

MURAL PAINTINGS AT DRAYTON.

LETTER

FROM THE VERY REV. F. C. HUSENBETH TO DAWSON TURNER, ESQ.

Cossey, August 4, 1849.

MY DEAR SIR,

The venerable old church at Drayton, which parish adjoins Cossey, has recently undergone some repairs; and, to use a familiar phrase, certainly not before they were needed. The archæologist, and especially the ecclesiologist, always trembles when parish authorities meet and determine on "doing up" the church. For its sacred original features are pretty sure to be destroyed; and if any hidden relics of antiquity are brought to light, it is usually their fate to be either annihilated, or again consigned to obscurity. In the present instance, some interesting frescoes have been uncovered, by scraping the walls for the purpose of stone-colouring them; but a portion of these have been already brushed over again and lost; and a similar fate, no doubt, awaits the remainder.

Having, however, paid several visits to the church since the operations began, and very carefully examined what was discovered, I have great pleasure in giving you the result, knowing how much the subject will interest you.

Between the north door of the church and the first window towards the east, a large portion of the wall is occupied by two subjects painted in fresco. A gigantic St. Christopher appears on the left hand. His head had reached to the top

of the wall; but when the roof was lowered long ago, he was decapitated. There remains of the Holy Infant, who was seated on his shoulder, only the right foot. The Saint has a red flowing robe over a close vesture of gold-colour, flowered. With his right hand he holds up his garments, and the broad gold-coloured hem of the red robe appears with strong effect, forming, as it now does, the margin of the painting; for there are only faint traces of the legs, one extended in the act of stepping out of the water; though no water remains to be seen, and of course the usual attendant fishes have disappeared. The left hand of the Saint grasped an enormous staff, like the trunk of a tree: the hand is gone, but a large portion of the staff remains. And this is, more ingeniously than artistically, represented so as to convey the incident recorded in the legend of the saint, that the Holy Infant, having made himself known to St. Christopher, directed him to fix his staff on the bank, and promised that it should, by the next day, grow into a tree, and produce leaves and fruit. Accordingly, the staff is here painted as a tree upon the bank, with much foliage at the top.

In a very curious position, just below St. Christopher, and in front of him, are traces of two figures, forming quite another subject. One figure stands under a kind of canopy or recess, and has nothing now left but the hands, and a small part of the robe in front, of an ochre colour. Before this figure is one kneeling and bending forward, dressed in a crimson robe, with apparently a black outline towards the feet. He has a venerable profile, with a beard and partially bald head. He extends his right hand towards the figure before him, who has his left hand raised upwards, and places his right upon the head of the kneeling figure. The subject here represented can be only conjectured. It may have been St. Thomas examining the wounds of our Blessed Saviour after his resurrection; but there is too little left, especially of the standing figure, to feel satisfied in this supposition.

Beyond the last window, and between that and the wall of the chancel, are two other paintings, one above the other. The upper one evidently represented St. George, standing, and piercing a dragon. The upper part of the Saint is gone, as also all traces of the hands. There are portions left of a flowing red cloak; and a black staff of a spear is partially seen. This probably had a cross at the top; for a red pennon with double-pointed end, is tolerably distinct. The Saint was turned towards his left side, and grasped the spear with both hands. His feet and part of each leg are very plain, cased in golden armour; and nearly the whole of the dragon can be traced writhing beneath the feet of his conqueror. His tail turns downwards on the right of the Saint; and on the other side, the head and black traces of the wings are still left, though the head is very indistinct.

Below this is the most interesting, best painted, and best preserved of these frescoes. It represents our risen Saviour appearing to St. Mary Magdalen. The face of our Blessed Lord has only a trace of the nose left; but the contour of the head is traceable, and there remains on it a golden crown with points and balls. Our Divine Redeemer has his breast uncovered, and exhibits, apparently, the wound in his sacred side. A very graceful mantle falls from his shoulders, of a violet hue, confined at the neck with a broad band of gold, and much resembling a cope. This he gathers and holds up around him with his right hand; while in his left, he bears a large cross, shaped like a **T**, with a very long top, and painted green. The holy penitent Magdalen is kneeling before him, holding up an ointment vase in her right hand, which is concealed under the folds of her robe. Her countenance is well preserved, and of great beauty. Round her head are rays of glory on a pale green circle, within another of still fainter green. Her hair, of flaxen hue, falls behind over her right shoulder, but is brought down in front on her left side in graceful tresses, which she probably held in her

left hand. Her robe is nearly of the same tint as that of her Divine Master.

The paintings, so far described, remain at present; but those to be now noticed, are again covered over and lost. The chancel arch, and the walls on the north and south of it, looking west, were covered with diapering of light and deep red colour, relieved with white and black. The patterns were rich scroll-work and alternate stripes, with flowers and stars. The only subject discovered, was our Divine Saviour seated on a throne, the upper part of his form without drapery, the lower covered with a robe of crimson. He seems to have exhibited his sacred wounds, as if to plead in judgment with man for the abuse of his plentiful redemption; for his hands were displayed, and the left hand had plainly the wound of the nail. Scarcely any features of the face remained. The whole figure was within an oval, or *vesica piscis*, coloured green. On the north side of the chancel arch appeared several lines of large black letters in the Old English character, but no word could be satisfactorily made out from the fragments; and before time could be found to scrape off more whitewash, and recover more letters, the whole was ruthlessly hidden beneath new stone colouring.

The only other paintings were three Consecration Crosses. One was in the centre of the wall in the nave, on either side, north and south; and these were of the same pattern,—a red floriated cross in a circle with a red border. The third was in a very unusual position, at the east end wall, near the east window, on the north side, and not in the middle of the wall, but more towards the window. It was of a most elegant design, painted green, with a narrow red edge, and within a circle similarly coloured, and having globular spots of red at intervals all round its periphery. It was perfectly preserved, and had a very rich appearance, but with the rest it has now disappeared. The subjects yet spared, but soon to be consigned again to oblivion, are very faint, for

the most part, and much broken and defaced ; but they have all the more venerable appearance, and it is exceedingly to be regretted that they will not be allowed to remain.

There is in the church chest at Drayton, a curious old cloth, which has remained unnoticed, and almost unknown. It is composed of fragments of ancient church vestments, probably of chasubles, and intended for a cover for the Communion table. It measures six feet in its extreme length, and is four feet wide. It is composed of five strips of white damask and green velvet alternately, which form the top of the cloth when laid on the table ; and a border nine inches deep hangs down on the sides and ends, being cut out at the corners, so as to fall close down the sides and ends of the table. The damask is plain ; but the velvet is embroidered with flowers of elegant patterns, worked in gold thread. The borders are divided into squares, alternately of coarse blue cotton cloth and pieces of embroidery from old chasubles, representing the following holy persons—Moses, Aaron, and two other Jewish figures, probably Prophets ; David ; and the Holy Apostles, Peter, Paul, James the Greater and Less, Matthew, Thomas, Jude, Philip, and Bartholomew. These are worked in gold thread and coloured silks, with great ingenuity, and are in very tolerable preservation. Such, my dear Sir, have been the researches at Drayton, of,

Your very devoted friend,

F. C. HUSENBETH.

