

NOTES ON THE FIGURE OF ST. CHRISTOPHER.

BY JOHN GREEN WALLER, Esq.

SINCE the publication of my paper upon the wall-painting of St. Christopher at Newdigate Church, several notes have been forwarded to me by Major Heales, F.S.A., and I have considered, that some additional remarks, embodying these may not be unacceptable.

At page 59, I had stated my impression, that these figures were generally shown as moving from right to left, and I could only produce one example, that at Ludgvan, to the contrary. But I find another instance at Gawsworth, in Cheshire; and it may be that the rule was, that if the painting was executed upon the north wall, as mostly the case, it would be as stated, but if on the south, it would be reversed; the reason doubtless being that the Saint was invariably represented as moving towards the east,—*i.e.*, the altar; an arrangement which would be agreeable to the spirit of the story.

I had mentioned that the figures were frequently in sculpture, and of wood; but, nevertheless, there is no doubt but that paintings on the wall were the most common. The notable example, formerly at Notre Dame, Paris, alluded to by Erasmus, I have already spoken of. There is one of wood still extant at Avénières, adjoining Laval, in France, placed against the pillar on the north side of the nave, and about 10 feet in height; date early in the fifteenth century. Also, in the Church of Santa Maria del Orto, otherwise S. Cristofero, at Venice, is one occupying a niche at the back of the apse immediately

behind the altar. In this instance, however, the position in which it is placed is not for the ready and general veneration of the people, but rather on account of the church being in part dedicated to the Saint. Either in France, or in Belgium, I have seen a large painted wooden figure of St. Christopher in low relief, but I regret to say I have not found my notes which would give the locality. Large statues of St. Christopher exist at the Cathedral of Auxerre, France, and also in that of Erfurt, in Germany; but of what material I am unable to state, but possibly of wood. Another, remarkable for its being stated to be of the actual size of the Saint, calculated from some of his bones brought to England in 1470, is in the Church of S. Maria della Pietà, at Venice.¹ In the Cathedral of Münster, in Westphalia, is a stone statue of the Saint fixed at the north-east angle of the transept. It is not of early date, possibly of the first quarter of the seventeenth century. The staff here given is a mere wand, foliated at the apex. This reduction of the usual size and character of the ragged staff may be occasionally found in early examples, as, for instance, at Fritton, in Suffolk.

There is a painting of St. Christopher, associated with the figure of St. George, by Roger de Bruges, which is so far worthy of remark, that this latter saint was another popular one, especially in England, being its patron. One of the most common subjects of our wall-paintings is of St. George conquering the Dragon: a very rude example was recently found at Finchley, Middlesex; and one at Dartford, Kent, is well known. The legend is of a similar class to that of St. Christopher, being clearly mythical, and the result of teaching by apologue and symbols. One of the latest instances of the subject of St. Christopher is that by Rubens, at Antwerp Cathedral,—a curious commentary, among others, of the force of popular views long after discredit has been thrown upon them. For both Roman Catholic writers, as well as those of the Reformation,

¹ *Dictionnaire critique des Reliques et des Images*. Par J. A. S. Collin de Plancy. 8vo. Paris, 1821, vol. i. p. 146.

equally disallow the legend of St. Christopher, though, as I have before remarked, with some reservation.

Among the Italian painters, Mr. Jameson mentions that Pollajuolo painted a gigantic figure of St. Christopher about 20 feet in height on the façade of the Church of San Miniato fra le Torre, at Florence, which served during many years as a model of form to the artists of his school. Michael Angelo copied it several times: it exists no longer. A St. Christopher, 32 feet high, was painted at Seville by Matteo Perez de Alesis, A.D. 1584.¹ A very interesting fresco, by Garofalo, was exhibited at the recent ceremony of opening the Guildhall Library.

In the south aisle of Headington Church, Oxfordshire, a mere fragment of a St. Christopher was found, together with a series of subjects from Scripture. Only the upper part was sufficiently preserved to show details; yet here was a divergence from the usual type, which makes it interesting in a history of the subject. The figure of Christ is upheld by the left arm, and the Saint wears a cap of a somewhat academical character, as seen in our monuments of canons, and other dignitaries of the Church. This example explains a passage from one of our records, quoted by Horace Walpole, in his *Anecdotes of Painting*; and it may be, that early examples do not represent the figure of Christ upon the shoulder of the Saint, according to our usual experiences. The record in question is from the Close Rolls, 1248, and is a precept to the sheriff of Southampton, "that he should cause to be painted in the Chapel of our Queen at Winchester, upon the gable towards the west, the figure of St. Christopher, as elsewhere it is painted: he shall bear Christ in his arms."² An earlier record is also quoted respecting some decorations in the Church of St. Peter, in the Tower of London, when, after describing the re-colouring of certain images, it

¹ *Sacred and Legendary Art*, vol. ii. p. 443.

² "Præcipimus tibi quod de exitibus comitatus tui depingi facias in capella reginæ nostræ apud Wintoniam super gabulum versus occidentem imaginem Christoferi, sicut alibi depingitur."

proceeds: "that a certain figure of St. Christopher, holding and bearing Jesus, should be painted in the aforesaid Church where best and most fitly it can be done."¹ The last clause probably meant in such a place where it could be best seen.

The distich given at p. 64 is often varied verbally, but not so as to alter its intention. Certainly the most curious of these is that found upon a bell in Shapwick Church, Dorset, by the Rev. J. J. Raven, of Great Yarmouth:—

" Illo nempe die nullo languore gravetur
Xtotori S̄ci campanam quicunque tuetur."

The efficacy of honouring the Saint is here even transferred to his bell. The labourer in the fields, hearing the sound of the bell of St. Christopher, would not faint during his toil. Such is the inference.

The Rev. Lee Warner has kindly given me from memory the following lines in English, which accompanied a figure of St. Christopher in the Church of Sedgeford, Norfolk, date about the end of the fourteenth century. He does not vouch for absolute verbal accuracy, nor orthography, but that it is substantially correct; being in the vernacular makes it especially interesting:—

" Wyth all thys world in hand,
Thy dry staff withouten let,
Shall beren leavis in land,
Where thou it set."

The references to the legend will at once be seen, for wherever we get the figure of St. Christopher, there will be, in some fashion or other, the leaf-bearing staff. In the Münster example this is made particularly prominent.

In Horley Church, near Banbury, Oxfordshire, an example was found in which the staff was represented

¹ "Quandam imaginem de Sancto Christofero tenentem et portantem Jesum, ubi melius et decentius fieri potest, et depingi in prædicta ecclesia."

as breaking in twain under the superincumbent weight, and on a scroll from the mouth of the saint these words were deciphered :—

“What art thou that art so he(vy) ?
Bar I never so hevy thyngē.”

The Saviour makes reply,

“Yef I be hevy no wunder nys,
For I am the Kyngē of blys.”

These lines are similar to some in Latin at Stoke Bardolph, Norfolk, viz. :—

“Parve Puer, quis tu, graviorem non tolleravi,
Non mirans sis tu, nam sum qui cuncta creavi.”

This breaking of the staff is altogether new to me ; it is not according to the legend, and was possibly an original idea of the artist, a rare occurrence. The work must have been late in the fifteenth century.

In the will of William Philpot, of Godmersham, 1474, is a reference to the existence of a figure of St. Christopher in Elmstead Church ; the will directing that certain seats should be made from the place where St. Christopher was painted, as far as the angle of the stone wall on the northern side of the same church. The painting exists no longer, but some of the seats remain.¹ Also in the will of Richard Shore, citizen and Alderman of Farringdon Without, and Sheriff in 1505, dated August, 1510, is another reference :—“I bequeth toward the making of a porche to the pïsshe church of seynt Mildrede in the Pultry of London xvli. sterl., and I will that on either side of the sam porche of seynt Mildrede churchē shalbe made an ymage of seynt Cris- tofer in stone embossid.” (Milbourn’s “History of St. Mildred’s, Poultry,” p. 12). Here we have a carved figure in stone, as in examples previously given.

¹ “Volo qd fabricant de novo scabella voc^r le Pewes in eadē ecclīā de Elmysted sumptibz suis vidz illud spacm̄ a loco ubi scūs Xpoforus pingitur usqē ad angulū muri lapidei ex parti boreali ejusdz ecclīi.”—HEALES’ *History and Law of Church Seats*, vol. i. p. 53.

The Saint was popular with guilds and fraternities. In Lambeth Church was a brotherhood under his patronage.¹ The description of the yeoman by Chaucer, already mentioned (p. 64), suggests the probability of his having been a member of such an association. Amongst the valuable collection of silver plate in the museum of the late Lord Londesborough were three finely-designed covered cups; one dated 1593; another similar in character may be assigned to the same period; and the third dated 1676. They all belonged to a fraternity of Arquebussiers at Gorichem-on-the-Waal, and each of them is surmounted by a figure of St. Christopher of the ancient type.² Chaucer's yeoman was an archer; the arquebussier was his successor in the history of arms; and doubtless, in both cases, the charm of St. Christopher's protection originated the custom. Representations have occasionally been found upon chalices in enamelled work as late as the seventeenth century, but I should scarcely think this by any means common or of any ancient use.

Besides the example on the brass at Wyke, Hants, to William Complyn, which I have already mentioned, there are two others, registered in Mr. Haines's manual, at Morley Church, Derbyshire, which contain accessory figures of St. Christopher; viz., one to John Stathum, Esq., 1444; the other to Sir Thomas Stathum, 1470. Possibly other instances of the figure as an accessory to a monument might be found either at home or abroad, as in an example in the cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle, date 1534.

Mr. H. L. Phillips, a member of the Surrey Archæological Society, has communicated a few interesting facts, from which the following passages are extracted. He says:—"In 1860 there stood near the parish church in Bermondsey Street, an old wooden public-house, which, besides informing the public that it was a 'House of Call for Scotch Bakers,' had for its sign 'the Fox and

¹ Tanswell's *History of Lambeth*, pp. 110-114.

² Engraved in Fairholt's Catalogue, 1850, plate xvii.

Goose.' This house, about this date, was pulled down, and some very curious old stones were then found among the foundations; and a new house, bearing the same sign, now stands on its site. In 1864 the next house was pulled down to make room for the tin manufactory of Messrs. Perkins; and, among some old spoons, keys, and knives, was found a gold signet-ring, with the figure of St. Christopher upon it, now in the possession of Richard Perkins, Esq."

Hughson, in his "History of London," published in 1805, in describing Bermondsey Street, says:—"Here is a very old inn, called Christopher's Inn, on which is a rude emblem of St. Christopher. Christopher (vulgarly Crucifix) Lane leads to Snow's Fields." This inn has passed away, and even its very site is unknown.

I give the above notes as very curious and interesting. The signs of these old inns, "The Fox and Goose," "St. Christopher," and another of the "Holy Lamb," which Mr. Phillips mentions that he found in an old lease, all bespeak a time which has passed away. It is not at all uncommon to find traces of this ancient apologue of the Fox and Goose in our old towns,¹ but there is really no connection between it and the legend of St. Christopher, as the painting formerly at Ludgvan² might suggest. Since writing the above, another example has been found at Henstridge Ash, in Somersetshire. "The picture occupies a space of 8 ft. by 9 ft. 6 in., and exhibits a gigantic figure of St. Christopher, bearing on his shoulder a small figure of the Saviour, whose hand is raised in the act of blessing. The feet of St. Christopher are in water, and around them are fishes. In the background are a windmill, a packhorse laden with corn, and a dog, with a man carrying on his head a sack. There is also a lofty rock, surmounted by a church, and on a projecting ledge stands a monk with

¹ At the corner of an old timber house of the fifteenth century at Ipswich is an excellent example representing the Fox preaching.

² Engraved at p. 50 of the *Journal of the Royal Institution of Cornwall*, No. xiii. April, 1872.

girdle and rosary, holding out over the water a lantern hung to the end of a stick. The whole picture is surrounded by a border of lotus-leaves." (*Church Review*, June 21, 1873.) Some of the above details are unusual.

It is a curious coincidence of the discovery of the ring as above stated, close to the old inn, but nothing more can be said of it. Many more singular facts might probably be found in illustration of the worship of St. Christopher, if time permitted extensive research.
