



PLATE I. SOUTHEAST. PAINTING ON THE NORTH WALL. THE TRIUMPHAL
ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM.

Sussex Archaeological Society

WALL PAINTINGS IN SOUTHEASE CHURCH

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THE small church of Southease, whose dedication is unknown, though shorn of much of its former extent and features, yet contains many points of great interest. Mr. W. H. Godfrey has shown that the church at 'Sueise' was given, with other lands, by King Edgar in 966 to Hyde Abbey, Winchester, the charter being extant; and the church is mentioned in the Domesday Survey of 1086. The present building consists in the main of an early-twelfth-century nave, the eastern part of which is now the chancel since the medieval chancel had fallen into decay at quite an early date. The round tower (one of three in Sussex grouped nearby) is also twelfth-century. A thirteenth-century lancet in the north wall, windows and the south doorway of the fourteenth century, a south porch and remains of a fifteenth-century rood-screen complete the medieval structural history of the building, the late-twelfth-century aisles or chapels having disappeared, though their extent has recently been ascertained by excavation. One of the most interesting features of the church, however, is the quantity of medieval wall-painting brought to light in 1934-5.

During a general restoration of the church in 1916 some plaster was removed from the north wall of the nave, revealing traces of colour on the original surface beneath. Further uncovering was wisely stopped at once, but nothing more was done for some years. Eventually Professor E. W. Tristram was consulted, and he confirmed the indications of medieval painting and the desirability of exploring the walls for further

decoration. It was not thought that very much more than fragmentary ornament would be found. During 1934 and 1935 I was entrusted with the work of uncovering and preserving any painting that might survive. As a result, an extensive and extremely interesting series of paintings of thirteenth-century date was revealed; and though they are much mutilated, enough remains to identify the general scheme, and most of the individual subject-matter.

The painting is on the north and west walls, with remains of colour on the sawn-off ends of the rood-screen, and late texts in frames with classical ornament on the timber and plaster tympanum above. There must have been painting on the south wall as well: but numerous tests showed the old plaster surface to have disintegrated over most of its area, and it had been largely renewed. Isolated fragments of painting might, of course, survive on sound patches of plaster. The reason for the perished condition of this wall is no doubt due to its exposure to the prevailing wet sea wind.

The scheme on the north wall, much defaced by the insertion of two 'lancet' windows in the nineteenth century, consists of ornamental bands and drapery, between which is a series of scenes from a Life of Christ, no doubt continued from the south wall, since it commences at the west end with the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. At the top, immediately below the wall-plate, is a frieze of Romanesque character, consisting of a broad band of yellow between two narrower red lines at top and bottom, with a series of chevrons or zigzags in between. These latter are composed of alternate pink and red, and light and dark yellow lines, with a single stroke as outline. Rayed suns or flower ornament painted in black or dark brown are placed in the triangular spaces. Then comes the range of figure subjects, about 3 ft. 6 in. in depth, bounded at its base by a second band of ornament of different detail. In this case the chevrons intersect, making a lozenge pattern, giving an effect of perspective or shading by the alternating light and dark of the red and yellow lines. Here

also there was ornament of some sort in the spaces; but it has nowhere survived sufficiently to be clear. Below this dado band was a painted representation of drapery hanging from it in the usual way. The scheme is best preserved at the west end, where a very good idea of its detail and general effect can be gained (Plate I).

The figure subjects are continuous in one tier, without vertical divisions, and this, in their fragmentary state, adds to the difficulties of identification. The first scene is the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. On the left is a group of onlookers, one in the act of throwing down a garment, with good drapery folds. Christ, with a black nimbus and long yellow hair that is employed throughout the series, is in the centre, and is shown riding on a light-coloured donkey towards the gates of Jerusalem, of which some part of the buildings are shown, with an archway and single-line masonry pattern, with towers and ornament above. The scene is well composed and grouped, and in spite of its mutilated condition still makes itself clear in its main outlines and achieves a rich effect of warm colour (Plate I). The next scene is defaced by a modern window. But just above the eastern side of the arch are traces of two figures, one with the dark halo and robe given to Christ in this series, which suggest the Betrayal. It would be in the correct sequence in this position, and one would expect the scene to be shown in this particular instance. Next probably came the scene of Christ before Pilate. A trace of the dark nimbus is again visible on the right, with Pilate's throne on the left and the drapery of a large group of figures in the centre. A fragment of architectural detail of the Judgement Hall may be made out at the top. The Scourging is easily decipherable. Christ, with slightly bowed head, and hair and nimbus as before, is in the centre, presumably bound to a pillar as is usually the case, while on the right the legs, tunic, and lower portion of one of the Roman soldiers, with scourge upraised is clear. Only a fragment of the other tormentor remains on the left of Christ.

It is uncertain whether any scene came between the

Scourging and the Crucifixion. On the whole the space is against it; though a contracted scene of the Carrying of the Cross might have been included. Of the Crucifixion itself very little remains. The second of the modern windows has destroyed the whole of the lower portion: and of the upper, the vestiges are very faint, not much more in places than the stain of pigment on the plaster. However, when examined with minute care at close quarters when under treatment, a good deal becomes intelligible, and most of the details can be traced. The cross was painted in black or dark brown, and its form is clear. The Saviour's head, with dark nimbus, inclined, is also visible, and the outline of one of the arms. Apparently Angels were represented as catching the blood from the hands in cups or chalices, as may be seen in contemporary illuminations in manuscripts. The drops are clear on the right-hand side, and the general form of one of the Angels on the left. No doubt the figures of St. Mary and St. John were shown standing beneath the cross in the usual way. When complete, this must have been a beautiful composition.

The remaining scenes have completely perished, so one cannot tell how elaborately they were treated. The Resurrection and Ascension would undoubtedly have been shown: but whether a Deposition, Entombment, Harrowing of Hell, or one of the post-Resurrection Appearances would have been included one cannot say. If, as Mr. Godfrey supposes, the original nave extended up to the present east wall of the chancel, there would have been room for about four scenes after the Crucifixion, judging by the scale of the preceding ones, and this would argue a fairly diffuse treatment of the later scenes in the series. The little twelfth-century window in the nave, which might be thought to have hindered the setting out of these paintings in the thirteenth century was no doubt used actually in the composition, as were the fourteenth-century windows of the chancel at Chalgrove, Oxon. In the Life of Christ painted there as part of the fourteenth-century scheme of rebuilding and decoration, a soldier accompanying Christ in the

scene of Carrying the Cross is shown stepping up the side of the hood-mould above the window-arch, as it were steps or a hill on the route.

The work at Southease is carried out entirely in red and yellow ochres and their derivatives, with a little chalk white and lamp-black, the oiliness of the latter pigment having penetrated farther into the plaster than some of the other colours and fortunately left a stain where the actual pigment has sometimes perished. The plaster itself is rather coarse, and its surface is very uneven, and much impaired by keying for later plasters, which were in places as much as half an inch in thickness. The painting is set out curiously high up on the wall, the lower border being 10 ft. from the ground. At this height one would have expected a second tier of subjects: but the hanging drapery comes immediately beneath, and there is no indication of further painting lower down. The artist evidently experienced some difficulty in setting out his long, straight lines over the entire length of the nave. For though they are straight enough in themselves, they drop in their course from west to east by almost a foot and a half. Similarly, on the west wall, the borders are lower by nearly a foot at the south end of the wall than at the north.

The date of the work on the north wall is probably not later than 1250. The ornamental borders are still Romanesque in character, but late in the style, as they are more delicate than earlier examples. The zigzag or lozenge ornament disappears in manuscripts earlier than in wall-paintings, and is not found in the latter after about 1300.

The west wall was found to be similarly painted high up with subject-matter between two borders of simpler design. The scheme did not, however, prove to be a continuation of the Life of Christ, but was a Majesty within a type of mandorla consisting of a barbed quatrefoil, flanked on either side by the symbols of the Evangelists and a kneeling Angel, probably censuring (Plate II). At the top is a plain frieze of two yellow lines. There was probably ornament or colour between, but it has



PLATE II. SOUTHEASE. PAINTING ON THE WEST WALL, NORTH SIDE. CHRIST IN MAJESTY, AND THE SYMBOLS OF ST. JOHN AND ST. LUKE.

perished. At the base is a similar band, the lines in this case being red, and there is evidence that the space between them was filled with black or dark brown. In the centre, between the two borders, which are almost 4 ft. apart, is the figure of Christ seated on a throne, the right hand raised in blessing, the left holding an orb: the drapery is still somewhat formal and stiff, but is elaborate. The background is powdered with stars in red, and the enclosing aureole is composed of equal red and yellow bands with a broader one of black on the outside. On the north side of the wall are the Eagle of St. John above, the winged Ox of St. Luke below, and a fragment of a kneeling Angel with elaborate drapery at the northern edge of the wall. All look towards the central figure. On the south are traces of the Angel of St. Matthew, with the winged Lion of St. Mark below, and some lines and colour at the extreme south end, which is all that remains of the Angel corresponding to that on the north.

The form of the mandorla is interesting, and is of great assistance in dating. In the Canterbury and Winchester Majesties the mandorla surrounding Christ takes the more usual form of a vesica with four foils or lobes in which the symbols of the Evangelists are placed. In another case there is a circle with four attached circles. All these paintings are of early- or mid-thirteenth-century date. The form enclosing the central figure at Southease is typical of the second half of the thirteenth century, and more particularly the last quarter, though it does also occur in the fourteenth century as late as about 1330—e.g. throughout Queen Mary's Psalter, where many of the New Testament scenes are enclosed in such a form. It is found in a painting by Cimabue in the church of St. Francis at Assisi; on the Syon Cope; and in the painting in St. Faith's Chapel, Westminster, all of which can be fairly closely dated in the late thirteenth century. It also occurs in Westminster MSS. up to the middle of the fourteenth century.

Careful examination reveals a good deal of detail and a wide range of ochre colours in the Evangelists'

symbols. The winged Ox, for example, was in pink, red, yellow, and brown, and some of the smaller feathers and shading on the wings can be made out. But the painting has been reduced by the ravages of time and by deliberate defacement to its barest outlines, which tends to give it an earlier appearance than is really the case. Taking all the evidence into account, one is inclined to date this painting between 1275 and 1300.

Beneath the lower border, which is itself 9 ft. 7 in. from the ground, there is much colouring suggesting the former existence of further subject-matter: but it is too fragmentary for identification. Several elaborate Consecration Crosses have, however, survived. That on the north side of the west wall is of the usual form of a bordered circle within which is painted the cross having curved arms composed of segments of circles, and a central line. In the spaces between the arms there has been further ornament of some sort. The Cross was set out by lines scratched in the plaster by a compass point. Beside the large cross (which is 14 in. in diameter) is a smaller one of different form; and on the south side of the same wall a similar small cross has been painted out by the larger one, and can be traced beneath the top centre of the vertical arm. A similar instance of two crosses, large and small in close proximity, was recorded at Chesham, Buckinghamshire, many years ago, though both have since entirely vanished owing to lack of treatment.

This duplication at Southease would seem to argue a reconsecration at an early date. The west wall is seriously cracked from top to bottom, the fissure, in places 6 in. wide, running up more or less vertically from the apex of the tower door. An iron tie-rod was put in at some previous restoration; and there has been no sign of movement for a very long time. There must have been a settlement of the ends of this west wall during the thirteenth century, necessitating much work, underpinning, &c., and the probable closing of the church for a time. The crack was filled, and plastered over, the painting of the Majesty being placed on top as

a scheme of redecoration. It will be noted that the figure of Christ is placed just off-centre to avoid the crack. Much of the medieval filling had disintegrated and had to be made good; but in several places the pigment still adhered to the plaster and filling in the crack, and wherever possible it was preserved to complete the evidence. When the work of restoration and redecoration with a scheme of painting was complete, the church was opened once more and there was probably a reconsecration ceremony, as witnessed by the two sets of Consecration Crosses. Parts of this wall were covered very thickly with plaster and limewash, the earlier coats of the latter being mixed probably with cow-dung—a very successful process used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to make it harden and cling. This is a most difficult substance to deal with. No solvent can of course be used: it is extremely hard, and moreover tends to turn the red ochres black or brown.

There are some reasons for supposing that the painting on the north wall had become in bad condition in late medieval times; and it may have been replaced, in part at any rate, by a fresh scheme. Considerable remains of pigment on top of the earlier work are visible on the central section of wall, just east of the north door (now blocked). It was quite a usual thing to redecorate churches in this way, even when the earlier paintings were in good order, as at Little Horwood, Buckinghamshire, where a representation of Pride and her seven Daughters is placed upon an earlier series showing the life of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of the church. The later subject at Southease was large in scale, as it extends over the earlier tier of subjects, the dado band, and the drapery; and both from its position opposite the main entrance door and from its nature one may conclude that it represented St. Christopher. The long yellow line of the staff may be traced, and also remains of the saint's legs and scraps of drapery. But the whole was thoroughly defaced after the Reformation, and a little had to be removed to make the earlier subjects clear.

Some remains of the texts and frames with which the paintings were first defaced were found on this wall. The lettering was of the earlier, black-letter type. On the lath and plaster partition above the sawn-off ends of the rood-screen, two later texts, of late seventeenth-century date, remain, and are interesting evidence of the appearance of the church at the time when 'sentencing' had replaced the medieval paintings. The texts are: north side, Romans xiii. 1: south side, Psalm lxxv. 7. The lettering is of Roman type, and enclosed in elaborate frames with typical classical ornament, cherubs' heads, &c.

As to the provenance of the medieval paintings at Southease, their condition is too fragmentary for one to be able to say much. The work is certainly of good quality, though not outstanding. Since the church was in the hands of Hyde Abbey, one would anticipate that any decorative work would be entrusted (though not necessarily at the abbey's cost) to craftsmen or artists from Winchester, where there was a very fine artistic tradition in the thirteenth century; in fact it was one of the leading centres of English art at that time. On the other hand, the powerful and important Priory of St. Pancras at Lewes was nearby, inheriting the strong artistic tradition of the Cluniacs in France. The priory owned most of the other churches in the Ouse valley. So that, in either case, one would expect competent work in the church. On the whole, an English source in Winchester seems the more probable.

The importance of these paintings lies less in their actual workmanship and condition than in the valuable evidence they afford of the subject-matter and its treatment, and the complete schemes of painting with which even the humblest village churches were formerly enriched. A complete set of drawings has been made: but only the two most suitable for reproduction are here used.