



MURAL PAINTING ON THE NORTH SIDE OF THE NAVE

## MURAL PAINTING IN CATFIELD CHURCH,

COMMUNICATED

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HAVING availed myself of a former opportunity\* to state my persuasion that a large proportion, and possibly the whole, of our Norfolk parochial churches had their interior walls originally ornamented with paintings, and that these were the work of different hands from the Saints, &c., on our rood-loft screens, and were also very inferior in point of execution, I must be excused from here in anywise entering upon the art of mural painting generally. To do so in a manner that might prove satisfactory to the Society, would not only lead me into a wide field, and require an article of a length disproportioned to our object, but would demand a degree of preparation and knowledge with which I am far from furnished. The subject, I observe with pleasure, is already exciting attention: the task I hope to see undertaken by younger and abler hands. To such I can confidently promise that a more interesting one will not easily be proposed them, and that the gratification they will find in the pursuit and the light they will have the satisfaction of throwing upon the History of Early English Art, will richly repay the toil and time expended in the inquiry. Confining myself therefore to the single picture before me, I will proceed in regular wise, and, "beginning from the beginning," will inform my readers, that,

Catfield Church is a modest rural building of flint and rubble, composed of a nave with two aisles, a chancel, and

\* Preface to *Catalogue of Engravings, &c.*, inserted in a copy of *Blomefield's History of Norfolk*, p. x.

a wide low square tower at the western extremity; and that it stands most quietly embosomed in trees, hard by the rectory, immortalized as having once been the residence of the Poet Cowper. Still further, that, immediately upon entering by the south porch, the painting here figured presents itself to the eye. It occupies the space between the first and second arch on the north side, as also that immediately over them extending to the roof. A considerable portion of it is now unfortunately effaced and gone past recovery. What remains is of a most curious character. Perhaps it would hardly be going too far to pronounce it unique. It has, at all events, been so regarded by every person to whom I have had the opportunity of showing it; and, very certainly, I myself never saw or heard of anything similar either in painting or engraving. The general idea of the artist seems to have been to represent a tree, bearing for its fruit the seven deadly sins, and at the same time exhibiting their fatal consequences in a language that the most ignorant could not fail to comprehend with ease, the most learned to contemplate with advantage. Justly might he say,

“Indocti discant, et ament meminisse periti.”

For this purpose he has painted a straight perpendicular stem, issuing out of a pair of huge gaping jaws, and furnished with six opposite horizontal branches. Each branch is formed of a Demon; his body long and cylindrical, with a large, fin-like, unfolded wing rising from its centre; his head with glaring eye and fearful horns; his wide mouth distended to the utmost, and armed with terrific rows of teeth. Upon the uppermost of these infernal monsters, midway between the wing and mouth, stands what I suppose to be intended for the angel blowing the last trumpet, but what, it will be seen below, my far more learned friend regards in a very different point of view. Within the jaws of each is seated an unhappy sinner, and by his side a devil of almost human form, evidently intent upon engulfing him in the

yawning abyss, whence he is seen emerging by an aperture at the opposite extremity. A chain meanwhile has been fastened round his neck; and, at this, a demon standing on the jaw below is tugging with all his might, to bring the wretch into the bottomless pit, into which a king similarly chained is at the moment descending headlong. I have said that the painting is sadly injured; and such is particularly the case with the eastern side. There the angel, if one there was, as I suppose there must have been to correspond with him to the west, is quite effaced; as is also the highest of the branch-like demons, together with the mouth and jaws of the central one, and the satanic imp in the lowest that should be placed in charge of his captive. But to this last the scroll with the legend, *Invidia*, is left; as on the opposite side are *Avaritia*, *Ira*, and *Socordia*. Of *Superbia*, *Luxuria*, and *Gula* there are no traces; neither is it easy to imagine where the seventh of the deadly sins, whatever it might be, could have been placed, unless it were on the top of the stem, no unapt situation for Pride. It is even possible that the monarch who is being hurled into the abyss, may have been intended as the personification of this. The two devils below, who have hold of the chain on either side, are likewise crowned. In them, and indeed in the whole picture, there is surprising spirit and character; far beyond what I have seen in any of the neighbouring churches; and also far, I should imagine, beyond what might be expected from the date, which is shown by the dresses of the Angel, the Sluggard, and the Sovereign, all *party per pale*, to be of the latter part of the fourteenth century. The windows and arches of the church, of the style when the Decorated was losing itself in the Perpendicular, assign the same period to the building.

To dwell yet a few moments longer upon the description of the picture—the Miser is intent upon counting his gold, while his attendant spirit, seen in profile, has his hands drawn back, clearly in act to spring upon him; and out he comes,

“the loudest laugh of hell,” with his darling treasure suspended from his neck. The Passionate man is gnawing his fists from fury: on the other hand, his Demon, sure of his prey, displays in his broad flat face the utmost calmness and complacency. See, too, the Sluggard: “a little more sleep and a little more slumber” seem all he cares for: his sinking head reclines most placidly on his arm; and the Devil, raised slightly above him, eyes him with a peculiarly evil smile: to aid his slumbers, he has quietly insinuated his right hand round his neck, at the same time that with the left he gently tickles his cheek. All the sinners are well dressed preparatory to their fate, but come out entirely naked. In the painting there is little other variety of color than is afforded by different shades of brown and purple, except as regards the king, whose dress is red.

This picture was first brought to light in the year 1840, after having lain concealed for an unknown series of years. The present rector, the Rev. John Prowett, was then engaged in the praiseworthy task of repairing, cleansing, and beautifying his church; and numerous coats of whitewash, the pious labors of as many successive churchwardens, were removed from the walls, with a view to their receiving a fresh and more decorous covering. But no sooner did the scraper produce its effect, than, to the astonishment of the masons, first colors peeped through, then figures; and

“Each after each arose to sight,

“As stars arise upon the night.”

Greater care was now employed; and it was found that the whole surface of the walls within the nave, on either side, a length of sixty-two feet, was, or rather had been, decorated with representations of divers subjects; some scriptural, others legendary, and one, the westernmost, simply moral. Mr. Prowett, pleased with the discovery, not only interested himself warmly, for which this Society owes him many thanks, in the preservation of these curious relics, but communicated

the information to his friend and neighbour, Mr. Gunn, whose zeal and intelligence in such matters are too well known, and have been too justly praised by our President in his opening speech, to need any eulogium here. By him my daughters were taken to the spot, and made the series of drawings which I have already had the honor of exhibiting in this room. Should the Society at some future time consider the rest, or any portion of them, also worthy of being engraved, they will always be at their service for the purpose. Meanwhile I feel I cannot better conclude this paper, than by subjoining the brief but lucid description of the whole, most kindly furnished by a gentleman whose profession and deep learning in these subjects give peculiar weight to his opinions, the Very Rev. F. C. Husenbeth, the Roman Catholic Vicar General of the Eastern division of England. The following is his letter to me respecting them.

NORTH WALL,

BEGINNING FROM THE WESTERN EXTREMITY.

No. 1. The Wheel of Fortune. There still remain the letters NA ROTA of the inscription, "*Fortuna Rota*;" meaning that Fortune is a wheel. The king, falling, says "*Regnavi*," I have reigned; and the one lying below, "*n regno*" (non regno), I reign not.

2. The Tree of the seven deadly sins, of which there remain only *Avaritia*, *Ira*, *Invidia*, and *Socordia*. The figure at the top seems to have been a flatterer trumpeting, for *Pride*.

3. These appear to have been a series representing the contrary virtues; but there remains only *Diligence*, the opposite to *Sloth*, expressed by three figures admiring the flowers cultivated by their own diligence and industry.

4. *Baptism*, and a fragment of *Confirmation*.

5. *Penance*, or *Confession*, and *Matrimony*.

6. *Extreme Unction*, and a fragment of the *Crucifixion*; intimating that the Sacraments are efficacious through the blood of Christ.

7. Above the second arch from the east. This was the Samaritan woman and our blessed Saviour resting at the well of Jacob: part of the border of the well is left near the woman's pitcher. The other compartment appears to have represented St. Luke; as the figure of the calf is seen below.

8. Last compartment from the west. The remains of a king and another figure, *perhaps* Nathan and David.

#### SOUTH WALL.

1 and 2 from the east. The first is the Adoration of the Shepherds, indicated by lambs at their feet: there seem some faint traces of the manger on the left.

The second is the History of the Wise Men. On the left they appear before Herod; and on the right they are come to Bethlehem, where our blessed Lady receives them at the entrance of the stable.

3. The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence. The Roman Prefect, under a canopy on the right, is ordering the Saint to be laid on the gridiron: two men are stirring up the coals.

4th and 5th compartments. They both represent the Martyrdom of St. Catherine. According to her Acts, she was condemned by the tyrant, Maximinus, to be bound on a terrible engine of torture, composed of four wheels. As soon as the engine was set in motion, an angel descended, and cut the cords which bound the holy virgin: the engine fell to pieces by the wheels separating; and she was afterwards beheaded. Now, in the fourth compartment, we have St. Catherine standing in the midst of the four wheels broken asunder; the angel having cut the cords which are seen on the ground on the left side. The sword is brought by the

angel, either to show the cutting of the cords, or as the instrument of her final martyrdom. The fifth represents St. Catherine, kneeling to receive the stroke of the executioner, one of whose hands is seen holding up her hair away from her neck.

6. Our Lord's Resurrection. In the recess intended for the sepulchre, is seen our Saviour, rising out of the body of a whale, in allusion to the prophet Jonas, whom Christ himself gave the Jews as a sign of his resurrection. This was the common mode of representing the resurrection of Christ employed by the primitive Christians. It is continually met with in the paintings found in the catacombs. Mary Magdalen is seen standing at the door of the sepulchre on the right; and, on the left, kneeling before our Saviour, taking him for the gardener. But, as she recognized him afterwards in his true shape, he is drawn standing behind her, as if just risen from the tomb.

7. Represents St. John the Evangelist before the Latin Gate, thrown, by the order of Domitian, into a cauldron or tub of boiling oil, *ferventis olei dolium*. Our Saviour appears in the gateway, ready to preserve his favourite Apostle, who was miraculously saved unhurt.

8. This appears to represent the History of St. John the Baptist. He is standing before King Herod; the lambs near him, to show that St. John is meant; and Herod orders him to be beheaded, as appears by the sword of the executioner.