

ON A MURAL PAINTING LATELY DISCOVERED IN WISBOROUGH GREEN CHURCH.

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IN some previous volumes of our Sussex Archæological Society's Collections, descriptive notices, more or less full, will be found of some of the most remarkable paintings of this kind, which have heretofore been brought to light by the needful reparations, which have, at different times, been effected in some, and in the course of the laudable restorations which have taken place in others, of our Sussex Churches, both in the eastern and western divisions of the County; while allusions only have been made to others. Among those that have been pretty fully illustrated and described, are the wall paintings, which were brought to light in Lindfield Church in 1846;¹ in Portslade Church in 1847;² in Stedham Church in 1850;³ those discovered in St. Olave's Church, Chichester, about the same time;⁴ the extensive wall paintings exposed to view during the restoration of Westmeston Church in 1862;⁵ and those discovered in Plumpton Church during the repairs that took place in it in 1867.⁶ Others have been alluded to only. Amongst these may be reckoned the paintings brought to light in Slaugham Church, while it was being repaired, about the year 1860;⁷ but of these No. 2 must be considered as not belonging to the class of paintings at present under consideration, it being far too artistic a performance to be of any

¹ See vol. i., p. 161.

² See vol. ii., p. 129.

³ See vol. iv., pp. 1 and 19.

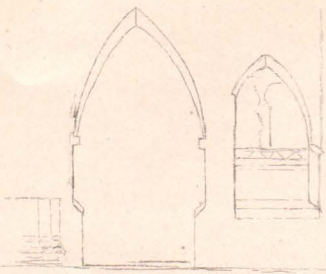
⁴ See vol. v., p. 213.

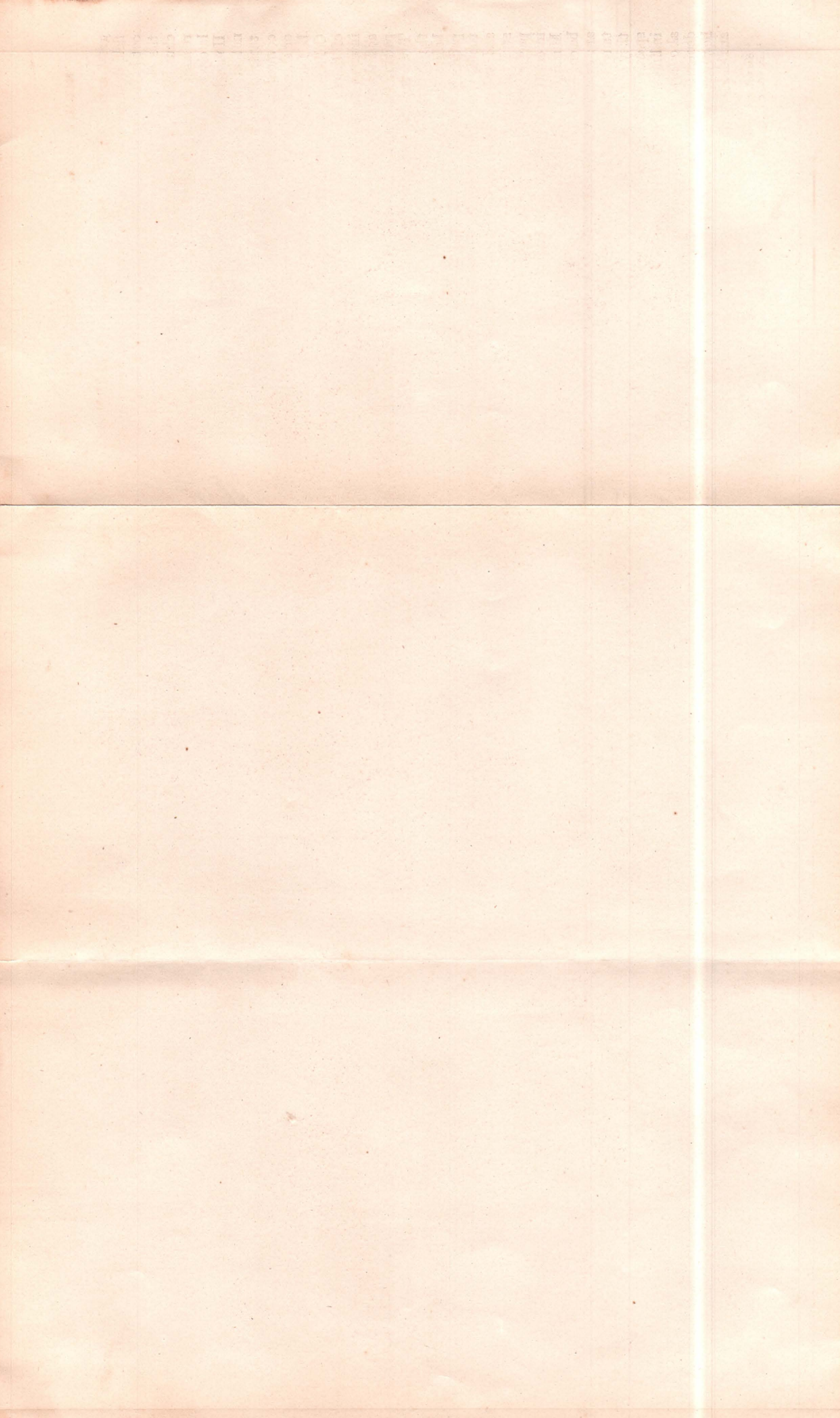
⁵ See vol. xvi., p. 1.

⁶ See vol. xx., p. 198.

⁷ See vol. xiii., p. 237.

Found in the Church
of
Wisborough Green
Sussex
1869





great antiquity; those found in my own church of Maresfield during the progress of some repairs, which were carried out in it about the year 1840;⁸ those brought to light when the old Keymer Church was taken down, and the present church built, a few years ago;⁹ those disclosed during the repairs of Slindon Church, about the year 1867;¹⁰ and those lately found in Binstead Church, which Mr. Leslie, of Slindon House, has brought under our notice;¹¹ but of which we have not at present any particular account. I have alluded to these different statements of Mural Paintings already discovered in some of our Sussex Churches, and of which longer or shorter accounts, according to their degree of merit, are to be found in one or other of the twenty-one volumes of our Collections, to shew that, as a Society, we are not regardless of them; but have dealt with them as subjects of much interest to the Sussex Archæologist. And to these I may add the wall painting discovered, in the year 1830, in repairing the Church of Preston, near Brighton, of which Mr. Townsend, the then curate, gave an account at the time in the "British Magazine," the discovery having taken place before the existence of our Society. With regard to the paintings themselves, they differ, as might be expected to be the case, very much from each other in their artistic merits and value. They vary greatly one from the other in their style and execution; even the best of them were but rude performances. Still, they are, in my judgment, all of them, interesting, as curious specimens of the style of the art of Mural Paintings of the period, to which they are supposed to belong—namely, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They are evidently, for the most part, the performances of self-taught artists, and lead *us* of the present day to wonder how they could have been either ornamental or instructive. Perspective these church decorators appear to have been wholly indifferent to, if they were acquainted with it. They appear also rather to burlesque the subjects they are intending to depict than to render them awakening and impressive. They, however, had doubtless some good end they were expected to, and did serve, for had not this been the case, they would not

⁸ See vol. xiv., p. 142.

⁹ See vol. xvii., pp. 249, 50, n. 19.

¹⁰ See vol. xix., p. 130.

¹¹ See vol. xx., p. 233, n. 16.

have been so commonly found in our churches as they are now.

With regard to the subject of my present memoir, it was exposed to view in the Church of Wisborough Green, in the year 1868, during the time it was undergoing a thorough reparation. H. F. Napper, Esquire, of Laker's Lodge, in that parish, and a member of our Society, having made a correct drawing of it, of a corresponding size with the original, exhibited it at the annual meeting of our Society held at Mayfield in that year ; but where, owing to the day being very wet, and the attendance of members and their friends in consequence comparatively small, it did not attract the attention it deserved, and probably would have done, had the weather been more favourable. And, therefore, in August last, Mr. Napper submitted it to the inspection of the members of the Surrey Archæological Society, at their annual meeting, held the day before our annual gathering at Knepp, where it attracted much attention, and was pronounced to be one of the most curious and interesting examples of Church Mural Painting that had ever been brought under their notice. It was afterwards sent to London for exhibition in the Surrey Society's Council Chamber, where also it drew forth so much attention and admiration, that the Council, under a mistaken apprehension of the exact locality of Wisborough Green, would have been applied to to engrave, and publish an account of it in the next volume of their transactions, had it not been previously discovered that the parish was in Sussex, and not in Surrey. To have done so then, would have been contrary to the rules of their Society ; and they handed it, by Mr. Napper's desire, over to me, with an earnest recommendation that our Society should do what theirs would certainly have done, had Wisborough Green been in Surrey and not in Sussex. In this way then, the matter fell into my hands. And quite concurring with the Surrey Council in the opinion that our Society should not suffer the discovery of this very curious painting to pass unnoticed, my first intention was to have forwarded it to Mr. Campion, of Westmeston, with a request that he would kindly prepare a history of it for our next volume of Collections, feeling that he is far better versed in this branch of Archæological lore than

I am. But it afterwards occurred to me that, as from the letters which had passed, first between Mr. Napper and some of the members of the Surrey Council, and subsequently between myself and the same members, the whole narrative of the history of this painting, both as to its subject matter and date, must be obtained, the better mode of proceeding would be to embody in a paper such parts of those letters as bore upon these points. I have therefore done so, and have thus made the Surrey Council give, through our Society, by means of this correspondence, all that is now to be said of this curious old wall painting; and this I felt I could perhaps myself do as well as Mr. Campion, or any other person; much of that correspondence having passed through me.

The preliminary steps taken to obtain a knowledge of the history of this painting, and its consequent exhibition, will be best ascertained by a letter from Mr. Napper to me, the date of which is August 25th, 1869, in which he says—“Herewith I send you a correspondence which has ensued from my exhibiting at the Meeting of the Surrey Archæological Society, which took place the day before the Meeting of our Society at Knepp, the copy of the painting found on the wall of Wisborough Green Church; which, you will recollect, I exhibited at Mayfield last year. At the Surrey meeting it seems to have attracted the attention of Mr. Waller, one of its members, who thereupon wrote to Mr. Butterworth, the celebrated architect, and one of the council of the Surrey Society, which led him to communicate with me on the subject. By Mr. Butterworth’s letter, which I send you, you will see that there is a desire on the part of some of the Surrey Council to recommend that it should be published; but as they now find that Wisborough Green is in Sussex, and not in Surrey, they suggest that the Sussex Society should take the publication in hand, thinking that in doing so they would be advancing the cause of Sussex Archæology, and doing it a laudable service. The drawing is now at the Surrey Society’s Council Chamber in London; but if it be the wish of the Sussex Society’s Executive Committee that I should do so, I would direct it to be sent to you, or to any other member of that Committee at Lewes, for inspection, as may be thought best. It awaits then your direction. I re-

gret that I have not a photograph of it left to send to you, but Mr. M. A. Lower may, perhaps, have the one I gave him last year at the Uckfield Station, on our way to Mayfield, on the day of our Annual Meeting there."

As our Executive Committee meets quarterly only, for the transaction of the Society's business, Mr. Napper, at my request, gave directions for the drawing to be sent to me.

Of the correspondence forwarded to me by Mr. Napper for my perusal, the first is a letter from Mr. Butterworth to him on the subject of the exhibition of this painting. It is dated Fleet Street, London, August 15th, 1869; and is as follows—"Presuming that you were the person who made the very interesting exhibition of a drawing, from a painting in Wisborough (Green) Church, I send you the enclosed description of the same, contained in a note from Mr. J. G. Waller to me, than whom no one is more competent to speak on the subject to which it relates. Hoping permission may be obtained for an engraving to be made of the same, for the benefit of the public in the (Surrey) Society's Transactions, I will, if you please, bring the matter under the Council's attention, and if you approve of my doing so, Mr. Waller will, I know, allow his description to be published with his name appended to it, for which purpose you will, perhaps, return me his letter. I was glad to meet you again with the Surrey Society."

Mr. Butterworth having discovered his mistake shortly after in supposing Wisborough Green to be in Surrey, again wrote to Mr. Napper in explanation. His letter is dated Fleet Street, London, August 19th, 1869; in it he says, "I am favoured with yours, enclosing a photograph of the wall painting, which letter I have given to Mr. J. G. Waller, who will, I know, much value it. When I last wrote to you, I imagined Wisborough (Green) to be in Surrey, and it was under this misapprehension that I made to you the suggestion which I did, as to our engraving it. I will still, if you wish it, bring the matter before the Council, but they *may*, and probably *will*, decline to engrave or publish it, because it is out of the county they are more immediately interested in. In that case, would not the Committee of the Sussex Archaeological Society take it up, and give it to the public with an

amplified description of the painting by Mr. Waller, which I have no doubt he would gladly furnish? A more interesting subject for their Collections they cannot well have."

We were not left long in uncertainty and doubt as to Mr. Waller's willingness to render us his able assistance in bringing under the notice of the members of our Society, and the public generally, this very curious wall painting, for in a letter to Mr. Butterworth, acknowledging the receipt of a copy of the photograph taken of it, which he had sent him, and which letter is dated 61, Bolsover Street, W., August 19th, 1869, as well as doubtless in reply to something he had said to him on the subject, Mr. Waller says—"Many thanks for the photograph. Whether to the Sussex or to the Surrey Society, I shall be equally happy to give my assistance in making the public acquainted with this highly curious wall painting." To this misconception, then, as to the county in which Wisborough Green is situated, we owe, in a great measure, the attention of our Society being again called to it, and the elucidation of its history.

Mr. Waller's valuable letter to Mr. Butterworth, explanatory of the subjects of this painting, is dated from the same street, August 14th, 1869; and is as follows—"If you know the exhibitor of the drawing from the painting in Wisborough (Green) Church, could you communicate to him my description of it thus recorded, as it is certainly the most curious example of wall painting I have seen for many a long day. We have here the crucifixion at the base; Christ is there represented as crowned, as bowing the head upon the cross, and giving up the ghost. There are portions of the figure about to pierce his side with a spear, on the right of the cross; but all else of this part of the picture is destroyed. On the left is a figure holding a vase in one hand, and in the other a small vessel; the vase, with its contents, he reaches up to Christ, as offering Him drink, according to the scriptural text—"They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall."—Matthew xxvii., v. 34. Next to this figure is St. John the Evangelist, and then the penitent thief, not crucified, but hanging, as it were, upon the cross by his arms, with his hands hanging down, and bound with cords, and the head bowing, and the eyes closed as in the act of death. But the

most curious portion of the painting is that above; for, if Wisborough (Green) Church be *on*, or *near* the Pilgrim's Way, it, without doubt, has a local signification to this circumstance, which accounts for the *unusual*, if not *unique*, character of the subject. The wavy lines which separate it from that of the crucifixion are intended to represent clouds; so that we are here introduced into Paradise. A small fragment of the figure of Christ, distinguished by the cruciform nimbus, is preserved; it is holding a cross. The next figure is that of St. James, the elder, distinguished by the cockleshell on the breast; he is habited as a pilgrim, and has his purse at the girdle, which has upon it three cockle-shells, heraldically displayed—two and one—and a cross between them. He holds in his hand a crozier, or a bourdon, surmounted by a cross, and is introducing a number of pilgrims, wearing the large overhanging caps, which usually distinguish countrymen in the thirteenth century. The architecture which we see here introduced is in obedience to the text which speaks of many mansions in God's House. This special introduction of pilgrims is so remarkable that it must have a particular allusion; and if the Pilgrim's Way lies near, without doubt it was intended in a forcible manner to enjoin the duty of pilgrimages. Possibly in the part of the painting destroyed we should, had it been perfect, have found the moral more strongly enforced by others being represented as hurried off to the infernal regions. I thought these facts might be useful, and I hope the Society will not fail to publish an accurate engraving of them. You will, I trust, be at the Council Meeting on Monday."

A glance at the date of this letter will be sufficient to shew, that it was written before the discovery had been made, that Wisborough Green was in Sussex, and not in Surrey, which will account for Mr. Waller expressing, in the conclusion of it, a hope that the Council of the Surrey Archaeological Society would publish it, and thereby manifest the high esteem in which they held this very curious painting.

Upon my communicating to Mr. Waller the very material fact bearing on the interpretation of this painting, that Wisborough Green was not situated *on*, or any where *near* the Pilgrim's Way, and in answer to a suggestion which I had

made to him as to its particular teaching and application, he replied in a letter, dated from his residence in Bolsover-street, December 10th, 1869,—“I had heard, previous to the receipt of your letter, that Wisborough (Green) was not on the Pilgrim’s Way; but in the interpretation of any old paintings on our church-walls, we must not enter into any abstractions. The principles of all early Christian art are opposed to it. That the figure holding the cross in the upper part of the painting is St. James, does not admit of any doubt; and it is equally certain that he is introducing Pilgrims to our Lord. Of this then, we must look for a very simple interpretation. If the church was dedicated to St. James, or even a chapel within it or if some benefactor to the church had been a pilgrimage beyond seas—perhaps to Compostella—it would then be considered apt to place such a memorial on the walls. We have many cases in point. At Padua, in the chapel of St. Maria dell’ Annungiata, the donor, the Marquis Scrovegno is represented as kneeling among the Blessed Spirits, holding the model of the church in his hands. And in front of the Cathedral at Basle, the donor of the gates is shewn as being introduced into Paradise in a similar manner. It is remarkable, that on St. James’ gipciere, or purse, there are three scallop shells, with, I think, a cross in the centre. This has the appearance of an armorial bearing, and, I think, might have reference to an individual. It would then be worth while to enquire if there was ever any one bearing these arms, or having the name of Palmer or Pilgrim associated with the parish. The painting is doubtless only one part of a larger whole, and is of a highly interesting character, inasmuch as the ordinary conventions have evidently been specially varied in allusion to some special person or circumstance now unknown. I shall be most happy to aid you further in the matter of the history of this painting, and if anything should occur to me, I will let you know.”

As the Church of Wisborough Green is dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul, and not to St. James, and as I am not aware of there ever having been any chapel in it dedicated to this Saint, or any persons of the name of Palmer or Pilgrim connected in any way with the parish, I instituted some en-

quiries as to how far the three escallop shells, with the cross between them, heraldically arranged on the purse attached to the girdle of St. James, could be brought to bear on the subject ; how far they could be identified as the arms of some person resident, or having property in this parish, but without success. Among those I wrote to on the heraldic part of the enquiry was Mr. William Smith Ellis, who, I have no hesitation in saying, is, in my opinion, the best versed in Sussex heraldry of any member of our Society, he having made this part of Sussex Archæology his particular study. His reply to my application to him for information upon the points suggested by Mr. Waller, is dated from the British Museum, December 18th, 1869, and is as follows:—" I have availed myself of a visit to the Library here to answer your letter. I have looked into Mrs. Jameson's work on ' Sacred Legendary Art,' which gives the emblems of the Saints, &c., and I find St. James, the greater, called by her the Patron Saint of the Spaniards. He is distinguished by his Pilgrim's staff, and an escallop shell on his shoulder, and on his hat. There is nothing said about a purse. St. James, the less, is distinguished by a club, which he carries in his hand, and which is emblematical of his death. But there can be no doubt that the figure of the Saint in the upper part of the Mural Painting in Wisborough Green Church, is St. James of Compostella. As to the purse in the figure, it was probably one of the many ways we meet with of representing this apostle. The three shells were probably introduced to give an heraldic cast to the emblem. I see no reason whatever for supposing that they indicate the heraldic bearings of any particular family. The three escallop shells are the later arms of the Kepels, Earls of Albermarle. The old earls of the thirteenth century bore a cross patée. They, however, were unconnected with West Sussex. The Earls of Arundel had property in Wisborough Green ; but these were not their arms. They bear a lion-rampant. The cross introduced on this purse had probably a religious, not an heraldic significance. I would have told you what Didron, in his *Iconographie de Dieu*, says of St. James ; but the work is not on the shelves at present. I will try to see it on Monday. I am sorry not to be able to tell you more." In

a postscript to his letter, dated on the Monday following, Mr. Ellis says, "I have not been able to get a sight of Didron's work to-day. It is still missing from the shelf ; but Vol. I. of the *Archæological Journal* contains an article on 'The Emblems of the Saints,' and it represents St. James with a staff in his hand, and a shell in his cap ; and it is said that his usual emblems are a Pilgrim's staff, wallet, &c."

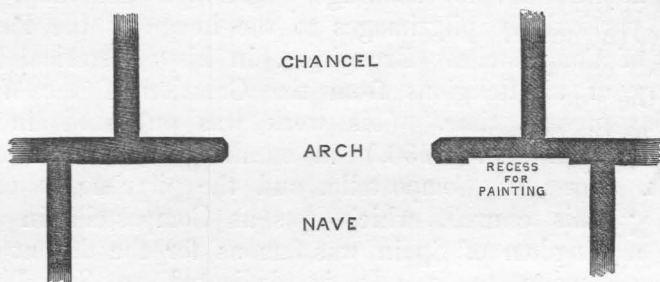
It is deserving of notice, as bearing closely upon the heraldic part of the subject, that the family of Michell, of Field Place, Warnham, and Stamerham, bore for their arms, sa., a chevron between three escallop shells, ar., and that they were, from an early period, considerable land owners in this part of Sussex. I cannot however discover that they ever had any property in Wisborough Green.

Upon a due consideration then, of the whole that has been brought under my notice as bearing on the history of this most curious wall painting, I am disposed to consider the upper part of it, for upon the lower part no question can arise, as intended to encourage pilgrimages generally, but more particularly pilgrimages to the image of the Patron Saint of Compostella. Broughton, in his "*Historical Dictionary of all Religions from the Creation of the World to the present time,*" (his work was published in two volumes, folio, in 1756,) in speaking of the Church of St. James of Compostella, and the pilgrimages to it, says, "This church, which was at Compostella in Galicia, a kingdom of Spain, was famous for the devout pilgrimages made to it. It is dedicated to St. James, Major, the Patron Saint of all Spain, whose figure has, for these nine hundred years, rested on the high altar of that Metropolitan church. It is a wooden bust, and has forty or fifty tapers continually burning before it. This figure the Pilgrims kiss three or four times, having their hats on their heads, with a respectful devotion. This done, there is, too, in the church, a stone cross, under which is a hole, through which the Pilgrims are expected to pass three times. This hole is so small, that in doing it they are forced to lay themselves flat, with their stomachs against the pavement, to enable them to accomplish it. This they call "the straight gate" of the Gospel, through which, so absolutely necessary

do the devotees think it to pass, to enable them to enter into the way of salvation ; so strong is the feeling that the happiness of heaven will be denied to those that have not complied with this absurdly superstitious custom, that some who have forgotten to pass under this stone cross, and who have afterwards been reminded of it on their way home, have been known to return five hundred leagues, or more, for the purpose of performing this part of the ceremony.

What then was so likely to arouse an anxious longing for such pilgrimages, as the feeling which this picture would very naturally inspire, that St. James would particularly commend to our Blessed Lord for salvation all such as had fully and faithfully accomplished them.

The situation of this painting in the church was somewhat remarkable. It was on the south side of the chancel arch. It appeared to have been painted partly *in*, and partly *on the side of* an arched recess in the wall.



The original use of this recess, for it could scarcely have been made for the painting, it would now be difficult to conjecture. It is far too large to have ever been intended for a hagioscope. Besides, it will be seen by the plan, that the southern chancel wall is directly at the back of it. The whole of the western face of the chancel division wall appears to have had paintings of a similar character upon it, all of them doubtless executed by the same artist. But these were for the most part in outline only, and this was more particularly the case with the drawings over the chancel arch. There were other paintings *in* and *about* the church ; but in

design and execution they were very inferior to those above, and on each side of the chancel arch. Against the tower were found the remains of a large painting of very debased manipulation, which, as far as an opinion could be formed of it from the little that was exposed to view, seemed intended to represent the day of doom. In several places Catherine wheels were discovered.

Wisborough Green is situated between Horsham and Petworth, in the western division of the county. The parish was very retired and inaccessible, and consequently but little known, until the line of railway from the Three Bridges Station, on the Brighton and London line, first to Petworth, and afterwards to Midhurst, was opened. The church, which is large, possesses, in its style and architectural details, many points of interest to the ecclesiologist. It consists of a nave, north and south aisles, a well-proportioned chancel, and a tower, surmounted by a lofty shingled spire; and as it stands upon a rather elevated site, it is a conspicuous object in the part of the county in which it is situated. As the parish is large, the church somewhat exceeds the usual dimensions of Sussex churches. The pillars supporting the arches connecting the side aisles with the nave, are stated to be Norman; but as the church is not mentioned in the "Domesday Survey," but the first notice we have of it is in "Pope Nicholas' Valuation," the date of which is 1291, they are very late Norman, if they are Norman at all. The arches springing from them are early English. On the south side the pillars are quite plain, and without mouldings; but on the north side they are very peculiar, and almost unique. The mouldings vanish into nothing just above the impost. I know of no other instance of this kind of moulding, except in the church of the adjoining parish of Alfold, in Surrey, where they are more beautiful, because more elaborate, and without any impost. Of Wisborough Green Church the clerestory windows are lancet-shaped. Of these there are four on each side. One of the south windows of the church is a late insertion; but the rest of the building is very much in its original state.

The nave, which is probably late Norman, is decidedly the oldest part of this structure. Its walls were very thick.

With regard to the entrance doors, they have, both on the north and south sides of the church, round-headed arches ; and on the west side of each door-way was found, on removing the stucco and plaster from the walls, small round-headed windows, in which no symptoms of a provision for glass could be discovered. From these it has been argued that the nave of the church is Saxon. Of these, the southernmost is now partly blocked up by the tower, which is built inside of the south-west angle of the church. At the north-west angle there were stairs, either in the thickness of the wall or in a turret. In excavating the floor, the thick walls were found to have been continuous, both on the north and south sides, so that the aisles appear to have been added to an older church, consisting of a nave, and perhaps small chancel. And when the aisles were added, thinner walls were evidently carried up, which were based on the thicker, and the clerestory windows inserted. After this the masonry shews on the south side, certainly, and perhaps on the north side as well, but on this latter point I do not feel quite so sure, that the arches were originally low and circular, and that they were subsequently raised and made pointed. The church then would appear to have been of very early origin ; but to have been subsequently anglicized. The arched doorway, by which the roodloft was approached, still remains in the north wall of the nave ; but blocked up by a tomb.

Some herring-bone work is to be observed on the outside of the west wall, and on the north side of its doorway.

The present chancel is in style pure early English. Its east window is triple-lancet shaped, and it has three single lancet windows on each side of its north and south sides. There are two piscinas in the building, one in the south wall of the sacrarium, and the other in the south wall of the south aisle. A bold semi-elliptic moulding runs round the chancel under the window, but over the north doorway leading into it, and round the triple-lancet window as well.

The south porch is large, and has the appearance of having once been a chapel, or perhaps vestry ; it is not strictly a porch. The chancel arch is quite plain, and pointed, similarly to the arches in the south aisle. This arch has evidently been enlarged. In its construction some large stones were found

inserted in it, in such a manner, as to impede, if not altogether to mar the sight of some portion of the wall-painting under consideration. These then, were removed, and plain, upright work inserted in their place.

The dimensions of this painting are—Length, seven feet six inches; width, four feet three inches. The figures of the lower part are about two feet six inches high, and of the upper part three feet three inches.

In conclusion, I beg to thank H. F. Napper, Esquire., of Laker's Lodge, Wisborough Green, and the Members of the Council of the Surrey Archæological Society, who have so kindly interested themselves in the elucidation of this most extraordinary wall-painting, for the very valuable assistance which they have rendered me in bringing it under the notice of the Members of our kindred Society.