

## Letter

FROM THE REV. WM. BEAL, VICAR OF BROOKE, NORFOLK,

ADDRESSED

TO DAWSON TURNER, ESQ., V.P.

### DESCRIPTIVE OF CERTAIN MURAL PAINTINGS

LATELY DISCOVERED IN HIS CHURCH.

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Brooke Vicarage, Nov. 7, 1849.

MY DEAR SIR,

Permit me to offer you tracings, made by Mrs. Beal, of the greater part of the Mural Paintings, which, in the course of last August, were detected in the church of this parish. There were others; but none of them, I am sorry to say, in a state to be traced or drawn. These I send, for the purpose of asking you to explain them to me, who am, unfortunately, little versed in such matters; and, at the same time, I would beg of you, if you see no objection, to submit them to our Norfolk Archæological Society.

It may, as a preliminary step, interest you to know the precise circumstances under which they were brought to light. In the course of the necessary reparations of the church, it appeared expedient to clean the walls by the removal of the numerous churchwarden-coats of whitewash, with which they had been successively besmeared. Below these, we came upon a tolerably thick layer of plaster, on the scraping away of which, upon the Western wall, now a letter and now a disconnected word became here and there visible. Our curiosity was excited; and, with care, we were enabled ultimately to uncover the whole of the Creed, written in eleven small,

narrow, parallel columns, that extended the whole width of the church. The type, though not modern, was not of the Old English black letter. The colours were red and black. It reminded me of the early days of the Reformation; and I was much struck with the fact, that, when the Creed was read or recited, the faces of the congregation would not be turned towards the East.\* Much as we had accomplished, it was still necessary to go yet farther with our operations; and, proceeding with the work of excoriation, we shortly afterwards arrived at marks of art and design. Nor was it long ere we had before us what was once evidently a large painting; its width at least seven or eight feet, and its height not less than from six to seven feet. Its lowest part was about ten feet from the floor of the building. The only portion in anywise entire, is that of which you have a representation; traced, like all the rest, from the *ipsissima picta*, and consequently of the original size. You will easily judge, therefore, how much of the contents of the seven feet must have perished, when all that I can send you is little more than the female figure, who is drawing from the caldron of molten liquid, some of its fiery contents. At the same time, we fancied we could discover that the piece originally contained two distinct subjects, both upon the same level, and separated by an interval of about three feet; the base, in both, being of the dull reddish hue, which is given with tolerable exactness in the tracing, under the stool that supports the caldron. Of the remainder, the indistinctness was so great, and its fragments so disjointed and incomplete, that, while it was in vain to attempt to copy any portion, it was equally impossible to guess at what it was intended to portray. Here, however, I must beg you not to misunderstand me, and suppose that, because I say that we could form no idea of the intention of the artist in the *effaced*

\* See Bishop of Worcester's *Charge*, for 1845, pp. 17—20.

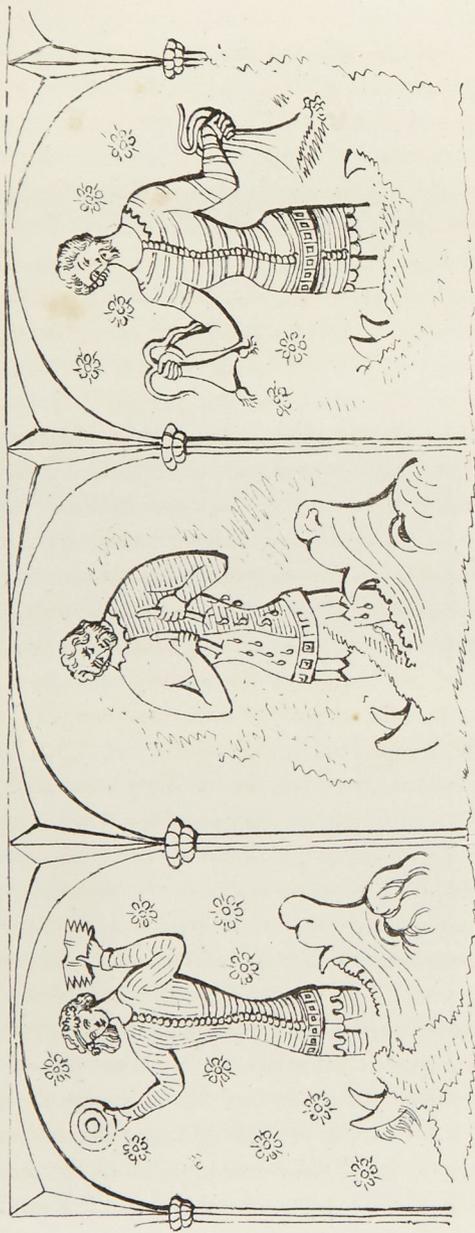
portion, I am therefore able satisfactorily to explain what is comparatively perfect. Such an inference would be most erroneous. You must rather allow me honestly to confess that "Davus sum, non Œdipus." I even doubt if it would be otherwise, could I see the whole of the picture in its original integrity, when the part, now irrecoverably lost, might be expected to throw some light upon that which is preserved. The only attempt at an explanation, and *that*, far from a satisfactory one, which has been given me of the female with her pot of flames, is, that she may represent the wicked Alewife; a curious figure of whom, copied from a Miserere in Ludlow Church, has been given by Mr. Wright in the fourth volume of the *Journal of the Archæological Association*. The same able antiquary there tells us, that transgressors of this description were classed of old among the great offenders of the day; inasmuch as, by the use of short measures, they habitually defrauded the poor at once of their support and their enjoyment. But, admitting the heroine of our picture to be of this number, how can we account for the angel descending from above and issuing from a cloud or volume equally full of flames, yet in his face and gesture typifying mercy? Or how, to go a step farther, can we reconcile it with an observation of Mr. Wright's in another place, that the "Mysteries and Miracle Plays," and, *a fortiori*, the Mural Paintings in Churches, "indicate the quantity and the peculiar character of the religious knowledge inculcated into the population in Catholic times?" It were difficult to imagine how such a subject, or indeed another in the series I send you, was calculated to convey instruction, or to inculcate faith, or in any way to give a useful lesson to the rude forefathers of our hamlet.

On the South wall we discovered, after scraping away the whitewash, two painted tablets, containing the Ten Commandments. The date of these was probably of the reign of Edward the Sixth; for we find in the Churchwardens'

Accompts of St. Mary Hill, London, a charge of £4., in 1547, for "painting the rood-loft with Scriptures;" and in those of St. Mary, Westminster, in 1554, a charge of one shilling, for "washing out of the Scripture of the high Altar-table." I suppose they must, at all events, be earlier than 1560, when "the Tables of the Commandments" were ordered to "be set or hung up in the East end of the Chauncell, to be not only read for edification, but also to give some comlye ornament and demonstration, that the same is a place of religion and prayer." (*Regist. Park.*, folio 215, a.) Underneath the Tables of the Law, was a large patch of dark blue paint, which we removed; and, after again taking off a substratum of plaster, we came upon another painting, from six to eight feet in height, and about the same width; the lowest part of it being nearly five feet from the floor of the Church. I regret to say, that this picture was so imperfect, and the plaster so friable, that it was utterly impossible to secure any tracing of the whole or even of portions of it; and my regret is increased by the consideration, that we might otherwise have had some interesting illustration of the costume and architecture of the day. One part represented a building of large dimensions and great beauty, with three gables, giving it the look of a cruciform church, and with windows of an ecclesiastical character. Outside the open door, stood a human figure, with arms partly extended, and in a stooping posture; evidently receiving with welcome a tattered, bare-legged, disconsolate-looking individual, who, half bent towards the ground, seemed to implore help, yet almost to despair of receiving it. On the right hand, was a third figure, stalking away with indignation; his back turned on the others in evident displeasure. He was well clad. In the distance, within what appeared to be some kind of inclosure, were swine, running as though to some one engaged in feeding them; but we could discover no remains of the swineherd. The person receiving and welcoming the stranger

exhibited so benign an expression of feature, and the tattered stranger himself, a countenance so betokening the “no more worthy to be called thy son,” that I cannot hesitate to believe that this painting was a representation of the parable of the Prodigal Son. From the style of the clothing, &c., the date must have been, I think, about the middle of the fourteenth century. Most appropriate was the position of this picture, as exhibiting the consolations of repentance, above the dismal punishment of heinous sin; for, immediately beneath it, were four arched compartments, each containing a human figure, in the act of being swallowed up in the open jaws of a huge monster, clearly intended, as you have yourself shown in the Mural Paintings at Catfield and Crostwight, to designate the jaws of hell. “Noctes atque dies patet atri janua ditis.” It cannot be doubted that the victims here represented, were wretched sinners of the most fearful description; but there may reasonably be a question, how far the painter intended, as in the instances just mentioned, to exhibit what are peculiarly denominated the mortal sins; for there were absolutely no traces of more than the four compartments I send you. Indeed, I might almost venture to say, that the arcade could at no time have included seven of them.

To enter into any lengthened discussion upon this question, or upon the figures themselves, would lead me beyond what the present occasion warrants: would weary you, and not be satisfactory to either of us. I should touch upon the subject, too, with the greater reluctance, in consequence of the conflicting opinions of two of the most distinguished of our Norfolk Antiquaries, Mr. Hart and Mr. Husenbeth, to both of whom I had the pleasure of showing the paintings. At the same time, I cannot help feeling that these are points not to be passed wholly in silence. I will, therefore, endeavour to be brief. The opinion of the last-mentioned gentleman was, that the first of the series—the female with the comb in one hand and a mirror in the other, her boddice rich, her



Cowells. Anastasio Press Ipswich

Mural Painting from Brooke Church. Norfolk.

hair ornamented with fruit and flowers—personified *Gula*. But, surely, these accompaniments are rather the symbols of Vanity than Gluttony; and Vanity, though not to be found in the sevenfold roll, can scarcely require less to be guarded against, by the wives and daughters of a rustic congregation. If, indeed, she be, comparatively, innocent in herself, she is, at all events, too often found to be the incentive to much that is otherwise. The second figure—he, whose dress, to speak heraldically, is party per pale, gules and argent, and thus confirms the date I have already ventured to assign to my frescoes—the man whose face betokens rage, and who grasps, in either hand, a knife which he has plunged into his breast, is by Mr. Husenbeth regarded as the emblem of *Ira*, but by Mr. Hart, of *Acedia*. My friend of Catton considers, that Anger, however it may be “a short-lived frenzy,” and may occasionally vent its fury upon itself, would hardly bring its victim to suicide; while he proves, by numerous quotations, that the mortal sin he names, is not unfrequently the father of despair, which ends in this miserable result. In reply, he will, I am certain, allow me to urge, that *Acedia* is considered, by churchmen of old, as synonymous with *Socordia*; is in English rendered *Sloth*; and is, in the Catfield frescoes, pictured, as you know, by a man half asleep, with his head supported by his hands. Notwithstanding, therefore, the definition of the learned, and that this sin is, in the words of Archbishop Peckham, “a loathing of spiritual good, inasmuch that a man delights not in God nor divine praises, but is attended with laziness, cowardice, despair, and the like,” I cannot but consider that the fact of its having been painted after the manner just pointed out in a neighbouring parish, and by an artist of the same period, shows that the latter was the prevailing belief regarding it, and that our “accursed slayer of himself” cannot be typical of *Acedia*. Upon the third figure we must all be agreed. The bag, in right hand and in left, clearly indicate the miser; and

an objection will hardly be started, in consequence of his tunic being like that of his neighbour, but of a single colour, and more ornamented, and carefully buttoned down in front; for *Avaritia* does not proscribe attention to personal appearance. The male or female in the fourth compartment was too much obliterated for any opinion to be pronounced upon it. All that could be seen, was a figure holding in one hand an open can, from which flames were issuing, and in the other, a vessel with a closed cover and round handle, like a milk pan. The coincidence between the female on the West wall and this, will not escape you. I only regret, that both are equally inexplicable to me; or perhaps you will permit me to say, that I the more regret the defacing of the latter, as we otherwise might have been able to tell whether the flames indicated any thing miraculous; for I omitted to mention, in speaking of the lady, that in her case they can scarcely be so, seeing that the fire under the cauldron might be supposed to account for them. The first three figures were under flattened arches, each compartment separated from the adjoining one by a pillar, and the background diapered. In the last, the diapering, pillars, and arches were all gone.

The grotesque painting of the Bear, belted and sworded, walking on its hind legs, and holding over its shoulder the bound feet of the half-armed, swordless human figure, which it drags along,—“an unkouth thyng, and strange ageyn nature,”—occurred on the same part of the South wall, some distance above, and, I think, not in connection with the large painting to which I have referred.

There were—as I have mentioned at the beginning of my letter—in other parts of the church, paintings which we could not uncover with sufficient distinctness or completeness to enable me to give you any account of them. On the North wall there had evidently been several. Over the South door, also, there had been a large one, most probably St. Christo-



Gen. 115. Anestalon. Press. Ipswich.

Mural Painting from Brooke Church - Norfolk.



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Mural Painting from Brooke Church. Norfolk.

pher; and there was one between every arch. They were all daubed over with the same thick coating, of dark blue paint and plaster, and, last of all, with repeated coverings of whitewash. Some, I ought to remark, were on paper, fragments of which I was enabled to pare off; and I showed them to Mr. Hart, who believes the practice to have been common, and is strongly supported in this opinion by another of our members, the Rev. John Gunn, who has very much directed his attention to our old paintings in churches, and has found more than one similar instance. I never, however, heard that it had been noticed before.

Perhaps I should not omit to mention one of the subjects carved on the old screen, of which we have scarcely any remains. Our first parents, in the garden of Eden, have been tempted by the serpent, which is twined round the trunk of a tree; the upper half of its body shaped in the form of a human female figure. "Turpiter atrum desinit in piscem mulier formosa superne." The fallen and guilty pair are leaving the garden; and the cherubim, beautifully carved, with flaming sword,\* "keep the way of the tree of life." I am the more induced to notice this, for the following reason. The church and manor were given by William the Norman, or perhaps indeed, as it would seem by one account, earlier, to the Abbey of Bury St. Edmund's. A poetical life of this Saint was written by Lydgate, in 1433, to commemorate the long visit paid to the monastery in that year by King Henry the Sixth. The original book presented to that King, (MSS. Harl. 2278,) is ornamented with no less than 120 limnings, among which are two banners, feigned by the poet to have been borne by St. Edmund, at "Geynesburihe," against the Danes. The first of these represents Adam and Eve by the tree of life, about to eat the forbidden fruit, which is reached to the woman by the serpent, who appears, down to the middle, with a human shape. (Dugdale's *Monast.*, p. 104, n.)

\* See Dr. Hinds' "Three Temples," &c., p. 10.

This would no doubt be a favourite subject for representation, by the monks of Edmundsbury; and the carving corresponds, with tolerable exactness, with the limning of the poet, who undertook his work by command of Abbot Curteys.

But I have already detained you too long. If what I have said about the Mural Paintings discovered in our Church, which appear to be both legendary and allegorical in their character, shall interest you in the smallest degree, I shall be very much gratified that this letter, undertaken as it is at your request, has been written.

I remain, dear Sir,

Yours very truly,

WILLIAM BEAL.

To Dawson Turner, Esq.

