

## THE ROMSEY PAINTED WOODEN REREDOS :

With a short account of Saint Armel

By ARTHUR R. GREEN

This remarkable and interesting example of English primitive paintings has in recent years been cleaned and preserved under the able direction of Professor Tristram, and is now placed in an appropriate position over an altar in the north transept of the Abbey, where its merits can, for the first time for many years, be fully appreciated (Pl. i). It is contained in a large wooden frame, filled with a series of upright boards, and having a ledge at the foot, the length inside the frame being 4 yards 1 inch and the height 2 yards 9½ inches.

Wooden reredoses are rare, the most important still remaining in the country being at Westminster, Norwich, and Gloucester, and one in triptych form at St. Cross, Winchester.

The Romsey reredos was painted about 1525 or 1530, and has occupied various positions in the Abbey. Charles Spence in *An Essay descriptive of the Abbey Church of Romsey*, published in 1841, writes : 'About thirty years ago some rude old paintings were discovered while making alterations immediately behind the altar . . . and although they have suffered much, and are indeed partly destroyed, enough of them remains to interest the curious.' The mutilation is only too apparent, but there is no doubt that the nailing of boards showing the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer over it, has preserved much which would otherwise have been lost.

The painting was originally much larger, and consisted of four tiers ; in the first and uppermost tier was a representation of our Lord in Majesty, and in the second tier, a choir of adoring angels. These are described in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1829, Vol. II, as being then covered with paint imitating

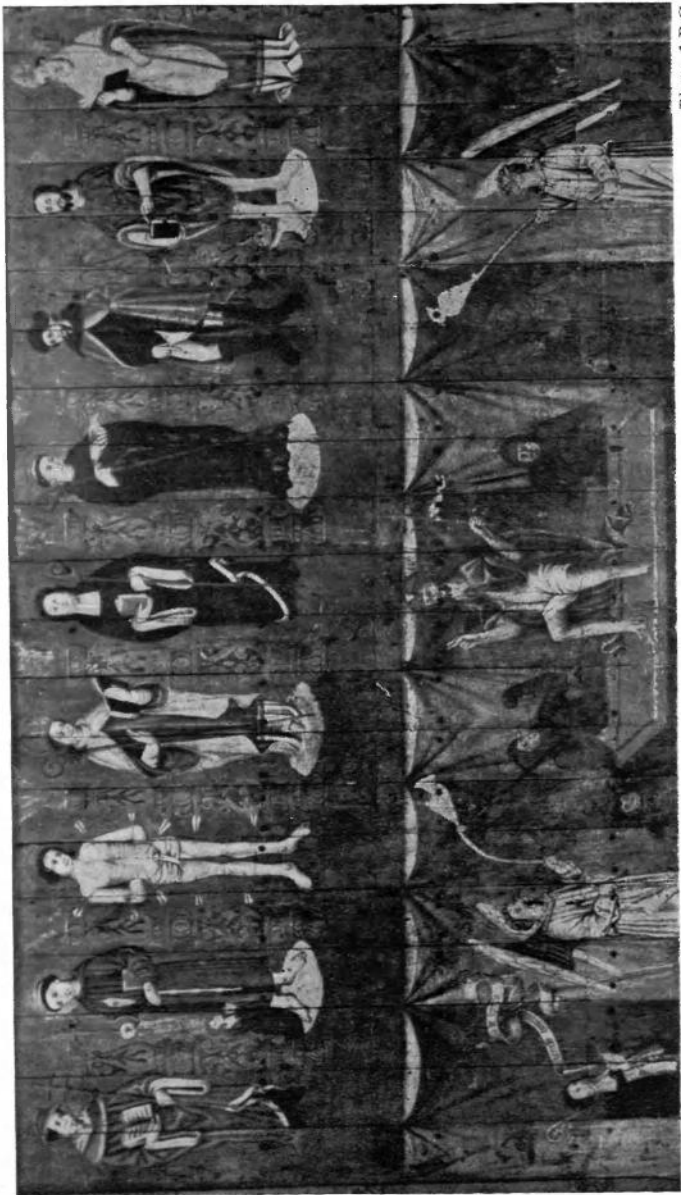


Photo A.R.G.

THE ROMSEY PAINTED WOODEN REREDOS



*Photo A.R.G.*

ST. ARMEL FROM THE ROMSEY REREDOS

marble, but they have entirely disappeared, and the portion which now remains consists of the third and fourth tiers of the original composition, a row of nine saints above, and Christ rising from the tomb below, with the soldiers and two censing angels, while at the bottom left-hand corner is the charming figure of an Abbess, possibly the donor, with a scroll inscribed, 'Surrexit Dominus de Sepulcro.'

The nine saints are painted upon a red background, and each stands under an arch supported by pilasters of Renaissance design in a golden colour, each figure measuring  $35\frac{1}{2}$  inches in height. Starting from the left the figures represent :—

I. *St. Jerome*, who wears a red garment with white at the edges, a cardinal's hat, and a cape over the shoulders. In the right hand is a book, and he carries a patriarchal cross with two bars in his left.

II. *St. Francis D'Assisi* in a sage green habit, a knotted girdle hanging down in front. The stigmata are shown, and he holds a short cross botonée in his right hand, and a book under his left arm. A female suppliant, in secular dress, kneels at his feet. She wears a kennel headdress, and carries a chain of beads, and may possibly be meant to represent *St. Clare*.

III. *St. Sebastian*, naked except for a loin-cloth, and pierced with arrows.

IV and IX. *Two Bishops* who cannot be identified with certainty. No. IV is vested in a yellow cope, showing the green lining round the arm-holes, over a red dalmatic. He holds a book in his left hand, and his mitre and crozier are also depicted. It has been suggested that this figure represents *St. Swithin* or *St. Augustine of Canterbury*, but it is not that of an archbishop.

No. IX is mitred and vested in a yellow chasuble lined with green and a red dalmatic. He carries a book in his right hand, and in his left a crozier. Perhaps *St. Augustine of Hippo* is here depicted.

V. *A Benedictine Abbess* clad in a dark garment, the widely open sleeves being edged with white, and

below her chin is a barbe. She carries a book in her right hand and a crozier in her left.

Edward the Elder is believed to have founded Romsey Abbey about the year 907, and his daughter St. Ethelflaeda became the first abbess, and was buried therein. In 967 Edgar, the grandson of Edward, reconstituted the abbey, causing it to be dedicated to the honour of St. Mary and St. Ethelflaeda, and placed there Benedictine nuns under the Abbess Merwenna, who is also said to have been buried there.

Very little is known of St. Merwenna or Modwena, beyond what has been already stated, but she is said to have been of noble Irish birth, and to have been an abbess of an Irish nunnery, and to have fled to Northumbria when her convent was pillaged. King Egbert gave her a grant of land at Polesworth, for having healed his epileptic son, where she is also said to have founded a nunnery.

Possibly one of these abbesses, St. Ethelflaeda or St. Merwenna, is here represented, but the late Dr. J. Charles Cox suggested St. Scholastica, and as she was the foundress of the order of Benedictine nuns, and is placed next to St. Benedict, the founder of the order of Benedictine monks, this certainly seems the most probable ascription.

VI. *St. Benedict* in the black habit of the order of which he was the founder. In his left hand is a book, and in his right a crozier, for he was the first abbot of his famous monastery at Monte Cassino. St. Scholastica was his sister.

VII. *St. Roche*, depicted as usual pointing to a plague-spot in his thigh. He wears a red cloak, the green lining of which is seen below, and a dark blue coat and black high boots.

VIII. *St. Armel* or *Armagilus* (Pl. ii). This saint is painted with long hair and a beard. His green chasuble is lined with red. His arms are bare, and he carries a book in his right hand. His legs and feet, which at first sight appear to be bare, are really enclosed in armour, the overlapping plates of the broad-toed sabbatons being plainly visible. At his

feet is a dragon, coloured in light red, with a stole round his neck.

This figure is the most interesting of the whole series, and was mistaken by Dr. Cox for St. Anthony, and when the reredos was sent to the Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, London, in 1923, to the Exhibition of British Primitive Paintings it was mentioned in the catalogue as ? St. John the Baptist.

There is, however, very little doubt that this figure is meant to represent St. Armel, and as this saint is unfamiliar, an account of him culled from various sources<sup>1</sup> may be welcome.

St. Armel, Armil, Armygill (his name is spelt in various ways), was a British Saint who crossed over to Brittany from this country in the fifth century and his feast is kept in most Breton Dioceses on August 16th. The Bollandists give his date as 482-552.

‘He landed with some companions at Ack in the diocese of Leon, now called after him Plou-Arzel. Here he lived holily (it would seem that he was already a priest) until the fame of his virtues and miracles attracted the attention of Childebert, King of France, who called him to his court where he remained six years. At last he obtained permission to retire, and the king gave him land in the neighbourhood of Rennes on the banks of the river Sèche, where he built a monastery. This place is now called St. Armel des Boschaux. Here he vanquished a dragon that ravaged the country, and binding it in his stole, led it to the top of a hill, now called Mount St. Armel, whence he commanded it to throw itself into the Sèche, “*Monstrum stolla colligavit et in aqua suffocavit.*” His relics are preserved in the parish church of Ploërmel.’ This legend<sup>2</sup> which is taken from the ancient Breviary of Léon, gives no explanation of his curious costume, partly that of a priest and partly that of a soldier

In addition to this painting of him on the Romsey

<sup>1</sup> Sources of information :—  
*Abbeys*, by M. R. James, O.M.,  
F.S.A.

Royal Commission on Historical  
Monuments, *Westminster Abbey*.

*Rood-screens and Rood-lofts*, by  
F. Bligh Bond and Dom Bede Camm.

Les Petits Bollandistes, *Vies des  
Saints*.

Illustrated Catalogue of the Exhi-  
bition of English Alabaster Work held  
in the room of the Society of Anti-  
quaries, 1910.

<sup>2</sup> Bond and Camm.

reredos St. Armel is represented in a medieval alabaster work now preserved at Stoneyhurst College (Pl. iii, A). Here in the centre is the saint, bearded, nimbed, and in plate armour, kneeling on a mountain before a crucifix, the plates of his broad-toed sabbatons and on his arms and hands being clearly visible. He is vested in a chasuble with a tippet over it, with a book in a red forel in his left hand, and holding in his right his stole, which is fastened round the neck of a dragon. Behind him is a building, and in front of him is the river Sèche into which he cast the dragon, whose dead body is seen floating therein, and also a ship.<sup>1</sup>

There is evidence that the veneration to St. Armel in England, if it did not commence in the reign of Henry VII, was much more popular at about this time than either before or after, and his name and picture are often found in prayer books of this date. Henry of Richmond, during his long exile, lived for many years in Brittany, where St. Armel was so greatly venerated, and so he could not fail to be well acquainted with his legend, and there is reason to think that he considered himself indebted to the saint for preservation from shipwreck, and he is said to have ascribed his successful expedition which ended in his being crowned King of England, to the prayers of this saint.

It is then only what one would expect when we find amongst the wonderful series of statues of the saints then most in popular esteem which surround Henry VII's chapel, two representations of St. Arme, (Pl. iii, B). In the third bay of the south triforium is a bearded man vested in a chasuble. His hands are encased in plated gauntlets and with one he holds his stole in which a dragon is bound.

The second statue is at the east end of the north aisle: a bearded man with a dragon at his feet, which he is holding by a stole passing from his right hand to the dragon's neck.

Mr. F. Bligh Bond and Dom Bede Camm (*Rood-screens and Rood-lofts*) believe that on the screen at

<sup>1</sup> This alabaster was exhibited at the Society of Antiquaries, 1910, and in July, 1930, was shewn at the

Exhibition of Medieval Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

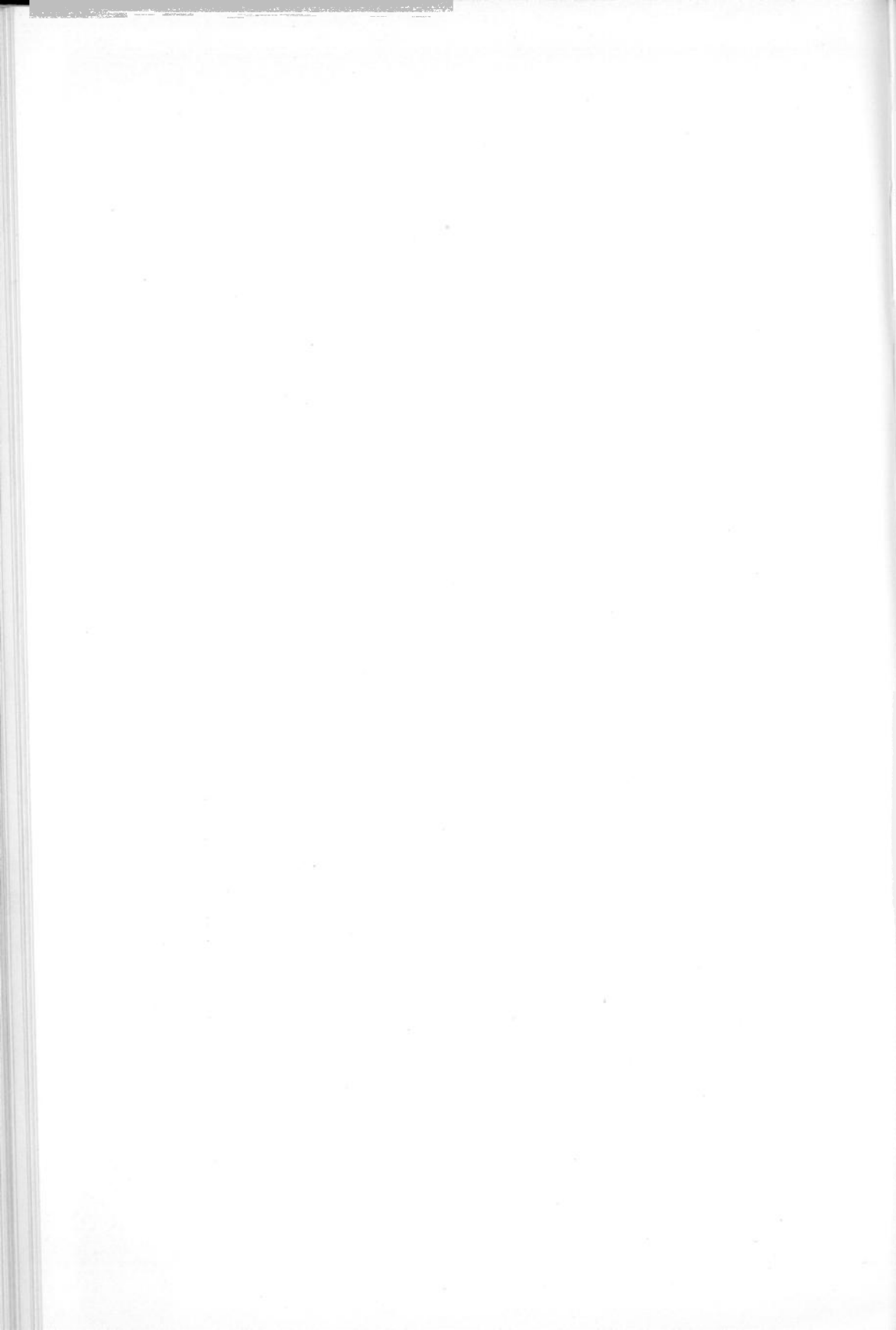


A. ST. ARMEL. AN ALABASTER PANEL NOW  
AT STONEYHURST COLLEGE



*Photo C. J. P. Cave*

B. ST. ARMEL, FROM THE TRIFORM OF  
HENRY VII'S CHAPEL, WESTMINSTER ABBEY



Tor Brian, Devon, there is another representation of St. Armel. Here a priest in a red chasuble over the black habit of a monk, holds a dragon by a chain, and it seems probable that it is meant for St. Armel, for although it is true that exactly the same legend of the vanquished dragon is recounted of St. Romain of Rouen, and also of St. Vigor, these saints are represented as bishops, whereas this is a simple priest and monk.

Mr. Aymer Vallance, F.S.A., has very kindly sent me a photograph<sup>1</sup> of a figure in a stained glass window at Merevale Church, Warwickshire, which he feels quite sure is St. Armel. The figure wears a large cope fastened by a morse at the neck and open in front, disclosing a complete suite of armour consisting of breast-plate and taces, beneath which a skirt of mail appears. The legs are in plate armour and the feet encased in broad-toed sabbatons. The left hand holds a crozier, and on the head is a mitre. A book is held in the right hand, depending from which is a long bag, resembling an old-fashioned ring-purse. In the bag is a dragon, his head only being visible through a long slit-like opening. The armour is that in vogue c. 1500-25, and the glass, which possibly is not English work, is of corresponding date.

Dr. M. R. James, Provost of Eton, does not consider that this figure is St. Armel, probably because of the mitre and crozier, but Mr. Aymer Vallance points out that he is represented as a mitred abbot because he presided over those who joined him when he founded his hermitage.

On Cardinal Archbishop Morton's cenotaph in the crypt of Canterbury Cathedral there are a series of figures of saints, all headless and otherwise mutilated, and the lowest figure on the east side has been identified by Dr. M. R. James as St. Armel.

John Morton was imprisoned by Richard of Gloucester, but escaped and joined Henry of Richmond on the continent. After Bosworth he continued to enjoy the confidence of Henry VII and was his Lord Chancellor for thirteen years, until his death in 1500. His cenotaph was constructed during his lifetime.

<sup>1</sup> The photograph is by Mr. F. T. S. Houghton, F.S.A.

The figure in question is that of an ecclesiastic, and on the front of his right shoulder is the infula, the fringe of a tassel, such as hangs from the back of a mitre. The T-shaped pallium is clearly seen in front over his vestments. The hands are missing, but the left one appears to have been raised in blessing, and from below the right a fold, which may perhaps represent his stole, descends to the dragon at his feet. In front of the lower part of the figure is a much damaged dragon, but a wing on the right appears almost perfect, and below this is one of the saint's feet ; if it was ever encased in plate armour cannot now be ascertained, no overlapping plates being visible.

No more likely situation for a statue of St. Armel could possibly be found than on the tomb of Morton, Henry's companion in exile and his chancellor and confidant in the years after his coming to the throne, and the representation here of an ecclesiastic apparently leading a dragon by his stole is much in favour of Dr. James' view. But there are difficulties. St. Armel was a simple priest and monk, whereas this statue represents an archbishop. The designer in picturing so rare a saint, possibly made a mistake.

There is also said to be a representation of St. Armel on the painted screen at Litcham, Norfolk.<sup>1</sup>

By the courtesy of the Rev. M. Le Marinel and the Rev. Philip H. Rogers I am enabled to record the existence of another representation of the saint in alabaster, now preserved in St. Mary Brookfield Church, London, and except that it is not painted, it is exactly similar to the alabaster at Stoneyhurst College already described. Its history is interesting; the Rev. Philip H. Rogers writes, 'It came into my possession on the death of my father, and I thought it best for its safety to fix it into a pillar near the font in St. Mary's Brookfield. It was found, together with another fragment depicting the bound Christ (now in Whitton church, Twickenham), concealed under the attic floor of an old farmhouse called " Plas-yn-Pentre " in the Vale of Llangollen. This farmhouse belonged to my grandfather, Thomas Rogers, of Oswestry. It

<sup>1</sup> Information in a letter from Dr. M. R. James.

is possible that the alabaster was brought from Valle Crucis at the time of the dissolution of the Abbey, or it may have formed part of some mural decoration at Plas-yn-Pentre and been hidden to escape the attention of Cromwell's soldiers, who are known to have fought in the neighbourhood.'

Diligent enquiries and search have revealed only these eight certain and probable representations of St. Armel in this country. Possibly this account may lead to others being recognised.

In the centre of the next tier the Resurrection from the Tomb is strikingly portrayed, and the picture presented may be compared with the same scene depicted in the centre of the painted reredos at Norwich Cathedral.

Our Lord is seen stepping from the tomb, His right hand uplifted in benediction, and a cross and pennon in His left. The red cloak which He wears over a yellow undergarment is fastened at the neck with a morse. The figure is about 31 inches in height.

Grouped around the tomb are the four soldiers clad in plate armour, which is coloured brown with black outlines, and having chain mail standards round their necks. Two of them are armed with a poleaxe. The helmets are probably of the variety called salades, the vizor being thrown back, and in this respect the armour is somewhat earlier than the date suggested above, but at this period armour was often consciously archaic.

The angels, one on each side, are in white albs, their white wings painted red inside and their heads covered with curly hair. Each swings a censor.

The figure of the Benedictine abbess at the extreme left has already been noticed, she carries a crozier.

The lower third of this tier was covered, except small portions previously removed, with a paint representing marble until October, 1929, when, under the direction of Professor Tristram, it was carefully, and with great difficulty, removed.

The background of this portion of the reredos is painted in hanging drapery, coloured in green and red alternately, the part behind the figure of our Lord, which is widest, is green.

The painting of the reredos is quite good, but it has at some time been badly and excessively cleaned, and some of the light and shade effects have thus been removed, and this is particularly visible in the flesh, where only the white surfaces have been left.

It has been suggested that an earlier painting is covered by the one now present and that traces of it are to be seen in various parts, but especially under the censer which the angel on the right is swinging. However this may be, there is no doubt that the reredos, as we now see it, is all of one date: early in the sixteenth century, but the figures of the saints are treated in a medieval style, while the pilasters of the setting belong distinctly to the Renaissance period.