

DESCRIPTION OF THE MURAL PAINTINGS AT THE CHURCHES OF CLAYTON AND ROTHERFIELD, SUSSEX.

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THERE are few counties where so many interesting examples of mural paintings have been brought to light in the various parish churches, as in the County of Sussex. Most of those discovered in Sussex have been carefully described, in many instances with illustrations, in the several volumes of the "Sussex Archæological Collections." No detailed account appears to have been contributed of the very remarkable series at West Chiltington, while on the other hand, some, of which, fortunately, careful descriptions have been communicated, have been entirely obliterated or destroyed, *e.g.*, those at Westmeston and Stedham. It certainly strikes one as a misfortune that, owing to the prejudices of an incumbent or other mistaken motives, these relics of the practical teaching of the Early Church, in most instances containing lessons well calculated to appeal to the religious sentiment of our own day, should in so many cases be thus ruthlessly swept away, and examples could be cited where regret has been too late expressed at the destruction of such subjects as St. Christopher, &c., when their religious and moral teaching had been explained.

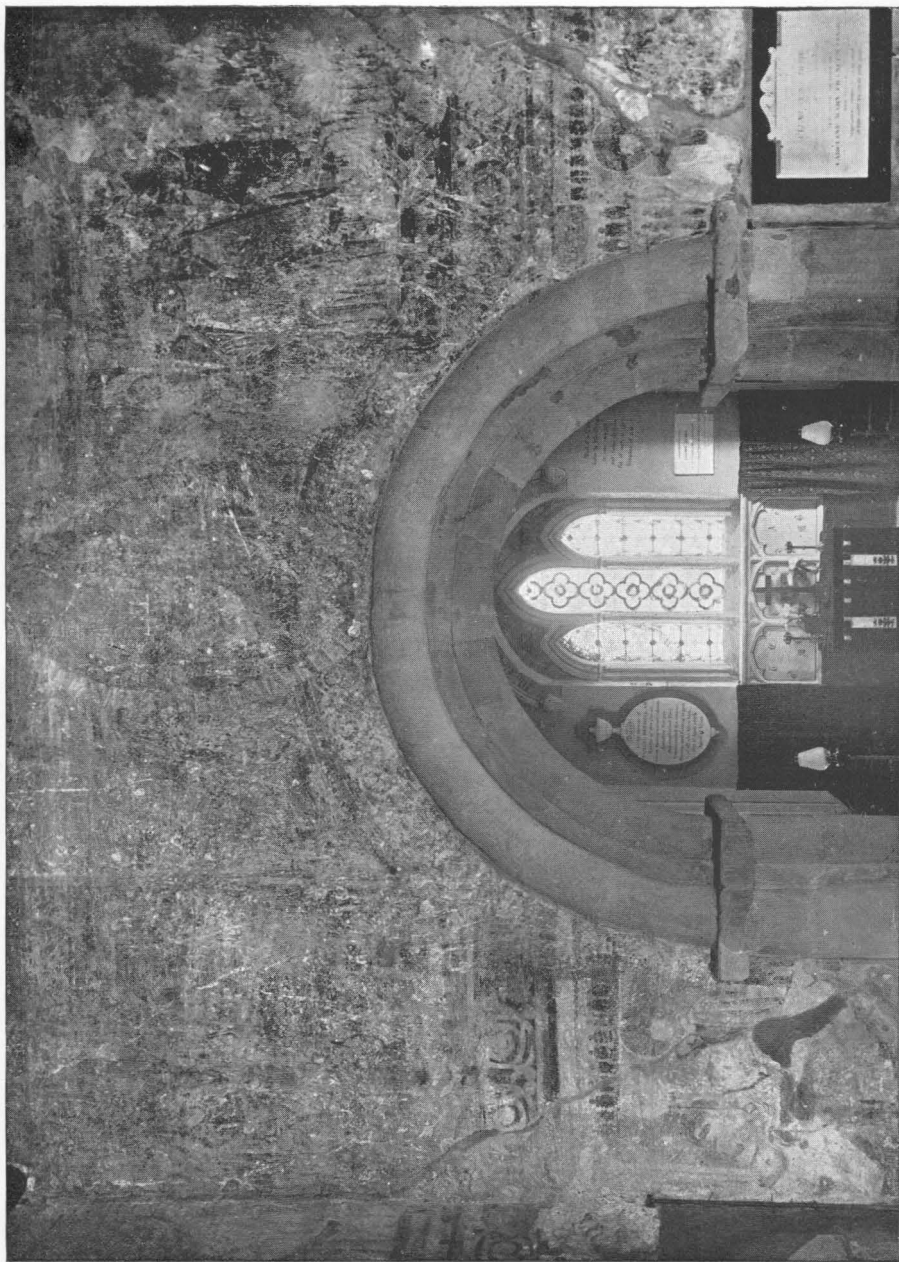
The object of this paper is, however, not to provoke lamentations for vandalism of this kind, but to endeavour to describe two of the most recent and interesting discoveries of mural paintings in the county, *viz.*, those which were found in 1893 at Clayton and Rotherfield, and in both instances most carefully preserved. Brief descriptions have already appeared in the "Archæological Journal," Vol. LIII., pp. 166-170, and elsewhere, and it is to be

feared that very little can be added to further elucidate the doubtful points in the pictures.

The church at Clayton is one of the many small and early structures which we find on and under the Sussex Downs, and its external appearance would not prepare one for the elaborate scheme of decoration with which the interior walls have been embellished. It consists merely of western bell-turret, nave and chancel. The chancel seems to have been reconstructed in the 13th Century, though at the south-east angle are some massive quoin stones, apparently of much earlier date, as there is a triple lancet in the east wall and two single lancets on the north and south, all somewhat over-restored on the interior side. On the south wall is now placed the brass of a priest holding the chalice and wafer, with inscription:—

Of yō charite pray for the soule of mayst' Rychard Idoñ p̄son of Clayton & pykeñ which decessed the vi day of January the yere of our lord god MV° and xxiii on whose soule Jhū have mercy Amen.

The chancel arch is of very early character and may perhaps be anterior to the period of the Norman Conquest. Both on its eastern and western face it has a bold half-round moulding carried round the arch, and continued through the abacus as an engaged shaft to the ground. The soffit of the arch is similarly moulded, and carried down as an attached shaft to the main respond. The abacus is massive and chamfered. On either side of the arch in the east wall of the nave is a semi-circular headed recess, no doubt for a former altar. There is a blocked up Early English arch in the north and south walls at the east end of the nave. The north doorway within a small porch is plain semi-circular headed and probably early. The door itself is also old. The nave roof is high pitched with massive tie beams. The west window is of two lights in the perpendicular style, with square label on the exterior side. The west turret has wooden shingles and is supported on massive beams within the church. There are three bells, one being of pre-Reformation date with invocation to St. Thomas (see "Sussex Archæological Collections," XVI., 205, 231, and



CHANCEL ARCH, CLAYTON CHURCH.

“M. A. Lower’s History of Sussex,” I., 116). There is a brass in the nave to Thomas A. Wood, date 1508. New windows have been inserted in the north and south walls of the nave.

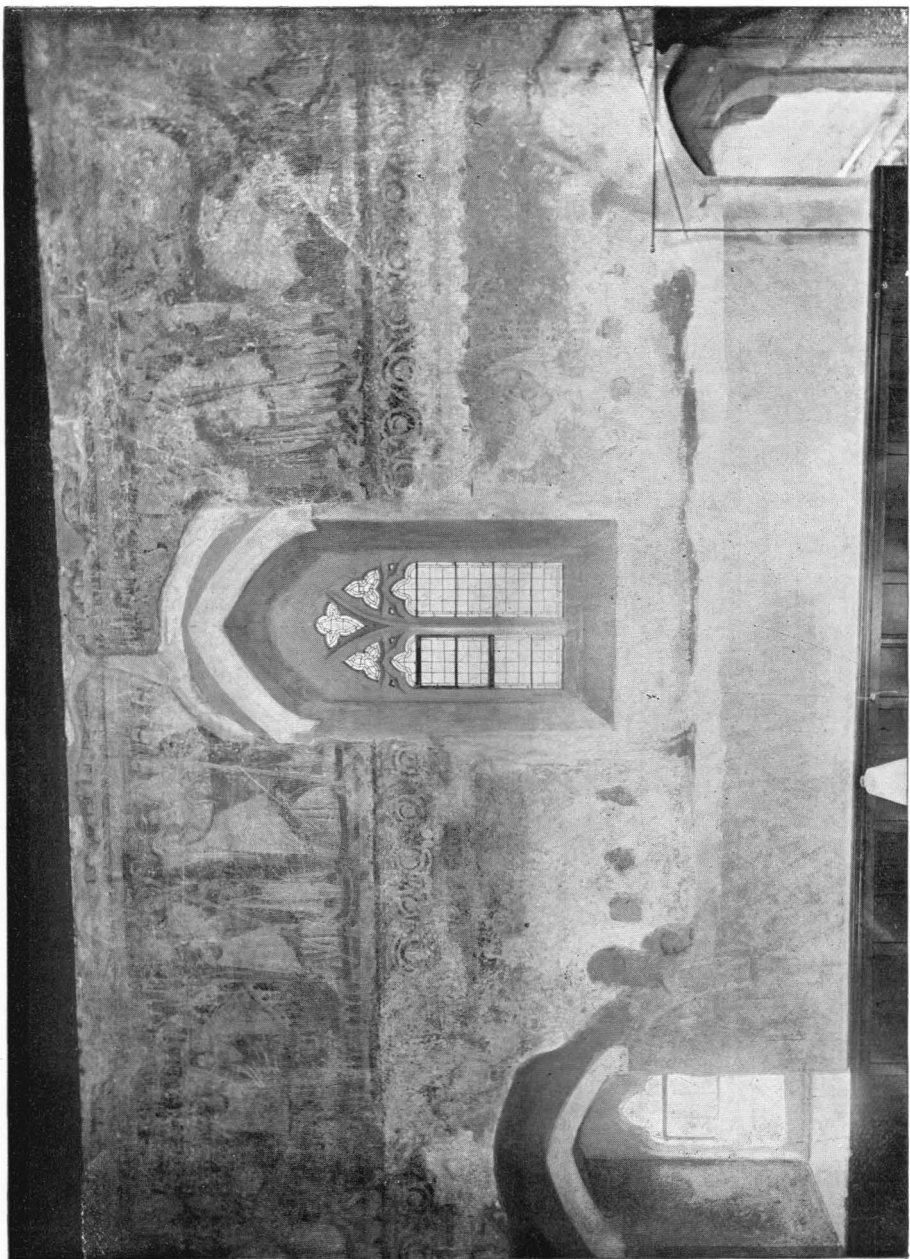
The restoration of the nave was commenced in 1893, and on the removal of the whitewash the whole of the nave walls were found to have been decorated with a most elaborate picture of the Doom. On the north wall are the remains of an earlier course of painting, viz., some large semi-circular arches on slender shafts. They are now very faint and mainly concealed by the later subject, which covers the whole space above the chancel arch, and extends along the north and south walls of the nave.

Over the chancel arch, and within an oval vesica, having a zigzag bordering, is seated a figure of Christ in judgment, with uplifted hands, no doubt exhibiting the wounds. His features are somewhat indistinct and the drapery is not clear. The ground colour of the vesica is a pale pink. On either side are several figures, which are all very faint, but appear to be nimbed and in attitudes of adoration, and are probably intended to portray the Apostles. A very elegant border of inter-lacing scroll foliage, white on a red ground, with an upper band of red and yellow, is carried round part of the arch, and then horizontally to the north and south walls. There is another embattled border to the upper part of the picture. Below, on either side of the chancel arch and above the early altar recess, is a figure of Christ with cruciform yellow nimbus and a red cross, richly vested. On the south side He has a beard, and is giving the benediction, a chalice being depicted on the wall to the south of Him. In the painting on the north side is a kneeling figure, probably of St. Peter, receiving the keys. In both instances a row of trefoiled arches is introduced above and at the sides of the paintings. A tablet partially conceals the one on the south side.

The main subject of the Doom is continued along the north and south walls of the nave. This is certainly unusual, and it is doubtful if any other instance can be

cited in England where the representation has been so far extended. The embattled border is carried along above and the scroll below the principal part of the subject, as on the east wall. On the north side at the east end is depicted a large hexagonal enclosure, the wall being portrayed by the trefoiled arches on a red ground, and the lower part by a kind of lattice work in red lines. In the centre are seated three nimbed figures, no doubt intended to represent the three persons of the Blessed Trinity. That on the west side is the most distinct, and has the right hand with the palm outwards partly upraised and apparently the cruciform nimbus. The figure in the centre is clad in white. The whole is somewhat indistinct, but there can be little doubt that the Heavenly Mansions are here represented, though in a very unusual manner. To the east of the enclosure is a large angel, and on the west a nimbed figure, probably of St. Peter, in full ecclesiastical vestments. His right hand is upraised, while with the left he is grasping the left hand of an ecclesiastic richly vested and with pastoral staff in the right hand. He also has the nimbus. To the west is another angel in white, with red bordering to his garment, and with the nimbus. He stands with partly uplifted hands, facing three more ecclesiastics. The lower portions of the two western figures have been destroyed by the insertion of the modern window. The ecclesiastics have red pointed shoes, while the angels and St. Peter are barefooted. To the west of these is depicted a procession of figures, with low crowns or velvet caps, short tunics and striped stockings, marching towards the east, the heads only of the eastern ones being now visible. At the west end is another angel blowing a trumpet. To the west of the modern window, below the procession, is another angel with bright red wings stooping down, and behind him are several uplifted hands, and two nude figures rising from their tombs.

On the south wall of the nave at the east end is a large figure, probably of an angel, and immediately adjoining it a large cross in red, with several figures nimbed, and apparently with wings, prostrating themselves at



NORTH WALL, CLAYTON CHURCH.

the foot, and below the eastern arm; a female figure on the west side is resting her head on the arm of the cross. To the west again is another angel, who appears to be keeping back the figures beyond him, namely, four ecclesiastics richly vested, and then a number of personages with low crowns or caps similar to those on the north wall. A modern window on this side also has destroyed part of the subject, and to the west of it are several figures, one crowned, one kneeling and all in attitudes of supplication. Three crowned personages adjoining the window, each holding a scroll, are turned to the west, and a figure on a large crimson horse, somewhat indistinct, is also moving in the same direction, while another human being appears with uplifted hands between the forelegs of the horse. On the lower level to the east of the modern window are faint traces of several persons rising from their graves.

The whole treatment of this solemn subject is most elaborate and unusual. The introduction of the cross, with figures adoring it on the south side of the picture, seems to be intended to point out the power of the cross to save even some of those who would otherwise have been condemned. There can be little doubt that otherwise the usual design has been followed, and that the saved are portrayed on the north (the right) side of our Lord, while the condemned are on the left, and are being driven back towards the jaws of hell, which, though not now discernible, doubtless occupied the western portion of the south wall. Slight traces of colour occur on other parts of the walls.

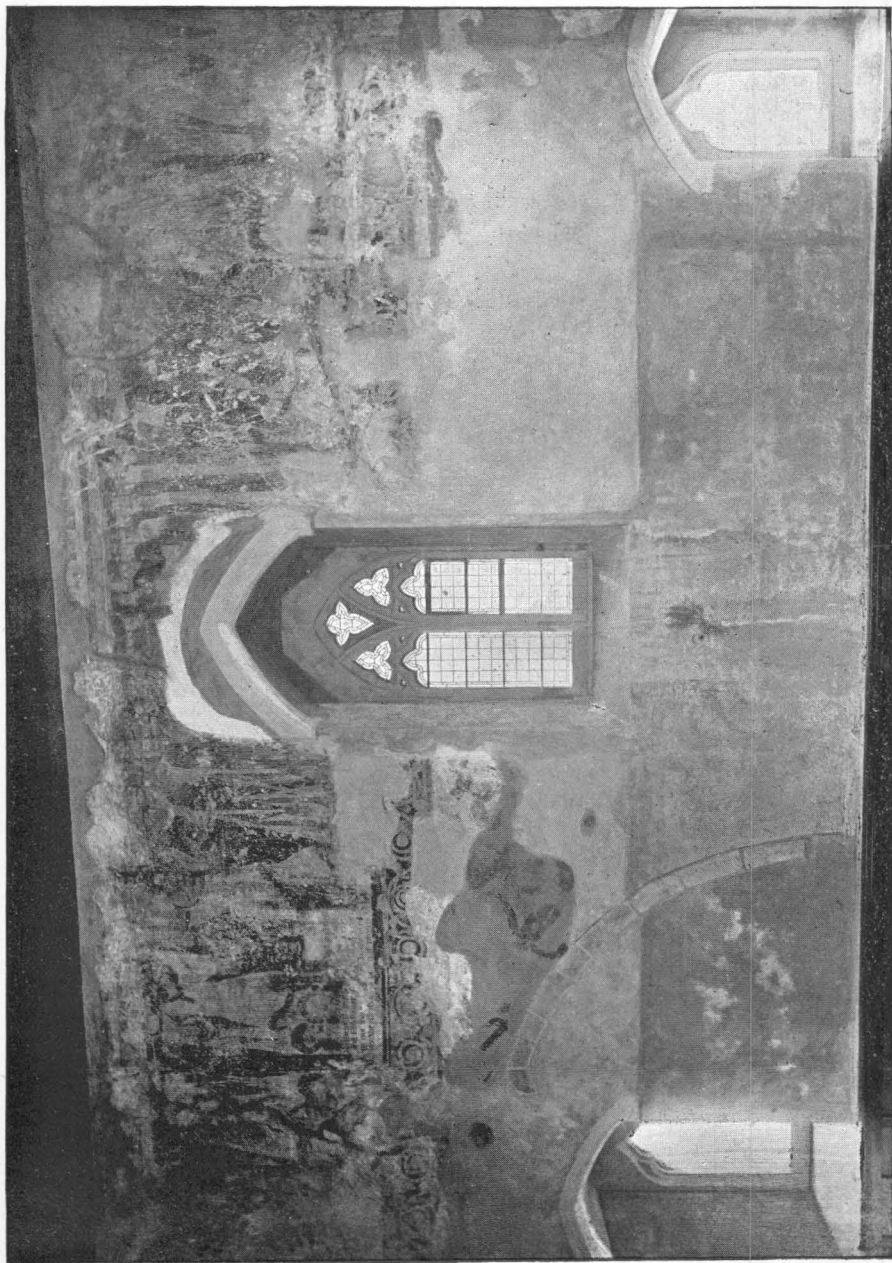
There is nothing in the history or architecture of the church which can give any clue to the date of the painting. It is, of course, of later date than the Doom in the neighbouring church at Patcham, but is an early representation of a subject which was afterwards portrayed in some form or other in almost every church in England. The architectural features, decorative borders and details of costume indicate a period for this Clayton example of about the reign of Edward the First, or the latter part of the 13th Century.

Rotherfield Church is a very interesting structure and in every way worthy of one of the largest and most important parishes in the county. It consists of west tower and spire, nave, aisles, north porch, chancel and north chancel chapel. There has also been a chapel on the south side of the chancel, the arches opening to it from the aisle and chancel being still visible in the wall.

The present church belongs mainly to the 13th Century, though there are traces of the earlier structure and many additions and insertions of later dates. The chancel, which had been restored previously to the work undertaken in the nave in 1893, has three large plain lancets on the south and two more on the north side. The east window of five lights is a large and fine example of the perpendicular style. On the south of the chancel is a plain segmental headed recess, then two sedilia with triangular headed arches supported on central and side shafts with bell-shaped capitals, the west arch being much wider than that on the east, and then further west, by the south chancel doorway, a plain arched piscina with deep basin. Near the west end is a large two-light perpendicular window. The roof is high pitched and of early date. On the floor under the choir stalls are three brass shields to John Wickham, Prebendary of Winchester and Rector of Rotherfield, 1580-1591. He was buried March 2nd, 1591, as mentioned in the Register:—

1591 Mr. John Wickham p̄son a very good preacher buryed the 2 of Marche.

There are two Early English arches opening to the north chapel with two chamfered orders resting on central octagonal column and semi-octagonal responds. A good perpendicular screen separates the chancel from this chapel. Two old chests with date 1635 are preserved in it. The east window of this chapel, formerly the lady chapel, is fine early decorated of three lights, with some old glass in the head, part of a figure of our Lord in the upper quatrefoil and some canopy work. Our Lord is seated wearing a red and white garment. He has the



SOUTH WALL, CLAYTON CHURCH.

feet bare, so as to show the wounds, and hands stretched out, not upraised, but probably in the attitude of benediction. There are two plain lancets on the north side and a plain segmental headed founder's tomb in the north wall. In the east wall is a plain piscina with large basin. The lower parts of the walls are concealed by modern panelling. The roof is high pitched and panelled and there is a lancet window in the west gable. There is an early arch opening to the chapel from the north aisle, of transitional Norman character, obtusely pointed with massive chamfered abacus.

The chancel arch is Early English, with two chamfered orders; the respond shafts are gone. The nave arcade consists of three wide arches on each side; those on the north side rest on circular, those on the south on octagonal columns. The north arcade seems to date from about 1250, while the south has been rebuilt or altered in the 15th Century. The nave roof is waggon-shaped. At the west end of each aisle is a blocked lancet, and in north and south walls three two-light perpendicular windows of very good design. The tower arch is massive of three chamfered orders. The west window is of three lights, segmental headed, of perpendicular style of the same date as those in the aisles. There is a small doorway to the belfry on the north interior side of the tower. The font cover is a piece of patchwork, but the panels seem to have formed part of a pulpit with renaissance carving, and a coat of arms with the Nevile saltire, &c.; a date on it may be 1533 or 1577. In the north aisle is a large monumental slab (?of iron), with a double cross, or perhaps two swords, on it, composed of Sussex iron and of early date. In the north wall by the door is the doorway leading to the parvise over the north porch. Here is preserved part of an altar stone found in the lady chapel. By the chancel arch on the south side is the rood-loft doorway. The lower part of the hood-mould and the respond shafts of the chancel arch have been clearly cut away for the insertion of the screen. The upper part of the hood-mould of the arch has also been destroyed.

On the exterior, the tower is of plain, massive character, embattled, with a north-east angle turret. The spire is plain and covered with shingles. There is a fine west doorway of perpendicular date. The north doorway, within a groined porch, is an excellent specimen of the perpendicular style. The porch has a good outer arch, and blocked-up windows on the east and west sides. The south doorway is small and well moulded of the same (15th Century) date. The south chancel doorway is plain and segmental headed externally. Against the east gable of the nave is some early masonry, said to be part of a buttress supporting a former central tower.

Most of the interesting series of mural paintings were, as has already been stated, discovered in 1893. In Murray's "Handbook for Sussex" it is stated that the martyrdom of St. Lawrence is to be seen on the wall near the pulpit, and Mr. M. A. Lower, in his "History of Sussex," Vol. II., p. 128, states that "the walls were anciently painted, and a representation of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence is now visible." No traces of this subject are now to be seen and it is supposed to be under the colour wash in the south aisle.

The lady chapel has been profusely decorated. On the west wall is an early scroll foliage pattern in red, and on the same wall and the splay of the lancet windows a masonry pattern of double lines, all probably of the 13th Century. On the north splay of the east window is painted a large angel on a red ground, powdered with a kind of ivy berry design. Over his head is an indistinct scroll, and though no trace now remains of the Blessed Virgin in the opposite splay, there can be no doubt this is St. Gabriel and that the Annunciation was here represented. The date may be as early as the 14th Century. On the east window on the north side on the east splay is apparently a nude female figure with golden hair seated and holding a distaff. On the opposite splay is the lower part of a bare leg, and it is most likely that Adam and Eve were here portrayed.

In the nave, over and at the sides of the chancel arch, a very large picture of the Doom has been discovered,



EAST WALL OF NAVE, ROTHERFIELD CHURCH.

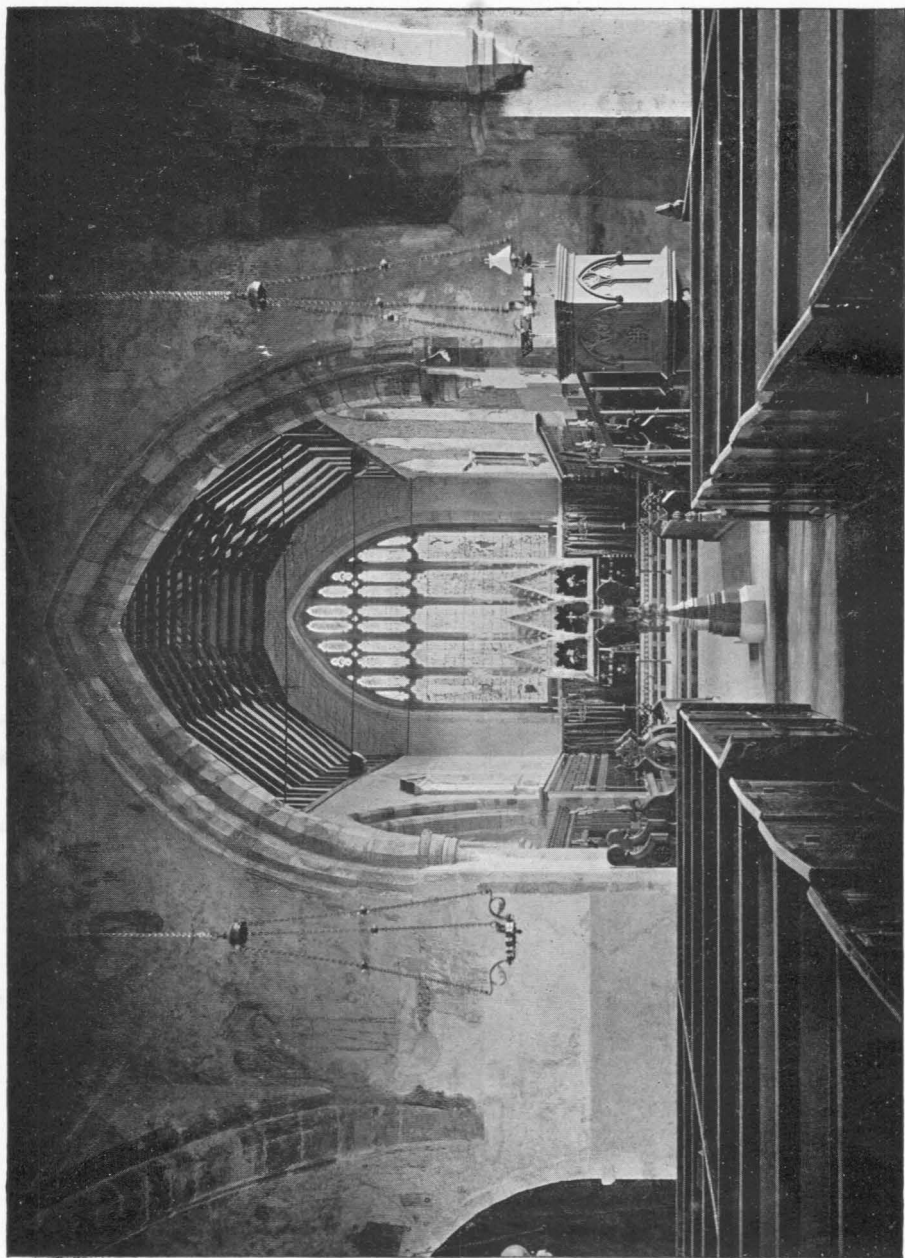
unfortunately, in a damaged state. The upper part of the wall, above the arch, is slightly recessed, and is probably of later date than the arch and lower part of the wall. The subject has been delineated both on the surface of the recessed portion and the earlier wall below it, and was probably executed in the 15th Century, at the time when so many additions to the earlier fabric seem to have been made. In the centre of the upper portion our Lord is seated on the rainbow with dark red under garment and yellow cloak. He has the hands upraised and His right side, arms and feet are bare, so as to exhibit the blood streaming from the wounds; His feet rest on a large orb and the sun and moon are above, each on a yellow medallion, on either side of His head. On each side is an angel with outspread wings, blowing a long trumpet; that on the north has red and that on the south yellow wings. On the right of our Lord is the Virgin kneeling, with hands clasped in attitude of supplication, while St. John occupies a corresponding situation on the left; both are nimbed and have red vestments. Below, the subject has been much injured, and only the heads of two monks are now discernible. On the south side nothing can be made out, but on the north is a large hexagonal enclosure, with yellow walls, red doors, and a pinnacle on the south-east angle. Within, several figures and the wing of an angel can be discerned. The enclosure probably represents the Heavenly Mansions, which occur in many other instances in this position. Below are traces of several figures and decorations in red, and below again on the north side of the chancel arch is the subject, often introduced into representations of the Doom, of St. Michael weighing souls. St. Michael is portrayed with yellow nimbus, and his wings and the lines of his vestment are a deep red. He holds the balances in his left hand and points with his right to the south side. The scale on the north is weighing down that on the south, close to which is a small figure, while several more surround that on the north, but all are very indistinct. Below is a border with a scroll pattern in vermilion on a white ground, and below

again two rows of small figures. The lines on their dresses are represented in vermilion, but this part of the subject is so indistinct that one can only hazard a conjecture that it is an adjunct to the main picture. The columns of the nave arcade have been decorated with diaper and other varied designs, and on the east pier on the south side are traces of a figure. Indications of a large subject are visible on the north wall of the nave between the two eastern arches, the borderings being clearly discernible. On the south part of the east wall of the north aisle is a large representation of the Incredulity of St. Thomas. Our Lord is portrayed considerably above life size, standing up and perhaps holding a cross in His left hand. He has the cruciform nimbus, painted red, a white robe with yellow lining, and bare arms and feet. A nimbed saint, clad in a crimson vestment, is kneeling at His feet. Our Lord is holding the right arm of this figure (which, though rather feminine in appearance, is of course intended for St. Thomas the Apostle), in His right hand, and is pressing the hand against the wound in His side. An ornamental pattern in yellow runs above His head. The subject, which is not at all a common one, may perhaps date as early as the 14th Century. Other examples of this subject have been found at St. Albans Cathedral; Wighton, Norfolk; and Preston, near Brighton. On either splay of the blocked west window of the north aisle is portrayed a large nimbed saint in deep red vestments. That on the south is holding some object, perhaps a sword, pointing towards his body, while that on the north seems to be an ecclesiastic. On the south wall of the south aisle is part of a scroll pattern; and decorative designs, some as early as the 13th Century, have been found in various places on the walls.

Such is a brief description of these two most interesting series of wall paintings. One can only hope that they may be carefully preserved (not repainted), not merely as interesting relics of a bygone age, but also as examples of that direct religious teaching which was thus severely impressed on the minds of those who had

not the educational advantages which are now conferred on all classes in these more enlightened, though perhaps less devotional, times. The picture at Clayton is of exceptional merit, and appears to have been the work of a master hand, and it will, indeed, be a matter of regret if it or those at Rotherfield were again to be concealed by colour wash, after the patience and care which has so recently been exercised in once more bringing them to light.





THE CHANCEL, ROTHERFIELD CHURCH.