

NOTES ON SOME POLYCHROME FRESCOES IN A HOUSE AT RENISHAW.

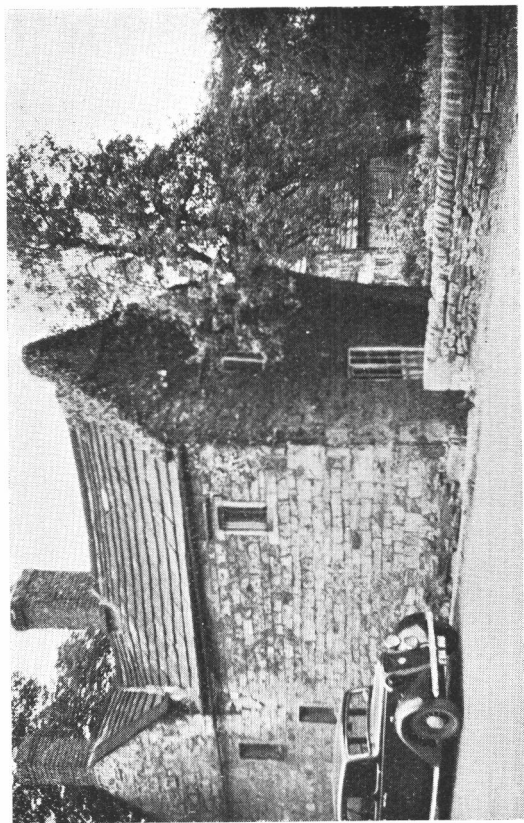
By ARTHUR COURT, B.A., M.B., Ch.B.

AT Renishaw in the parish of Eckington, there stands an Elizabethan building near the main road after it crosses the L.M.S. railway bridge at Eckington station. The building faces south, and overlooks the river Rother which now flows some fifty yards away. This house has been in the possession of the Sitwell family for very many years. I have not been able to obtain the records of its earliest history, but its appearance suggests that it was built in the latter half of the 16th century.

The building is of the small manor house type with a projecting wing at the west end. It is this wing that is of particular interest to us. The principal features can be seen in the illustration. Many years ago this building was converted into cottages, but it is generally accepted locally that previous to its conversion it had been used as an inn.

Shortly before the last war, these cottages were taken over by the Renishaw Golf Club, and several alterations were made. When the old firegrate was removed from the central hall, now the billiard room, a Tudor fireplace was disclosed with large chimney recesses. At one corner of this room, an inconspicuous door leads to a spiral oak staircase with typical Tudor newel post.

From the landing on the first floor, there are doors leading to rooms in front, and to the right and left. It is the room on the right which chiefly claims our attention.



OLD HOUSE AT RENISHAW
showing position of windows of upper room.

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This room is eleven feet wide, fourteen feet long, and seven feet high. There are three windows in this room. A two-light stone framed window at the south end facing the entrance, and two single light windows, one on either side, but inserted only two feet from the end of the room. One of these windows is well seen in the illustration, and the significance of this will appear later. There is a plaster ceiling to the room, but clearly of no very ancient date, the room having been at one time open joisted.

When certain repairs were being carried out, the old paper and whitewash was stripped from the walls, and on coming down to the original plaster some very interesting frescoes were revealed. The overlay was most carefully removed, and the frescoes appeared in an excellent state of preservation. There are two of these paintings, one on either side of the large window at the end of the room.

Copies of them are seen in the illustration.

The one on the left depicts Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, who can be plainly seen with the faggots on his back.

The angel, the fire, and the ram in the thicket are all plainly visible. The colours used were red, black and chrome, and can still be distinguished. This picture is 46 ins. square. It is surrounded by scrolled work, and floral emblems decorate the window reveals.

I will call your attention to the curious costume worn by Abraham. He is dressed in the striped breeches and shoes of early Stuart days, but his coat appears to be an old fashioned one, suggesting an earlier Tudor garment. His style of hair-dressing and the moustache are certainly Stuart in character. On the right of the window is a picture of St. George and the Dragon. This picture is 46 ins. in height and 40 ins. in breadth. It is in the conventional style of this subject. St. George is armed with a dagger in his right hand, and the lance in his left. The Dragon's tail is curled round the hind leg of the charger.

In the upper corner of the picture is depicted a hawk-like bird, probably a mascot. In front of the charger is a floral emblem suggesting a hyacinth. St. George is dressed in the bonnet and clothes of early Stuart times, and his hair-dressing is of the same period.

Scrolled work at one time decorated the upper part of this room but it has not been preserved.

In the room on the left of the landing is a manhole leading to the false roof. The rafters of this and the adjoining room are bare, but on crossing the rafters to the room over the one we have been discussing one finds an old concrete floor still in existence, and evidently of the same date as the rest of the building. The old wall plaster was not continued over the gable end from the wall in the room below, and it is quite evident that this attic was never a part of the lower room. There is a single light window in the gable end of this attic, but it has been closed for many years.

Observations:—

There are a number of interesting and significant facts disclosed, not only in the frescoes themselves but in the building as a whole, and before going further I should like to emphasise some of these facts. It appears to me that when the building was originally designed the architect had in mind certain features that he had been instructed to incorporate, and for the following reasons:—

1. The room containing the frescoes is so designed that one end of it should receive the maximum amount of light, judging both from its southern aspect, and the position of the windows.
2. The staircase was placed in an obscure corner of the hall and could be approached without disturbing the inmates.
3. The two side windows were at the end of the room instead of being placed centrally.



Above—THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC.
Below—ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON.

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4. There was no provision made for a fireplace in the room.

5. A concrete floor laid on the false roof above this room when no such floor was laid over the other rooms.

Remarks.

In my opinion these facts point very strongly to this room having been planned as an Oratory at the time when the house was erected; one of the most significant features being the position of the side windows. In their present situation they are admirably placed to light an altar, but in a most unfavourable position for the general lighting of the room. Again, these religious frescoes, placed as they are at each side of the central window would be well illuminated and clearly visible to a congregation seated in the body of the room.

The concrete floor above this room was undoubtedly a part of the original structure, but why a concrete floor over this room when no other room has been treated in a similar manner? The reason seems clear. This small chamber would make a place of retreat for the priest, or for the storage of vestments. Again, there was no provision for a fireplace such as one would expect if the room was intended for secular purposes.

My attention has recently been drawn to the very interesting paintings which have been uncovered at Harvington Hall in Worcestershire. Here the principal paintings are on the staircase and corridors, they are 16th century work of excellent design. In addition there is decorative work in a room on the first floor which was definitely used as an Oratory, but it is much inferior in quality and of the early 17th century. I have made careful search on the staircase and on the walls of the other rooms at Renishaw, but have failed to detect any evidence of paintings there.

Towards the close of the 16th century, wall painting in this country was declining as an art, and at the beginning

of the 17th century was indifferent in quality and had become uncommon.

In fact as a wall decoration in the ordinary house it had almost disappeared by the commencement of the 17th century.

This part of the County of Derby is well known to have been a centre of Roman Catholicism in the 16th and 17th centuries, when most of the large landowners were Roman Catholics. In those days, the Sitwells themselves, the owners of the property were of "The Faith."

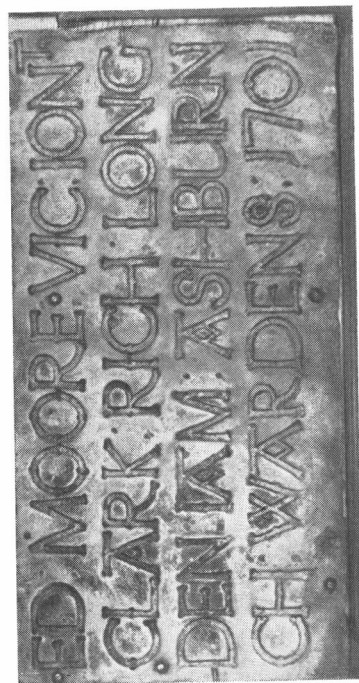
It is fair to state that several objections have been brought forward against this theory of an Oratory:—

1. The room is not orientated.
2. At this period religious subjects were commonly used for secular decoration, and have no significance from a religious point of view.

The particular combination of circumstances I have outlined seems to exclude such an intention on the part of the artist, and I consider that these objections carry no weight whatsoever as against the evidence I have adduced in favour of this room being used as an Oratory.

I have little hesitation then in stating my firm conviction that we have here in this somewhat obscure house at Renishaw a private Oratory built in an unobtrusive manner and planned during the period of the persecution of the Catholics, but before the extreme severity of the laws of 1584. The frescoes seem to have been added in the first quarter of the 17th century when the severity of the laws was somewhat relaxed.

I have to thank Capt. Osbert Sitwell for permission to publish these notes, and to Mr. A. L. Armstrong, M.Sc., F.S.A. and to Mr. W. H. Hanbury, F.G.S., for valuable suggestions.



A LEAD TABLET RESTORED TO YOULGREAVE CHURCH.

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