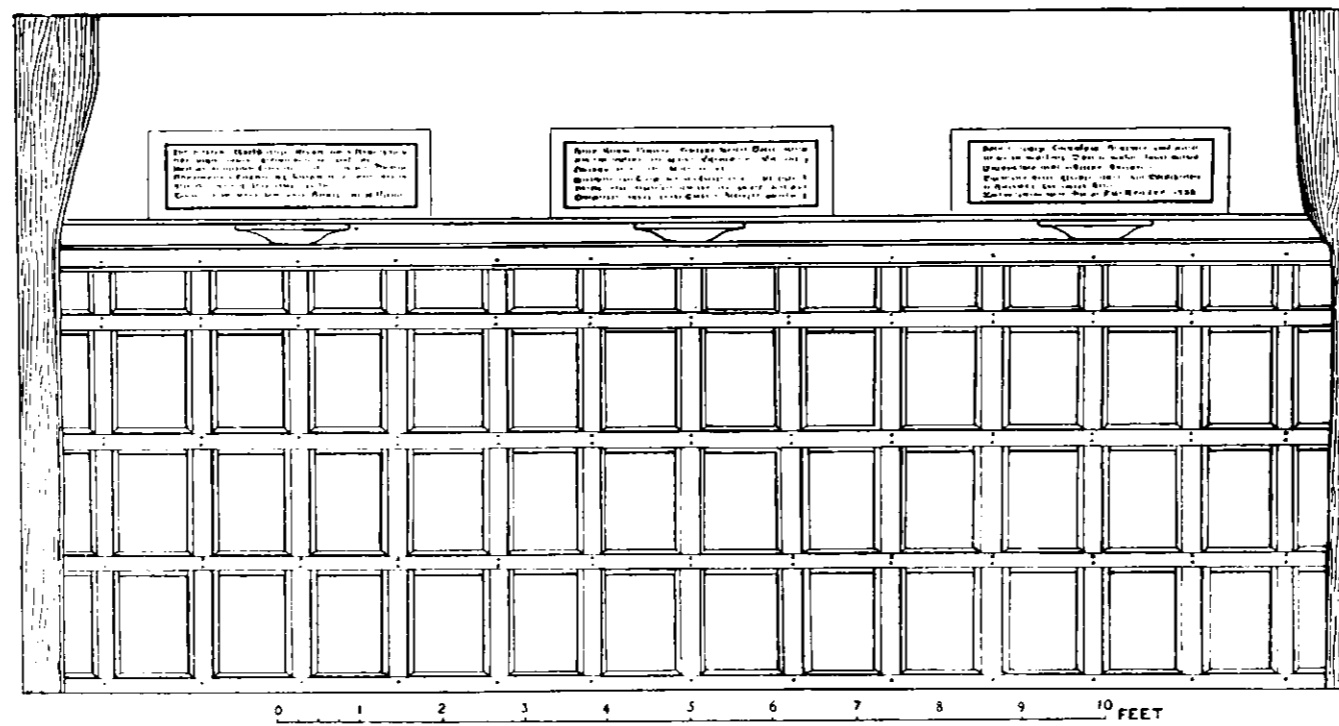
NO. 28, GEORGE STREET, ST. ALBANS



[*Drawn by F. W. Reader.*
WALL PAINTING.



NO. 28, GEORGE STREET, ST. ALBANS



[Drawn by F. W. Reader.]

WALL PAINTING. MEASURED RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SCHEME.



of Bucks, XII, 47) and Meadle, Princes Risborough (*R.A.I. Journal*, LXXXIX, 170), both early seventeenth century. The blackletter is late but not unduly debased. The suggestion of early date in the lettering is counteracted by the style of the panelling represented. Blackletter, of course, lasted in debased form into the seventeenth century, as the evidence of some texts on church walls, carried out under the Visitation Injunctions for "sentencing," proves. So that one must date this painting as in the immediate neighbourhood of 1600.

In a room at the back of that just mentioned, flanking a large open fireplace, is a good fragment of bold decorative painting. The design is a large brocade pattern or ornamental foliage design, carried out in black and white with a certain amount of grey shading or infilling. The foliage is free and boldly drawn, and has a well-developed classical character, with the usual acanthus leaves. But one is disposed to date it rather earlier than the other painting, perhaps mid or even early sixteenth century.

I wish to express my grateful thanks to Mr. F. W. Reader for very kindly checking these notes from his personal knowledge of the paintings gained some years ago when more was visible; and for the use of his excellent drawings.