

## THE WALL-PAINTINGS IN ST. ALBAN'S ABBEY.<sup>1</sup>

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The distemper wall-paintings in St. Alban's Abbey may, for convenience sake, be divided into two classes; the first class, which is by far the most important, consisting of figures, either singly or in groups; the second being merely decorative. I propose now to describe the paintings of the former class only, since a complete description of both would extend this paper beyond reasonable limits.

It will be remembered that the fourth nave pier from the west on the north side is mainly Norman, and that what Early English work it contains (that of John de Cella) ceases abruptly just below the capital; this singular arrangement would seem to be due to a feeling of reverence for the distemper painting of the Crucifixion—the first of the series—with which the western face of this pier is adorned. Here is shown a crowned figure of our Lord upon a cross (coloured green) in the form of a tree with lopped boughs, called in heraldic language *raguly*, with St. Mary on the spectator's left, and St. John on the right holding a book. Such a cross would seem to have reference to the lines of St. Venantius Fortunatus:—

“ Impleta sunt quæ concinit  
David fideli carmine,  
Dicendo nationibus :  
Regnavit a ligno Deus.  
Arbor decora et fulgida,  
Ornata Regis purpurâ,  
Electa digno stipite  
Tam sancta membra tangere.  
Beata, cujus brachiis  
Pretium pendit sæculi.”

Beneath is a representation of the Annunciation;—the Virgin is crowned, seated upon a throne, and holds a sceptre in her right hand. Above, on each side, is an angel censuring.

Through the middle of this design was placed, in the fifteenth century, a small stone bracket, which still remains, and which formerly supported an image of St. Richard of Chichester.<sup>2</sup> The date of this painting is probably early in the 13th century.

On the south side of the same pier is a large figure of St. Christopher walking through the water, and bearing the Infant Saviour upon his left

<sup>1</sup> Read in the Section of Antiquities at the Bedford Meeting, July 29th, 1881.

<sup>2</sup> J. de Amundesham *Annales*, i, 444. (Rolls series.)

arm. The head of the saint is covered with a hat of Flemish shape. His effigy, as is well known, is the one most commonly met with in churches, and to behold it was thought lucky.

"Christofori faciem die quacumque tueris,  
Illa nempe die morte mala non morieris."<sup>1</sup>

Erasmus, in one of his *Colloquies*,<sup>2</sup> thus writes:—"Sed præcipua spes erat in divo Christophoro, cujus imaginem quotidie contemplabar. HA. In tentoriis? Unde illic divi? TH. Carbone pinxeramus illum in velo. HA. Nimirum haudquaquam ficulnum, ut ajunt, præsidium erat carbonarius ille Christophorus."

The next, or fifth pier, has on its western face the Crucifixion, the cross being of similar design to the last. St. Mary with clasped hands is on the right, and St. John on the left; the background is sprinkled with hexafoils. Below, is the Annunciation under a canopy of five arches. The date is early thirteenth century. On the south side is shown an Archbishop, wearing alb, dalmatic, chasuble, maniple, gloves, and shoes, holding a cross-staff in his left hand, and blessing with three fingers of the right. The head is so defaced that no mitre can be made out. The chasuble is ornamented with a Y shaped orphrey, but there is no pallium. Above the figure is a crocketed canopy, and beneath the feet something resembling a square box (which may be intended for his shrine), with two lancets and three hexafoils on the side facing the spectator.

On one side of the head are the letters S M, and on the other M A S, the whole probably reading SANCTUS MARTYR THOMAS. The design is of the kind technically called "Flemish." In the great *Liber Benefactorum* which formerly lay upon the High Altar of the Abbey, and is now preserved in the British Museum (Cotton. MS. Nero D vij) it is recorded that during the Abbacy of Thomas de la Mare (1349—96), Robert de Trunch caused to be painted the figure (ymaginem) of St. Thomas Archbishop of Canterbury. I think there is little doubt that St. Thomas of Canterbury is intended by this figure, and this view is confirmed by the facts that the saint was collated to his first living, that of Brantefeld (now Braintfield) in Hertfordshire, by Abbot Symon<sup>3</sup> (1167—83), and that an altar dedicated to the Saint's honour stood at the eastern extremity of the north aisle of the nave.

The sixth pier has on its western aspect the figure of our Lord upon a plain cross; the Virgin is on the left side with the hands clasped, and Saint John on the right. Below is a pointed arch with two sub-arches, having an angel under one, and the Virgin under the other, to represent the Annunciation. The date is fourteenth century.

On the south side, standing on a bracket, is a large figure in a bluish grey gown, short-waisted, reaching to the ankles, with sleeves rather loose at the elbows, and tight at the wrists, of the fashion worn about the year 1440; both hands are raised in the attitude of prayer, and the left hand holds a rosary. Near the head are the letters S C A, and near the feet an estoile. It is by no means clear whom this painting

<sup>1</sup> Inscription below the earliest dated woodcut known. In the possession of Earl Spencer. See *Catalogue of Caxton Exhibition*, 1877, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> *Militaria*. See also the *Encomium Moriae*.

<sup>3</sup> *Gesta Abbatum*, i, 183; J. de Amundesham *Annales*, ii, 306.

commemorates. If it be intended for a male, as is rendered probable by the habit reaching no lower than the ankles, I should be inclined to assign it to the originator of the Devotion of the Rosary, St. Dominic, whose emblems are a star and a rosary. Mr. Keyser, however, thinks it stands for St. Citha or Osyth, who formerly had an altar<sup>1</sup> in the north transept.

The seventh pier. On the west side is shewn the Crucifixion; the arms of the cross are cut off at an acute angle; the attendant figures are omitted. The Annunciation is represented beneath, the figures standing under two pointed arches; date, fourteenth century. Between the two subjects is a band of arabesque pattern, closely resembling one on the south side of the Presbytery. On the south side of the pillar is a group, consisting of a male figure habited in a reddish gown, having a scrip hanging at his right side, and grasping a white staff in his right hand; on his left is what looks like a female figure, but it is very indistinct. Each looks towards the other; both are barefoot and stand on a bracket; close to the head of the male figure the face of a third person may be dimly perceived. Beneath the bracket is the following inscription in black letter with Gothic capitals:—"✝ P(riez) pu (r lalmes de) Willelme iadis bal: e iohanne sa femme e pur lalme Will. . . . . ." We learn from the Abbey Records that near this spot were buried William Tod and his wife Johanna. He was bailiff of the town of St. Albans, and collector of rents in 1429; in 1430 his wife died in childbed.<sup>2</sup>

The inscription is clearly a prayer for the repose of the souls of William Tod and his family; and the painting above, which is thought by Mr. Waller to be St. Edward the Confessor bestowing a ring upon a pilgrim, who turns out to be St. John, is most likely a memorial of the Tods.

The eighth pier. On the western side the Crucifixion is repeated, this time upon a red ground; St. Mary is shown on the left, and St. John on the right. Below, under a cusped canopy, we find the Coronation of the Virgin. She is seated upon a throne, and wears a crown of the kind now called in heraldry "ducal;" on her left is our Lord, also enthroned. He wears a white garment and a coloured cloak, has the crossed nimbus, and extends three fingers of the right hand in benediction; the left hand holds the Book of the Gospels, which rests edgewise upon the knee; it has two clasps, and a cover ornamented with lattice and other work. Above, are two angels swinging thuribles; the whole design is artistic. The date is probably fourteenth century, or even earlier. The eminent antiquary, Mr. M. H. Bloxam, remarked to me in 1876, that he thought this Crucifixion and Coronation may have been painted by Walter de Colcestre, of whom we have the following account: "In the time of Abbot William de Trumpington (1214-35), when Master Walter de Colcestre, then Sacrist (an unrivalled painter and sculptor), had completed a rood-loft in the midst of the church, with its great cross, and with Mary and John, and other carvings and suitable structures, at the cost of the sacristy, but without sparing his own labour, Abbot William himself solemnly translated the shrine with the relics of blessed Amphibalus and his friends, from the spot where it

<sup>1</sup> J. de Amundesham *Annales*, i, 446.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* i, 49, 50, 57, 162; ii, 443.

had formerly been placed, that is to say, near the High Altar, close to the shrine of St. Alban, on the north side, unto the place in the midst of the church, which is enclosed within an iron latticed *grille*, a most beautiful altar being made there, with a frontal<sup>1</sup> (*tabula*) and super-altar (*super-altare*), painted at great cost.<sup>2</sup>" On the south face of the same pier the Crucifixion is repeated, but the execution is very feeble.

It has been thought by some that beneath each of the five foregoing paintings of the Crucifixion there stood, at one time, an altar; but taking into consideration the facts (1) that in a document<sup>3</sup> of the date 1429, which gives a description of all the altars then existing in the church, no mention is made of any such altars, although some of the designs are nearly 200 years earlier than that document; and (2) that no marks of the attachment of an altar or its accessories can be found here, it seems much more likely that Mr. Waller's opinion that the paintings served as stations of the cross, is the correct one, although a repetition of the same subject (Christ on the Cross), and not the series of events terminating in the Crucifixion, is depicted.

On the ninth pier are the remains of a large figure of Christ in His glory: it is too indistinct to describe. There are traces of an inscription, of which the words (in black letter) . . . . . xpe . . . . . Amen . . . sancte . . . . are decipherable.

Turning to the south side of the nave, we find upon the western face of the fifth pier from the west, which is partly Early English and partly Decorated, remains of a distemper painting in outline, of St. Mary with her Infant in her lap, who receives the adoration of the Magi (*Oblatio Magorum*). Close to this, towards the south, are traces of a repetition of the subject. Before this painting stood the Altar of St. Mary at the pillar,<sup>4</sup> erected at the cost of William Wynturshulle, almoner of the monastery, c. 1380, in the time of Abbot Thomas de la Mare.<sup>5</sup>

Connected with this altar was the brotherhood of St. Alban.<sup>6</sup>

Choir. Upon the western face of the third pier from the rood-screen, on the north side, is a representation of the Holy Trinity. The Almighty is seated, with the right hand raised to bless; and He supports the Saviour upon a tau cross on His lap, whilst the Holy Ghost is represented above by a star or dove. To this painting Mr. Keyser assigns the date of the fourteenth century.

Upon the buttresses between the clerestory windows on the north and south sides of the choir, are four large figures, exceedingly indistinct, painted in a dull red colour, and each having the nimbus, three being on the north side and one on the south. The last-mentioned holds a staff, and is conjectured by the same authority to be St. James the Great. The westernmost figure on the north side holds a book in the left hand. Upon the eastern wall of the north transept, near to the north aisle, is a painting of early fifteenth century date; under a perpendicular canopy of five arches is shown a figure of Our Lord standing, crowned with a nimbus of rays, with blood streaming from the

<sup>1</sup> Or, perhaps, a re-table.

<sup>2</sup> *Gesta Abbatum*, i, 281.

<sup>3</sup> J. de Amundesham *Annales*, i, 431.

<sup>4</sup> J. de Amundesham *Annales*, i, 442, 448.

<sup>5</sup> *Gesta Abbatum*, iii, 369. On the next pier but one, eastward, is scratched in court hand the name "Wynturshulle."

<sup>6</sup> J. de Amundesham *Annales*, i, 446 *Chronicon Angliæ*, 146.

five wounds, wearing a cloak fastened with a morse, holding in His left hand a cross-staff with vexillum, and looking towards St. Thomas, who, with a nimbus, and clad in a loose robe, kneels on His right side, and thrusts two fingers of the right hand into the wound in Christ's side. Near Our Lord is a scroll with the inscription in black letter, "*Beati q. non viderut et crediderut*," and near St. Thomas one bearing the words, "*Dns meus et deus meus*." The painting thus represents what is commonly called the "*Incredulity of St. Thomas*," but is described in one of the documents (to be quoted shortly) relating to the Monastic Church, as the "*History of the Resurrection*." According to this authority there formerly existed below it a painting of the "*History of the Passion*," which seems from the description to have been a representation of the "*Agony in the Garden*." Below the painting may still be seen the following lines, taken from the prayers after Mass in the Sarum Missal :

"Mors tua, mors Christi, fraus mundi, gloria celi,  
Et dolor inferni, sint memoranda tibi.  
In cruce sum pro te; qui peccas, desine, pro me;  
Desine, condono, pugna, juvo, vince, corono."

These two paintings formed the reredos of the Altar of the Leaning Cross and St. Lawrence. The following very curious description, written A.D. 1429, of the Altar of the Leaning Cross and St. Lawrence (also called the Altar of the Holy Cross) and its surroundings, which include the painting described above, may be quoted here:—

"For the explanation of the same pictures and mysteries of this Altar, it is to be noted that like as the truth of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ on Mount Tabor was made plain to five witnesses, namely, to three Disciples and two Prophets; so the salvation of the world, which the Saviour thereof vouchsafed to accomplish in the midst of the earth (that is, in Jerusalem, which is situated in the midst of the habitable world) on the Mount of Calvary, by the testimony of the chief Prophets of His Passion, Jeremiah, namely, and Isaiah, and of the chief and chosen witness of His Resurrection, His Disciple Thomas, He willed to set forth in the midst of our church, at the altar placed near the public path, where many persons pass by and go out; that the Scriptures and their life-giving testimonies, may be the oftener read and seen.

"Now, there are in that place two true columns, the shafts whereof denote love to God and one's neighbour, whereby hang all the Law and the Prophets; one of these, of the colour of the earth, signifies our humiliation, according to the passage, '*Remember that thou art dust, and unto dust shalt return*,' and reaches from the base of humility unto its capital, with the turret of charity.

"But the other, red with the blood of Our Saviour, besprinkled at His scourging, denotes His victory and honour; its shaft, as above, is extended from the base of virtue unto the capital of the turret of honour.

"On these columns are inscribed externally the emblems of the Passion, in the following verses:—

"Vincta, flagella, minæ, probra, sputa, columna, spinæque,  
Derisus, colaphi, nudatio, lancea, clavi,  
Cum calamis, felle, crux, laus fuit istadelii."



"And lest any one deceitfully attribute to himself the gifts of God alone; in the hands of angels, standing together in the said turrets, are written these verses:

'Quicquid habet meriti, præventrix gratia donat,  
Nil Deus in nobis præter sua dona coronat.'

"There are also two angels, sent from the Court of Heaven to comfort the Only-Begotten Son of God the Father in the Agony of His Passion, and to relate to the same celestial court His glorious victory, the salvation of men, and the restoration of the tenth order<sup>1</sup> of lost angels. And in order that the memory of the boundless love of Christ may the more firmly abide in the minds of His worshippers, and that (a man) may most humbly admit his own wretched state; between the history of the Resurrection and of the Passion it is thus written:

'Mors tua, mors Christi, fraus mundi, gloria coeli,  
Et dolor inferni, sint memoranda tibi.'

"And—

'In cruce sum pro te; qui peccas, desine, pro me;  
Desine, condono, pugna, juvo, vince, coronò.'

"And it is to be noted, that one attains from humility by the column of the Love of God and one's neighbour, to the turret of charity, and by virtue, and uprightness of life, one comes to the turret of Honour, as John says in his Epistle:—"God so loved the world, that He gave His Only Begotten Son, that we might receive the adoption of sons; and of honour, which according to the Philosopher, is recognised as the reward of virtue."<sup>2</sup>

In the south transept, in the spandrel over the arch leading into the south aisle of the Presbytery, is part of the figure of an angel, the arms and wings being extended, to which the late Sir G. G. Scott assigned, I believe, a very early date.

In the Saint's Chapel, under the northernmost of the three eastern arches, are some remains of the decorations belonging to the Altar of St. Hugh and the relics. Part of the wall is coloured chocolate, and this part is sprinkled with white six-leaved roses; another part has a background of green, upon which is painted a very artistic representation of an Archbishop. He has rather long hair combed back, and a short beard, and is vested in a white alb with a scarlet apparel adorned with a lozenge pattern, blue dalmatic with pink lining, dark crimson flowing chasuble lined with scarlet, over which there is no pallium, amice of scarlet outlined with black, rather low mitre of blue and red; black shoes, a white glove on the right hand, three fingers of which are raised in the attitude of benediction; a ring upon the middle finger over the glove; the left hand is bare and grasps a cross-staff with four knops, and pointed at the foot.

<sup>1</sup> "The tenth order revolted and became evil." *O. E. Homilies*, i, 218. Ed. by Dr. Morris (E. E. T. S. 1868.)

"He made knyzttes in hus court. creatures ten,

Cherubin and seraphin. suche seuene [and] another."

*Vision concerning Piers Plowman*, Text c passus ii, 105, and Mr. Skeat's notes upon the passage, in Part iv, p. 33 (E. E. T. S., 1877.)

<sup>2</sup> J. de Amundesham *Annales*, i, 421.

Beneath the figure is a shield of arms—*Lozengy, argent and gules*. Beneath this again are the words "*Scs Willmus.*"

Dr. Nicholson believed St. William, Archbishop of York (1140 to 1154), to be the person commemorated by this design, the style of which belongs to the latter half of the fourteenth century. We find it recorded in the *Liber Benefactorum* (fol. 83), that during Thomas de la Mare's Abbacy (1349—96), Robert de Trunch placed relics over the Altar of St. Hugh, and adorned it most suitably with gilt iron-work, pictures, and carvings. This painting may therefore be attributed to him.

I cannot conclude this paper without saying that I have received considerable aid in its compilation from the article on the distemper paintings by Mr. J. G. Waller, in the Rev. Dr. Nicholson's *Guide to St. Alban's Abbey*, and from Mr. C. Keyser's paper on the same subject, read before the St. Alban's Archæological Society on December 17th, 1878.